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DELIVERIES

Jess and I took inventories of our bags and each other's bodies, checking that we'd packed our sleeping bags, extra undies, first aid kits, water pills, and duct tape in case our tennis shoes tore on the road. We slid our knives into their woven sheaths and hooked them backwards on our belt loops, the knives inside our pants, the covered blades beside the skin of our thighs. We checked each other's bodies to make sure the knives weren't visible through the fabric of our jeans, that the hems of our t-shirts covered the little clip that held them in place.

Because freight trains slid through our hometown, slowing down as they passed the anarchist coffee shop down the street from our house, most of the traveling kids we knew used Pensacola as a kind of home base. Most of them carried at least one knife when they traveled, though we'd never heard of anyone actually having to use one. Being choosy about drivers, traveling in groups of two, making sure one person always stayed awake—these were the ways we kept ourselves safe. Still, Jess and I knew how fragile our bodies were and how little our own skin did to protect us. We kept the long knives under our clothes, our secret, safe.

It was the summer I hitchhiked for the first time. My friend and roommate, Jess, had been hitching wherever she needed to travel for a couple of years. Both of us had paying jobs, a rare thing in the community of gutter punks and squatters living in the community beside the train tracks in our Florida hometown. Jess used the money she earned working at a daycare and I used the tips I earned waiting tables at a Japanese restaurant to pay for a two bedroom bungalow that housed as little as three or as many as six people at a time.

We could have driven my car, but hitching was a kind of rite of passage for the younger members of our community, a way to show that we were both committed to and hard enough to live as a part of a community that thrived together, sharing resources, trading goods, all of us living a membrane away from the material world that Jess and I had grown up within

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and would later return to.

Jess went with me on my first hitch.

Before the summer started, Jess caught a little cold, nothing serious. A few weeks after the cold ended, a pink rash developed in the palms of her hands, her arms, her shoulders, her chest and belly. The rash spread across her whole body. Small bumps became long red splotches. Eventually, the rash lightened, went pale, died. The top layers of skin, the rash, detached. Jess went to the doctor. A side effect of mononucleosis, he told her. You just have to ride it out.

The kissing sickness.

In the beginning, she could peel the dead layers off in sheets. Short tubes of skin slid off her fingers. Little flakes fell off her back. Like Elmer's glue when you were a kid. Squeeze it out on the top of your arm, smear it in, let it dry, peel it off.

I was too afraid to hitch alone, so I rode a bus up to Baltimore to visit my boyfriend for a few days before I met up with Jess. We met at my boyfriend's dorm. We sat around his tiny wooden kitchen table, drinking hot tea and talking about the summers we'd spent separately. All your skin falling off, my boyfriend said to Jess, like a snake.

Gross, Jess said.

My boyfriend sipped his tea, his knuckles dotted, with pink and red and yellow paint. It's one of those things that you can't ignore.

One hell of a metaphor, I said, trying to sound like I knew what he was getting at.

It's just my body, Jess said.

One of Jess' friends, another traveling kid, showed up at my boyfriend's apartment with his Mom's car and two paper lunch bags filled with cut vegetables for our trip. The kid drove us twenty miles out of town to a busy truck stop. A few minutes after he dropped us off, the rain started. Cold and grey. Jess and I shivered under our thin hoodies; we knew summer and not much else. Across the parking lot, we saw a truck driver walk to his truck and open the door. He was bald and wore a loose t-shirt and baggy jeans. If this guy won't pick us up, we'll go inside until the rain stops, Jess said.

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As we walked, our hoodies soaked up the rain. The wet hoods stuck to the skin on the sides of our faces.

We approached the driver, and he immediately agreed to bring us as far as Atlanta. But I have to make a stop in Massachusetts first, he said.

Jess and I looked at each other. Neither of us knew much about the geography of the northeast. Massachusetts couldn't be that far away from Baltimore, and the rain was coming fast.

Sure, we said.

Marvin, the driver said and pointed at his chest.

Jess and I introduced ourselves.

Marvin pulled a lever and pushed the driver's seat forward so Jess and I could climb into the back. Marvin climbed in and closed the curtains that separated the back of his seat from our part of the cab.

Jess and I took turns sleeping while Marvin drove through the night. Five or six hours in, Jess leaned over to wake me up. She pressed a finger over her lips like shhh without saying it. She pointed at the crack between the maroon curtains that separated us from Marvin. Through the crack, Marvin's hand pressed buttons on the dash. A hushed voice came through the radio.

You picked up two girls?

Yeah, buddy, Marvin whispered. And I think they're going to kill me.

Jess and I rolled our eyes.

Marvin whispered into the radio, his words unintelligible.

Jess shook her head, bunched her hoodie into a pillow, and laid into it. It was my turn to stare through the curtains at the strings of rain blowing sideways across Marvin's windshield while Marvin drove and whispered into the tiny receiver, like a mouse in his hand.

Watching the rain, I thought about all the invisible bits of Marvin spread across his cab. Thirty to forty thousand cells a day, almost nine pounds of skin a year, sloughed off of our bodies into the air around us. All of Marvin's edges, lost in the air of the cab or stuck to the seats, the doors, the curtain between us.

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In some hours, Jess and I would crawl out of the cab. The soles of our sneakers would land on the concrete beside some highway. We'd stretch and watch the back of Marvin's truck disappear into the morning heat. Our old edges would stay in the cab with Marvin. Some of his edges would stay with us, too.

In the morning, we arrived in Massachusetts. Marvin closed the curtains tight and told us to stay quiet while pulled into a warehouse, unloaded and reloaded his truck. We sat in the back finishing our bags of chopped cucumbers and baby carrots. Jess peeled off the last bits of dead skin that had flaked around her fingernails and piled the pieces on a flattened paper lunch bag between us.

We chewed and whispered while the cab heated up, telling each other stories of the last month of summer. I had stayed in Florida, working extra hours to save money for classes at the community college that fall and camping out between beach dunes with my boyfriend for the three weeks he visited. I told Jess about the way my boyfriend laid behind me on the sand, running his finger down the knobs of my crooked spine, telling me my hips were thrilling and strange. How it made me feel like an alien when he said it. My boyfriend, the art school student, had such a different life from mine, flying from Baltimore to Florida and back in the summers, tearing open checks from his parents in the beginning of each month the way I tore open my paychecks. Different lives and different bodies. Somehow, there was still that point of contact. The skin of his finger sliding down the skin of my back, vertebrae to vertebrae. Cell against cell, skin against skin.

During the month I was in Florida with my boyfriend, Jess had been hitching around the Midwest. She told me about the rides she had caught before she met up with me in Baltimore, the way she spread out her hoodie on stranger's car seats to catch any skin that fell off. She told me about the boys she had met on the road, the way they held her body and didn't give a shit about the rash, the way it came apart when they touched her, the chill of the fragile skin underneath. A body is just a body, one of them told her.

She told me about a truck driver who picked her up while she was traveling with one of our mutual friends. The driver bought them a couple meals

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a day and snacks in between. He looked kinda like Santa, she said. The best hitch ever.

Marvin climbed in, turned the truck around, and started driving south.

By the afternoon, Jess and I had run out of food and things to whisper about. The humidity thickened. We had been sweating for a while, but without any airflow, we were really starting to stink. I leaned up through the curtains. A blast of a/c hit me in the face from Marvin's part of the cab. I held onto the starched edges of the curtains. Can we open these?

Marvin's eyes shifted toward me in the rearview. He looked scared, No. Where are we?

Almost to Baltimore, again.

I sat back and looked at Jess. The last time we had stopped to pee was at an empty truck repair stop the night before. We'd been holding it for hours. Jess leaned up through the curtains. We need to piss right now.

Marvin cleared his throat and nodded. A little while later, he pulled into a truck stop megaplex. Two diners, a hotel, and several dozen pairs of truck headlights blinked through the grey afternoon. My stomach throbbed. Jess and I gathered everything we had brought into Marvin's truck. Marvin didn't look at us while we hopped out. Thanks, Jess said.

Yeah. Thanks, I said.

We turned to walk toward the truck stop, but Marvin said, What the hell?

We turned back. He wrinkled his nose and handed us a shower card. He said, Ya'll stink like white people. Jess held the card with the tips of her fingers and stared at him. She scratched her shoulder. Tiny leaves of skin flaked off where her nails touched. More than I could even see.

Marvin fiddled with something in his back pocket and looked away from us, Hurry up we've got a long drive. We jogged toward the truck stop showers. Do you think that's why he was afraid of us? Jess asked.

Because we stink?

No. Because we look white.

I looked at the tops of my hands. I wondered if Marvin's truck would be there when we finished our showers. Did it matter that Jess wasn't white, that I was, that Marvin wasn't? Did it matter more that we were women and he was a man? Or that we could've afforded a truck stop shower if we

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wanted to?

A truck stop. A couple naked, teenaged girls and a tall, quiet man.

Who was the predator and who was the prey? What if nobody fit those roles? What if we all fit both of them? Within whose body did the danger actually reside?

Jess and I entered the truck stop under a sharp blast of a/c, followed signs to the women's showers. There was no soap in the shower, so we filled one of our empty Ziploc bags with antibacterial hand soap from the bathroom sinks and brought it into the shower stall with a stack of paper towels. Jess and I took turns standing under the lukewarm shower, washing our faces and arms and each other's backs with the hand soap. We tried to dry off with the paper towels, but our bodies were so wet, the paper rolled off into tiny pieces and stuck to our whole skin.

When we left the shower, Marvin was there, leaning against the side of his truck smoking a long cigarette. He motioned for us to hurry up, and we jogged back and crawled into his cab. The next morning, he dropped us off on the side of the highway fifteen miles north of Atlanta. We walked for about an hour before an older guy picked us up in his rusted hatchback and drove us downtown. He dropped us off at a Taco Bell. We went into the bathrooms to run water over our wrists, splash our necks, comb the dead skin out of our hair, rub soap on our armpits.

We ordered four bean burritos and ate them fast. We were a five hour drive from home.

Jess and I waited at Taco Bell until the sides of our soda cups sweated themselves soft. We threw them away and walked between the hot metal buildings downtown, stopping occasionally to ask people for directions to the bus station. We debated about splurging on tickets, walking for a couple of blocks. At a stop light, Jess waved at a car filled with teenagers. They pointed to the right, told us the bus station was like six blocks away.

I thought hitching would be more dangerous, I said.

Everybody thinks that before they do it, Jess said. Having your own car is like a protection. Like a little moving house.

I thought about all the road trips I had driven by myself and all the peo-

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ple passing me, all the people I passed. All of us alone in our cars, our cars separated by less than a foot, a dotted line in the middle of the road.

Hard to let go of all that, Jess said.

Jess and I felt like sellouts when we bought the bus tickets. We agreed to not tell anyone in our community that we had gotten home that way.

The bus was empty except for me, Jess, a guy sleeping under his ball cap, a girl listening to her headphones, and a couple curled, sleeping on their sides across two chairs each, their bodies separated by the aisle between the seats, feet pointed at each other. Jess and I sat beside each other out of habit. We stared forward the whole way home. We had already talked about everything in the back of Marvin's cab. We knew each other's summer stories, our histories, our whole lives, but it wasn't so much about the knowing, just the being. We had given each other permission to exist, side by side, all of the truths of our body delivered, accessible. We didn't even need to reach.

On the way home, I watched the heat choked trees pass by our window and thought about my boyfriend's body back in Baltimore. I thought about the house Jess and I rented back in Pensacola, my narrow bedroom, my short black apron crumpled on the floor.

I looked at my arms, tiny flakes of paper towel still clinging to the small hairs. Soon Jess and I would be home, taking turns in our own shower to wash it off, to cover our skin with soap and lotion that smelled like citrus. We'd get dressed and go to our jobs—Jess to teach her daycare class, me to the sushi restaurant. I'd walk in an hour before opening. I'd turn on the coffee pot and fill the tea maker. I'd cut lemons and polish wine glasses and stack bowls. I'd carry trays to customers for five or six hours, trays filled with diet sodas, fried pork, rolled sushi, and sashimi, squares of tuna, salmon, mackerel organized into small roses, pink or white blooms, octopus tentacles curling out on top of a cucumber salad like a kid's drawing of the sun, tentacles that some drunk real estate agent would pick up and hold up in front of his teeth like fangs, all the flesh lifted from one body into the mouth of another and transformed into the energy we need to make meaning of our own lives and the membranes between us, membranes that are always shedding and reforming, even when we can't see them.

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And the flesh, consumed. A bite pulled into the mouth by a hungry tongue. Is it fish or flower?

The mouth decides.

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ABOUT A GIRL

It's been three days since I've seen her and my last text message (a pretty lame joke actually, a feeble effort to remind her of what a funny and unserious guy I can be) went unanswered. It seemed like my life was on fast forward too, everything happening so fast to me, a year flying by faster than a bullet, but then we decided to have our little "catch-up coffee" and she said some things and I said some things, and now, every hour drags on and every waking minute is stretched out into an eternity. My friends (and this is friend in the loosest sense of the word) tell me I've got a bad case of heartbreak, but I deny it fervently. I do not have a broken heart. I did not like her that much, and I certainly wasn't in love. I just liked her company and miss her. Nothing more.

Since our last date I haven't really had much to do. I've gone a couple times to the grocery store where we first met, looking over my shoulder for her every so often, making a special effort to linger by the can of beans which actually sparked our first conversation. Unlike most good memories, I remember that day well. The forecast had said it would be eighty, almost ninety degrees, so everyone wore their summer outfits, but by noon it had shot down to the forties, and suddenly everyone in town was underdressed and freezing. I always keep a jacket in my car, and I can recall how people gave me envious looks as I wore it around that day, warm and snug. I had been given a list of groceries to buy for my grandmother, and since she never specified (or cared, really) which brands I bought, I just got whichever and tried to get out of the place as fast as possible. When I got to the canned goods aisle I saw her standing there, radiant, lost in thought. I tried not to stare so she wouldn't think I was a creep and kept my head down as I snagged the first can of beans that I saw. I didn't even try engaging her in conversation—she was in a whole other league, tax bracket, and area code.

I was walking away from her when she called out after me.

"Hey! Hey, wait a minute!"

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I didn't think she was talking to me so I kept on walking briskly, not wanting to turn around and embarrass myself.

"Excuse me," she said again as she placed her hand on the back of my shoulder.

"Hmm?" I hummed awkwardly, turning around cautiously to face her.

"This may sound weird, but how did you know which one to choose?"

"What? You mean which can of beans?"

She nodded her head.

"Beans are beans," I laughed. "I don't think it matters what brand you get."

"So you just came up and chose a random one," she said, frowning.

"Pretty much." I paused for a moment, realizing that this was the point where she either said thank you and I left, or I kept going and tried to get her number. I realized it was a long-shot, but why not?

"You try it," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Come on, try it. Try to pick a random one without even thinking about it."

"I don't know," she looked down with a shy smile appearing on her face.

"You can do it. I'll guide you every step of the way."

"You're screwing with me," she said playfully.

"I'm just trying to introduce you to the can of beans that will change your life."

She chuckled, "So it really doesn't matter which one I get?"

"Hey, at the end of the day, it'll smell the same no matter what brand you get."

Damn it, I thought to myself. Damn it, damn it, damn it, a poop joke, leave it to me to make a goddamn poop joke to a hot girl I just met.

But she just laughed. "That's funny," she said. "What's your name?"

"Elmo."

"Elmo? Like the—"

"Yes, like the furry red monster. I know."

"Your parents named you after a furry red monster who's in love with his goldfish?"

"It's a family name, actually, but they're the type of sadists who'd do that to a kid. So, anyway, about these beans. Here's what I want you to do. Close

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your eyes and spin around three times. Then reach out in front of you and take the first can your hand touches. Got it?”

So we went on like that, making jokes, daring each other to do various things in the grocery store (embarrassing things on my part, but hey, when it's for a girl does it really matter?), until I worked up the balls to ask for her number. I remember sitting in my car staring at the sheet of paper with its seven holy digits. It didn't feel real; I didn't think I was capable of taking down a girl like that, but I just had. And I was happy. I thought we were going to be golden, but I should've known right from the start. When your first conversation involves shit, that kind of sets the bar for the rest of your relationship.

I've been reading a lot of Hornby lately, *How to be Good* especially. It amazes me how he writes from the point of view of a woman so convincingly. If I hadn't known the author's name I would have had no trouble at all believing that he was female. After reading it I even tried to mimic him, you know, write a story from the point of view of a chick, but I just couldn't do it. Whenever I read over the story, I discovered that my protagonist thought like a man, spoke like a man, saw the world through the eyes of a man. It made me realize that, after everything I've been through, I still don't know jack shit about women.

She's read my stories before, and I've read her a lot of her poetry. Unlike my writing, her poems are very satirical, purposed to make a mockery of everything she hates in this world. A few of these objects include high heels, olives, walk-in showers, hummers, and basically anyone who makes over fifty grand a year (so you can imagine how she reacted the first time my parents invited her to dinner—the silverware alone was enough to make her vomit). She also had no shyness when it came to her work. I mean, the girl gave me a whole portfolio of her poems on our second date for crying out loud, and she would get this strange kind of buzz off my approval. I, on the other hand, am extremely timid when it comes to my stories. I've only shown them to her and my sister (not a fan of my work, under the belief that the short story was created for wannabe writers with neither the talent nor diligence to write a novel) and my grandma. When I asked my

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grandmother what she thought about my stories, she said, “The writing is good, but there is so much sex! Sex, sex, sex! Don’t you have anything else to write about? Is that all you can think of?”

And to this I responded, “Well when I was younger I’d write about murder, but these days murder is so cliché. Sex is the only type of murder that can still surprise people.”

And my grandma just rolled her eyes like she does whenever I try to be deep. She’s the only one who can always see right through my phoniness: the truth is that I write about sex because I’m a horny bastard.

I call up Stan, tell him I’d like to take him up on his past offers to take me golfing. When I pull up to the country club an hour later, I see that I am vastly underdressed in my sweats and Metallica t-shirt. Stan tells me it’s all right, but I know from past experiences (his critiques of my table etiquette when we used to eat out at restaurants in college, his disbelief at how “lazy” the knots I use in my ties look, the way he tends to “forget” to invite me to parties with his old private school buddies) that he’s already regretting inviting me.

We start on the driving range and he lets me use one of his irons. I fail to make contact with the ball my first ten swings and he tells me to keep trying while he goes to work on his driver. He hits the ball a good “two football fields” and just tells me to do what he’s doing. In the next fifteen minutes I hit the ball maybe three times, and the farthest one I hit isn’t even close to the fifty yard flag. Eventually, an old-timer Stan greets as Mr. Knox comes over and tries to help me out but gives up politely after five minutes. Finally, Stan says I can take a break and we head over to his golf cart. For the next hour I sit in the passenger’s seat as Stan plays a game of eighteen holes with his dad, the two of them arguing like a divorced couple the entire time.

Stan invites me to stay for dinner at the club with his dad and his dad’s girlfriend, but I tell him I’ve got plans and I see the ensuing relief in Stan’s eyes. When I get back home my grandma asks me if I had fun. I say I did.

It’s a full week, a week of doing nothing, a week of being unable to write, a

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week of being unable to read, a week of still no calls from my job interviews, a week of checking my empty inbox for emails from literary magazines I sent submissions to nearly a year ago, a week of my text still unanswered, a week of Grandma asking if I've found an apartment yet, a week of saying not yet, a week of my parents' unrelenting invitations to move back in with them, a week of my stubborn refusals, a week on my couch, a week still sad. It's a full goddamn week.

Then my cell phone rings. It's Scarlet, my sister.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Nice to know you're happy to hear my voice," she says.

"I'm a busy guy, Scarlet, can you get to it?"

"Well it's not just me," she says. "It's dad, too."

"Hi, son." I hear my dad say. Great. A conference call with my two favorite people.

"Dad, I'm not going back to school," I say in a way that probably sounds rude to anyone who hasn't gone through the shit he's made me go through. "I know that whatever you've got to say next is just another one of your schemes to convince me, so I'm gonna hang up now. Bye."

"Wait, son, wait. Just wait a moment. Please."

"What."

"I haven't seen you in a while. Neither has Scarlet," he says.

"We miss you," my sister says, but even as she says it, I don't feel missed at all. I feel like the opposite. What would that be? Unwanted? Forgotten? Patronized? Yeah. That's more like it.

"Well that's sweet," I say, but neither of the two are very good at picking up sarcasm so I continue. "Is there a point to all of this? Because if you guys just called for a little chit-chat you can come to Granny's and do it in person. We live in the same city if you haven't realized."

"Elmo," my dad says, "I just want you to know that I feel bad about not spending enough time with you—"

"We both do."

Shut the hell up Scarlet and let the man finish.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Well," he pauses dramatically, like they do in movies before saying

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something intense that always winds up in the trailer. “Scarlet and I are going to DC. We want you to come with us.”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” And I hang up the phone.

“Who was that?” I hear my granny call from the kitchen.

“My father.”

“What did he want?”

“To tell me he misses me.”

“That’s sweet of him.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

The next day, during the middle of Family Feud (this episode was a special. instead of two families it had strippers versus wrestlers and every question had some sort of sexual connotation. my personal favorite: name something you might see a squirrel at the park doing with his nuts. strippers won.) I hear the doorbell ring and answer the door to find my mother with a slightly disappointed look on her face. I kiss her on the cheek and invite her in. I ask her if she wants tea but she just sits down on the couch and gets right to it.

“Your father told me you weren’t too happy with him on the phone yesterday.”

“Well excuse me for not being overjoyed at the sound of his voice.”

“No, stop it. We’re going to have a mature discussion. Can you be an adult?”

“Fine,” I say. I give my mom more of a chance than my dad. Even though she’s also a doctor, she isn’t always trying to get me to go back to college to fulfill the med school requirements. With my dad, I’m afraid to say anything because he’s good at using my words against me. Any hint of unhappiness from me, and boom, he tells me about something that’ll make all my problems disappear: a big fat MD after my name.

“The way I see it, this trip will be totally harmless for you. You don’t have to pay a dime, you get to stay in a nice hotel, eat good food. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to get out of this place for a bit?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I’m doing all right,” I say, but we both know that isn’t true. I’m watching Family Feud at one in the afternoon for Christ’s sake.

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“What about Kasia? You could bring her along,” my mom says, and there it is, the first mention of her name since the day the two of us split. Should I tell her or should I—

“She’s busy,” I say, and leave it at that.

My mom tells me to think about it before leaving and I do think about it. I think about it the rest of the day as I go from channel to channel, from movie to movie, from book to magazine to YouTube to my notebook, to the story I’ve been working on, frustratedly, unsuccessfully, the story that baffles me and angers me, and the story that I now find myself unable to write, incapable of finishing. It is the story that makes me put down my pen and make up my mind about DC.

Six months later. Time has passed in the way that it does, slowly yet quickly, refusing to allow your mind to catch up. I have changed (for the better, I think), the people around me have changed, and the world has changed. It’s half a year later and I’m pushing a row of shopping carts through the automatic sliding doors of the grocery store where I now work. I take off my fluorescent yellow vest and my boss tells me he needs me on register number three for the next hour until closing time. Since the store is practically empty, I bring my backpack along with me. I sit on the stool behind the register, putting the backpack on my lap, and I reach inside for my anatomy textbook—my professor’s assigned nearly sixty pages and I know I’ll be too tired to read if I wait till I get back to my apartment to start (plus, my roommate hasn’t yet discovered the innovation of headphones)—but while I’m rummaging around, my hand comes into contact with something familiar, something I have completely forgotten about. I pull out the thick notebook and open it up, flipping through the ruffled pages containing all the stories I’d written at a point in my life that feels like a bad dream I can’t forget. I skim over some of the stories: stories about me, stories about her, stories about failure, stories about dreams, and I realize how sad I used to be, how pathetic my life was not so long ago. So I shut the notebook, toss it in the garbage can at my feet, and put the anatomy textbook in its place. I take one last glance at the notebook and force myself to say goodbye. Goodbye forever.

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I've finished twenty-five pages and it's almost closing time when I see her walk in. She isn't Kasia but I think it's safe to say she's a lot more beautiful. She's got on a tight tank top and a pair of Nike shorts that make her look like she's been jogging although she doesn't appear sweaty at all. I watch her as she shops and notice that she has this systematic way of doing things. She holds a list in her right hand while she pushes the cart with her left, she knows exactly where everything is, and instead of asking for help when she needs to reach a box of cereal that's too high for her, she retrieves the footstool we keep in aisle three as if this place is her own house. When she finally places the last item into her cart, she heads over to me, her brown bun bouncing with every step.

"Hi there," she says with a smile.

"Hi," I say back. She's got a lot of groceries but I take my time, trying to think of something to say to her.

"So," she says, eyeing my textbook, "you're in school?"

"Indeed I am."

"What are you studying?"

"Medicine."

"That's cool. I'm pre-law. I've got exams coming up, actually, that's why I've got all this junk. Me and my study buddies slash roommates switch off and today was my day to make the run."

So it goes about as boringly as that. I introduce myself as Mo, she introduces herself as Rachel or Rebecca or something else that begins with an R, and, after briefly debating our views of America's educational system, she gives me her number. I'm not ecstatic but I can't say I'm disappointed either (imagine bringing a girl like this home to my parents—they'd go bonkers).

Finally, I get to the final item on the belt. It's a small can of Ortega black beans. I pick it up, scan it, but in the moment before I place it in the bag, I hesitate.

"This is going to sound weird, but just tell me. Why did you pick this can of beans out of all the ones you had to choose from?"

"This one's the cheapest," she says back without pausing to think. "I'm a

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smart shopper.”

“I can see that,” I say, and look down to avoid her eyes.

She pays debit, and (of course) she’s a member of our rewards program so I give her a discount. I thank her for shopping with us and she tells me to call her sometime. I tell her good luck with exams.

By the time she’s gone it’s closing time. I look at the piece of paper where she wrote down her number and put it in my textbook as a bookmark before shutting it. I put it into my backpack and then look back at my notebook, which is still sitting there in the garbage can like a stick of dynamite, waiting patiently for someone, for me, to ignite it. Sure enough, I find myself picking it up and opening it to its final story, which I left unfinished all those months ago. My boss stops by on his way out and tells me not to forget to lock up. I look back over at him with a pen now in my hand and tell him that I’ll try not to stay for long. I’ll try. I’ll try my best.

GUY CHOATE

BUT I HAVE AN MFA

I can feel a human presence on my right. It's Walter, standing there with a large chef's knife, the blade of which is dripping water.

"Have they showed you how to clean the knives yet?" he asks me.

"I don't think so," I say.

Walter pulls a kitchen towel from his pocket and wipes the blade once, hard. "Just like that," he says with an all-knowing smile. "That's all you have to do."

"Cool," I say.

And then he walks his lanky, 6-foot-2 frame toward the knife magnet.

I wish that was Walter's sense of humor on display, but it's not. Walter likes giving me information. He likes telling me exactly how to do things because, while he's not my boss, he does have seniority on me. I haven't been here long in the red-bricked Hanover Tavern outside of Richmond, Virginia. The older crowd comes here for dinner and a show at the in-house theatre, but in the kitchen, hidden away from everyone, Walter reminds me that I need to wash both sides of the sheet trays because the bottoms get greased up when they stack.

One of the cooks asks Walter if he's found a house yet.

"There's one house in Hanover County that I can afford to buy on a 30-year mortgage with what I make here," he responds. "It's a \$49,000 house."

The statement hits me hard from a couple of angles. The first hit comes as a reminder that I'm only making \$8 an hour. The second hit comes upon the realization that over the previous three years I've accumulated more in student loans than what it would take to buy a small house. And then as my thoughts progress, it hurts to realize it would take me more than 30 years of washing dishes to pay off the debt I accrued in order to get my MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing.

I try to stay positive by engaging the conversation. "Are you buying a house, Walter?"

"No," he says, "it's just for a school project."

GUY CHOATE

I find comfort in hearing that Walter is taking classes. Somehow him investing in education makes me feel better about my own investment, which has yet to pay any financial dividends.

“Where are you in school?” I ask.

“Hanover,” he says.

I’m new to this area, where my girlfriend Liz grew up, and I don’t know all the colleges yet. Of course, it crushes me when Walter explains to me that Hanover is not a community college at all, but rather a high school.

When I can’t remember where to put the clean bowls, Walter gives me a disappointed look. I don’t know why it matters to me, but I want him to think I’m smart or cool. He doesn’t.

When I started looking for jobs, I focused on full-time editing gigs, but when I didn’t get much response, which is to say I got absolutely no response, I began applying for proposal writing jobs, which were more plentiful. I wrote what I thought were some solid cover letters in response to jobs that required only a bachelor’s degree. Some of those jobs would even let me substitute experience for the education requirements. However, I have both. And a master’s degree to boot, but none of that seemed to matter. I was lucky to even get an email letting me know that the company had gone with another candidate.

For a while I focused on jobs that were committed to hiring veterans—a lot of government jobs will give preferential treatment to those of us with a military background. But apparently not me, despite spending my 21st birthday as a NATO peacekeeper in Bosnia.

A friend put me in communication with one of the founders of a large dot com in Richmond. However, the only opening they had at the time was for a marketing intern position. I emailed back and forth with the founder, felt a connection, and then I swallowed my pride and said I’d like to apply for the internship. I never heard from him again. When I finally convinced myself I had the capacity to be a dogcatcher in a neighboring county, I applied for that. No response. I applied for a part-time job running the Facebook page for a local Girl Scout Troop. The application took a good thirty minutes, but I never heard a thin-minted word from the little brats.

My sister is a corporate recruiter and she tells me my resume looks good

GUY CHOATE

and my cover letters are even better. I'm baffled as to why I haven't heard anything. Every few days I go back and look at the files I've sent potential employers. I double-click my resume and a big part of me hopes that when it pops up, it's not my resume at all, but rather that picture Liz took of me sitting on a toilet someone placed on the curb to be picked up with their garbage. Had I accidentally sent the dozens of potential employers a picture of me pretending to defecate in the street, at least I would understand why I hadn't been granted a job interview. Instead, my resume pops up, and I am left with no explanation.

The guy who cut my hair the other day told me I can't find a job because Obama.

A lot of people tell me I can't get a job because I got a useless degree. A smarter demographic of people tell me I got a teaching degree, but I don't want to teach, and there's a strong possibility I'm just straight bad at it.

I am eager to work. I am 31 years old and I'm lucky enough to have been given a place to stay rent-free until I can get back on my feet. But I am 31 years old and I am barefoot staring at a rocky mountain of debt that I have no choice but to try and climb. I am 31 years old, and for the first time in my life I am questioning whether or not I am a man. Because I am 31 years old and sleeping on a bunk bed at my girlfriend's dad's house with no prospect of supporting myself, much less the children that I'd like to one day have.

I know what you're thinking. You're sitting there, reading this, and you're thinking, all of this works conveniently well in a self-deprecating essay, but this guy's probably got some prospects in real life. And the reason I know you're thinking that is because I've thought it myself. In fact, I've thought of nothing else besides that, for months. I'm 31 years old. I'm healthy. I'm educated. I'm well-traveled and well-read. I have good manners. My military record says I can follow orders without question. My liberal arts education says I can think for myself. I'm self-reflective. If you can get over me talking out of the side of my mouth, it's sometimes possible to find me attractive even. I have dependable transportation. I'll organize the office March Madness pool. I'll chip in \$5 to get Jenny from Accounting, whom I've never even met, a gift for her baby shower. I'm a fun person to have in

GUY CHOATE

the office and I'll do whatever it takes to get hired, to get health insurance, to remember what it's like to experience the feeling of self-worth again.

"You should try Capital One," a friend of a friend advises me one night.

No shit, I think to myself.

People who have jobs, who don't turn down dinner invitations because they know they can't pay for dinner...this is how they think. They think, this guy's unemployed and therefore must be an idiot, he obviously hasn't checked with the largest holder of jobs in the area, perhaps he's never heard of the Fortune 500. People with jobs must have this idea in their heads that I can just show up to the Capital One offices and Alec Baldwin (or whomever it is they have hired as their current spokesperson) will be there hanging out with an army of Vikings, all of whom are eager to give me one of the spare jobs lying around the premises.

Liz, an aspiring counselor, comes home frustrated from work where she uses her degree in psychology to bring people the pasta they ordered. Someone has told her that she should give up waiting tables to be a teacher.

"As if I can just decide to be a teacher one day," she vents to me. She speaks with sarcasm—"Oh yeah, thanks, hadn't thought of that. I guess I'll just start teaching tomorrow!"

People with jobs are oblivious to what it takes to find a career. They all know someone who makes "really good money" and "loves his job" doing something that I'd "be really good at."

"Why stop at teaching?" Liz asks. "Why don't they just tell me I should give up waiting tables to be an astronaut? I'm sure they make good money."

Taking the trash out at my dishwashing job, it's a long walk from the kitchen, through the gravel parking lot to the dumpster. It feels good to get away from the sweaty sink. The fresh air is cold on my skin and so I put on my sweatshirt that reads across the front, "University of New Orleans," which is the school where I got my MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing. A car pulls into the parking lot right about the time a trash bag rips open to spill out a disgusting mixture of food onto the ground. I can make out the bones of a fried buttermilk chicken breast and a soggy dinner roll drenched in what I guess to be she-crab soup. Because I've been in this position before, I do what I know I need to do—I drop all the trash bags

GUY CHOATE

except the torn one and I desperately try to balance it so no more of its contents falls out before I get to the dumpster.

On my way back to the other bags, I have my recurring daydream. Someone will see my sweatshirt with what looks like a vomited version of the Hanover Tavern's dinner menu on it, and that person will ask me about my education. I will tell him about my master's degree, and he will say something clichéd (because he's a normal person without an MFA)—“What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?”

But strangers don't come up to dishwashers in the parking lots of restaurants and offer them jobs at the businesses they own in town. So, I walk back to the kitchen, and I stand over the sink full of mushroom gravy-stained sauce pans and I regret not going to school for something more useful, like nursing or welding or maybe Lamaze.

I guess there are good things about my dishwashing job. I get more than my fair share of free food. Good stuff, too—oysters and pear salads and steak. While I may be in my stained sweatshirt and camouflaged cut-offs, I'm eating just as well as the patrons walking through the front door in their suits and dresses.

I think about people in the corporate game who complain of their power-hungry and manipulative bosses. I'm thankful to just have Walter. He seems sincere in simply wanting the sheet trays to be grease-free. I can't fault him for that. And he's not even breathing down my neck until late in the afternoon, after he gets out of school.

When I think about it, having a shitty job isn't quite as shitty when you have a liberal arts degree that taught you how to effectively express your feelings about that shitty job. I may not have the financial peace to pay retail for cocktails. I may not have the health insurance that would allow me to see the doctor about the slightly concerning gastroenterological issue I seem to be developing. And I may not be able to afford all the vacations every single one of my Facebook peers are going on all the time even if they have a family of five and who the hell still goes to Disneyworld anyway, you miserable sap.

But, I do have an MFA. So there's that.

JESSICA PEARSE

HOW TO SPEAK TO DADDY

When Daddy says “Which one from ‘Ol Blue Eyes tonight?” you know exactly what he means because Frank Sinatra is your favorite singer and you’re his little girl. It’s February, so you choose “My Funny Valentine” and Daddy takes your hand so you can stand without stumbling and feel like a grown-up, like Mommy does when she wears heels and pink lipstick. You’re sure he is the only man you could ever trust, so you make him promise he’ll always dance with Mommy and he’ll always dance with you. He says nothing will ever change.

Then one day Mommy sits you down and tells you Daddy has to fight in some country called Iraq and he won’t be home for a while. You ask how much “a while” is but two birthdays pass and you begin to miss all the dancing and you stop asking.

Then one night Daddy will come home and you’ll dust off the old records without a second thought, but downstairs you’ll overhear him telling Mommy he saw too much. He’ll tell her he keeps having the same nightmares and he’ll start sleeping on the basement couch every night because that’s where the war can’t reach him. You wonder why Daddy has stopped dancing with you and why he keeps coming home late smelling like liquor and waking Mommy up from all the stumbling in the kitchen.

Then one night you’ll hear screaming and swearing and the sound of shattered glass. Then you’ll hear someone gets slapped. It grows quiet but you’ll run downstairs because you’re confused. Mommy will say, “Daddy’s just upset, sweetheart. Go to your room, sweetheart. Go draw me a picture of a castle. You love castles, don’t you sweetheart?” You wonder why she has scrapes and why she is being so brave. Tell her to not be so brave.

You’ll learn that castles aren’t for fairy tales. You’ll learn that castles can hold people prisoners and that the princess isn’t always rescued. You’ll ask fewer questions but wonder more. Eventually you’ll stop dancing and drawing altogether, and you’ll begin to write because words are all you have.

JESSICA PEARSE

One morning you'll see flashes of red and blue outside the living room window, but you'll refuse to draw back the curtains to see anything more. You hear a couple of men at the door speaking with Dad about his "rights" and Mom about calling a lawyer. You don't speak or ask anything anymore because Mom's face said everything. Tell her to be brave. Oh, for God's sake, say something. Don't ask, just say.

After that morning you'll move to an apartment on 3rd St. with Mom and attend high school and prom and English club. You'll visit him only through plated glass and you'll only be allowed ten minutes at a time to tell him to get better. You'll tell him how easily he could change and move back in and you'd help him through, and so would Mom, but you weren't sure about the Mom part. You'll learn to compromise.

At the commencement ceremony, you'll graduate with honors but you'll keep wondering why he didn't try harder to get out and see you. You'll get a call that day saying he was rushed to the hospital and you'll rush to see him because you still see something in him. You'll pray because words are all you have.

When you walk through the door to his room, play Frank's "The Way You Look Tonight" in your mind. You will remember how Daddy took your hand, how you would use his feet as your feet, his steps as your steps, his hands as your heart, and before you step back in time to the harmonies and melodies and beautiful days of dancing as Daddy's little girl the needle in your mind will scratch off the record and end the song. Beyond the coldness of the air and the colorless walls and the IV drip and Dad's old blue eyes, you will hear your voice telling him it is time to get real help, and you will hear his voice telling you he is sorry. Sorry for going to war, sorry for that last night, sorry for the alcohol and missing graduation and the severed memories and hollowed hearts. You say you're sorry for pretending to see none of it. You'll wonder if he's still strong enough to keep promises and mend the scars. You'll wonder if he'll ever learn to dance again.

JACQUELINE KIRKPATRICK

GIRLS IN MY TOWN

Girls in my town get knocked up by the river in the backseats of Camaros and the beds of Nissan pickups. They cling to the salvation promised over the tops of their Buds and Gennys. They don't have to sneak back in at sunrise cause no one's home and no one cares anyway. They open the door that no one bothered to lock and walk down the hallway to the dirty bathroom and wipe the night off their faces.

If the night was good, meaning, if someone told the girls they loved them then they might feel good too. When girls in my town feel good they try to be good. They will get dressed and wake up their siblings that share their beds and help them get ready for school. No one wants to go to school but they have to because it's a guaranteed meal.

From the first of the month until around the ninth there will be no tears, no screaming, and no fighting. In my town, the first of the month means eating at least once a day. From the first of the month until around the ninth, the girls in my town, if the night before was good, might make their siblings some toast before trying to get to the bus on time. Sometimes, the girls in my town have to pray to Jesus that their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) will get home to bring them all in to school because they missed the bus again.

When the mothers (and sometimes their fathers) don't come home in the morning and they miss the bus, the girls in my town do what they have to do. They call up the creepy, older guy that has stalked them since they were about nine years old. Every girl in my town has one creepy, older guy who has made her feel just a little off by lingering hands on her arms, or making compliments about her body.

I know what you're thinking. She thinks it too. It's disgusting. She gets what she deserves. But girls in my town take care of their little brothers and sometimes their little sisters too. Only sometimes because when little sisters start to bleed, start to get knocked up by the river, start to come home at sunrise, they become competition. Little sisters are tricky in my town.

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The creepy, older guy always answers his phone. He picks up before the second ring. He immediately knows who it is. He addresses the caller by name and sometimes adds a honey, a baby girl, and says be right over.

He gets there in seven minutes. In my town you can get everywhere in seven minutes. He'll wait outside, revving his engine. He wants everyone to know he's picking her up. He's helping out. What a great guy.

Girls in my town send their siblings out first. She tells them to be nice to him. He reaches over, opens the passenger door, and shoves the seat forward letting the siblings pile into the back. The siblings talk nonstop. Sometimes the little sisters understand what's going on, if they have just started to bleed, or if they listen real closely to his breath when he makes eye contact with them in the rear view mirror, but girls in my town don't listen real closely. They smile back. Girls in my town always smile back.

Sometimes just as the girls in my town step out of the screen door onto the porch and begin making their way to the creepy, older guy's Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) get dropped off. They will thank the creepy, older guy for helping them out and their mothers will look at their daughters with jealousy and contempt, because daughters are tricky in my town.

The ride to school will take seven minutes and most of the ride will be the chatter of the siblings. They won't see it from the backseat but his right hand, when not shifting his Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, will be on her thigh. She doesn't mind it too much.

He drops them off across the street from the school. She gets out, shoves the seat up and the siblings pile out onto the sidewalk. Her friends are there waiting for her. They can't smoke on school grounds, so they smoke here and wait until the final bell rings. The creepy, older guy smiles at them all and burns out in front of them in his Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, and they all laugh. She tells her siblings to have a good day and they race across Main Street to the school because they want to get to the cafeteria before it closes for breakfast. They like to save the morning apple juice or orange juice in their coat pockets for after school.

They will lie to their friends about what happened at the river. They can't have Amy, or Brandy, or Lindsey, and definitely not Tonya, knowing that Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, and definitely not Patrick, doesn't give a shit

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because then they will slip Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, and definitely Patrick a note before last period and ask them if they want to meet down at the river. Friends are tricky in my town.

At lunch time the girls in my town piss on sticks in the bathroom waiting for the lines to appear. One line means no. Their friends smoke cigarettes with the window open sitting on the ledge of the sinks waiting for the results. Sometimes they are nervous, but mostly they are jealous. Pregnancy means someone loves you in my town.

When their water breaks they call Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, or maybe Patrick, but they don't answer. They haven't answered since the two lines appeared in the bathroom at lunch time. Then they have to pray to Jesus that their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) will get home in time to bring them to the hospital. When the mothers (and sometimes their fathers) don't come home in the morning the girls in my town do what they have to do. They call up the creepy, older guy and ask if he'll drive. He gets there in seven minutes. He waits outside, revving his engine. He wants everyone to know he's picking her up. He's helping out. What a great guy.

Girls become mothers who don't come home at night in my town. They are in the backseats of Camaros and the beds of Nissan pickups clinging to the salvation promised over the tops of their Buds and Gennys. They don't have to sneak back in at sunrise cause no one's home and no one cares.

They get dropped off by creepy, older guys in their Camaros, sometimes Nissan pickups. If it is the first of the month until around the ninth, and the night was good, meaning, if someone told them they loved them they might smile at their children, say good morning, blow a kiss, and wish everyone a nice day. They will thank the creepy, older guy for helping them out and their daughters will look at them with jealousy, and contempt, because mothers are tricky in my town. They open the door that no one has bothered to lock and walk down the hallway to the dirty bathroom to wipe the night off their faces.

Girls in my town who become mothers will walk back down the hallway to the living room. On a ripped, stained, and spring-less couch they will stay all day drinking their Buds and Gennys yelling drunken obscenities at Channel 13. When the sun sets and their children have left with their

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friends, or are asleep in their shared beds, the girls in my town who become mothers drink orange juice or apple juice that they find in the pockets of their children, and call Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, or maybe Patrick to pick them up and go down to the river.

ED TAYLOR

RUMPLESTILTSKIN

Someone here to see you, an intern had said, raising his eyebrows and lifting his arms to make a shark mouth, biting. Now that they're "interns," instead of apprentices, they do what they want—like children, Giorgio thought, shrugging and moving from the bench toward the door suddenly filled with a shadow. *Il grande squalo bianco*.

A green and white ambulance filled the Venetian alley behind the shadow, two other thick men standing beside it in dark suits without ties. No siren but the lights still flashed; an odd thing, the mixed signals. The vehicle squatted heavily on its tires: armored, Giorgio noted, his heart beating harder for a few seconds. This big man introduced himself, and asked if there was a place to talk. Giorgio raised his hands and looked around at the big space, shrugged, made a face. A place more private, the man said. Others kept doing what they were doing but followed the two with their eyes as Giorgio and the big man moved toward the tiny room with a desk, a couch, and a door, Giorgio with his sailor's wobble and the other as if on rails.

That meeting is why Giorgio now stares out over Abu Dhabi from the wall of windows, watching, the night and the lights in it equally vague, unsettled. Maybe the tall pricking spikes of buildings made the night restless, he thinks, as if talking to one of his grandchildren. He sighs.

In response to Giorgio's first question, the big man had said: I often travel by ambulance. It saves time. The big man had laughed: I also can lie down when I need to.

The big man continued with a slight shrug, his black silk suit shiny and wet looking.

I am here in search of true blue.

True blue, Giorgio repeated, frowning.

I want a stable, consistent, indisputably blue, blue firework. More specifically, a blue firework in the shape of a rose. A group of acquaintances

ED TAYLOR

and I have made a wager concerning who will produce one first. It is a race. I would like to bet on you. Are you interested in participating.

Giorgio laughed. He gestured at his office, his apron, using his dirty hands, and shrugged again.

The man smiled.

I will pay you whatever you like. I will pay it twice. Once for the work leading up to it, and an equivalent amount if we win. This is your chance to—here the man also gestured, smiling, with one hand—buy new furniture.

Giorgio kept his face as still as he could, but: blue. It always evaded him, and everyone else. Everyone.

If you agree, there is a condition.

Which is.

Solitary confinement, the big man said laughing, and shrugged. I want your undivided attention, and so, no family or friends, no contact with the rest of the world, and nothing but work until the game is over, one way or another.

Giorgio frowned, and stood behind the desk.

You are serious.

As the Americans say, serious as a heart attack. No joke. True that. Feel me. I want total devotion for the length of the project, remembering, of course, that you'll be—well, well paid sounds insultingly unspecific.

Giorgio raised his eyebrows—a blue rose.

Yes.

Giorgio watched the big man not moving, the big face smooth, well cared for, healthy, his teeth white, tongue in glimpses pearly like the best veal, the whole package the best of genes and money. The eternal kinds of power.

You will be comfortable, and have everything you need, but you will spend your time solely devoted to this project. That's my requirement. In return, I pay you for the inconvenience. I must regretfully also say that I will need your answer now and if you say yes, you will leave straight from here to the facility I have set up for you.

I can't do the work in my own studio.

ED TAYLOR

No. The big man's flat impassive, face became even stonier, but in an odd, neutral way, simply an effect, chosen—he half smiled: in order to ensure focus and to control at least most of the possible variables, I will require you to work in my space, certainly with your input for modifications, should you agree to the discomfiture.

Big word. Giorgio half-smiled.

The big man laughed, moved each gimbaled shoulder in an athlete's absent-minded testing and stretching of parts, abstract and automatic. The man wasn't a shark, but a cat.

Giorgio's eyes wandered from the man to the room and to the window through which his cavernous studio was visible, those in it lazily moving from station to station, working on standard municipal programs for feast days, holidays, the biggest weddings, corporate parties, football matches.

I'm afraid I must say no. Con rispetto, Giorgio added.

The big man slipped a phone from his pocket, looked down and tapped it, held it out for Giorgio to see. It was a shot from the foot of Giorgio's bed, with moon through the window on the two hills of himself and Giulia.

Scratching his nose and pursing his lips, the man aimed his eyes and smiled. I am not dangerous. But—here he raised his chin and pursed his lips—I am persistent. And I hate to lose.

Giorgio had thought, looking back at the big man, that sin might be not something you did, but something that happened to you.

Now Giorgio leans his forehead against the high cool glass, closing his eyes on the spikes of weird city around and below, stretching to the pewter of the night sea. Whatever ocean it is. He's forgotten. He is old.

He strains to look back into the new dark studio provided by the big man; he might finally need to get glasses. He'd refused for twenty years, seeing double unless he squinted, relying on memory, habit, and cues from others. But blurry is just blurry, no longer tiredness or bad light or small print. Smears of color are what he sees in his work. But no blue.

Since leaving Venice, Giorgio is unsure of the day. It has been possibly a week.

ED TAYLOR

The big man's voice on the phone Giorgio'd been given. A blue phone. Giorgio laughed when the handler gave him the phone. The workspace itself was blue in every shade.

Do you know the French artist Yves Klein. That's the blue. I want a Klein blue rose. That is your quest. The man's laugh strained out of the small thing in Giorgio's palm. Giorgio thought the man might be drunk.

Yes, I am drunk. Yves Klein blue. Ciao.

Light. Blue light. The emitters are copper compounds, plus a chlorine producer; copper acetoarsenite; copper chloride. There's light produced by heat, and cold light. Materials and skill, money, intuition, a feel for the finicky, temperamental copper, which becomes a gas, which burns too hot or too cold, pale, gone, another color, unstable at higher temperatures.

Weak blue, lilac, purple, pale blue and turned to green. Purity and purity—any traces of salts or other contaminants ruined colors. The purest coppers.

In the milky night outside the glass, from his high nest, Giorgio watches the bright blinking reds in the air, all around the city—aircraft warning lights. He remembered the night Giulia and he, still dating, climbed the thick brick villa wall of a Venetian businessman away in Russia or America, according to the friend who had discovered the place. Giorgio fell in love when he watched the way Giulia took her shoes off and aligned them next to the garden wall as if in a closet, then lifted her summer dress up to climb, to pull and cling to the vines you had to use to scale the stucco. Once in the other side's dark, they bent under trees and pressed through hedges toward an old pool, a tiled rectangle with grass at its edge, a place for bathing only in the old way. They stripped, and Giorgio remembered the red flares of her nipples in the black and white night, signals to the world. And he understood lipstick for the first time.

Red was easy, orange and red, yellow; flame colors, chemically simple.

Giorgio notices the new space smells like combat and lunch. Olive oil and accelerants, emitters. Meat. He walks from the long glass walls and wanders among the work tables, the little cities of glass and tubing, the pots and heat shields, and thinks about what money can do, and cannot

ED TAYLOR

do. When do they fade, the explosions of money, the patterns they burn in walls, faces, names.

Giorgio stands now in front of the black tablet computer with which he's been provided, but which he has not used since he arrived. He knows what he needs already, and he can't do anything else on the thing—it is monitored, and the rules require no distractions. He figures a younger person might find a way to send and receive messages, but possibly not. Giorgio imagines the dauntingly talented fill every level of the big man's operation or business or whatever the word was.

Giorgio doesn't need much sleep anymore, and since he's been in this place he catnaps, sleeping an hour or two and getting up as if simply interrupted, continuing a conversation or a thought. Controlling the burn is the problem and has been for the millennia that the Chinese and everyone have wrestled with blue.

Sapphire, blueberry, mold, cadaver. Blue in the world. The color of water, serenity, death. Giorgio has been burning and burning, using things he'd only heard of, dreamed of, and couldn't before afford. But nothing: nothing.

Pale blue, like ghosts: a few feet away the shade dissipates into the air. Giorgio has an assistant available, on the floor below this one. Assistants if necessary. Everything he could want: equipment banned for export, regulated, rare, for military use only. He has access to computing power so massive, so hungry and hot, the servers are above the Arctic Circle to remain feasibly cool, according to the big man, who calls once a day. And it is almost time.

Do you like art, the big man says when Giorgio picks up the phone and says pronto, as he does each time, an offering of formality, the maintenance of a diplomatic distance: one thing he can control, although he never thinks this, just does it.

Do you ever think of your work that way, the man asks.

Giorgio clears his throat: no.

What do you think art is.

Art is pictures.

You mean paintings.

Yes.

ED TAYLOR

The big man's large laugh forces itself through the tiny holes of the speaker, pinpricks in plastic. Force the world through a sieve because you can. That's what we do now. Bully things. Like children.

Giorgio feels sunken, pressed down. Why, he says, are you asking me these questions. Con rispetto, I need to get back to work.

I am fascinated by expertise.

Giorgio snorts. It's just work. You do it until you get good. Whatever, playing the violin, painting, making a business. Making shoes.

Giorgio shrugs in the dark. I go to a work place every day, and I work. I have lunch. I work. I go home and have dinner. I have a glass of wine. I go to sleep. If you are a writer, you sit at a desk and write.

The big man laughs: that is like a concert violinist saying, to play, you pick up the violin and place it under your chin, then move the bow across the strings. Is that really the story.

Giorgio pauses. In a way, yes. It is in the doing. Everything else is just talking.

The call ends.

How does anyone ever do anything, Giorgio thinks. Colorants, Giorgio says in his head, trying to think of this as just work. A job. Color producer, oxygen producer, binder, fuel.

Giorgio wakes: the phone. Giorgio's heart stops, then starts. Stops, then starts.

Sorry for the surprise. How are things going.

Giorgio cannot decide: lie still and talk, or sit up, which is less humiliating. He decides to not move.

I have no news for you.

Ah. Do you know the Latin name for copper.

No.

Cuprum. Shortened from Cyprium, which means metal of Cyprus. During the Roman era it was principally mined there, and the Roman name is what stuck. But it has been mined around the world for thousands of years. In most European languages the name is a cognate of copper. In

ED TAYLOR

Italy you call it rame. Do you know where that comes from.

No.

It also comes from Latin, from the root aes. Which meant money.

Money.

The call ends.

Giorgio thinks of alchemy, art from charcoal and muddy oxides. Marble, a dull rock. But split, there is, maybe, fire. And fairy tales. Maybe magic. Tremotino, save me. He makes a face.

Where is the fire. Giorgio's hands shake as he holds a measuring spoon; he uses kitchen tools, which made the big man laugh. Just don't tell me you're superstitious, too, the man said.

Giorgio touches wood, makes offerings routinely and absentmindedly: you never know. Giorgio remembers seeing television about Africans who went to mass, then left to make sacrifices and dance in masks, just to make sure. Giulia watched programs like that. She liked reading about traveling, liked meeting people, liked parties. He didn't. She called him her snail, slow moving and happy in his shell.

Something spills. Giorgio curses, softly, powder scattered over the worktable. It's harder and harder to keep his hands from betraying him. The phone.

Pronto.

In Egypt, there have been two weeks of rioting.

I would not know. Why.

Protests, unhappiness, sectarian violence. Some say outside agitators. Some even say a mysterious single person is behind it, a foreigner. And today, a coup. So tonight there is a big celebration. The streets are packed. And there are fires. The world is watching, cameras are everywhere. And over the square, higher than everything, there was a blue rose. A deep true blue. A rose. A rose. A rose.

Giorgio remembers trees after rain, dust washed away, blinking and glittering in sun, slowly, the earth speaking, every day.

Now, at the edge of his hearing he hears, pulsing like a heart, a siren.

ED TAYLOR

Slowly swelling, the sound, louder and louder, waves that keep coming as they do in the sea, they just keep coming. And ninety stories below on the street, as he stands now at the windows, he sees an ambulance.

I lost. The big man stares at him, in the ambulance, with doors like wings.

Giorgio said, I'm sorry. Inside hollowed, then words came.

Where am I going, Giorgio asked.

To meet your wife, the big man said, finally.

JOSHUA BRITTON

THE AUDITIONER

Forget about the thousands of hours of practicing. Forget about the bachelor's degree, the master's degree, the performer's certificate. Definitely forget about the GPA. Forget about the summer festivals, the symposiums, the master classes. None of that matters once I step onto the stage. I have an idea who's sitting there, twenty rows back, behind a black screen, though I won't know for sure unless I win. They have no clue who I am. They don't know whether I'm a guy or a girl, whether I'm nineteen or forty-six, whether I went to a prestigious conservatory or to a state school, whether I aced or flunked my twentieth-century theory class. To them I'm just a number, say, twenty-seven, out of eighty. They might speak to me but I can't speak back. If I have a question I whisper it to the proctor. Then it's horn to mouth.

Take this highly coveted job: a \$36,000 salary for playing second trombone with a full-time symphony orchestra. I can drive to Jacksonville in a day, so I don't have an excuse not to take the audition. Check-in is at eight o'clock, auditions start at nine. In the hotel I'm too jacked up to get a good night's sleep and barely get three hours. I take a freezing cold shower and chug Red Bull and Mountain Dew. I listen to Mahler, loud. Mahler Five is on the rep list. I listen to Shostakovich Seven. It's not on the list, but it pumps me up. I may never get to play Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, but if I even want a chance, I'll need a job like this.

Sometimes, at check-in, the personnel manager is very friendly, as if she assumes she's going to be working with each candidate who comes to the audition. This guy isn't rude, but he doesn't try to make friends.

"You can warm up here if you have a practice mute," the personnel manager says as I check in. "But please don't play otherwise because it will bleed into the concert hall. Fifteen minutes before it's your turn I will bring you to a private room and you can play there."

"Do you know how many people are auditioning today?" I ask.

"You're the thirteenth to arrive," he tells me. "We're expecting seventy."

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There are more people here than there were for the Coast Guard Band job, and that has a higher salary with better benefits.

I have about an hour and a half before I get called in. I don't have a practice mute so I'll have to get by with buzzing on the mouthpiece. I look around. After so many auditions, I've started to see some of the same people. I've decided I don't want to talk to them. I don't need to know if they've gone to a better school than me, if they have a higher degree than mine, or if they already have a regular playing job and are here looking for an upgrade.

Some are wearing suits and ties, while others are wearing jeans. I used to wear a suit and tie. It finally struck me as pointless, though. The committee doesn't know what I'm wearing. The personnel manager does, but he doesn't have any say. After a few auditions, I decided it was more important to be comfortable than to impress the personnel manager. I don't strip down to shorts and flip-flops, but I've settled on khakis with a collared shirt.

The rep list only has twelve excerpts on it. The personnel manager tells us which five will be asked in the first round: Mozart, Mahler, Saint-Saens, Bolero, and The Ride. I feel good about all of them except The Ride. The Ride gives me fits.

Once the tenth candidate finishes, the committee confers and relays the message, by way of the personnel manager, that nobody from the first group of ten will move on to the second round.

My turn to use the private practice room has arrived and I decide to play through all five excerpts. I take too long with the Mozart. I don't finish Bolero. I don't even get to The Ride.

The personnel manager ushers me out of the practice room, down the hallway, and onto the stage. There is a long carpet I need to walk on so the panel won't be able to tell whether or not I'm wearing high heels. The music is waiting for me on the stand but I'll use my own copies.

I look around the hall, huge, empty, and gorgeous. I see the big black screen in the middle of the orchestra level. There could be three people behind it. There could be ten. I play the solo from Mozart's Requiem. It goes all right, though I flub the high A flat. Then I play the three passages from Mahler Five. I hear my sound bounce off the back of the concert hall,

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and, after the third passage in particular, my reverb tells me I'm not good enough yet.

"Thank you," someone says from behind the screen.

I look at the personnel manager. He avoids eye contact but stands up to escort me offstage. I follow him. I'd been on stage for less than five minutes. Forty minutes later I learn that I, too, won't advance to the second round.

We win orchestral jobs. We may be hired for a gig, but positions in an orchestra are won.

I figure my chances for the Syracuse audition are better because the salary is nearly \$10,000 less than Jacksonville's. I still avoid small-talk with the other candidates, but they talk among themselves loud enough for me to hear. One guy is from Julliard. One is from Eastman. There is a contingent from the New England Conservatory, and one each from the Cleveland Institute of Music and from Curtis. It hadn't occurred to me that Syracuse is in the middle of Prestigious Music Conservatory Central.

Someone asks me where I'm from. "Oh, well, that's pretty good, too," he says after I tell him.

I play four excerpts this time—Lohengrin, Saint-Saens, Bolero, and Till – before getting sent home.

There are horror stories I suspect are true. I heard of a trombonist at a Philadelphia audition who only got a few measures into the Tannhauser Overture before the principal oboist came out from behind the screen and got in his face, screaming at him for offending his ears. I heard of a committee who couldn't decide between two finalists, so they put both on stage and asked them to take turns playing the excerpt from Also Sprach Zarathustra over and over until one of them missed a note. I've heard of major orchestras inviting over a hundred trombonists to audition, listening to them for three days, and deciding none of them are the right fit. This can go on for years. Then the orchestra goes on tour in Australia, finds a trombonist it likes, holds a private audition so the union can't file a grievance, and offers him the job.

I'm optimistic about Huntsville. The Huntsville Symphony is a part-time

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per-service orchestra with no benefits, so it shouldn't draw the numbers that the full-time orchestras do. And Alabama is a long way from the biggest classical music hubs. It is surprising, then, that while checking in I'm told the orchestra is expecting eighteen trombonists to audition for the spot I have my eye on. Both the women's and men's dressing rooms are made available to all of the candidates. The men's dressing room is crowded, so I head for the women's. There are two people in there. One of them is a young guy, an undergrad or maybe even a high school student. He is playing Bach when I walk in and he sounds terrible. My confidence shoots up.

The other is a woman, also young, but maybe a master's student. As I'm putting my horn together she asks where I'm from, and in turn she tells me that she's from San Francisco.

"You flew from San Francisco for this?" I ask.

"I subbed with the orchestra last night," she says. "They pay travel and comp a hotel room. It's very convenient that the audition is the same weekend." Who knew Huntsville is so flush with cash?

Apparently, she goes on to inform me, the orchestra performed an amazing program the night before which included Respighi's Pines of Rome and Roman Festivals. For both pieces, they needed three extra trombones. The principal and bass trombonists in the orchestra come from San Francisco, and they were able to get their friends at the San Francisco Conservatory hired and flown out, entirely at the expense of the orchestra. Since they are here anyway, all three are auditioning for the job.

On stage I play the Mozart, La Gazza Ladra, and Mahler Five, but before I get to the Saint-Saens and The Ride, I hear the dreaded, "Thank you," from behind the screen.

I'm sent home. Guess which three candidates advance to the second round?

There's no simple solution. It's more than a two-step process. More face time is needed, yes, but I need more of everything.

I need to record myself more. I need to videotape myself more. I need to read essays in the Trombone Journal about practicing and audition

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preparation. I need to take lessons from the greats, the ones who charge a hundred dollars for a lesson, or the ones in New York who charge two or three hundred. I need new books of etudes, warm-up methods, breathing exercises, lip slurs, approaches to audition excerpts. I need a new mouthpiece. I need a new trombone.

I need to work harder and longer. There is also the Doctor of Musical Arts path, but some joke that DMA stands for “Didn’t Make Audition.”

The Pittsburgh Opera is holding an audition for principal trombone. I’ve shied away from opera and ballet auditions because the repertoire is very different. There’s always Wagner, of course—The Ride and Tannhauser are asked often enough—but half of the excerpts on the Pittsburgh rep list I’ve never worked on before. I’m betting that’s true for a lot of other trombonists, though, and that it would turn a lot of them off, upping my chances. Still, more than twenty show up for the audition.

I wouldn’t stand a chance with the Lyric or Met Operas, but the Pittsburgh Opera is part-time. It’s within driving distance of a lot of those great conservatories, but I’m playing better than I ever have and I think I can hold my own. Besides, I’ve been told a thousand times that the best player doesn’t necessarily win, but whoever plays the best on that particular day. And I’m good enough. I can win. Hard work trumps talent, supposedly.

I’m the second one to go in. I play the concerto. Then I play the “Hungarian March” and the excerpt from act II of *The Magic Flute*. That’s an obscure one, and I was hoping it wouldn’t be asked, but it goes ok. Then I play Tannhauser. I was told ahead of time that the preliminary round would end there, but then someone behind the screen asks me to play *La Gazza Ladra*.

The personnel manager says they must’ve liked me. He tells me that the panel will hear every candidate before deciding whether or not there will be a second round, and, if so, who will advance. I walk around the city for two hours before getting a text message from the personnel manager telling me that I was not selected to advance.

I’d never before been asked to play something extra, though, so I’m encouraged.



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Thousands of hours and thousands of dollars later, my next audition will be my fifteenth. San Diego has a full-time position open, but it's on the other side of the country so I opt to go with the part-time Orlando second trombone position and its directly conflicting audition date. I might make \$9,000 in one season with Orlando. Two weeks after the Orlando audition is a Memphis audition, also second trombone. The Memphis job is advertised as a full-time gig, but the salary is only \$11,000 with minimal benefits. Apparently, several other smaller gigs unofficially come with the job, so I might be able to bump the salary up to \$20K. That would be pretty good.

The two audition rep lists are similar. The Orlando list is shorter, making it almost like a trial run for Memphis.

I go to work. I'm practicing up to eight hours a day. I'm recording almost everything and listening back. I've taken lessons and have gotten friends together so I can play for an audience. I've fixed on a new mouthpiece, a new slide lubricant, a new warm-up method, and an entirely new thought-process I'm trying to train myself to utilize involuntarily once I'm on location. For the day of, I even have a new breakfast routine.

I've listened to dozens of recordings of all of the pieces on the list. Mahler Two is almost an hour and a half long, but I can sing it from start to finish without interruption.

It's early but I refuse to drink anything caffeinated. In the communal rehearsal room I keep my back to the other candidates, and, as unselfconsciously as possible, go through my new and improved forty-five minute warm-up routine. I try not to let it bother me that twenty people still showed up to audition for a part-time job, including one guy who won't shut up about how great it is at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

I time my warm-up to end approximately twenty minutes before I get called in, giving me time to rest so I'll be fresh and at my best for the performance of the first round excerpts. When I'm next, I am moved out of the communal room into a private room. I play a few more notes to make sure my lips are still working, and then I do some deep breathing exercises. I've never been better prepared.

Then I'm called onto the stage of the concert hall where a music stand is

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waiting for me, with the excerpts displayed on it, and a black screen twenty rows back hiding who knows how many members of the orchestra.

First I am asked to play the opening movement of the concerto. This is my chance to show off my musicianship. I'm in the zone. My note accuracy is flawless. The push and pull of phrases is exaggerated but organic. My louds are loud and my softs are soft. I'm so musical I impress myself. I look forward to performing the concerto with the entire orchestra backing me up and the concert hall filled to capacity.

I play the Berlioz, a loud and technical excerpt, and I nail it. They won't even need the rest of the trombone section for that piece; I can play big enough for three.

I begin to wonder if it would be ethical to win this job and then turn it down two weeks later when I win the Memphis job. I wonder if it will be possible to do both.

The Mahler is next, and again I'm picturing myself at the head of the low brass. Earlier I noticed this piece is scheduled to be performed during Orlando's upcoming season and already I'm excited about it. There's no composer I want to play more than Mahler.

Third is the solo from Mozart's Requiem, which will be followed by Bolero and The Ride. The opening fanfare of the Mozart goes all right, but I have response issues with the first lyrical line. My mouth is dry. I never thought to bring a bottle of water out on stage with me. There is a fermata over the rest and I take an extra-long pause trying to garner enough saliva to coat my mouth and tongue. Finally I have to go on; it's already the longest pause in the history of the solo. There are more flubs, more response issues, more missed notes.

"Thank you," I hear from behind the screen.

I walk off the stage with my heart in my stomach, leaving Bolero and The Ride behind.

I pack up my horn, my books, and my excerpts. I take everything out to the car. I come inside and sit by the door for an hour, watching candidate after candidate go in to audition and come back out. I study their faces to determine how they think it went.

The personnel manager announces that there will be a second round.

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The guy from Cleveland advances. I do not.

This one hurts more than any yet. There are two weeks before the Memphis audition. I'm not sure I want to take it after all. If I do, I'll have to get to work.

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THE LAUNDROMAT STORY

You're here again. Our laundry day always seems to coincide. As if a conspiracy. Or maybe we work similar shifts. But here we are. We nod at one another, slight acknowledgement. I wonder who you are. You seem adrift, as I am. Unmoored, without an anchor, in the midst of these prairies.

The machine I'm using shudders after its final spin. I haul my clothing out of it, dump it into a wire basket on wheels, scoot it to a dryer, toss my things in. Bras, panties, t-shirts. The history of this pink bra, the weariness of it, the wear of it, a safety pin securing a cup to a strap. These lacy, azure-blue panties, the nights in them, the nights out of them. This faded red t-shirt with a sailboat embroidered on it, memories of other times, happier times. I insert quarters into the coin slot and select Hi Temp. Click, click, click, and the tumble-thump of around and around, how it adds to the soothing din of others. Of yours.

Suds Laundry, wedged between a nail salon and a pawn shop. The people here. We all ignore one another as our intimates and other things soak, spin, whirl. But I observe, slyly. A guy in an Arby's uniform deftly folding tiny shirts, tiny pants as his glum twin tots punch one another. A teen couple, pseudo-desperados, the boy picking a scab on his elbow, the girl twisting a lock of her dyed-jet-black hair. I glance at you too. You, sitting so coolly, reading a paperback, licking a thumb to turn a page. What are your quirks? What is your hurt?

As usual, I check out the cork bulletin board, the fringed notices pinned to it. What's wanted. Daycare, roommates. What's unwanted. A bicycle, a rod and reel and tackle box. Here too is a rack of religious pamphlets with hints about salvation, with comical sketches of a gleeful devil and people boiling in brimstone. Sinners. Sinners needing a roommate. Sinners wanting to get rid of fishing gear.

It's pleasant here and pleasant matters. Suds isn't one of those modern laundromats I've been to in the Bay Area or Tacoma, one of those laundrolounges with a cappuccino bar and leather couches and hip music, all flash

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and chrome and cleverness, with a faux-Gaga attendant. Suds is spare and ordinary. A double row of plain white washers, a wall of dryers. A vending machine with little boxes of Tide, All, Cheer. And a plump matron with horn-rimmed specs who empties lint trays, puts abandoned miscellany in lost and found bins. Normal, nice. Nothing cool about this place in this wayside town in eastern Wyoming. What's cool about laundry anyway? Screw cool.

I sit in a wedge of sunshine, in an orange fiberglass chair bolted to the floor. The sun, a high prairie luster, floods the large windows, shines through the word SUDS, casts the shadows of the letters. S and U lie on the floor, D is in the dip of the chair adjacent to me, the final S is in my lap. I cup my hands, tilt the S in my palms, then let it drop, let it shatter across my knees.

The warmth and hum of the laundromat lull me, loosen my achy muscles. I shut my eyes. Screw cool, I think again. I've become leery of cool, if only because I was cool once upon a time. Scott's voice skims my brain. "You used to be cool, Alice," he said. "Now you're complicated."

It was an afternoon with edges, hardness. As if all objects had been whetted to a blade. Pillow, curtain, comb. "It's because of you," I said. "You've complicated me." I remember the cup of tea on the vanity, the curl of steam as if razor wire. I remember the zip of his suitcase, the metallic growl of it. "I want simplicity," he said as he hunted for stray items of his. A souvenir baseball, a chain link bracelet. The dolphin. He wants the dolphin? I remember thinking. The ceramic dolphin, one flipper chipped, that we found at a flea market. "And softness, Alice. Softness," he added as he turned away, as he banged his suitcase out the door and was gone. Yet Scott's love lingers in all the things he touched. Lamp, cutlery, faucet. And in me, my body.

I look at you again. Bone-slender, with sandy hair, pallid skin. Khakis, gray hoodie, red high-tops. I see who you're not. You're not Scott, all suddenness, a dark swoop, a raven. You're calm, unhurried. You tuck a bookmark into your paperback as your dryer buzzes, as your clothes collapse mid-whirl. You rise, check your things. One more quarter of dry. Twelve minutes. You sit again, delve again into your paperback. But you

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notice me looking at you and now you look at me and say, "Hello."

"Hello."

"I'm Gavin."

"I'm Alice."

"Nice to meet you."

"Why do people say that?"

"Pardon?"

"Nice to meet you."

"Habit. What else would you say?"

"True."

"Anyway, it is nice to meet you."

"Okay, then. You too."

You grin a genuine grin. Not a sneer, not a smirk. I want to ask about you, Gavin. Your journey, where you've come from. The how of you, the why. But instead, I say, "What's that book about?"

You shrug and say, "It's about this girl in her thirties. She's lost. Untethered, uncertain. She's gotten so far away from her suburban childhood, that when she thinks back, she wonders who that little girl was. Ballet class. Scout troop. Frilly, squeamish. Now she's a vagabond. Town to town, guy to guy. Out of touch with family. But it's not rebellion. It's only wanderlust. She's wandering around in her heart too."

The summary wraps around me, the words a straitjacket. I mutter, "Sounds interesting."

"I guess." Your eyes fall back to the book. "It's okay." Suddenly shy. Are you shy, Gavin?

Where I live was once a fancy hotel. Or so claims a tarnished plaque in the lobby. And there are sepia-tinted photos of old-timey stars of westerns and gangster films. Buxom vixens with plumed hats. Wiseguys in pinstripes and fedoras. Men with chaps and six-shooters and ten-gallon stetsons. Now the hotel is a boarding house, scarred, crumbling, mildewed. I shun the ancient elevator, its clank and jolt, and I climb the creaky stairs. In the dim and silence of my room, I breathe in the scent of chemical seabreeze as I dump my laundry on the bed, sort it, fold it. Here is Scott, in this shirt's

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buttons that he unbuttoned, in this bra's hooks and eyes that he unhooked. Not yet laundered out, yet a ghostliness in the seams. And I wonder. I wonder if that film cowboy in the lobby photos is in that moth-gnawed settee, if that voluptuous dame is in the roses of the wallpaper. We all leave traces.

A little snooze ticks the minutes of the afternoon. I dream lightly. Scenes. An extravagant tea party with an array of dolls. Pedaling a tricycle around the flagstone driveway. Shrill with glee as I win a ribbon for...for what? Momentous, vague. All in hues of cotton candy pink, the same pink of the dusk seeping in as I awake. I put on a purple v-neck jersey, black jeans, motorcycle boots. I line my eyes, color my mouth. I grab my canvas satchel and hurry to work, to Ruby's Oasis.

It's a saloon. Dim, dank, smoky. Pool tables, a vintage jukebox. A sanctuary of anonymity, a haven of loneliness. I tend bar and listen to guys' woes about girlfriends or ex-wives and I parcel out false sympathy. They're maudlin, gloomy, and it's always the same why, why, why. I never speculate for them. Maybe she... Maybe you... Anything would hurt them, any truth, any honest thought. But these guys aren't so bad after all. Their hearts too have been bruised. They're usually ranch hands who meander the prairies to find work. Or they're oddjob men who eke out an earning, here, there. Is that who you are, Gavin? Heart-mauled, heart-muddled?

If these guys want to flirt with me, that's fine. No harm in it, even if it's hapless, clumsy. I took one back to my room once, led him through the moonlit streets, six blocks. Clued him into my mood, made sure he understood the meaninglessness of the night. I don't want meaning anymore.

My bosses are twin brothers, nephews of Ruby's who inherited the saloon from her. They're brawnily gracious, graciously tough, cynical but kindly. I clerked at a TJ Maxx in Walla Walla, waitressed at an IHOP in Boise, but there was always some hardass boss, some bitchy tyrant with a clipboard and a clicky pen. Here is ease and no pressure, and the brothers deal swiftly with any trouble, any rowdiness.

It's a typical night. The clack of billiard balls syncopates against the blusey twang coming out of the jukebox. Lining the long bar of knotty, lacquered

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pine are exhausted men cooling their raw, calloused hands around pints of beer. A youngish guy in a workshirt smutched with oil, a mechanic?, sits alone at a table, circles help wanted ads in the local gazette, knocks back shots of whiskey. A trio of rodeo gals in straw cowboy hats and big trophy buckles whoops and laughs around a pitcher of draft and a bowl of pretzels. No one is from here, no one will stay. I've listened. L.A. Wisconsin. Knoxville. Always elsewhere in their minds, in their mouths. Six months, eight months tops, I told myself. That was a year ago.

Another week loops around and it's laundry day again. I gather scattered clothing that I've stepped out of or tossed aside, cram it into my mesh sack, trek to Suds. You're already here, hauling jeans and socks and boxers out of a machine, wheeling them to a dryer. I buy a box of Cheer, load a washer. "Hello," you say. "Alice? It's Alice."

"Yes. Hi. And you're Gavin." As if we have to assure one another of our identities. I settle into a chair and glance around. Here's the matron, vigilant sentinel. A young mother, frizzy, frazzled, in a batik broom skirt and black tank top, with a sullen child, a boy playing a game on a smartphone. Another young woman, my age, earbuds in her ears, and she nods angrily to the music, and she is tattooed, her anger inked on her neck, her arms. You sit now, close to me, and pull out your paperback. "Same," you say. "Same book. I don't have a lot of time to read. With my job and all."

I don't ask where you work, what you do. Because it doesn't matter. It'll do for now, won't it? Until you've saved up and can move on to somewhere else. I gesture at your paperback and say, "What's happening now?"

"So, okay. This main character has this boyfriend and they're okay together, at least not unhappy. And then one day, he says, 'I don't understand you, I don't understand any of this.' He accuses her of being a labyrinth. He tells her that he doesn't want twists and turns. So he moves out."

"He wants simplicity," I say as my heart shifts, seems to careen within my ribcage. Some writer has invented me. Maybe I'm fiction. I'm a story. "The boyfriend wants cool."

"Exactly."

"And what does she do after he leaves her?"

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“I don’t know. I haven’t gotten that far.”

I turn away.

I turn farther away.

I gaze at the bus depot across the street.

Silence becomes distance. Minutes create a chasm. Your dryer buzzes and you go to it. You don’t bother to fold anything, you fling it into your white plastic hamper. You sling your backpack onto your shoulder, angle the hamper to your hip. “Bye, Alice.”

My name seems a fiction. As does yours. “Bye, Gavin.”

Unfocused tonight, my prattle with the ranch hands is aloof, then steely, my mind seeming to snag, then skip. The night narrows and the saloon empties, my bosses gently coaxing out the one lingerer, a sixtyish woman in faded satin, loose sequins. I wipe the bar and the tables, tally the till and my tips. Twenty-three bucks, not bad. One final song oozes out of the jukebox. It’s a country ballad with wry and melancholy lyrics. I used to sort of enjoy such songs, but no longer. The heart doesn’t actually shatter. Or ache. It can’t be lost. Or found. It’s only a muscle with an electrical pulse and it continues to pump blood. It isn’t a metaphor. It isn’t a writerly thing.

I bid goodnight to the brothers and haul myself back to my room. Mini, microwave tacos, a glass of zin, a dip in the claw-footed tub. As soon as I flop into bed, sleep seeps in, and it is a flat sleep, flat as a prairie, but with little blips, flashes. Scott taking the ceramic dolphin. You tucking a bookmark into your paperback. Scott, the first time he ambled into Ruby’s Oasis, when he echoed my name, when he touched my wrist. And you. You again. I awake within the beautiful, menacing violet light of late morning.

I have no chores to accomplish today. I’ll take a stroll and think, not think. After a pot of bitter coffee, I set out. I wander streets at random. Brick buildings, abandoned, even the For Lease signs are weathered. But here’s a place where someone is defying the blight. A small French café. Troughs of geraniums. Gingham tablecloths, cane chairs. A chalkboard with today’s specials. Quiche, salade niçoise. I turn another corner, walk across the weedy parking lot of a Circle K, and now find myself on the street with the nail salon, the pawn shop, Suds, and the Greyhound depot. A bus is idling under an aluminum canopy and people are boarding, climbing the

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grooved steps into the murky interior.

And you're here, Gavin. You're in line to board. You have that paperback and you're reading it as the line inches forward.

A porter latches the cargo hatches as the final passenger gets on. The driver pulls the door shut and the bus rumbles away in a cloud of noxious exhaust. And what does she do after he leaves her? I don't know. I haven't gotten that far. I cross the street to the depot ticket booth, ask the destination of your bus. "Rapid City," says the cashier. I buy a ticket. I'll follow you, Gavin. I'll follow you and find out what happens.