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BRENT FISK

Bank and Trust

When I was ten, my mom worked at a bank twice a week in downtown Evansville. I went with her once, reluctantly, because my father wouldn't. She didn't like to go alone.

We waited in the car for the branch manager to bring her pay because they forgot her when the checks were cut. A rainstorm blew through and water dripped from the security lights and the ragged Christmas decorations that still hung from buildings and wires late into January.

The floorboard was littered with pennies, cellophane, the chewed caps from ink pens. Annoyed with the static, my mother snapped off the radio and sat shivering and quiet, biting her lip. She opened the window a crack, took a few drags off her cigarette, then dropped the butt onto the pavement for the wind to tumble across the asphalt. I scrunched beneath the smoke, and looked through the filmy windshield up through the branches of the crab apples at the lights in a squat, angular building. My mother drew in a deep breath and held it.

"You see that stairwell? That's where they found the body of a woman I worked with."

She did not look at me, but fiddled with the black plastic buttons of her coat.

"He got away. Her pantyhose were knotted around her throat. They never found her skirt."

I wanted to know why a man would do that to a woman, but didn't know how to ask.

Another cigarette flared to life, but she left the window sealed this time. The smoke spiraled away from her slender fingers. It wasn't the first time I noticed my mother's beauty, but I'd never sensed how fear fluttered at its edges like dark, ragged feathers.

For a long time after that I was afraid of stairwells, and the pale yellow lights that buzzed in them. I was afraid of the way a car could be shaken by winter, and the low moan of clouds that scrubbed the color from everything. I was afraid of bare branches against the night sky, and the shadowed movements of men who skulked through cities like large lost animals.

Her boss banged out a security door at the back of the bank, pulled his coat tight and passed an envelope to my mom as she rolled down the window.

"Sorry we forgot you," he said, and headed to his car.

She opened the envelope and looked at her check.

"Don't tell your father I told you, okay?"

She stuffed the envelope into her purse, put on her thin black gloves and then she took my hand. I was too old to hold hands, but I let her.

"Our secret, okay?" She squeezed my fingers.

"Our secret," I repeated, and then she let go.

She shouldn't have told me, but she did. We were waiting, her paycheck was late and small, and she had come to the end of something men never even have to learn the name of. I carry that with me everywhere I go, soft as my mother's voice, sharp as smoke on the skin.

BRETT BUSANG

Escape, Rescue, and Redemption: Unless You Had Something Else in Mind?

An inveterate house-cat, our Pretty Girl escaped one evening after a grueling Reiki session, in which my girlfriend and I were lulled by healing hands into a state of near-narcosis and were therefore not as sharp as we could have been.

After the session, we'd shopped for groceries and slogged them back to the car. (Add shopping-fatigue to a general symptom of uncoordinated bliss.) When we got home, my girlfriend—whose idea of hell's kitchen is to ascend the nearly perpendicular flight of stairs that connects our second-floor apartment to the outside world—went up and experienced that "little death" that is said to come after sex, but could be attributed, in this case, to a long, long day that had just begun to release her. That is to say, she was flat-out tired and had to lean against the door for a bit. I know the feeling. I was about to come up and do that myself. First, however, I had to point the car in a westerly direction and make sure it was safely housed in the off-street parking space I marvel at to this day. Almost everybody else on my block is obliged to risk the arbitrary justice of the meter maid—a profession too gently named for my money.

When I came to the front door, it was ajar because my girlfriend had put the groceries there, deciding it would be easier for me to just grab 'em without fishing for keys and opening the door first. As far as that goes, she was right. When I arrived, she said that one of the cats had been out on the stair—an unusual occurrence

that always bears mentioning—but she'd shooed him back in. We both got ready for bed as quickly as our complicated routines would allow and slept well.

The next day, when feeding-time rolled around, Pretty Girl, possibly the most housebound of all the cats we have adopted over the years, did not show up. Infamously gluttonous, Pretty could be counted on to arrive, like a rock-and-roll-crazed acolyte, at her feeding station before any of the others and wait her turn. But a cursory glance did not yield her. Nor did a thorough, and increasingly agitated, search.

After having dived into closets and scoured hidey-holes, I concluded that she, Pretty, had slipped out the front door before I was able to get to it. The timetable was fatally short. By the time my girlfriend had spotted the other cat, she, Pretty Girl, was gone. I quickly mobilized and made posters; put in obligatory calls; filed reports with local animal organizations. Such efforts appear, in retrospect, to be more tied to my own sense of helplessness than with any sort of pragmatic result. I cannot, for the life of me, imagine anybody being able to get near enough to this particular cat to describe, let alone capture, her. I was not, however, aware of the strategies runaway house-cats adopt in order to be reasonably safe and not too far from home lest they get a hankering to come back. And these are strategies. Cats may run away on impulse, but once they're "out there", they develop a plan.

I was naturally hoping that she'd not gone far. The animal communicators who were able to "check in" with her said as much. However, they could not offer the sort of concrete information a human subject might be able to provide.

Most communicators get imagery of one sort or another—often highly useful imagery that can suggest not only immediate whereabouts, but very specific places that would resonate with an owner who's neighborhood-savvy. I got a series of lean-tos and overhangs—places a cat with an interest in hiding-out

would naturally find. Lattice came up—a common feature in the neighborhood, but, alas, *too* common. Also: construction materials, raw concrete, a white house reached by an abrupt "fork" in the road—which couldn't have been anything else but an alley, a characteristic feature of our nation's capital.

Specific enough, these things, but, alas, much too ubiquitous in a neighborhood around whose periphery massive construction projects have been going up like weeds. Yet the desperate man takes whatever lead is given him, and I set out, during the day, with the cat carrier Pretty was not very likely to jump into; at night, a good, ragged-beamed flashlight was added to the repertoire, which drew no cat, but police-cars aplenty.

OFFICER: What are you doing there, sir?
ME: Uh, looking for a cat.
OFFICER: A cat?
ME: Yes, my cat ran away and I'm looking for her.
OFFICER: Well, okay, but you be careful.
ME: I will, officer. Thanks for your help.

Such uninspiring dialogue was the stuff of those first nights and days, when I was grasping for straws and stumbling around with that carrier. Yet I did learn a valuable lesson: when you talk to the cops, you keep it simple.

The night after Pretty's defection I took a somewhat desperate measure whose ripple-effects may yet endure.

Because we live on the second floor of a two-unit building, no ordinary cat has direct access to the front door; nor would he or she be able show an interest in it and be seen. So I decided I would spend the night out on the porch. There were certain risks, the least of which involved predatory persons who might wish to snatch away a beloved personal item, or forget about the stuff and go at the person himself. I ran a much greater one with

a landlady who'd thrown down the gauntlet when I'd had the temerity to suggest that thuggish workmen were sassing me and my girlfriend. We have spoken to each other, since that time, in monosyllables—or through the property management company she enlisted to keep us in line.

I used to enjoy sleeping outside. Gone were the constraints of roof and ceiling; of brotherly surveillance, parental control. I was alone with the elements—and such wandering things as intercepted me as I slept or fidgeted. I hardly ever woke up refreshed, but I felt I'd bucked the system, kept it real, got in touch with something rare and deep.

I didn't necessarily expect to recapture these soil-bound feelings, being exposed, on the one hand, to the rapacities of the night and on the other to a landlady's possible outrage. But I will admit to being thoroughly uncomfortable. The sullen night air made the mind woozy and the flesh stink. My senses were gratuitously sharp. Cars whooshing by, people pretending not to stare as they hurried past, dogs barking: these things had a throbbing heartbeat that got inside of me and stuck around. Nor was it possible to relax with a slab of concrete underneath my butt and the glare of a porch-light searing my eyeballs.

My mission, however, focused me as it kept my sense of martyrdom in check. I was there *for her*. If I saw Pretty, I could lure her home. At the very least, she would know I cared enough to be close. I called out to her now and then—an audible postcard she might catch on the wind. By the wee hours she had no doubt found her lean-to and was resting. As I could not.

Sometime in the pre-dawn hours, I received the verbal equivalent of a rap on the knuckles and went bolt upright. So I *could* fall asleep! How about that?

The landlady had said my name. Not good. I looked her way. She had been looking my way much longer.

"This is no good, for you to be sleeping like this."

"Oh. Oh. Oh," I said, with an attempt at inflection.

"This is unacceptable, for you to be sleeping out on porch. The girls. . .they will come here and you will scare them."

She meant our fellow tenants, fearless young women who would have stepped over me coldly, if regretfully. My landlady believed in outdated notions of the fair sex—or pretended to in order to feel outrage at me for having sullied her dominions.

Blind instinct told me I should probably rise, if not shine, so I got up and wandered around to the back. Since I had no reason to be there, I found nothing in particular to do, so I wandered forward into a scene that had gotten much livelier since I'd left. There were two patrol cars out front and four anxious policemen who were probing the area with flashlights.

When I arrived, one asked me, reasonably enough, who I was.

I said I was probably the guy they were looking for. It was not enough for my landlady to find, and tongue-lash me; she needed the sort of closure only an irritated officer of the law could provide.

"You were the guy who was out here?"

"Yes, I was."

"You really shouldn't be out here."

Give it to a cop to add nuance.

"I lost my cat this evening. I thought she still might be close by."

"So you were here for a cat."

"Yes. Yes, I was," I said.

One of his colleagues expressed, without resorting to language, the world-weary disbelief of his kind. His shrug spoke volumes. *You get a call, you come out. But some people are just pathetic. Spending the night out here for a cat? Could anything be sadder?*

"She's very security-conscious," I added, alluding to the landlady—of whom that could most definitely be said.

"Just don't do it anymore, okay?"

"I won't," I said, having already moved on.

"She said he was spying," said one cop, who wasn't quite done.

"Yeah. Spying," huffed another, who failed to discern undercover intentions in the ragged person who was trying very hard not to yawn.

"There *are* some young ladies in the apartment underneath."

"Oh."

"Come on. He's looking for his cat. I believe him."

(*He believes me! He believes me!*)

"I like cats," said *my* guy.

"I do too."

"I'm more of a dog person myself."

"Too much maintenance."

"Yeah, like YOU!"

"The lady said you were out here spying," said a heretofore silent partner, offering me a *raison d'etre* that was elegantly suspicious.

"He's no spy. Even I can tell that."

I wasn't spy material. I would not resent that till the following afternoon.

"You'd better go in," somebody said.

"Can't be easy to sleep out in this," said somebody else.

By "this" one of my protectors meant the unmediated humidity, which had been causing lapses of judgment in a population that was otherwise super-alert.

It was nearly light out by the time they left. I went back inside, trailing my bedroll. Pretty hadn't shown. Her adventure was still fresh and new. Now that she had stepped into the outside world, why would she want to crawl back into a crowded apartment?

When you're looking for something, you find all sorts of people who want to help you—or want to waste your time in the guise of helping you. Yet, in addition to re-affirming the goodness of human nature, well-meaning strangers add life. Their warmly human dimension provides a counterweight to the solitary core of

any search that hasn't quite evolved into a rescue.

After I'd brought in a pet detective—yes, there are those—I was instructed to hit neighboring alleys. Her dogs had picked up Pretty's scent in one, so I went back to that and started calling out to her. She knew both my voice and her name; by combining them seductively, I might succeed where the dogs had failed. Yet when you search *vocally*, other hearing organisms are invited into your private yearning. After just an hour, I had tripped every canine alarm system in the neighborhood. You know how that goes. One goes off, then another; finally, every dog within a five-mile radius is barking its bloody head off. A keening schnauzer led the locals, though among the schnauzerian accents I could discern dobermanish brays and pug-style squawking. The neighborhood's admirable acoustics allowed for a purity of volume that is often heard, but seldom so well-expressed. It was only a matter of time before a neighbor saw me.

As I squeezed through fences, hopped over small barriers, and poked my head into things I shouldn't have, I had become a trespasser. "Pretty. . .Pretty. . .you there?" *Ruffruffruf. Ruttaruttarutta. Rugrug.* A distinctively human voice stopped me as I poked through the ruins of a potting-shed. It came from a second-floor aerie I'd often noticed while walking my dog. In my less-than-casual duds, I could have been a homeless person smelling out a crib. I had to radiate respectability. I trotted out the demeanor I often use when around people who think I might have gone off my meds and am hearing voices again.

"I'm looking for a runaway cat. The pet detective said I should start in this area."

"The pet what?"

"Detective. Yes, I know. I'd ask the same question."

"You're looking for a cat?"

"Yes. Seen one?"

"Only ours. And he stays inside."

"I know it must look like. . .I could very well be somebody who isn't looking for a cat. But why would I be making such a racket? Or promoting one?"

Now that I had him thinking, it was time to be gracious.

"I'll be out of your way very soon. I'm here because the dog went right up to this place. I mean, right up to it. If you were looking for a cat and a cat-sniffing dog had done what this dog did. . .wouldn't you be here yourself?"

When I was done talking, I considered making a bee-line on outta there, but when you run away, you inspire alarm. No amount of self-exoneration erases the image of a fleeing body. So when I left, I did it with a leisurely *sangfroid* by which I hoped to suggest that my involvement with a pet detective was strictly circumstantial and had no effect on necessary motor skills. The weeds were high, chunks of concrete made progress difficult, but I was able to separate myself from the area—and with an oafish grace that is rarely, under similar circumstances, shown.

My neighbor wished me well as I flung brambles aside and ran roughshod over a picket fence. As she left, she said something to someone I couldn't see. Something on the order of needing a security light out there.

Later on that day, as I was putting up the third edition of a poster that needed, as I was told, to offer reward money, a man in a wheelchair stopped to study Pretty's picture, which was, all things considered, an excellent likeness.

"You're looking for a cat?"

"Yes, I am."

"What kind is it?"

"A tabby. With white paws. She's been missing since yesterday."

"A tabby? With white paws?"

When some people repeat what you've said as a question, you want to hit them. This guy was just making sure he "got it."

"Yes. She's about seven years old," I said, irrelevantly. Only cat-people care about such things.

"I think I've seen your cat."

"You have!" I exclaimed, as any exclamation point might suggest, for the world to hear me.

The man who was "driving" the wheelchair winced, as if to say: "It's just a cat. Pipe down."

"Yes. I think. . .she's been coming around to my backdoor. With an orange cat. Does she know an orange cat?"

What a question. How should I know about Pretty's burgeoning social life here in the wild?

"I don't know."

"Well, it's an orange cat I've seen her with."

"Where?"

He gave me an address, to which I hied immediately.

No cat, orange or otherwise, was there to greet me. But Pretty could have been there, just as she could have been almost anywhere. Yet when somebody gives you a lead, they've taken you one possibility forward. The list-maker in you can underscore and eliminate it. You can come back from time to time and savor a special moment when you were not completely in the dark. I remembered the location and went home. I needed to sit around and feel sorry for myself.

There comes a time when single-minded devotion begins to show faults and creases. You fight it, you feel guilty about it, but there it is. If you don't take a break, you'll burn out. But: here was a lead I *should* follow. If my cat had been coming around with an orange companion, I really ought to give myself a chance to see them. I had, unfortunately, failed to ask the man for a telephone number. But—glory be!—I saw him again as I was walking back home and took the opportunity to ask him whether I might call from time to time should Pretty—or the orange cat—turn up again. He

provided his number eagerly. Too eagerly. I should have run in the opposite direction, even as he'd brought hope-soaring news. Eagerly, I say.

And eagerly he called. Practically on the hour.

"He's here! You've got to come here now!"

"Okay. I'll run over."

When I got to the house, *he* was lying on a bed that was as massive as an old mansion. There was nothing remarkable about him choosing to receive me in this way. People take naps in the afternoon, or just feel better lying down. There are all sorts of reasons why people, who might otherwise be sitting, assume a recumbent position to receive a guest. Yet this stranger was completely naked, except for a satiny blanket, which he had tossed over himself in order not to seem as naked as he was. I sat in one of two chairs that were somewhat adjacent to the bed. The one I chose was closest to the door, next to a TV set which was teaching the world's wives how to cheat on their husbands. "You go, girl!" someone said. Someone else chimed in obscenely. A wife-bashing edition of the show would be on during the next half-hour. Fair is fair.

"He was just HERE! He was RIGHT HERE. I mean, RIGHT HERE IN THIS HOUSE!"

"*My* cat?"

"No, the orange cat. But your cat was right behind him. God, if I could have just shut the door in time! You see, I'm an invalid and can't get out of bed, so I just had to lay here and watch him—and her—escape. God, if you could have been here just five minutes ago. I swear—five minutes and you would have had your cat!"

"Well, I appreciate you telling me," I said, glancing toward a half-opened door, an empty patio, and, about a hundred and eighty degrees to the north, an eligible bachelor.

"Five minutes!"

He wanted to emphasize the irony. Oh what a difference a day,

an hour, five minutes, can make! I got it.

"Maybe next time."

"Oh, yes. They'll come around. You can bet your sweet bippy on that."

I guessed, from the allusion, that he was about my age—for which past generations nourished expectations of wisdom and gravity. These days, it doesn't matter how grave and wise you may be; if you aren't twenty-two years old, you are irrelevant. Of the two of us, I possibly had more gravity, gravely interested as I was in finding my cat without seeing any more of this man's bottom. He was perhaps wiser because he had found a way to get by without having to get dressed. I watched him as he lay there on his throne-like apparatus and considered the possibility that he was taking me for an antique furniture-surrounded ride. But a lead was a lead and I needed to stay in this fellow's graces.

"Well, just give me a call. You have my number."

And with that, I went home.

He called again. Fifteen minutes later.

"I think they're going to make their move."

"They?"

"Yes. I can sense it."

"What should I do?"

"I just want you to prepare yourself to shoot over here."

I received no call to arms until the following day.

"HE'S HERE!" said my bedridden friend, hoarse with excitement.

"All right. I'll be there in a minute."

"The gate's open."

The cats apparently got in through this open gate, so it was left ajar in order to ensure an appearance. I would never see any cat in there.

When I came in through the door, my informer was resting.

I did an "ahem," which roused him in the neutral sort of way I wanted. He was wearing nothing underneath the faint bedcover he wasn't using as much as I would have under similar circumstances. He was, in fact, displaying his hindquarters as openly as he could and still be able to deny it in the future. I discreetly turned my head away and watched the television. It seemed as if nothing new had transpired there since the last time. *You go, girl!*

"I'm SOOOOO sorry! They were both just right there, next to where you're sitting. I put out this bowl of tuna and the orange cat, he came right up to it and started eating. But your cat stayed behind. God, if I could only make it to that door! I wanted you to come here because I thought you might be able to come up behind her and close it. But he scarfed down that tuna and he was gone. I mean, he was outta here like a light! And she went with him."

As I listened to this tale, I had an intuition: crippled man in a small apartment surrounded by the grandeur of Ages Past. An ambiguous relationship with an effeminate care-taker. What does *this* look like? To make things even more interesting, the hypothetical cats seemed to disappear just before I got there. Was this some sort of hoax a lonely, and possibly too-interested, fellow was perpetrating on another fellow who was morbidly obsessed? A fellow who might fail to see all else? A fellow whose beloved pussy was lost and was therefore all-important?

I bethought the possibility and considered my options. I didn't want to burn bridges, but I could spend no more time watching this man gradually shuck off more and more bedcovers. Luckily, he was not lying about his physical handicap, so even if he'd wanted to escalate his pursuit of me, he couldn't have done it with any more success than he was doing it now.

So what did *I* do? I thanked him for his diligence and said that I would return if he could lure my cat into the house. Given the

orange cat's dominant role—as well as my own cat's unimpeachable skittishness—nothing else would do.

I heard from him only one more time. He had a question. About a dog.

Another week went by. Then: a real sighting. And then another, better one. On this second occasion, I committed a strategic error. I gave chase to a cat no human being could possibly catch. But hope springs eternal and that's what you do.

A second week passed *sans* hide nor hair. Being of the ADD persuasion, I had all but forgotten about the cat, let alone any possibility of recovery. But there she was as I was finishing a stroll with my dog. There she was, sitting before me, serenely possessive of herself and of the moment. I tempted her with outlandish promises that involved food-bowls filled perennially to the brim and cat-nip bacchanalia that raged from dusk till dawn. After appearing to consider them, she ran off to the porch next-door and slipped out of sight.

Same thing next time. An appearance followed by a too-hasty exit. But at this juncture the case had broken. A certain houseward trend had been established – one that would undoubtedly continue until such a time as I found a way to make her do what she'd already done in a somewhat different order.

Two evenings comprised the evolution of her surrender. On the first, she came up to the porch steps—an inconceivable development!—to eat out of a small bowl I'd piled with the tastiest stuff in the larder. The heavy door was swung wide and full, offering as clear a way in as could be. I watched her eat with a mind-numbing sense of the Almost, the Just About, the Too-Close-Not-To-Happen. An elusive miracle was on fate's fingertips. All I had to do was time it right. All I had to do was slam the door before she was able to escape from it. This was a cat. Why shouldn't I be able to out-reflex her?

My fateful action was ill-timed. She really needed to be another five or ten feet up the stairs. But when victory seems so close, you can't always stop yourself. Your sense of immediate realization trumps a more sober reality: a cat can skedaddle faster than you can slam.

The next night I expected another appearance, but could not hope for the result an outside observer might consider pre-ordained. Our next-door neighbor was sure, once Pretty appeared, that we'd catch her. We *see*, therefore we ought to *get*. Not necessarily. Count thou neither cats nor chickens. Keep on the windy side of the law. Don't frontload if you can cram things in from the back.

My girlfriend had told me of a premonitory dream in which Pretty had escaped again, after which I tracked her down and killed her. When you're in the tilt-a-whirl of pursuit and capture, this is not a good thing to know. When emboldened by consistent patterns—and sightings galore! —you're looking for something a little different. You're looking for a fat lady with a crystal ball who'll tell you that you're about to win the lottery. Unless she wishes to start singing.

Let me finish the story with a little memoir I wrote for the tenacious folk who had communicated with Pretty, supplying us with imagery that confirmed a hopeful sense of her nearness.

We finally caught Pretty, and in the mundane enclosure of a pillow-case. She'd been coming around at nights, teasing me. She'd run up the porch, blow a raspberry, and retire to the adjacent house whose majestic facade suited her pretensions (and re-enforced her fundamental strategy: to be somewhere else.) Rather than let this go on and on, I was determined to see this thing through and get her the hell inside. We were staying up to catch a great meteor shower that was scheduled to begin after midnight, so I had the time to do it.

Well, everything turned out as if I'd planned it. Cat appears, cat is

tempted by food, cat ultimately shies away. Then: cat offers herself to be stroked, which gives me a splendid opportunity to "bond" with her afresh and re-establish the old song-lines that had been severed—or severely scrambled—by nearly three weeks in the wild.

I must've sat on porch, landing, and stairs for three hours stroking and encouraging. Food was offered as backup; though forward strides were harder to come by when the treat was edible. Perhaps there are more stakes, as it were, in tangible, rather than emotional, support. Or am I just talking "like a man"?

It was no-go until after we got back from the shower, which was not visible from where we were straining to look, like fatigued UFO enthusiasts, at one a.m. It was a good outing, though. The night was cool and only serious drunks were out in the park where we'd gone for the clearest conditions.

I didn't even expect Pretty to be around when we got back, but she'd decided to stick to our side of the block. This was a vital courtesy because it narrowed her range, giving us a fighting chance. My girlfriend thought we should attempt to pet her together, so we hunkered down on the steps of the house next-door and got to work. I started her off, but she advanced to my girlfriend in virtually no time at all. Another huge stride, considering the fact that she, Pretty, wouldn't let me get anywhere near her for weeks. My girlfriend had climbed this Everest of resistance in one evening. It's as if I'd done nothing at all. Such are the wages of every pioneer. At any rate, all possible barriers had now been breached—except the Big One that lay behind the doorway Pretty would not enter voluntarily. After she got nice and comfortable, my girlfriend suggested that I go get a pillow-case. She'd been picking Pretty up—something Pretty never allowed when she was "with us"—so time and circumstance seemed to favor the cunning business we had in mind.

Without going into how miraculously trouble-free it was, we were able to do as planned. When my girlfriend picked her up by the scruff of her neck, Pretty went limp and allowed herself to be

lowered into the pillowcase, after which I pulled it shut and ran upstairs. When I was safely inside the apartment, I set the bundle down and let her find her way out. She was nearly able to fit her head through a rent she'd casually made as she was struggling, but she decided to make a more elegantly frontal exit and go about her business from there.

Since that evening she has been—with the exception of the past hour—tamer than she ever was. The only male cat has temporarily turned against her, though he is not the most forceful of creatures and has expressed his displeasure by keening a little bit, then hiding. But it's been effective. It's forced Pretty, the erstwhile lost cat, underneath the sofa.

The balance of power is out of whack—and will continue to be until everybody starts talking.

HEATHER MARTIN

Glow, Worm

And thus the journey ended. But the travelers lived on. Every one of them became rich and successful in the new country… The Glow-worm became the light inside the torch on the Statue of Liberty, and thus saved a grateful City from having to pay a huge electricity bill every year.

–Roald Dahl from *James and the Giant Peach*

It rose from the belly of the Atlantic, a yellow knot of glowing loops. Rolling coils agitating, as the churning of water just before boil. The first light flicked across the harbor to the foot of the great green prison. The Glow-worm exhaled. She had endured another night.

The Sun was her exemplar—the beautiful, troubled marriage of fusion and gravity—and even the Sun, the estranged mother of all the illuminated, will die in due course. In the shadow of death, the Sun will grow apart from herself, the gaps between her layers swelling, moving ever closer to the Glow-worm's dreadful sky. Massive and thin, she will spread last delicate wings, the someday germs of new planets.

On one of these nascent planets, born of the ashes of the sun, might exist, the Glow-worm thought, a peculiar creature, made victim by unknown magic, tormented and forgotten as she. But she couldn't believe it, not really. Her situation was tragically singular. The Glow-worm was the only of her sort. A cursed and beastly thing she was, a Shelleyian monster, alien and unrecog-

nizable even to her own kind—if she could even claim herself among them.

Before the prison, there was nothing and everything. There was a hill and a tree and a sky and the dirt. There were others like her, identical to her. The surrounding things were nameless. There were no words for them—they were neither sign nor symbol, and, thus, they were everything. Perfectly so. But then there were the demon crystals all around, consuming and infecting her. She was awash, sinking in a glacial flood, frozen and immobilized by a new alienation: consciousness. And then it was there, a newborn thought—the first sign of her plague. She changed, grew apart from herself, swelled to an enormous size. And with this change came the death of all things before.

And then the boy and the mutant peach and the other monsters. And now, she was here—exiled to her tower of sadness, doomed to look east upon the sea in the direction of her faraway home and disappeared existence.

IRENE TURNER

BELIEF

I was a dead-end director with a worthless career and a film I was proud of had tanked. To avoid facing the future, I'd thrown it in festivals: thirty-five to be exact. Fond of South America, I'd included Montevideo.

When I told friends they'd say, "Paraguay? Wasn't that dangerous?"

"I was in Uruguay," I'd tell them. "Nobody goes to Paraguay."

I said it so many times, I knew I'd end up here.

I'm in Paraguay to research a novel. Of course, I've never completed more than one mediocre screenplay, let alone a short story or book. But I'm single, at loose ends and 39. That this whole idea is an elaborate midlife crisis doesn't occur to me. I just book plane tickets from Los Angeles and Yahoo-search language schools and pack a tiny suitcase with backpack straps and wheels.

The first two weeks I boarded in Asunción with an upper-middle-class family and spent four hours a day learning Guaraní. Now I've got three weeks to wander the rest of the country, so I board a decrepit bus. Notetaking keeps me from answering my own best question: what the hell am I doing here?

Asunción's suburbs only spread east, so when the bus chugs west across the Río Paraguay, I'm struck by the empty vista of spare grass and palms and a few tough ranches. There are no constant stops, no vendors, none of the roadside hawking typical of this city. There's nothing to slow down *for*.

Instinctively I want to put on sunglasses. To hide the way I

always do. Except nobody wears them, not even to look cool. Are my light eyes that much more sensitive to the sun? The L.A. fashionistas would be horrified. But as I check out my companions, I realize they probably can't afford them. Paraguay's only natural resource is the Itaipú Dam and—although they've had a democracy since 1989—going from Spanish kings to 200 years of dictators created a lot of working poor. My fellow passengers all assume I'm in the Cuerpo Paz—which, as cuerpo translates to body in Spanish, at first makes me wonder if that's some weird cult. When I realize the other meaning, I shake my head. No, I'm not in the Peace Corps.

Outside, a cowboy on horseback rides a sack of feed over his leg to some animal destination. Telephone and electric poles form a tenuous link to the east. But they don't connect to the multicolored tarp tents with walls of thatch that cling to the side of each estancia or the more prosperous ranches which have wooden huts and maybe even a tatakua (brick oven) or a rusted, corrugated roof.

A fire burns listlessly beside a fence, muddying and choking the setting sun. A flock of something loosens its "V" formation as it crosses above us. Good luck or bad, I can't tell. The darkness shuts up the young children across the aisle, but not my mind. I cram story notes in spiral notebooks and work on my characters to avoid thinking about my stomach. Having started up my anti-malaria meds in anticipation of later river travel, it aches of Malarone. Because nobody goes to Paraguay, the mosquitoes have been underexposed to this older drug, I can take it and avoid Larium, which is famous for its psychotic side-effects.

Eight hours of bumps and ruts and curious glances and I stumble out into the wide and dusty rutted avenues of Fíladelfia. I cough and cough, convinced I've made a terrible mistake. The streets of Brotherly Love are not paved.

The Hotel Florída is brick, sparse, and sensible.

The rates: Economy Room (no private bath): 54,000 Gs. $9
With private bath and hot water: 90,000 Gs. $1

I splurge. I'm lucky they're not full: it's the only inn in town.

The Mennonites have taken over the Chaco desert of the western part of the country—or what portion of its desolation can support life. It's like having 100,000 people spread out from Santa Cruz to the northern border of California, except with no mountains or oceans, rare rain and few rivers. Fíladelfia's population won't creep outwards: it's a permanent frontier.

The Mennonites raise dairy cattle and speak Platt Deutsch, and the oldest families have been here 70 years. Most of them fled Canada to avoid religious persecution—every time I think of this I laugh. As a good liberal Democrat I've always had the requisite fantasy of fleeing *to* Canada, where medicine is for everyone and freedom seems to exist.

But Canada didn't want the Mennonites teaching their kids in archaic High German and the stubborn sect blew town in the 1930s. Extreme pacifists and individualists, they wanted to control their own destiny and cut a deal with that month's dictator. It was called, "The Privilegium," and stated they'd never have to fight in the army. But soon after they established their first outpost, Bolivia invaded Paraguay. The new immigrants became pawns in the Chaco War.

Since then, they've navigated an uneasy truce with the various corrupt dictators and presidents. They remain an anomaly in this overwhelmingly Catholic country. But if you're drinking milk in Asunción, it's most likely from their cows.

I only have one day to explore Fíladelfia: this is about eight hours too much. The municipal truck drives by twice a day—not to sweep, but to spray smelly, brackish water to tamp down the dust. The Chaco is in the middle of yet another terrible drought: 3,000 animals dead, 11,000 people affected. Presidents have been

promising a solution for years.

The Museum Jacob Unger scares me. Its cluttered taxidermy of desert animals reminds me more of Norman Bates than natural history. Butterfly collections and rusted farming implements are crammed in beside sober black-and-whites of a scant past.

Fortunately, the museum's volunteer guide is feeling chatty and is fluent in English: my Spanish is decent, but I'm starved for easy conversation. He was born in '57 in Paraguay, grew up in Vancouver some with college in Indiana. Big into music, he owns 500 CD's, which makes me realize I've confused the Mennonites with the Amish and have no idea what religious restrictions they have. He says his collection is getting messy, especially with the kids being teenagers. I joke that messy and teenagers is a worldwide phenomenon. On cue his son enters: a classically blond Germanic presence—slim and reedy, in his awkward years.

We talk about the ranches and the dairy cattle and carefully stay off religion. He mentions the Mennonite ranchers will drive by certain street corners in the morning, looking for day laborers among the indigenous peoples, who've drifted here looking for unskilled work. Most of Paraguay is mestizo, that is mixed: in Fíladelfia, it's either/or. You're a German-Canadian Mennonite. Or not. And if you're not, you're very dark. Being from California, the image of white people picking up brown people for agriculture is uncomfortably familiar. I don't mention this to him.

Finished, I walk across the street to the town's only bookstore, which is more filled with religious stickers and calendars and tracts than books. It's noon and the sun beats down, relentless. The owner doesn't speak Guaraní. "Maybe five words," she says. She thinks that the second language of Paraguay should be English, that the kids should be taught this instead. Practically speaking, I agree and wonder what she'd think of my two weeks of study, most of which is leaking from my brain. But emotionally, why does there have to be this cultural hegemony of Eng-

lish? Why *isn't* it okay to speak your own language? I cut off the conversation and pay.

On returning home, I work on the novel for eight years. It fails, of course. Most novels do. But my crazy confidence leads to a screenwriting career. I've even been nominated for a Writers Guild award.

Later, I think about the stubbornness of the Mennonites, about their determination to find a place where they can hold fast to *their* religion and customs and yes, their High German—even in a land where it would be more useful to learn Guaraní.

J.C. REYES

An Assessment of Time

It happened abruptly. After I sliced strips of cheese and returned the block to the fridge. After I flipped the sandwich grilling on the pan and returned unused mushrooms to their container and wiped the countertop once and then twice for good measure. It happened after all this that she said

Juan, can I have some water?

Excuse me.

Juan, can I have some water, PLEASE?

My daughter, all of three years old, all of two months shy of three years old, suddenly believed we were on a first-name basis.

She stood by me and waited, her hands pressed to the counter. All we could do was stare at each other, a silent showdown between lessons learned and lessons yet to be learned. She waited for her water and I wanted to respond simultaneously with *Here you go, honey* and *You do know my name is* dad, *right?*, but the word jumble in my head almost fractured into an aneurysm of chopped letters and shards of punctuation. But, hey, at least she remembered her *PLEASE*, and perhaps precisely because she had remembered her *PLEASE*, she soon lost all her patience.

Ugh, I'm going to the table.

I watched her walk away, nonchalantly, my tongue almost crumbling into strips of flesh and question marks.

My baby, my baby girl, my little girl, my girl, was suddenly her own timeless alien of authority.

I returned to the stovetop, flipped the grilled cheese sandwich

onto a plate, its top a charry black, too burnt for my daughter's tastes which meant I was about to eat coal or at least have to try.

Spotting crumbs by the sink, I swept them into the trash. As I started for her water, I stopped to towel off plates on the drying rack, and as I did, I heard her get up, reach into her bottom cupboard, and get to the fridge for water. Her bustle didn't have the same bumbling commotion I was used to. Sifting through her cupboard for not just a cup but an acceptable cup, the most acceptable cup, the only acceptable cup, acceptability varying by day if not by hour if not by mood, was usually a loud racket. This time, however, it was not.

After I was satisfied with the state of the counter, I walked over to sit down and I slid her sandwich across the table. I noticed the moment I bit into my sandwich that she had suddenly overgrown her seat. By a lot. She had longer hair than I swore she'd had seconds earlier, a taller nose and clearer eyes that a minute ago had been slightly, no, much less, significant. She suddenly couldn't fit her knees under the table, and she had to hunch over it to eat her sandwich. And when she sipped her water, only a drop, maybe two, slipped off her lips. As far as drinking goes, as much usually ended at her collar as on her tongue so either she was wearing the costume of an older human being or she'd become an awful hallucination I could only stare at.

Um, hello?

What happened to you?

Um, I don't know.

When did this happen? When did you grow up?

I don't know. But that's a weird question. Are you asking me what I want to be when I grow up?

No. Not in the least. But, heck, sure, do you want to tell me what you want to be when you grow up?

I think I want to be a teacher. Or a captain.

I see. A captain of what?

I don't know. Mom says I'm capable. With a big C. Capable. And I think I want to be an astronaut. Or a teacher.

Okay. A teacher of what?

I don't know. A teacher.

But a teacher of what, honey?

She suddenly got huffy like I was challenging her, and then she got up, I think to get a napkin, because I soon heard the pantry curtain blow open, as if a puff of anxiety burst out of the kitchen and then back into it, and then, just as quickly, she was turning the corner around my chair and the wind of her strides brushed my neck.

Before she sat, I saw the ceiling light glow around her cheeks. Her height, which I swore less than two minutes earlier had been at least a foot closer to the floor, towered over me as I sat in the low chair. This time she didn't even try so squeeze her legs under the table when she sat. She pushed the chair back, stretched her legs and crossed her ankles and brought the plate to her chin. Meanwhile, my sandwich almost slipped out of my fingers disbelieving the course of our afternoon and I had to take refuge for a moment. I settled my plate on the table and swept crumbs off it and into my hands. She didn't pay much attention to me as I cleaned, and I had to consume one of those awfully deep breaths with barely the air around me to inhale.

Who are you?

Um, I don't always have to be thinking about what I want to be, man.

That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking what happened to my little girl.

Um, I'm right here, and I'm in seventh grade, and I can walk to school without a chaperone. You get that, right?

No. Not at all.

Um, anyway, I have ballet practice and soccer this afternoon and mom's busy so you have to take me.

I do? Why is this happening so quickly?

Um, I don't know. But there's a clock, and it moves, and mom says that when you get busy, time moves really fast.

But I was busy making us food. And I was cleaning just a little. And just a few minutes ago I could carry you on my back, and, now, do you even want a piggy back ride anymore?

Um, not if you say it like that. Now it's just weird.

I shrugged her off because somebody was playing a game on me, like every time my attention veered, a new astrophysical dilemma punched a hole in the world. So I decided I wasn't taking my eyes off her. I didn't know what was happening, but not for another second that afternoon were my eyes flipping or shutting or going incongruent. This gamesmanship needed my full attention, and there wasn't a better way to conquer the universe than to identify and name its waves, making them exceptionally real until they go back to being just real.

How she grew up that much in minutes, in two, five, ten, however many lost beats without a shadow or a clock hand to bat away the flies, I don't know, and I hadn't been long at attempting an explanation to begin just then. I vowed to home in so much that I didn't even look back to trash the bread crumbs in my hands. Sure, I fiddled with the garbage can and rattled and shuffled it until it almost tumbled, but I was okay paying that dirty price. Clearly, I was the only one feeling the shock here. She didn't even seem to feel the twitching of a changing body. And so I figured some noise could do us a little good, so I banged my ankle into a table leg to confirm the face value of reality, and I'd be damned if crumbs I hadn't earlier seen shook their way to the floor. It took all I had not to dive to pick them up.

What are you doing?

Just giving myself a pinch, you know, honey. So how are *you* doing? How do you feel?

Um, I'm okay. Are you okay? You don't look so good, pop.

That's it, I excused myself. She intended to confront this situation directly in the same way that the light in the room had wanted to conceal the distance between us. Thankfully, I had the microwave door to look into, and as far as I could tell, I couldn't see a single new wrinkle. My eyes were still the same tired and faint planets, and they bore into the plastic glass in their same tired way. I checked my neck for sags, but the stubbles there were still a young-ish kind of black.

And I'd be damned if, when I glanced to the stovetop, there wasn't a stain on the back left burner. No, no. I reached into the drawer for a towel, I dampened it, I scrubbed. I let the surface air dry to return to the microwave door, to assess the state of my nose, its freckles like spots of coffee on a grainy napkin, my brow and its pale lines like crested waves from miles above the ocean. Of my ear, I caught the reflection a much taller girl, a young woman, who, after I turned around, shrugged my direction like she expected answers, not the least of questions being why it was that her hair had been trimmed to her shoulders and why her bangs covered her eyes and why she sat flicking car keys on her lap.

What do you think you're doing?

We've been over this, man. I have those financial aid workshops at the college later.

That soon? When did you come to this decision? What's with all the change?

We've been over the whole hair thing already. The purple's only temporary.

I'm talking about the college thing. How many schools did you apply to?

Just the one by us, and I'm going to be late for the workshop if I don't leave soon.

But you need to get on the highway for that.

I know, I know, but I'm over the fear of merging after the toll booths.

Do you even have money for the toll booths?

Not yet.

She sang her implicit request, setting her knuckles on the table, palm up. She smiled, and I'll be damned if it wasn't such an awfully pretty smile. And to keep from both crying and laughing, I fell into a sigh that, I'll admit, was as theatric as the massive changes hurled upon me at the small blue table in the middle of the kitchen, and I pulled my chair back, I sat down, and, yes, theatrically, pressed my cheeks into my palms because something, anything, had to be better at carrying the weight of these moments than just my head.

I was done trying to reason through the improbabilities here. Eyes closed and in the dark of my hands, I decided simply to buy into the logic here, the idea that I had no control of maturity and the winding clock that insisted to age us both, even if my life I was only aging by the thought.

I can't believe you still have this old thing.

Honey, I can't see what you're talking about right now. Give me a second.

How many times have you repaired it, glued it back together, repainted it?

I opened my eyes to see what she was talking about. She softly knocked on the table as if to accentuate the new view. The pantsuit. The hair in a bun. The watch on her wrist. The buttoned collar. I didn't know the full extent of the woman in front of me, but I did know that I've enjoyed that face longer than I ever imagined I would have.

Goodness, you look so much like your mother.

I know. Grandma has to laugh because she always thinking she's seeing a ghost.

Yeah. I think I know a little about that.

At that point I decided to own this little game. I closed my eyes. I held them shut for all of five seconds, and when I opened them,

I met a sincere but confused little face, one that, by its narrowed eyes, I had to briefly consider I might have hurt or insulted or wounded in a fabric of time I couldn't ever have lived. And then I looked down.

I would have told you both earlier if I even knew.

There's no way I'm not upset.

It's just that we weren't exactly trying and I've never heard of anyone waiting to show until they feel it and, well, I'm just shocked.

Sure, I am, too, but trust me, it's only gets fun from here.

I'm going to need that, dad. You've got to help me stay light through this. I'm nervous. We don't even know what's happening with my job.

Oh, that doesn't matter. It's always a good time—it's always the best time.

She smiled, rubbed her belly. I closed my eyes. This time I couldn't even wait to five. I opened them at four and met an expectant face, waiting for whatever circumstances defined the chance of a good encounter.

Why do you always look at me like that, dad?

Like what?

Like every time we see each other, you're waiting for some kind of surprise.

I don't know. I think maybe it's just you have a pretty decent plot to whatever story you're writing.

Don't make me laugh. I'm not the writer here, but I am good at drafting the plot of a building.

Of course. And the plot of a few kids' lives, I'm sure.

I'm at two, dad, so don't give me more than I wanted or more than I can handle.

I know. I don't mean to. As far as planning goes, your bother was it for us, too.

He's doing pretty well, too. The kids all got together last week

for a picnic at the lake.

I'd love to see them. When's the next time they're coming around?

Her eyes wanted to mist, I think, but I didn't see how they did or didn't because I closed my eyes. I'd reasoned that in whatever shuffling parade of a game this was, I'd only have her to enjoy. When I opened my eyes again, I met quite a testament to the expansions of life. Parts of her hair had grayed. She'd let it longer again and she braided it. Her eyes breathed an exhaustion that seemed to want to laugh with whatever confrontation, coming or going, they'd prepared to face.

We talk about it all the time, you know. I can't believe how quickly the twins grew up.

You're never ready for it. It happens as fast as a day sometimes if you're not looking. As a parent, you're never, ever ready for it.

I mean, first they're at dinner with us barely holding spoons and then they're graduating high school.

I know. You know, I love these little meetings of ours. That you take the time to come.

Saturdays don't feel all that complete unless the sandwiches come from you.

I hope so. I hope they've always been appetizing.

It all tastes the same in this kitchen, dad. It's all been good.

That's good.

I closed my eyes. I waited more patiently this time, almost counting past five. When I opened my eyes, I found a greyer, plumper woman. Lighter jewelry on her arms, a softer collar to her shirt, a breezier smile. Like she had put in her time. She wore glasses, and even they hung in a frame so light, its color almost blended into her skin.

The Barcelona family says hi. Auntie says you should call her more.

She always says that. And, besides, I think she's too old to com-

plain anymore, isn't she?

I guess. I don't know. What I do know is you're going to have to get someone to put those leaves in a pile in the front yard.

Don't we have another generation of grandkids to do that?

Sort of. But they're still figuring out how to crawl.

Well, it's never too early to learn the value of work.

Funny. I'm not sure, though, your neighbors would enjoy seeing children chewing grass.

She smiled. I closed my eyes, and I realized just then that I'd resigned to the elements of these rules that I only vaguely, haphazardly seemed to understand, and that I didn't know exactly when I'd signed off on our constraints at the table. I thought I'd been able to take advantage of what the game had given me, closing my eyes as quickly as I could, foregoing the tension of everything beyond me just to get to the point, all those points, where I knew how to grasp the things I could manage. But counting the seconds with closed eyes, I started wondering if I hadn't unwittingly and to my detriment played into the deception here, rushing to every next stage just to avoid the unexpected jumping too quickly at me.

I waited seven, eight seconds that next time, and when I opened my eyes again, she was thinner, older as usual but absorbed in the kind of aging that never took her by surprise. Her eyes soft, a quarter or less closed, complacent. I watched her for the brief moment, it seemed, that she just wanted to watch me, and I noticed a little flicker in her bottom lip. It wasn't too pervasive that it tainted the way she talked, but it did make her have to pause in places that perhaps she hadn't been used to. And maybe that's why she waited to let me talk first.

So how long has it been?

Don't be funny—dad. Like you don't know.

You know, I've never known as much as you think I have.

I know.

I paused to listen to the space here, to the breaths I anticipated and the silence that echoed in a satisfied, reclining kind of way.

I'm not usually this insecure, but I have to ask. Have you always enjoyed this? The laughs? All this passing time? Between us? For you?

You always—ask me that, dad. And I'm not sure—I'm never sure that's ever been the point.

What do you mean?

What's the point—the point of enjoying it, when—when I can—I can be putting all my joy into it?

You've always impressed me. That sounds about right, doesn't it? That sounds like you. I remember how even so young you were always so hard on yourself.

I know. I guess—I guess I never had a problem—with that. I just enjoyed—always enjoyed—that part of myself.

How? Why? Isn't that the kind of thing you try to push away?

No. Not for me. That was the only—the only part of myself—that reminded me of you.

And you were okay with that? With what you had?

Always, dad. Always.

I swear: I did not want to close my eyes that last time. It happened so abruptly when I went to scratch my crow's feet, that bags over my cheeks, but it happened nonetheless, and when I saw her again, she was having trouble sitting upright in her chair. Her eyes, facing up, were closed, and her heaving breaths seemed terribly hard to swallow. She opened her eyes just a squint, and in her hesitation to ask something, she bit her lip, but the message was clear. I got up as quickly as I could and knelt at her side and wrapped myself around her. Her neck had oils I'd never smelled before, her hair a deep white I'd never imagined possible. Even after all those years, her cheeks never lost their light olive, and her hands, clasped on her belly, were the same long threads I knew so well all those years, all those minutes, all that time, however short

or long or indefinite ago our earliest moments ever were.

Hold me, daddy.

I'm here, baby.

I loved it, holding her, staring at the bar counter across the way and just waiting for her—waiting for her to say or ask me whatever it is she wanted.

Do you know what time it is?

I haven't noticed the clock in a long time, baby.

That's good, daddy.

She wheezed. Her voice coarse. She raised her hand to grasp mine and then she brought it to her lips for a kiss.

Was I ever difficult, daddy? Was I ever any trouble?

Only the best kind of trouble, baby. You and I had fun. So much fun.

Did we, daddy? Did we enjoy a good meal?

We did, baby. We did.

That's good, daddy.

For the first time since I can remember, since maybe the last time I put her to bed, I dug my nose into the smell of her hair. It smelled of lotion, of orchids, of shampoo. I brushed her hair back with my free hand, tucked loose strands behind her ear. If I was putting her to bed again, I figured to settle in for the longest kind of evening, the kind of long haul that shatters the boundary between moonlight and the most brilliant sky. I figured if that was the last time I was putting her to bed, there was nothing in the kitchen to pull me away from the sound of her tired eyes.

KATHY BLUESTONE

Windows

The house is a cube wrapped in cedar, its roof a wide, deep V. A narrow line of windows hugs the roofline, too high to see what's going on inside. A concrete balcony hangs above the front door like a guillotine about to drop. We walk beneath it, hesitate, then knock. The agent opens the door and kisses us in.

We follow her up wooden stairs bleached alabaster-white. The stairs ascend into an empty living room, its floors formed of the same bleached, blinding wood. The far wall is a bank of windows, stretching floor to ceiling; this wasn't visible when we drove up. Through the wall of glass, through the trees outside, I see another street, a smaller one, insignificant and made of dirt, but a street just the same. A car passes, huffing up the narrow road. I stand in the enormous window, looking at the driver, but the driver doesn't look at me.

We walk into the kitchen, where the owner, the architect who built this house, pretends to read the New York Times. He's anxious to sell, so he can build another house high up on the hill he owns next door. And we are desperate to buy; something, any house, if not this one. Our house is suddenly too small for three of us, the instant family we became when I said I do to someone with a daughter, just four short months ago.

We circle back to the living room to meet the agent; she leads us down the sterile stairs, thanks us, shoves us out the door. Before we're even in the car we've listed all the house's flaws: The kitchen is too small for the way we like to cook. The floors are too pale for

a family with an eight-year-old. And those big windows make me nervous. I'd feel too exposed, I tell my husband. Who lives on that little street? How much can they see when they drive by?

We don't buy the house. Instead, we wander down that small dirt road and find a piece of empty land that's wrapped in woods. We buy it and we build a different house, with a bank of windows stretched from floor to ceiling, facing empty forest.

No one but the deer will see what's going on inside.

I've just moved to Manhattan with one suitcase and three boxes of my stuff. Until my wedding day, four months from now, I'll share an apartment on a twenty-somethingth floor with someone I don't know and never see.

The apartment is so small it doesn't even have a bed, just a table and two chairs and a wide, white couch. A long closet runs along one wall, unusually large for such a tiny space. I hang a few threads of clothing there and tuck the rest of my possessions in the back.

I sleep on the couch while my roommate works the night shift. In the morning, I roll up the sheets and blanket, stow them in the closet, then leave for work before she returns. I don't want to be a bother to this woman who's allowing me to share her space. Save for my toothbrush in the bathroom, there's not much evidence that I exist.

For nine weeks I work in a temporary position, no promise of permanence. I know no one in this city but my fiancé, who's busy working on his doctorate. Most nights I return to the apartment, nothing to do. There's not even a television to distract me.

When it's time to sleep, I lie on the couch and stare out the windows that line the south wall of the apartment. There's a clear view to another building on 31st Street, three blocks away. I follow the line of the windows in the other building, watch the lights blink on and off like little stars. Some windows flicker blue:

people watching game shows, or the evening news. Many windows have no shades, and I try to see what's going on inside, but the building is too far away. I imagine the residents putting away groceries, pulling off their socks, turning down the covers of their beds. One evening I come home in the early winter darkness, tear off my clothes and throw them on the couch. I turn on all the lights, open the blinds, stand looking south toward the residents of the other building, naked in the window.

There's no response, just the faint throb of blue from distant televisions.

The next day I walk into the street, expecting someone to recognize me. It never happens, not on that day, not on any of the other days I live in this place.

The building used to be a mansion, but the glory of its former self has been carved up into ten dissimilar apartments. My apartment is the smallest, with a separate entrance in the back. His apartment is around the corner, right next to the front door where everyone else enters the building. All of the apartments have big windows, but his are the biggest, three tall panes of glass that open wide onto his patio, looking out across the front yard to the street.

We first meet in the driveway, crossing paths on our way to the garage. It's six months before I walk around the corner and knock shyly at his door. As if he were expecting me, he offers me a glass of wine and pours himself a scotch. Soon it is a habit: Twice a week I knock, and out comes a bottle of wine and some Macallan or Glenlivet or Laphroaig. We let ourselves get fuzzy with the alcohol, pretend to watch the evening news, and get naked on his scruffy brown-and-tan striped couch, right beside the windows.

He's sure that people passing on the street are watching us; he's sure that everyone entering the building can see us on the couch inside. I say, Who cares? Let them look. But he insists on privacy and masks the bottom half of the windows with poster board. It's

not attractive, but it has the intended effect: We can't see out, no one can see in.

I'm drying dishes in my kitchen one night when he drives into the garage behind our building. I watch another woman step out of his car, watch them walk right past my window. She looks up at him; he drapes his arm across her back and guides her around the corner to his apartment.

I want to scream my fury out the window. Instead, I walk in silence to my car, drive out into the street, and park where I can watch his windows. The lights are low; his television broadcasts blue.

Now I know exactly what it is he doesn't want us all to see.

The architect has built a second house, high up on a hill above the house that we considered. His new home looks like a shipping container, long and thin, with tidy, compact rooms that run in single file from south to north. The windows on the east are small and high, tucked into the eaves along the roof; the west wall of the house is one long span of glass that stares out into woods.

We meet the architect at another neighbor's party. We invite him and his wife to have dinner at our house; they reciprocate. We climb their hill to share a meal. Sitting at the table in their skinny dining room, I look out into the darkened trees. I wonder what they do at night? I haven't noticed a TV.

Their cat stands outside the dining room, looking in, the last three inches of her tail twitching back and forth. It's hard to tell if she's pissed off, or just curious. I'll bet she's wondering if she can trust these guests she doesn't know. She scratches at the glass, but when the door is opened, she skitters down the hall and hides.

After the wedding we are eligible to live in a graduate student apartment, tucked into a pocket of Manhattan far uptown and east. Our zip code is among the richest in the world, but our

building is a bleak and barren concrete bunker, full of future Ph.D.'s who are blind to all but books and lab results. We make friends with no one but the doorman. He says hello and tosses us our packages when we come home at night.

We exist just slightly above poverty, me working double shifts to pay the bills and have a bit to get away, my husband making nothing, not even making progress on his doctorate. The cells he cultivates are not cooperating, dying unexpectedly, although he feeds them like a mother, twice a day.

The apartment sits suspended on the third floor of the building, hanging over 70th Street. Windows line the northern wall. If I open up the blinds I can see into a red brick building that lies across the street; this means whoever lives there also has a good, clear view of me. I prefer to keep the blinds angled down and out, so I can watch what's going on below, invisible to everybody else.

On evenings when my husband is held hostage in the lab by his always-dying cells, I amuse myself by watching people going in the bar below our building. It must be interesting down there, I think; it always seems a long time passes by before they come back out.

Sometimes we go out to see a movie, or to the opera if we're feeling really flush. We walk home through streets where brownstones sell for millions, trespassers in the valley of the super-rich. If I'm lucky, a few residents have left their curtains open, and I can see pieces of a life I think I'll never lead: crystal dripping from the ceiling, the furniture below as solid and forbidding as the owner's wealth.

Back at home, more nights go by, alone. I think about undressing, standing in the window, blinds tilted so that only someone who looked above from three floors down would see me. It's just a thought, until one day it's not.

Of course nobody looks. If anybody did, I'd die of shame.

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It took a long time for the house with the big windows to sell. When the new owners finally moved in they pushed boxes, blankets, and books high and hard against the windows. Eight years later, the piles remain, undiminished, disarrayed.

When the owners first arrived we invited them to all the neighborhood parties, but they didn't come to any for a while. When they finally appeared they told us they had moved from Brooklyn, as if that explained things. Everyone who lives here came from Brooklyn, one neighbor said. That's not an excuse for the piles of crap in your windows, we all thought; that doesn't give you a free pass to drag our property values down.

They didn't come to any more parties after that. We haven't spoken to them in years.

Twice a day or more I drive down my dirt road, past their windows, watching the house fall apart. The coppery stain on the siding is weathering away, blotchy and pockmarked by insects and woodpeckers. A chunk of cement has gone missing from the balcony. The grass along the side of the driveway grows untrimmed, like a fringe of unruly bangs. Two blue tarps have wandered from the garden into the yard and lain there for months, sometimes moving a little further into the woods when a storm blows through. The house is decomposing, falling into ruins, right before my eyes. The piles in the windows expand.

Every night every light in every window blazes like the structure's going up in flames. I wonder if the house is trying to immolate itself, to incinerate all that junk. When the lights are on I can see past the piles that are mounded against the window, into the house, clear to the back wall. There's never evidence of anyone in any of the rooms. The owners are invisible; their debris is not.

What is it they want us all to see?

There's nothing like the sound of glass shattering on ground, splintering to shards, a million tiny stars. It slakes my anger,

soothes my nerves.

He tells me that he's helping her with homework. She's a secretary where he works, getting her associate's degree. She lives with her parents, he explains; he can't go there to tutor her, she must come to him.

And come to him she does, once a week at least.

One night I see that woman walking by my kitchen window, his arm around her, once again, and a thing inside me snaps. I drink another glass of cabernet and wait until it's late, until the lights in everybody's windows have gone dark. I open up my door and walk into the night, wineglass in my hand, and edge around the building until I stand beside his bedroom window. I move in to listen, try to hear what might be going on inside.

What I hear is nothing. Maybe she's the silent type. Or maybe she's gone home.

But I won't find release until I smash the glass that's in my hand. I think of aiming it directly at his window, but think again; I throw it into the bushes that lie below instead. It's broken with a nearly-silent thud, but it's enough.

The architect's wife is gone. He's living alone in the house he built, way up on that hill. I wonder whose idea this was, his or hers. I wonder if they'll sell the house, pay off the mortgage, split what's left. I wonder if he has a TV now, or if he spends his evenings looking through his windows, waiting for the cat to scratch to come inside. I wonder if we ignored or didn't recognize the signs, the hints that something in the house was wrong. I wonder if you ever really know what's going on with someone else, even when they're visible behind a wall of glass.

I leave my husband sleeping in the bedroom and shiver out the door into my icy car. The windows are black in every house I pass, driving to the morning shift at 3 AM. There's not a single thrum

of blue; my headlights are the only sign of life, a thin bright ribbon that I follow into nothingness. I wonder if this is how it feels to be the sole survivor of an epidemic, or an atomic bomb. It's the loneliest I've ever been.

Hours from now, the sleeping residents will rise. They'll brush their teeth, pull on their socks, come to the bakery to buy the bread I've just pulled from the oven. But for now they are asleep, dreaming like the dead, buried in the dark behind their windows, and I am driving past them, still unseen.

MONET THOMAS

The Day of Two Dogs

The first time he told the story, it was the way I'd share the weather: no tone change, no connection, relax, there's nothing you can do about it. Drunk on two neat whiskeys, my elbows braced against the bar, I assumed I'd misunderstood. Two dogs? In one day?

After five years, you think you know everything. You know he was born in Moscow, Idaho and that once he almost died on a dirt bike. You know how he got that scar on his elbow, maybe you were there and maybe you gave it to him. You know his siblings and his mother and his father who died before you ever met.

He's telling the story again, this time we're in the kitchen, not at the bar, and I'm working my way out of the liquor. I want to understand. I put both my hands on the counter and try to control the room.

"Your dog and his dog?"

"Yup." He turns on the cold water faucet, sticks his face under the running stream.

"You buried them both?"

"One after the other." Slurp.

You know how he likes his coffee, how he folds his underwear crosswise. You know how his biceps flex just before he comes. And knowing those things, you can't unknow them. That knowledge is yours. You collected those seashells in the skirt of your dress. Some days you pour them out on the living room floor, finger them, consider their varied edges, and whisper to yourself, "Look at everything I know."

The split was a surprise; the sex afterwards was not. Tomorrow, he'll leave and who knows what anything means. I'd floundered for a long while—gotten tangled around trying to be who I wanted to be and lost him. I don't know. The kitchen is the only unpacked room in the house. I think about cooking dinner, making sandwiches. The whiskey sits low in my stomach. He turns off the water, wipes a hand across his wet mouth.

"Who told you about your dog, that it had been hit?"

"My mom. She was driving to work, saw it on the side of the road."

The kitchen is too warm. The whole house is too warm. I drop my sweater to the floor.

"Yeah, so I went home. Buried my dog." *The weather will be fine tomorrow and the day after.*

He leans a slim hip to the wall, crosses his arms. If the alcohol is affecting him, it doesn't show, and I know where to look. I know this mouth, usually a thin, lipless line, rounds when he's intoxicated.

"I buried my dog. Went over to my cousin's house and accidentally hit his dog in the driveway." He lifts the brim of his hat, reveals his balding scalp—emotion. *A seashell.*

"And what did your cousin say? Was it really so snide?"

He smiles, a real one with teeth. How can he smile when he says, "'I guess you're burying two dogs today.'"

JOEL BEST

The Dogs are Gone

Out repainting the garage is what. Too old for this crap, but the garage is the garage and the paint is the paint. Creaky shoulders are what. Rotator cuffs shot to pieces, bone grinding against bone. Shoulders are shoulders, cuffs are cuffs. The sun in his eyes, his vision dancing with black spots, he can't help thinking CANCER even though he knows the truth about black spots. When we're born. The vitreous fluid of the optic orb. Microscopic organisms within perish and leave behind diaphanous skeletons to periodically float across the field of view. But his father had the CANCER. And possibly an aunt, though she died overseas and an autopsy had not been performed.

Here comes the guy from across the street.
Ever think of going with a different color?
White's as good a color as any.
Kind of plain.
It gets the job done.
White's okay, I guess.
Better than red, anyway.
Know what you mean, I hate that house.
We all hate that house.
This sun is a mother.
The TV said even hotter tomorrow.
So much for good news.
At the end of the street a pack of dogs appear. Just there is what.

Coming from where? Not from the next street over or the one beyond that. Maybe from a different part of the city or another city completely. These are strange dogs. The sun lies on their fur like melted gold. They are afire. Twenty dogs, give or take, a blazing pack of them. Dogs moving in silence. Dogs drifting like smoke. The pack lopes along the asphalt, not pausing to sniff trees or lift legs. Whoever saw such a thing, so many together and behaving as though guided by a single mind. Birds travel in similar fashion, but nobody gives it a second thought because birds are small and relegate themselves to the sky. Birds pose no threat and might as well be illusions.

The pack nears a red house down the block. A kid out in the yard, that kid the rest of the neighborhood fears. A bad one. Hard eyes, mean soul. Common knowledge he was responsible for vandalizing cars. No proving it, though. The cars or all the other acts he's committed.

The pack of dogs spies the kid. The pack slides to a halt.

Someone ought to do something says the guy from across the street.

I'm not putting myself in that says the guy with the paintbrush.

He might mess with the dogs and get a big surprise.

Wouldn't mind seeing that.

You and me both.

The son of a bitch busted the windshield of my station wagon.

He got the headlights on my jeep.

The dogs fix their steaming eyes on the kid. The kid stares back. Time shudders. The world becomes vacuum. The kid and the dogs exist in their own realm. Science would claim such an event to be impossible, but science is a gutless fool. Always changing its mind. Science has no spine.

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The kid raises his hand in a wide-fingered salute. Let science figure that one out.

The dogs drop their heads and trot down to the corner.

The dogs are gone.

NANCY WILSON

Views from Gibraltar

Dad needed cigarettes. A carton was $3.33. While he drove the two blocks home, he had me open a pack and punch in the dashboard lighter, light his cigarette, take a puff, hand it to him. No complaints; he's Dad, the person I already had a million feelings and thoughts about and knew I'd have millions more. He's not so easy to love, I was frightened of him, but loved him anyway. The cigarettes, belching, his dirty boxer shorts on the floor didn't get in the way. I watched his confidence, his ease with decisions, and superior knowledge.

Every morning his smoker's cough came from their bedroom across the tiled hallway that he laid on his hands and knees, the tiled hallway he left unfinished for over a year. Fed-up sighs and rolling eyes from Mom made him finally finish the job.

There was a wicker laundry basket between my parents' bedroom and the bedroom I shared with Sister. It stood crooked. Over it hung a large watercolor painted by our maternal uncle, now dead. It was a bull angrily wrapped around a bullfighter with his red muleta.

The bull was vulnerable, the basket was unsteady, my parents' marriage, I thought, was the Rock of Gibraltar.

Every morning, my mother got up and put on a full-length, blue bathrobe, took the clothes out of the hamper, went barefoot to the kitchen to make breakfast for the family and start the wash, while Dad sat on the edge of the bed in his light-blue cotton boxer shorts worn thin, coughing up phlegm before rising to

shave and recite late-nineteenth-century American poetry.

O captain! My captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

He was an electrical engineer for the phone company. Sometimes he dreamed aloud of being a medical doctor, reading up on diseases and pathology to offer diagnoses on older family members' failing health. He let his opinions be known to anyone traipsing through the kitchen to the family room—"Linus Pauling is a fake!"—and to Mom, who didn't want to know his opinion, but was told her mother probably had Alzheimer's disease.

"I'm doing research," he said, "the NIH and CDC."

She cried, leaning against the wall where she hung her copper-bottom pans.

"It's not senility; it's something attacking her brain. They don't know what causes it; they haven't been researching it long enough. Not enough funding. Damn Congress. You all right, honey?" He put both arms around her. "What's for dinner? Did I see hamburger rollups in the oven? *Au jus*? I'll be reading the Mayo and Johns Hopkins research, and some international studies this week. You can't just go off the CDC or NIH."

He was six-foot-three, large, handsome with dark hair, dimples in his cheeks, an authoritative man, incredibly intelligent, unduly analytical. He reminded me repeatedly that I wasn't up to snuff.

Turn the light off when you leave the room. Eat the rest of your

dinner, damnit. Knock it the hell off! That's enough. Take your dishes to the sink and don't forget to rinse them. Goddamn it, stack the cans in the cupboard like I taught you. You laying an egg on the heater grate? Don't touch that thermostat; leave it where I set it. You wanna pay the bill? Here, take it. Due date's next week. Alpha to zeta—organize those spices. Herbs on a separate shelf. C'mon! I'm watching you. Don't tease the dog. Leave the dog alone. Five-minute showers—I'm timing you! I don't want to see anything less than an A–. I don't want to see any B. You get a C, you're no child of mine. Don't leave a mess for your mother to clean up. She's not your slave. Go do your homework. What did I tell you! If you do that one more time, goddamnit—. Go to your room. Quit teasing the damn dog. Are you wearing underwear to bed? C'mere. How many times have I told you not to do that! Go to bed. I don't ever want to see your goddamn face again.

"Is it *au jus*?" he repeated.

Mom moved from him to the stove to check her gravy.

He poured a gin and ginger ale, lit a cigarette, and waited for dinner.

Mom and I stand at Dad's side on a street corner in downtown San Francisco. We watch him fumble with the machine's numbers and letters.

One, then three people wait in line, then four, five, clearing their throats, shifting, tapping their feet.

When the ATM spits back Dad's card, Mom and I move a little further away from him.

When his card is eaten, I stare.

"Goddamn machine." He slips a hand in his pants pocket. "Jesuskrist," he grumbles. He pounds the screen twice with the butt of his other fist and shouts, "It's *my* money!"

I stand very still, embarrassed. He's capable, intelligent, and has

withdrawn money innumerable times. A man who could calculate the area under any suspension bridge; who redid the circuit design of a hundred-year-old telephone to make it work. He knows geometric proofs forward and backward, understands the science behind the A-bomb, how it was assembled, and its first test in Alamogordo, but he can't get money out of an everyday machine to take his wife and daughter out to lunch. I don't understand. Things begin to make less and less sense to me. "What did I do?" starts to sink in. I must've done something wrong.

Dad kicks the money machine. "Sonuvabitch!" and sets out up the street, Mom and I in horror, trying to catch up.

The endless ways we push away from each other—water, chisel, blood.

He goes to see his mother in Pocatello, Idaho, taking a 727 jet plane to Salt Lake City, transferring to a small regional jet for the flight north. Mom doesn't hear from him while he's in Pocatello, but she knows to pick him up at the Oakland Airport the following week.

She calls me the day she's to meet him. Crying heavily, she manages, "He didn't get off the plane!"

"I'll be damned. They have to get him off—or throw him off. Otherwise he's grounded the plane. I wonder if he's protesting something." I imagine my dad taking a swing at a flight attendant, missing, stumbling because he's uncoordinated now, and winding up being restrained by four of them who shout for the pilot while my dad struggles and spits like a rabid dog. It's not so far-fetched.

"He wasn't *on* the plane." Anger rises from underneath Mom's telephone tears. "The airline won't tell me if he made the connection in Salt Lake. I called his mother. He left for the Pocatello airport this morning."

"They have to tell you if he was on the plane. He's your husband," I say.

"They said passenger lists are never given out."

We guess that he lost his way in the Salt Lake airport, missing the connecting flight home, so after a fitful night's sleep, we go back to OAK the following day for the arrival of Flight 894 from SLC. There he is, walking down the jet bridge, appearing relaxed and confident.

He stops at Mom. "Hi," he says, emptiness in his expression.

She doesn't question him, just motions for him to follow.

I drag my dad's suitcase off the baggage carousel and catch up to them at the car, Mom sitting alone because he doesn't know how to open the car door.

"Hey Dad, where'd you spend the night?" I ask.

He gives a small, disconnected laugh, and looks around. "Waiting for you."

For twenty years he was an avid reader of sweeping books on World War II—Churchill's six-volume magnum opus; *The Manhattan Project*; *The Third Reich*; Mussolini's fascism; Pearl Harbor; Rommel, the Desert Fox; famous battles of land, air, and sea. He was always reading. Then we got a TV and his reading material became subscription magazines. Now he only tried to read the first page of the newspaper.

"Cookie-cutter politicians and lazy-ass union workers. Goddamn teachers." He tosses the paper on the coffee table and picks up his cocktail. What the hell are we graduating, misguided kids taught by know-nothing teachers–? No manners, no respect, broken families. Gee Zuss Krist, Mary, and Joseph.

He goes through yesterday's mail. "Look at that bill. For a headlamp? I should've done it myself—twenty bucks total. Another bill? More fabric on the credit card? You outfitting an army?"

Mom kept her head down, watching the soup.

"Everybody wants a piece of my goddamn wallet!"

"'Ching chow gwo jai.' Singsong old Chinese women bastards

walking three and four abreast just so I can't pass, goddamnit!"

Everybody is out to make his life more miserable.

About this time, he began to take unscheduled days off from work—unheard of for him—and for long periods of time he gazed into the near distance, as if listening to music no one else could hear.

He was in his late forties as his mind tangled up with itself. His more confused behaviors seemed to start with his anger and his anger always arose with his drinking, so we thought alcohol was the culprit.

When the IRS found his $7,000 mistake on the taxes, Mom suddenly saw it. Hands on her big, straight hips, she said, "What do you think you're doing?"

He ignored her, sipping his Manhattan.

She quietly fumed, eyes aflame, and it came over her. "What in *hell* do you think you are doing?"

"Oh gawd, she said hell, she said *hell*, uh oh, she said hell," I gasped quietly in the dog's warm ear.

Mom reached into the cabinet above the oven and pushed around the large bottles of booze—*clunk clank clank*, like cheap steel bells—until she came to the bourbon, grabbed it by its neck, twisted off the red cap, and plunged it upside down into the garbage disposal. "God damn you to hell!"

"Don't turn it on, don't turn it on," I whispered and covered my eyes by hugging Joni close until she struggled free.

Bash! went the empty bottle into the recycling bin.

Dad still sipped on his Manhattan.

The next day, a new bottle of bourbon was in the cabinet above the oven.

One day I found a crisp greeting card under the newspaper on the family-room coffee table. Dad's fancy-tight handwriting—

which I inherited—made a condolence card to Andy's widow. They were old friends from his childhood in Idaho, but Andy had died more than a decade ago.

This was more than alcohol.

"For Andy? No way. Something's really wrong," I told Mom decisively. "Let me find a neurologist."

"I don't know." There was a long pause while she looked away. "How do you find one?"

"I know somebody in the medical field. She does autopsies, so she knows a lot of doctors."

A neurologist referred us to another doctor, and that internal medicine specialist said Dad had injured his brain with too much alcohol for too long—encephalopathy. But Dad only got worse when we hid the bourbon, sweet vermouth, gin, and poured him no more wine.

We were sent down the line to more specialists, having to struggle with Dad to dress him in street clothes too many times over weeks, months. Most days his lower jaw was firmly set, jutting hate. If not that, it was dropped in loss. Mom and I tried to ignore him, talk to him, invite him, ask him, even love him. Nothing but curses, refusals, or blank stares were returned.

Almost six months since we set out to help him through the sticky web of M.D.s, we were referred to a medical center in Berkeley, where the specialty was Alzheimer's disease.

I drove. I'd driven by that hospital a thousand times since my early days in the Bay Area and never knew there was a center inside for unpredictable, failing people like my dad.

Attacked by a reflection of the past—its hope, simplicity, innocence—I parked. Back to the sadness of now. The speed of life.

A nurse took my father into an exam room.

At a table that filled up an entire small room on the other side of the narrow hall, three doctors came in and sat. The one with the Middle Eastern accent said clear as day, "Your husband has early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Quite rare."

"No," Mom clamped her lips, unsure of herself. "No." Her eyes were full of bewilderment. "How can I?"

We can't be sure what to expect, how things will change.

The descent into the unsolvable.

When the doctors went away, Mom turned her watery eyes to look at me. Her face was ashen, her mouth still set. She choked back their entire life when she said, "I knew he'd do this to me," and pulled her shoulders back. "Golden years," she scoffed.

RENA GRAHAM

No Roses in Roseville

We hold my mother's wake in a Chinese restaurant in Roseville, California. Had she been Chinese, this might be less strange.

She died in a prefab home reeking of plastic and cigarettes. Decades earlier, she and my father had proudly shown me around their new double wide in a manicured senior's park outside Sacramento. I'd wondered if they would ever get rid of that factory smell. Every surface made to look like something it was not, in a town called Roseville where there were no roses.

My sister calls with her official bad-news voice. "Lung cancer, stage four. She's refused intervention. When can you get here?" I immediately hear a chorus of small children from my childhood singing the same plaintive refrain. *Does she smoke in the shower? Your mother, who we've never seen without a cigarette, does she smoke in the shower?*

The diagnosis is sudden but trails years of fighting another cancer. When I call, my mother's voice is strained and raspy, all vitality dissipated. "I hope you aren't disappointed in me, but I can't go on." I assure her the decision rests in no one's hands but her own, and promise I'll catch a flight down from Vancouver.

How many times have I called my sister offering help, only to be rebuffed? She didn't want another person to look after, but that was not the real reason she pushed me away. There is so much more to our history than that. Grime-filled corners of our lives where bits of resentment have settled. Attics full of squelched emotion, chimneys choked with the soot of burned-out connec-

tion. This is the place we all live in now.

A year earlier, I'd been traveling on business and was standing on a sky-bridge in the Denver airport. My plane was delayed so I called to see how my mother was doing. Could I be of help? Could I come for a few days and let my sister and father have a rest from their caregiving tasks? "No," my mother said, "I just want to be with family right now. I hope you'll understand."

Strangers filed past, oblivious to the boot at my chest. Her words delivered with an unsettling lack of rancor knocked the wind out of me. I wanted to grind my phone under my heel and make those words fly backwards. Leaning against the railing, I looked out over the white sails of the terminal and witnessed two tears fall. Tiny puddles of DNA on the floor far, far below, testifying to my existence. I stood like that for a long time before raising my head to the expansiveness of the space. Over the cacophony of the terminal I heard my flight called. With practiced determination, I walked towards the boarding gate, grateful for the gentle anonymity and dreamlike quality of travel.

Now I'm boarding another plane, the last flight I'll take while she's still alive. It's been six months since I've seen her and as usual, that visit left me weak with depression. A malady I contract every time I spend time with my family. Whether they want to admit it or not, I am still part of them. My only sin is being even more a part of myself.

Of all the things that make me different, my silence and solitude provoke the loudest response. When we enter my sister's house, she immediately turns on music. She leaves me alone to read. I turn off the background din. She walks back into the room, picks up the remote and turns the music back on. When I say I'd prefer the quiet, she says it's unnatural. At my parent's, my father wakes from his nap, startled to find me in the living room work-

ing on my computer. “Geez, why don’t you turn on the TV so I’d know you’re here?”

This seems like such a small difference but it speaks to a larger issue. Without silence for our thoughts, we live a life of distraction and illusion. Listening to and making peace with our minds allows us to make peace with ourselves. Without that truce, we can slip into unhappy dependencies or the blunting power of substance abuse.

My sister blames me for my father’s drinking. Am I also responsible for her inheriting this family tradition? But we can’t talk about that.

“He’s been an alcoholic since before I was born.”

“Yeah, but you make it worse. He feels judged by you.”

“He has a disease he won’t seek help for. If he had hepatitis and I showed concern, would that also be judgement?”

There is no winner in a discussion where both people are right. The drinking covers his anger and shame, while creating more. My mother, the only one with any real influence, refuses to get involved. She’s found a level of stasis with the situation and will not be thrust into unsafe territory.

I’d pulled myself out of this sadness and dysfunction decades earlier in order to save myself. I’d chosen my health over the security of family and paid for that decision with each subsequent interaction. A harsh decision for an ugly predicament but one I’d never regretted. My needing and wanting more from life provoked a deep divide.

I take my seat on the plane leaving Vancouver and think about the conversation I had with my mother after that phone call in the Denver airport. She apologized and said she hadn’t understood how hurt I might be. I’d accepted her apology, but the truth behind the words lingered like the stale cabin air that now enveloped me.

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Eighty and exhausted, my mother has taken to her bed to await the inevitable. I arrive three days before she dies and when I see her, my heart plummets. In my absence, she's turned into a tiny, emaciated birdlike creature. All hollows and sharp places where bones thrust themselves forward. The last words she speaks are, "I'm glad you're here." Words of hers I also believe. Wound tightly in the paradox of our lives, I tell her I love her and have missed her. Another expression of honesty.

The screened-in patio, with its desk of half-finished duck decoy carvings is never used. My father and sister drink scotch out of jelly jars and tell stories in the garage, away from the prying eyes of neighbors. California, with near-perfect weather and they choose to sit in a windowless space, smoke cigarettes and get loud and drunk listening to country music on a cheap radio. I sit with them and try to join in the increasingly disjointed conversation. Try to be part of something I am not.

I know my mother will be gone by tomorrow. When I say I'd like to be with her tonight, my father looks at me with his habitual distrust. To ease the tension, I drink a beer but when they offer me another and I put up my hand in refusal, their eyes narrow.

They've been with my mother through the hard times—the times of sickness and reprieve. The years she fought off another malicious, soul-starving cancer. Remission and recurrence. Phone voices pulsing with dashed hopes and trampled emotions. Mistakenly declared free of another illness she'd fought for years, she went to the doctor complaining of shortness of breath.

My news arrived long distance, exactly a week ago. But tonight I'm here and I know.

The early morning's stillness is broken by my soft chanting. My family is so stubbornly lacking in beliefs of any kind that when the time comes, I can't fill the gaps with even a common Christian prayer. Not that one comes to mind exactly, but I might be

able to summon one up, if I felt it would be appreciated. Instead, I say Buddhism's 100 syllable mantra of purification. "Om vajra sattva samaya, manu palaya…" The rhythm of repetition, though barely audible, saturates the space with relaxed acceptance.

When I return from the kitchen with my cup of hot tea I know she's gone. Death can be like this. People talk about how lonely it would be to die alone but more than once, I've sat by a deathbed for hours, only to have the person escape the minute I leave the room. It's as if the act of pulling away, of making the final rush to freedom is too intimate to share. As if death is so special, so precious, that those still alive should bear no witness. Intensely private with secrets she wrapped her life in, I'm not surprised this is how my mother chooses to leave.

Holding her cool parched hand, I know that what existed between us is done. Whatever karmic imprint brought us together is singed. The connection, like the string to a kite, is two black, burnt ends. Not to be connected ever again. Whatever we needed to do or be to one another is over for all time. She could have been a better mother and I could have been a more devoted daughter. But that's not the way it was. That's not the truth of what happened, but showing up with the intention to bring comfort brings forgiveness. My simple act of being here, of witnessing her passing from this life is enough.

I sit in silence, offering prayers for a safe transition, hands folded at my chest and head bowed. Fingernails dig into my chin.

With a deep exhale, I rise to wake my father from his sloppy, medicated sleep. As I leave her room, I have a jarring premonition that I won't be attending his death but have no idea why.

"She died at 4:05." My father looks at the clock and notices the ten-minute lapse and then looks back at me. Is he wondering what he can blame me for? How he can hold me accountable for this calamity? Why was I the one to be with her at the end—the one who always received her news long distance? How did I

know when she'd go? He says nothing.

My sister stumbles to the bathroom and washes last night's makeup from her face. Her twelve-year-old daughter wakes up and looks scared. There is a dead body in the house. Will she have to see it? Touch it?

My father goes in first. He leaves her room with shoulders deflated and head hung low, walks to the kitchen and pulls the gallon jug of whiskey from beneath the cupboard. In the hush of the morning, I hear a loud glug as he fills his coffee cup.

Quietly sobbing, my sister enters my mother's room as my niece looks in from the doorway. Afterwards, we all sit together in the living room, stunned by the slap of death's finality. Within the hour, my sister makes a phone call and two men clothed all in white arrive, eyes towards the ground, hands clasped professionally in front. "No one needs to stay in the room with us," one of them says. "It's usually too hard on the family." I don't want to leave her with strangers, so I stand just inside the door until one of them points to her hand. I remove the wedding ring my mother's worn for fifty years and slip it on my finger for safekeeping. I check her ears and carefully remove the diamond earrings, secreting them in the pocket of my jeans until I can give them to my sister.

When they pick her up with gloved hands, she is no longer my mother. She's become just another wrinkled, decimated old person who has decayed and died. Another corpse. They zip her into the dark regions of the body bag. Body and soul surrounded by plastic in death, as in life.

They take her out the front door before dawn comes and the neighbors wake up to see the telltale white van parked in the driveway. I close the door and we sit in the living room and cry. It is the last time we ever cry together.

On Sunday we are quiet, cocooned in the solitude of grief.

On Monday, my father belts down several strong drinks and

makes phone calls to their friends—many whom they've known their entire married lives. His hand trembles as he flips the pages of their worn address book. He tentatively pushes the buttons on the phone. With a steady voice, he tells them he has bad news. He sits quietly and finishes his whiskey. Getting up to leave the room, he turns to me and says, "Making those calls was the hardest thing I've ever done." Swaying with grief, he walks slowly to the end of the hall, gently closing the bedroom door behind him.

On Tuesday, I take everything of my mother's and put it in bags for garbage or charity. Her bedroom, a place of sickness and suffering, is scraped clean of memories. Every undergarment, every hair pin—gone. As if she'd never been there, as if her existence couldn't be linked to even a tear. This is what my father asked me to do. She's been dead less than three days and he wants no visual reminder of her? I struggle with this until I realize she was sick for ten years. For the last decade, his life has revolved around her care, her appointments and her distress. Prying open my heart, I realize it's not my mother he is getting rid of, but the decrepitude he can no longer live with.

Later that day, I take down the Hummel figurines from over the tall windows at the front of the living room. I sit them on the counter, wipe them with a wet cloth and begin packing them into shoe boxes. When my niece says she wants to keep them, we are all surprised. No one in the family ever understood the charming, soulless, innocence my mother cherished.

To honor her wishes, there will be no funeral, no service of any kind. She is cremated and put in a beige ceramic urn large enough for my father to join her when his time comes. I take a faded photo of her fishing in Alaska, when she was still young and newly married, to the newspaper with a short obituary. We fax it to the town in Alaska where they met, where I was born. No neighbors come by. No one calls.

That night we drive to the Chinese restaurant and drink jas-

mine tea and eat cashew chicken. It's located in a faceless strip mall, between the hardware store and a hair salon. Brass bells announce our arrival. We sit at one of the corner tables on uncomfortable chairs. The tubular metal frame meets my back in all the wrong places. After our order has been taken, I talk about how much my mother had liked Chinese food and say that it is therefore appropriate we are having her wake in a Chinese restaurant. No one smiles or agrees. My sister nervously jiggles her chopsticks while my niece stares down at the tablecloth. My father glares at me. I have acknowledged the truth that she is dead and we are alone. We say little for the rest of the meal.

Because we cannot pay homage to her death, we cannot celebrate her life or the ones she left behind. The stark, denuded landscape of her passing, stripped as bare as her bedroom, is a world deprived of ritual and any sense of the sacred journey we each take.

What could have been leaves only a void, an empty hole that our familial connections soon dissolve into.

As we get up to leave, I glance towards the entrance and see two cut-glass vases on painted red pedestals. I hadn't noticed these when we came in. Roses. Plastic pink roses. The only roses I've seen in this town called Roseville.

JAMES TADD ADCOX

Excerpt from *Repetition*

The "survey of the literature" is fundamentally an act of repetition. How strange, then, that there exists to this point no comprehensive survey of the burgeoning scholarly work on nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist Constantin Constantius, who spent his life struggling with the question of repetition. This year members of the Constantin Constantius Society celebrated their namesake with the Society's second annual conference. These notes, written in the conference's immediate aftermath, do not presume to the sort of comprehensiveness the subject deserves; nevertheless, it is hoped that the following document will begin to rectify this omission in the literature to some small degree.

The author of these notes is a founding member of the Society as well as the Society's former president. He—I—will not hide, when appropriate, his opinions on the actions of the Society, particularly regarding the recent decision by the board on the matter of executive leadership. He—I—understands that true objectivity comes not from hiding one's own biases or beliefs, especially when dealing with sensitive or controversial subjects, but stating both one's subject position and the facts as clearly as situation and evidence allow[1]. But more on that at the appropriate time.

[1]The present author is aware that a summary of the conference proceedings has been or will be offered up by former Society president and current interim acting president Professor Thomas Grinding, almost certainly a timid and lifeless recitation of the panels and presentations, with perhaps some albeit slight

There was a sense of hopefulness at the outset of the conference. The Society, as well as many of the non-Society participants, recalled the inaugural conference, under the presidency of Dr. Grinding, as a disaster. Questions were raised in some quarters regarding the desirability of hosting a second conference at all. Other members had argued for ignoring the existence of the first and urged an inaugural "redo"—an idea which certainly had its appeal, given the Society's philosophical concerns. However, holding in mind Constantius's dictum that "the interesting can never be repeated," it was determined, for both historical and scholarly reasons, that the Society must move forward, building off of the previous year's mistakes—each member, as the vote was cast, thinking to him- or herself, if not in fact muttering aloud: "God save us from such interesting events as those of the previous year!"

The lead-up to the second annual conference, it may be humbly noted, was significantly more successful than the inaugural. Panelists attended from all regions of the United States and a good number from abroad, including Japan, China, Western and particularly Eastern Europe, and one scholar from Australia. A particular draw this year was the venerable F. Barnabus Florantine, a tremendous name in Constantius studies, who had refused, on theoretical grounds, to attend the inaugural conference, but had agreed to give the keynote at the second.

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engagement with the ideas presented; but as Professor Grinding's paper will not engage with the actual events of the conference—how could it, except in their shallowest, that is, their objective and outer manifestation?—the present summary is offered, in part, to fill these gaps. If it appears written in haste, this is because the present author recognizes the timeliness of such an engagement, undertaken while the body is still warm, so to speak; and he believes furthermore that there is only one in the position to do so.