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The Heart of Another Is a Dark Forest

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ENGLISH

THE HEART OF ANOTHER IS A DARK FOREST

By

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Nine short stories.

ABSTRACT

HOME AND GARDEN

Here's my problem: I can't get flower seeds to germinate and grow in my own backyard. I soak "Electric Blue" sweet pea seeds overnight before planting. I cut tiny grooves in the round backs of "Endless Summer" lupine. Thing is, nothing I touch grows anymore. The problem is apparently all mine—Sharon, my wife, has no problems. Aside from beds of pink petunias, she grows rows of "Sweet Conception" tomatoes, a variety that thrives here in Southern Minnesota. "Sweet Conception" gives gobs of little tomatoes, which is good because there's always someone around here who wants little tomatoes.

I get home from work and my wife is waiting for me in an empire-waist dress I'm sure she likes because it looks like maternity wear. We're already late for our appointment at the clinic, but she ties a dish towel over my eyes and leads me, with her cold fingers squeezing my wrist, down into the dirt-smelling basement. I'm afraid she'll show me something else she wants done to the house—a newer water heater installed, another surface painted pink. Used to be, the first thing we did when I got home from work, before we became obsessed with little tomatoes, was squeeze past the orchids filling our house and have a frolic in bed.

"Surprise," she says, pulls the blindfold to reveal the basement storeroom lit bright. My old recliner from the living room is now hunched in the middle of the storeroom, and my bookshelf sits next to it. A reading lamp I've never seen rests on the bookshelf. First thing, I wonder who helped her move the recliner down the basement stairs while I was at work.

"Now you can read books whenever you want," she says. "Without bothering anyone."

The storeroom has piles of boxes against the walls. Sharon smiles at her reflection in a mirror I found at a garage sale two weeks ago. I thought the mirror would be valuable but it turned out to be just another worthless thing. And now I'm directly in front of this mirror, and I can see my wife behind me closing one eye as she appraises the wall. I see my own face and I exhale on the mirror's surface. Then, in the space between my wife's reflection and mine, I circle my finger through the condensation, and the surface is chilly. I'm just doodling, but before I know it I have a small smiley face. And it strikes me that there is power in a face—and if we had a child, this face would also be me, and all the faces that came from this face would be me. Then, as I watch, the face evaporates away.

"It's better for you down here," she says, and turns to crinkle her nose at my bookshelf. "Books collect so much dust."

"Do they?" I say, glancing at her reflection. "I hadn't noticed."

"No, you wouldn't have," she says. A moment passes and she evaluates the far wall again.

"I think we'll put the bathroom there," she says, pointing.

"Bathroom?" I say.

"Don't worry, contractor Dan will put it in," she says. "He's the one who cut the well for me."

An image of Dan Frisk pops into my head. New steel-toed boots and a moustache thick enough to hold pencils. I can almost see the high-water mark of sperm in the whites of his eyes.

“I’ll do it,” I say. “I’ll put it in.”

So, we’re late for the post-coital exam at the clinic. Doctor Kroft, apparently the best fertility doctor in our city, has agreed to squeeze us in after the clinic’s closing hours, and before he flies to Salt Lake City to deliver a paper. As Sharon fills out forms, I stare at the silk plant next to the receptionist—probably supposed to be a swan orchid with its white, prehistoric flowers, one male and one female. I glance at Sharon’s reflection in the reception-station glass as she trowels through her tight purse. The form in front of her wants of all things a driver’s license number. Further down, it wants an “M” or “F” box checked for “Sex.” I lean over and write “yes” above “Sex.” My wife crinkles her nose at this.

A pregnant nurse leads us into an even smaller waiting room that smells like dried-flower potpourri and has a reproduction oil painting of a foxglove-nestled cottage hanging on the wall. A microscope sits on a high table in the middle of the room. After a time, there’s a shuffle and a knock at the door. From the gentle knock, I’d have thought Doctor Kroft a slight man like myself, with a clean-shaven upper lip. But the man who steps in is not thin and pale, with biceps like vines and a dead-end job as teller at Harrison Bank downtown. He looks more like a lumberjack, a contractor—someone you’d hire to dig a well. His moustache pricks-up vigorously and I understand just why my wife’s friends say he’s the best fertility doctor in the city.

“Ok,” the doctor says, after we’ve shaken his oven-mitt hand. “Should we take a look?”

“Yes,” Sharon says, and I can hear she means it.

“How does it work?” I say.

How it works is this doctor takes my wife away and returns with his sleeves rolled up, holding a prepared slide. My wife looks how she always looks, but I can see just a touch of color in her cheeks like when I complement her on her petunias. Doctor Kroft’s forearms swell as he positions the slide and turns the focus adjustment.

“Care to see?” he says, looks up at me. A small knot of heat rises in my belly as I put my eyes on the warm oculars.

“Why do some have two tails?” I say, blinking into the bright light.

“Absolutely normal,” Doctor Kroft says. He’s sitting on a stool, and I can hear him smile at my wife. “Not all swimming in the same direction, are they?” he says.

I look up at his black moustache. “No,” I say.

“Totally normal,” he says, folding his arms over his chest. “Totally.”

I stare at him until he takes a breath.

“Well then, our little guys are healthy enough, and the medium is hospitable,” he says. “Tell the receptionist to schedule a histogram for when I get back.” The doctor slaps his hands to his knees before standing. “You know,” he says, “You’d be surprised how many couples come to me with conception problems, and it turns out the problem is they’re simply not having steady sexual relations.”

After the exam, I sit at the kitchen table at home with a glass of warm milk and the windows open to the first cool evening. As I sit, a creamy full moon rises over our backyard. I smell the night-blooming day lilies like baby powder on the breeze, and hear the moths bumping against the screens, trying to get at the hall light.

“What are you doing in the dark?” Sharon says, switching on the kitchen light. “Is the car pulled around?”

The moon is high by the time we get to John and Cindy’s house. John, my hair-gel wearing supervisor at the bank, invited Sharon and me over for drinks and charades.

Gardening is something we all have in common. In fact, he's trimming a hedge by moonlight when we pull up, and he flashes a toothy smile into my headlight beams. His English-cottage-style front garden has the necessary foxglove and delphinium piercing up through a white-picket fence. Just like in the picture hanging in Doctor Kroft's examination room. I notice as I step out of the car that the moon-lit foxgloves are losing leaves, and the delphinium are staked. Over-watered—too much idyll hose work at this house.

"How's everything look?" John says.

"Great," I say.

He surprises me with a frontal, full-body hug, and I smell the synthetic-floral cologne on his neck hairs. Then he surprises me by hugging Sharon, who surprises me further by hugging him right back. Cindy, his wife, chooses this moment to open the front door and begin her descent down the flag-stones steps, and I get a strong feeling that she's coming in for a hug, too.

"Beautiful," John says, letting his eyes stick on my wife for just a moment before looking up at the full moon. And it strikes me that John has the shoulders and arms to move heavy objects, like stones, say, or recliners.

"Yes," Sharon says. "It really is lovely,"

Cindy smiles at me, and I try to think of something to say about the moon. "Looks like a screaming face," I say. "Sort of."

Sharon crinkles her nose at my comment.

After spending some time staring at the moon, Cindy coughs. "John finished another bush," she says brightly. "Anyone want to see?"

She leads us around the house, along a pea-gravel-covered path that crunches like egg shells under my feet. Then we're into the backyard. I'm walking behind the others, so I can't see very much until Cindy stops on the patio and flicks a switch. The backyard comes alive with light from fixtures mounted on poles. I blink in the magnifying-glass-brightness until my eyes adjust, and I see what's all around me.

The backyard is crowded with shapes, all silhouetted against the lights. Boys and girls running, playing. They seem correct, more than correct—they seem so exact that I have to reach out and touch the prickly hand of a soccer-ball-kicking boy, just to make sure he's really cut from a juniper bush and not a block of wood.

"I like to sit out here," John says, glances at Cindy who is turned away and staring down at a shrub-toddler pulling a wagon. John lifts the shears he'd been using when we drove up, and as we all watch, he very carefully lops a cow-lick shoot off the toddler's head. He pats the head gently before turning away.

"And are those you?" Sharon says, pointing at the only two adult shapes, standing off to the side. John shrugs.

In a moment I've walked to where the adult-shaped topiary stand. These must have been what John was working on earlier in the day—the detail is amazing. I can even see the straps to the woman's maternity dress. Her belly is big, and that makes my pulse tap against my wrists like a moth at the screen. From her height, I can tell this topiary is modeled on Cindy, but I'm not imagining that belly on Cindy. Then I notice the topiary standing next to her. It's supposed to be John, of course, but it seems somehow taller, more rigid. Like it should be wearing work boots and a walrus moustache. This juniper isn't losing leaves, and doesn't need to be staked. In fact, it towers over topiary Cindy, and is generally cut with the long face and broad shoulders of a granite statue of a hero.

I'm still looking at the topiary when John ushers us into the house and starts mixing rum drinks. Me, I get something called a *Dark and Stormy* when what I really want is *Sex with Consequences*, a sweet drink Cindy gets. John mixes Sharon something called *Five Green Brothers*, which causes my face to go so hot that I have to slip outside for another look at the topiary superhero. When I come back in the superhero himself is playing charades with my wife.

"Trees? Manual labor? Contracting?" John yells at Sharon. "You're having a heart attack!"

Sharon shakes her head. She's bent over, imaginarily carrying something long and heavy.

"Join my team," Cindy says, waving me over. She leans into me and I feel her lips against the small hairs on my ear, smell the sweet drink on her breath like over-watered orchid roots. "Laying pipe," she whispers, carefully forming the words against my ear. At that moment John yells at Sharon, "I got it: Pipes. You're putting pipes in a trench."

We rotate teams and it's my turn to act for Sharon. I draw a torn slip of paper that has "Superman" written in John's squiggly letters. Superman, Ok. First, I extend my hands above my head as though I'm about to fly. I stare off at the ceiling.

"Baby-want-mama?" my wife yells. "A hex? Casting a curse?"

I act as though I'm tearing open my button-down oxford. I unbutton the shirt carefully, then I pull it open with what I hope looks like real vigor.

"Exercise? Pumping up?" my wife says. "Getting attractive?"

I shake my head and I look out the sliding glass door at the topiary of John. I strike its exact pose—hands on hips, shoulders thrown back.

Sharon is silent for a moment as she closes one eye and evaluates me, in the same way she evaluated the basement storeroom. "A man?" she says. "I mean, a real man?"

"Superman," I blurt, a little too loudly. "Super-man."

The drive home is an absolutely silent affair. Sharon doesn't say anything, and the green lights off the dashboard illuminate her face so she looks like one of the five green brothers. I'm certainly dark and stormy. And I'm trying not to worry about how Cindy's sex with consequences is coming.

At home, Sharon hops out of the car and goes into the house. It's just me and all the moths banging around the porch light, and the pressurized din of the male cicadas in the silver maple.

Sharon is pretending to be asleep when I get into bed. This is a game we used to play, after a night out. Around the room our tables and the dressers stand at attention, and I slip my hand around so it's resting on her warm belly. She doesn't move. And for a moment I imagine my hand will one day rest over the curled shoot of a baby growing in her. My hand goes lower. I feel a tremendous pressure rising in me, like the slow, turgor pressure of a seedling pushing through soil, and I let my hand go lower.

She rolls over, and her face is a moon in the dark.

"Is it's hard?" she says.

"What?"

"Putting in a bathroom?" she says.

It takes me a second to understand—like blinking into the bright light of a magnifying glass—but my hand is where it should be and this is the first step in a ritual we haven't preformed in a very long time, so I keep going.

"Your bathroom?" she says, and sits up. "Your room in the basement?"

I sigh. "I'm sure it'll be a challenge," I say.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “Dan Frisk can help you get the job done. There’s room for two down there.”

There’s nothing to do but watch football highlights in the living room. My recliner’s in the basement, so I lie on the couch. I watch the old pigskin bully its way again and again into the end zone. It occurs to me, it really does, that the coach doesn’t care how the ball gets into the end zone, only that it gets there. Replacements are common. Cuts and substitutions happen. The player who can get the job done stays in the game.

I blink once, and wake hours later, still in the chair in front of the TV, still in my bathrobe. The dawn sky is the light blue of a delphinium flower. A pet food advertisement on the TV shows a dog digging a hole for his bone. After that, the architectural special that had apparently been playing as I slept comes back on. A man in tweed stands before a huge greenhouse, speaking. I find the controls and hit “mute” and his English-accented voice fills the room, “—And, anyway, in many cases ladies were not to be found unescorted in magnificent greenhouse such as this,” he says, gesturing. “Many in Victorian England thought ladies were unable to control themselves around these erotic flowers.” The man raises one eyebrow, and the shot switches to an expanse of orchids inside the greenhouse, with the man doing voiceover as the camera moves through. “Before we chastise the Victorians for their naïveté concerning the fairer sex, we might well consider why men in our own time find it so necessary to give orchid corsages,” he says. The camera moves between lush rows of orchids, brushing the full, pink petals. My gaze leaves the TV screen and goes to the corner of the living room.

Where my last orchid sits dying on a coffee table. I stand and go to the table. A butterfly orchid, a very dry-tolerant species able to stay alive when all the others in my collection are long gone from neglect. This plant is surely losing leaves around the base. I had maybe one-hundred orchids when Sharon and I first married, when the love we made did not have a purpose. Over the time it took us to become serious about careers and getting pregnant, my collection slowly shrunk. We lived according to a fertility chart, and I soon forgot about anything else. Now I reach down and touch the orchid’s dry pseudobulb so like a child’s wrinkled fingertips, and the man on the TV says, “But this glass testament to human ingenuity will live forever,” he pauses. “Even when the plants that fill it are long gone.”

I turn off the TV and sit in the dark until the sky turns slowly to honey-colored sunshine. When the toilet flushes upstairs I stand and go to the kitchen. Sharon will be down soon. She’ll snatch the Sunday paper off the front step, check the classifieds, beg me to fry her two sunny-side-up eggs with bacon. When I suggest oatmeal, she’ll ask me what yard work I want to do today.

I take two glasses out of the cupboard, put them on the kitchen table, and fill them with orange juice. Then I put the dying orchid in the middle of the table. I stare at the orchid until I hear the front door open and shut, and Sharon comes sauntering in with the paper under her arm. She sits down at the table and opens the paper, and I watch as her eyes flit over the listings. She takes a sip of orange juice and crinkles her nose. “Tastes funny,” she says. Her eyes go to me for a moment, evaluating me like I’m about to be knocked down to make way for a bathroom. Then it’s back to the classifieds.

I don’t say anything.

“Why’s this plant on the table?” she says, without looking up.

“It’s almost gone because we didn’t take care of it,” I say. I just let that hang in the air like pollen, and she looks up for a second at the orchid, then back to the paper. “It used to be really great,” she says, ruffling the newsprint.

“It can be great again,” I say.

She glances at the dying orchid.

“You want some bacon and eggs?” I say.

She nods.

I make the food and put it in front of her, where it sits untouched. The yokes are unbroken, the bacon is crisp and straight. There’s buttered toast. But Sharon looks up at me with a slight flush to her cheeks, like in Doctor Kroft’s office after the examine.

I’m about to push my advantage, tell her how much I love her, how much I like being the moth to her porch light. But before I can speak, she opens her mouth. “Have you thought about last night?” she says.

“Yes,” I say.

She takes a sip of the orange juice, wrinkles her nose again. “Then you’ll do it?” she says.

“I’d like to have done it.” I say. “Last night.”

She stands, goes to the sink, pours the orange juice down the drain, takes a deep breath before turning back around.

“You can help Dan Frisk,” she says. “Put it in.”

“Why do we even need another bathroom?”

“I need it. You need it. You’ll be allowed to pee standing up down there. Splatter to your heart’s content.”

“How will a bathroom help us have kids?” I say.

“It’ll help. Believe me. Having Dan Frisk work his magic down there will fix everything,” she says.

It doesn’t take me long to drive to one of the huge hardware stores on the edge of town. I turn the car off and sit in the parking lot, and watch men wheel pieces of wood out on metal carts. Some wear Dan Frisk’s type of steel-toed work boot. As far as sperm go, there are blockers and runners, I remember this for some reason. I read it somewhere, and I never forgot it. There are actually sperm whose job it seems to be to block other sperm from getting to the egg. I take a good long look at myself in the rear view mirror. Blockers never get to run the ball.

The inside of the store smells like a rubber, strangely enough. There are people everywhere, all going in opposite directions, blocking the aisles with their full carts. Almost running into each other. I can’t find an employee, but I bump around until I find myself standing in front of the book rack.

The air smells musty over at the do-it-yourself book rack. A thick book bound in explicit orange has the title, *Do It Yourself At Home*. Around it are books on constructing gazebos and tree houses and kitchens. There is a heavy book on bathrooms, and I pick it up and start leafing through. The pictures are glossy and leave nothing to the imagination. Here is how you seat a new toilet over the main drain. Here is how you solder copper tubes to establish pressurized water to a sink. Laying pipe is covered in great detail. I yawn. Behind *Do It Yourself Bathroom* is a book I don’t see anywhere else on the rack: *Do It Yourself Greenhouse*. The picture on the front shows a small backyard greenhouse with little gables and a stone foundation. A tight, cottage-style thing with foxglove and delphinium growing in front. Through the glass I can see plants hanging and standing on shelves, and, to my eyes, there appears to be a bed in there.

I put *Do It Yourself Bathroom* back on the rack, and pick up this greenhouse book, which is strangely light, maybe the same weight as a football. I look closely at the picture on the front. It's a bed alright, and as I look closer I see a dresser and night table as well, and suddenly I feel my pulse tremble in my lips and fingertips. The orchids behind the glass are all lush and open. I hunch closer—so close that condensation from my nose is on the picture, and in that moment I think I can smell the orchids blooming as sweet and potent as a rum drink.

I look over to see a man in a tan trench coat ogling the *Do It Yourself Window* book. He rearranges himself under the coat and turns a page, seriously and studiously avoiding my eyes.

The greenhouse book in my hands has the directions and plans to build four different greenhouses. Each style of greenhouse has a list of materials. The greenhouse I like, the one from the front cover, wants stiff 2x4s, 4x4s, plywood, and other lumber, panes of glass, gobs of caulk, three cubic-yards of pea gravel, stones for the faux-foundation, bricks, and piles of other things like nails and screws and concrete. It tells me the power tools I'll need, including a tool I've always wanted: a nail gun. A nail gun will allow me to nail things.

I take this book up to the customer service counter where a clean-shaven man makes a list of all the items, adds up delivery, and I pay with a credit card. This man refuses to look at me, just as the man in the trench coat had. As I'm leaving the store, a young boy in a stroller notices me and points, "Mommy, why is that man wearing his bathrobe?"

Sharon is squatting, weeding her thick bed of pink petunias, when I pull up. The petunia swath is roughly almond shaped and surrounded, for contrast, by hairy, black-potato vine. She tips the straw hat back on her head and looks up as I walk into the front yard.

"Hey, honeydew," I say.

She looks at me like I'm a moth that's landed in her glass of milk. "Did you go to the store dressed like that?" she says. I can tell she's not pleased.

"It's Sunday," I say, looking down at my robe.

She blinks and opens her mouth, blinks again. "That doesn't mean you have license to be a fashion catastrophe."

I shrug. Her face is a bit more flushed than usual, and that forehead is the same pink as the petunias next to her. I'm sure suddenly that our baby's cheeks would be the same pink.

"Ok, let's see the receipt," she says, standing and wiping topsoil from her hands. I admit I can go a little crazy at the home improvement store—and I like it when she takes that annoyed tone with me. Makes me wish she'd ask for other things in that exact tone.

I go to the car and come back with the receipt, the *Do-it Yourself Greenhouse*, and the nail gun. I hand her the receipt. Her eyes flit over it, until she drops the trowel she's been holding. She blinks and looks again at the receipt.

"Would you say you're able to control yourself around orchids?" I say. "I mean, around those really big ones we used to have?"

She looks up from the receipt with round eyes.

"Remember? We used to have tons of orchids?" I say, "Remember that summer?"

Sharon takes a breath, cocks her head sideways. "We were twenty-four years old," she hisses, like I'm guessing wrong at a game of charades. "We lived in a dump. You forgot my birthday every year. The bathroom stank."

“But I remember your garden then.”

“You would,” she says. But her cheeks turn a bit pinker, which I’m sure is a good thing.

“Remember that swan orchid we had that smelled like Juicy Fruit when it bloomed?” I say, then add, “Even that flower opened one night a year.”

“John...,” she says. She closes her eyes for a second, and when she opens her eyes again the skin above each eyebrow has a small crease. She looks at me, and she keeps looking at me for awhile—maybe about as long as it would take her to lead me up the stairs to our bedroom. Then she shakes her head. “Go back and cancel this order,” she says, handing me the receipt.

“Ask me again like you’re annoyed,” I say

“You need your own room, not more orchids,” she says, still shaking her head. “We both need Dan Frisk. I’m calling Dan Frisk.”

“Hey,” I say, holding up the nail gun as she turns to go back inside. “Ask him if he’s got one as big as this?”

She goes into the house and closes the door.

I drive to the greenhouse on the edge of town and buy enough orchids to fill my back seat. Their plastic pots are wedged together, and when I drive away over the pea-gravel parking lot, each flower stem bobs in the back seat like a waving homecoming queen.

When I get home there’s a pickup truck with big wheels parked in my place in the driveway. The house’s front door is locked and I can’t reach my keys, my arms are so full of orchids, so I ring the doorbell. Who should open the door but Dan Frisk. There he is squeezing my doorknob and smiling as he does it.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” he says, and steps back to let me into my own house. “I like the bathrobe, by the way. I get it: it’s Sunday.” He’s a tall man, and very rigid—so that’s why I don’t punt him in the crotch right off. I put the orchids down on the table, and he leads me through my kitchen, toward my basement stairs. My hands go cold when I notice the two cups of coffee on the kitchen counter. The scent of *Angle*, the same brand of soap that we use in our upstairs shower drifts from Dan Frisk’s freshly scrubbed neck. I follow him down the basement stairs to the storeroom, and there is Sharon standing near the mirror, and she doesn’t look pleased with things. I can tell.

“I think we should all sit down and talk,” she says.

“Talk about what?” I say.

“Things,” she says.

“I want to stand,” I say.

Dan Frisk looks at my recliner, then at me. “Can I?” he gestures to the recliner.

I ignore him, and he shrugs and sits in my chair.

“Dan and I have been,” my wife looks over at the contractor, who is busy snuggling his butt into the chair. “We’ve been talking.”

I wait for it, but I don’t have to wait long. *Blockers and runners*, I think. *Blockers and runners*

Sharon looks at me for a couple of seconds before speaking. “Do you remember that clump of hellebores in the back?” she says.

I nod.

“We divided them and put them at different parts of the yard?” she says.

I nod, and she cocks her head at me, waiting for me to understand where she’s going. When I don’t say anything, she continues.

“One clump went over next to the petunias, and the other went into the shade. And they’re both healthy and thriving because we separated them,” she says. “Do you remember?”

Dan Frisk moves, and my chair sighs under his weight.

“But only one of the clumps grew,” I say. And boy did it grow. That hellebore in the part-sun near the petunias doubled, then tripled in size in just one growing season. Now it looks like the perfect specimen you see next to the written description of “hellebore” in a plant encyclopedia.

“The other clump,” I say to Sharon, “looks sort of—” I shrug, “It looks sort of lonely.”

“How do you know the big clump isn’t horribly lonely?” she snaps.

“Doesn’t look lonely,” I say. “Looks happy.”

“Not everything shows,” she says, squinting at the far wall. “Maybe it wants to do more than just grow and reproduce?”

Dan Frisk sort of sits up and smiles. “What’s a hellebore?” he says.

“A plant,” Sharon says, not looking at him. Her eyes stay on me as she speaks. “And most people don’t know that plants live on love. The love of bees. Bees that come for the nectar.” Her eyes never leave mine. “See, bee’s are lucky,” she says. “They can see and taste their love, and they can hoard it. They build fortresses to protect it, they raise their young on it. It’s that important to them. They know the nectar is the good, valuable part—not the pollination. The pollination is just science,” she says, and looks all around the room, everywhere but at me. “But I think some of us have forgotten the nectar.”

Then it’s very quiet in the storeroom. I move my feet.

“Well,” Dan Frisk volunteers. “I like that royal jelly. On muffins.”

Sharon sort of saunters over to the recliner. “Dan is going to make this room into a bedroom.” She sits on the arm of chair, very close to the contractor’s left shoulder, but never stops looking at me. “Your dresser can go there,” she says, pointing. “The bed can go there. We’ll see how this arrangement works.”

I sleep that night on the couch, of course, and I don’t go to work the next day. Dan Frisk’s shiny, black pickup arrives at around ten, pulling a huge trailer piled with lumber like a dead insect’s legs, and I watch him unload the wood and tools and set them on the front yard. He steps on her petunia bed twice while carrying the wood into the house. Twice. Me, I’m on my hands and knees in the front bed, pulling weeds. And he’s stepping on plants.

The material I bought from the home improvement store arrives later that day. I stand in the driveway and watch the delivery men stack the wood, and glass, and bags of gravel and cement—the new tools in their boxes.

After the movers are gone, I pull my car out of the garage. Slowly, piece-by-piece, I transplant the building equipment from the driveway into the space formally held by my car. Dan Frisk opens my front door and stands, hands on hips, shoulders thrown back. Lord of the manor.

I know what he’s thinking, watching me come up the driveway with a post-hole digger over my shoulder. *Blocker*.

With *Do It Yourself Greenhouse* in my left hand, I measure out the dimensions on the ground—and it’s larger than a garden shed, but only just. Unlike a garden shed, I choose a place directly in the middle of the back yard. I measure off the rectangle and start digging up the grass within. Then I dig the post holes at each corner. Holding each

post level and troweling concrete into the hole proves a little tricky, but by the time the sun is high overhead all four posts are in place. They seem straight. No problem. I eat a peanut butter-and-honey sandwich and listen to Dan Frisk's circular saw grind my house.

The greenhouse gets trickier when I have to make two triangles and nail them to the posts, to give the roof angle. I build them on the ground and hammer them in place with one side on each post. Then I run a long two-by-four from the top peak of each triangle to the other. That's the frame of the greenhouse, and I have it done by sunset. Most of the joints are slightly uneven, and nails stick out of the wood in places. On the other hand, I got to use my nail gun. I got to use my chop saw, my tape measure, my post-hole digger. I sunk posts into the dirt. My hands hurt and I have sticky honey at the corners of my mouth and in the creases between my fingers. And as I'm walking toward the house to take a shower, I hear something strange, rather, I don't hear anything. Dan Frisk's circular saw is silent.

I run the rest of the way to the house and yank the sliding glass door aside and charge in. There in the living room is my wife and the contractor. They're on the floor, sitting—sipping coffee from mugs. There are a couple of candles burning around on tables and the waft of beeswax and coffee gives the room sort of musky smell that makes the hairs on my arm stand. The TV is on, of course. My wife leaves the TV on all the time—she's one of those. It's always tuned to the garden network. This particular time the host is talking about how to separate an old hedge. But Dan Frisk and my wife aren't looking at the TV, and they sure are making a show of not looking at each other.

“What are we talking about?” I blurt.

Sharon looks at me, then back to the wall. “Price,” she says.

Dan Frisk nods big as if to put all fears to rest—yep, just discussing price. Out the front window I see the sycamore the neighbor across the street keeps trimmed so that the spring growth comes from large knobs at the tip of the old branches, and in the breeze this tree stirs, like its shaking knobby fists.

I hook up the flood lights and work late into the night, hoping that Sharon will come out and tell me to quit. But she doesn't come out, and the whole time I'm wondering if Dan Frisk's truck is still parked in front of the house.

That night I dream that Sharon is standing over me in the dark, looking at the greenhouse. But when I wake the eastern sky is petunia pink, and Sharon is nowhere to be seen. Turning to look at the work I'd done the night before, I almost cry. The angles are off, way off—a trend I'd started by not leveling the posts. The wall studs are not quite level with each other, leaving gaps thick enough for a baby to be born through. Which I like. In fact, the more I look at the faulty greenhouse frame, canted slightly to the right and lacking only its glass, the more I like it.

I get in my car and drive to the mall, where I buy a bed disassembled in a long box. I get a box spring and a mattress. As an afterthought I buy two-hundred beeswax candles at the place that sells candles, and some incense called “Orchid Passion” which smells something like Juicy Fruit gum. I go home with the mattress and box spring strapped to the top of the car.

It's almost dark by the time I get home, and I know I have to work fast. The other houses on our street have their living room and kitchen lights blazing. In some houses I see people standing or sitting in the kitchen or in the living room. The stars are out again and it's warm, and I just know that if I roll the windows down to scream, I'll hear cicadas. Male cicadas. It's no secret what the female cicada will soon do: she'll split her back, crawl out of her skin, and leave.

My own house is mostly dark, except for the kitchen. Dan Frisk's truck is parked in the driveway.

The bed is easy to put together—I'm done in a half hour. Now the bed is in the middle of the greenhouse. I put all my new orchids on the benches I'd built into the walls of the greenhouse. Between the orchids I put the candles, and I light every wick before walking into house, past the night-blooming day lilies that smell like baby powder. Behind, the greenhouse is as bright and flickering as the painting of the cottage in Doctor Kroft's office.

My house is completely silent. But as I come in the back door, I hear movement from the basement. I slip down the stairs with my heart beating fast. The storeroom is brightly lit and I can see the hardwood flooring Dan Frisk laid. In the far corner is a small door and from inside a toilet winks in the darkness. Sharon is holding something against the drywall. Dan Frisk is behind her with his hand on her hand, helping her place a white box on the wall. A tiny light on the device turns from red to green.

"Ok," he says. "There's the stud."

Sharon laughs.

I walk across the new floor and take my wife's hand. Nobody says anything. They're both as still as topiary. I take my wife by the hand and pull her away from the wall. She giggles. Her hand is cold as I pull her up the stairs.

In a moment we're outside with the thrashing cicada, and the seeded beds of bright stars above. I'm not dark and stormy anymore. I'm light. She's light. I'm so light that I start to run. At the door to the greenhouse, I turn and Sharon's cheeks are pink and I think she's blushing.

Inside the candles flicker around the full orchids, and the incense fills the empty space. My blood is pounding through me—and I look at my wife who is looking at me and I know she feels the same way. Her cheeks are red and then we're kissing with honey on her lips, and the cicadas are screaming, then her arms are around me pulling me down onto the bed, where all the flowers in the world seem to open and sing the buzzing bee on his path.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

I work as a network administrator for an advertising agency on the twentieth floor of the Qualcomm building—monitoring servers and generally solving issues of connectivity. I don't talk to anyone, and while I go about the office looking disconnected and remote my thoughts tear continuously around a track, like little race-cars moved by electricity. Out the window the gray ocean shows between the skyscrapers, and Marin county forest lashes green beyond it. Sometimes my pager beeps in the mornings, but most times I get called out to find lost people in the afternoons.

Everything's in the trunk of my Honda: my twenty-four-hour pack—an Osprey Backside, 2800 cubic-inches—contains everything I need to survive, to thrive unaided for one golden day. There's a little radio in that pack, and extra flashlights. Usually I pull on my gray Duotherm wick-layer shirt and chest-mounted walkie-talkie harness as I wait in the Golden Gate toll line. All my gear's gray, though this is purely by accident.

Once at the rendezvous point, we're briefed on who's lost. And if there's danger. Black bears can eat a body whole, skull and all. The other searchers move into the forest and I follow at a distance, ducking branches and dogging it until they've stomped away through the grape-smelling laurel. They're like the tiny radio in my pack—it works, but you can't find the station you want. I lay very still on the ground with my eyes closed until the wind gusts just right and I think I feel the ticklish sap raising under the trees' creased bark. I feel the energy from the breast of the Goddess come into me and I feel my scalp prickle and draw back, and suddenly I'm sure I can hear every living thing in the world. I'm like a short wave radio, and I can *hear*—even the spirits rustle and snap in the jet stream overhead. I can hear my wife mutter absently in my ear. In fact, it is her that I want to hear most. The dead are always watching us. This makes me feel good, most of the time. Gerald Gardner, you see, tells us that death is nothing but the ecstasy of nature.

The tracker's job is to find sign—a heel indentation from the right type of shoe, a certain kind of toe scuff, a single broken needle in a mat of unbrokens—and then you're on all fours, branches switching your face open as you move, run really, and you are so close to the ground you're almost sniffing it.

Most of our searches revolve around Mount Tamalpais, which has thousands of different sized trails radiating off it like secret passages from a burial room in a pyramid. I know every trail, and I'm usually the one to find the body, or the huddled, shivering being—more animal than person by that time. Sometimes it's a lost hiker or mountain biker, but most times it's an old lady with dementia who's wandered out her back door and into the wild. I'm usually pretty grubby by the time I get to her, and I take a second to tuck in my uniform shirt, brush off some of the dirt. Cleaned up, I am once again deputy Robert Wye, Marin County Volunteer Search and Rescue, and I have a little blue plastic name tag pinned to my uniform shirt to prove it.

I put the windows down for my drive home. The radio drones classic alternative, and sometimes I drive all the way to Pacifica, Half-Moon Bay, or even Capitola. Since my break with drugs, I spend plenty of time parked in my car reading things like *The Gardnerian Book of Shadows* and Macgregor Mather's *The Key of Solomon the King*. *The White Goddess*, by Robert Graves. I like parts of Zoroastrianism, and a lot of *Shinto*—but sometimes Eastern mysticism is a little too pat for me, a little too civilized. It's messy down here. We're running wild and dying, we're dying every minute. I accept this great mystery, but I need something to help me understand it.

That's pretty much why I track people, I think. Stewart Farrar, the great Wiccan, says that the believer must recognize his last fall into the Earth Mother's bounty. This recognition happened to me a couple of years ago. I was walking on Valencia Street and I didn't look both ways before crossing. It was my own fault. The bus was already on me when I looked up—it clipped me, knocked me into a parked Toyota, and head first into a curb. I guess I blacked out. I saw my body lying like a bag of meat, and something strange happened—brightly colored roots nosed out of me. Roots as thick as pythons grew out from between my white lips and down through the sidewalk. My finger tips stretched into rhizomes. Even my eyelashes wove down. The earth is always ready to take us back—I realized as I lay dying—to bear us down.

I didn't die, of course. I had a rare glimpse of the first stages of what Doreen Valiente calls "the rapture of the infinite." That accident changed my life. I look both ways before crossing a street, let me tell you. Watching the paramedics save my life lead me to take CPR and first aid classes. Some of the people in my class went on to take First Responder and even EMT-1 classes. I followed their lead. Why not? I had nothing to do. And in rehab they tell you to stay active.

Let's assume that what I have said doesn't make a lot of sense. It all boils down to this: one of the people in my EMT-1 class was from Marin County Search and Rescue. She invited the whole class to a SAR meeting, and I went because I was interested. In her, at first. To that point most of my attempts at dating had amounted to awkward silences and dead-quiet telephones, but I hoped someone might find me interesting again. I'm only thirty and I remember when I first met Cynthia—the feeling of her mouth, the soft cushion of lips and hard bone—the excitement of being so close to another person you can't even focus your eyes.

Now, in July, the sea otters are washing up dead on beaches all up and down the coast. I'm in my dark office working on a new Linux rollout when the pager starts beeping. By law my employer has to let me go.

I can tell immediately that this search will be different. The little pickups with the cages in the back tell me that the search coordinator has called in tracking dogs. A green, county helicopter swacks overhead—there are even searchers wearing Stetsons and tugging on the girth straps of horses as I park my car. This all means that somebody important is missing. Problem is, dogs are undependable and get easily sidetracked, helicopters are good for covering distance but can't see a person who crawled under bushes for warmth, and horses don't like pokey manzanita bushes or the kind of steep embankments that cover half the county. I hoist on my pack and clip the bite valve from my water bladder onto my shirt and go in for a closer look.

Ralph St. Germaine—search coordinator—is strutting around jabbing his finger at the topographical map in his hand, and yelling orders. He's a fire fighter who oversees SAR on the side. He pays me no attention and I extend to him exactly the same curtesy—it's been that way from the beginning—but I like to think he knows just where this team would be without a tracker like me, and he never orders me to cut sign, or do scree scrambles, as he does many of the less-experienced trackers. Following behind him are the representatives of the horse units, the dog units, even a sheriff, bald and unhappy. A girl with long red hair who I assume works in the gift shop is leaning against the small ranger station, smoking a cigarette.

"You work at the gift shop?" I say.

She lets her green eyes sweep over the ocean, like I'm talking to her from out there. The wind blowing through guy wires securing a port-a-potty makes a moaning

sound. She looks down at the nametag on her sweater. “Brigit,” she says, rubbing her cigarette out against the building. “Gift shop.”

The girl turns. Sculpted eyes and lips glow on her face, and her skin is as pale and smooth as marble. Then she walks back into the station. In that instant I consider laying down a spell that will make her love me for a thousand years.

Instead, I walk with the other searchers to a nearby line of forest, all the while thinking when was the last time I had an easy time talking to women. Oh yeah—never. I moved to San Francisco right out of high school. I moved because nobody in my family had ever left the state of Minnesota, and I could already feel the place pushing me in directions I did not want to go. In San Francisco, in the Mission District, everybody looked so different—cool, perpetually cool—sauntering down Valencia Street. Nothing about me looked anything like them, and when they sniggered I understood fully just how much of a joke my different hair and clothes were.

I was out of place in the Mission District of San Francisco in the year 2000, it didn’t take a psychic to see that. My one great sweep of luck—or so I thought—was to find a room in an apartment on the corner of 21st and Valencia, right over the voodoo shop. It was a popular building with the kind of people I wanted to be around—artists and musicians—and I just happened to respond to a classified with cash in hand. Luck maybe. One of my roommates helped me out. I’d smoked weed in high school, of course, but this guy took my experiences further—straight to meth and, eventually, heroin. I followed right along, desperate for companionship and the people he introduced me to. Minnesota’s blandness was a bad dream, I thought. As soon as people believed my chattiness was due to drugs, I was able to attain a sort of standing in the community of the hip. Even now, I can feel my blood start to thump faster in my neck as I think about the time before I realized the ecstasy of nature and the love of the Goddess.

I follow the searchers into the woods, but veer off and take a seat on a fallen tree. As their footsteps move away into the forest, I keep replaying the strange woman’s sideways glance. Valiente says that followers of The Craft know that all acts of love and pleasure are rituals to the Goddess. I feel the caldron deep within my chest boiling over, trickling down to my lower places and then, before I can stop it, I’m thinking about people I shouldn’t. I take some time meditating, imagining roots extending out of me and deep into the earth. I soak up pure energy and feel all the pain float out and away. The whole time I am trying not to remember that last night when Cynthia and little Oscar were giggling in bed, smelling like lavender soap. Suddenly my walkie-talkie comes to life, “Command center, this is unit 6, we’ve got a code D at the following coordinates...” Code D. Body removal.

The body is already stinking like old shrimp tails by the time they get it out, and I can see where a coyote has pulled the skin off the ring finger leaving strictly pink bone. Cycle of life stuff. It’s dusk by the time I get back to my car. A woman stands next to my Honda with her red hair snapping like a flag in the wind. Even before she brushes it out of her eyes, I feel like saluting.

“Can I help you?” I say, trying to sound as cop-like as possible. “Do you need assistance?”

Brigit smiles. “I have something to show you,” she says, glancing around before pulling down the neck of her sweater enough for me to see the silver pendant she’s wearing. It’s a silver five-pointed star—a pentagram—with crescent moons on each side and a milky moonstone in the center, and I almost pass out seeing it hanging there against

her freckled, white skin. But I don't let on, I imagine the roots coming out the soles of my feet are deeply rooted in the earth, and will keep me from losing myself.

"Very nice," I say.

The wind gusts and I have to take a step back to regain my balance. I know her pentagram. I know very well that the moons represent the three aspects of the Goddess—maiden, mother, crone. She's a Wiccan.

"You're him," she says. "Aren't you,"

"Who?"

"They talk about a wolf-man on Mount Tam. Something sniffing at the ground and running on all fours."

I stare at her a second too long, "There aren't any wolves in California," I stammer. "We killed the last one in 1924."

She shrugs, "Did you see the *Chronicle* last week? Someone saw a wolf-man on Mount Tam. There are eyewitnesses and a website and everything."

"You believe that story?" I say.

"Not anymore," she says, touching the place where the pentagram must be hanging against her skin. "Now I see that you're one of us."

Suddenly it's very late, and I feel my tired muscles going slack. My lies seem to have no impact on her, so what's the point? I don't know why she waited for me. I know that if I could find a way to dose her with the valerian-root sleeping potion in my car, I could escape her clutches.

"How can I help you?" I say.

She looks over her shoulder at the slamming car doors. "I'll tell you at Muddy Waters," she says. "The café on—"

"I know it," I say. "What if I just drive away?"

She points at my name tag. "I know your name, Bob Wye. You'll be there."

So, there I am at the café—in the waft of burnt coffee and hot cream—and she wears a snake ring on her first finger. She's gulping wine out of a cup. the smell of it makes my stomach feel hot. Her skin is covered with small freckles, and the highlights in her hair are the color of the rust I find on heat-sink conductors of certain old—and untrustworthy—computer motherboards. She's telling me about werewolves and I'm trying not to roll my eyes. Shape shifting, mind reading, astrology, tarot—are all rot in my book, all new age crap. Each is unnecessary and detrimental to the true power attained through a solid connection with the Goddess and the natural world. But I don't say any of this, Brigit is working up to something and I don't want to break her train-of-thought. She's explaining her reasons for wanting something she has yet to mention. "You see," she says, "the wolf has always been a potent totem. In prehistoric Russia a shaman wore wolf skins and ate poisonous mushrooms. The tribe drank his urine."

"Hmmm," I say. "Urine."

She frowns. "Monotheistic religions turned the werewolf into the monster we see today in movies, with the blood and the tearing people open—"

"Can I interrupt—?" I say. But she keeps at it.

"Hello, who suckled Romulus and Remus so they could found Rome?"

"Can I call you Brigit?" I ask. "Brigit, what is this all about?"

She blinks and sits back hard, and suddenly I feel terrible for being so blunt. She gives the table a little push before bending down to stuff a matchbook under one of the feet. Then she stares out the plate-glass at the corner of 16th and Valencia and sips at her wine.

“Should we go back to the part about drinking urine?” I say, after a while spent listening to the honking.

She sort of smiles at this. “You’re him, right?” she says.

“What gave me away?” I say.

She looks back to the plate-glass window. “I’m psychic. Plus, I could see the outline of the pentagram through your shirt. I still can.”

I feel my hand jump to my neck.

“There’s no way you could see it through my shirt,” I say.

She leans forward. “I’m a freakin’ psychic, ok?”

She looks at me. Somewhere a coffee machine hisses. I’m the first to speak, to try something. “Tell me about the mating habits of wolves?” I say.

She lifts one eyebrow, gulps the last of her wine. “Golly. Can’t say I know.”

She smiles like I’ve asked her what makes the sky blue.

“Brigit,” I say.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t bring me here to flirt, did you?” I say. “What are you after?”

She puts the empty glass on the table. “Right. Ok,” she says, blinking. “Here it is. Why not teach me?”

“Teach you what?”

“Tracking.”

I go over the fact that you don’t just learn tracking. “It takes years—years spent in the field—so you have to be Border Patrol or SAR. Years taking classes and passing examinations. And it’s dangerous. Sometimes you have to track escapees, and that gets tricky when you actually find them. There are timber rattlesnakes everywhere, I see a couple every search. Plus, you have to have medical training.”

“I did first aid,” she says.

“First aid,” I say. “Wow.” I hope it doesn’t sound too snarky, but she smiles, and I’m reminded that teeth are only bones poking out. “Why do you want to do this?” I say.

“I don’t know, why do you do it?” she says, and an image of Cynthia’s lavender-smelling, blue-lipped corpse pops into my mind before I can stop it.

“You’ll have to be at least First Responder certified—” I take the cop tone again with her, the one I reserve for telling CEOs their computer problems and talking to lost children, where I try to pronounce each word clearly. “You should go up to Weed, at the Oregon boarder, and take classes. That’s for starters. Frankly...”

“Why are you being this way?” she says. “You think I’ll tell someone you’re the wolf-man of Mount Tam?” she’s suddenly good and mad, her face flashing. “I won’t. I wouldn’t. You have to trust someone. I can see you in there looking out at me, and I can see how scared you are—I can tell what you want. Why do you hesitate? Why hold back?”

She’s right, of course. And she knows, of course, that by meeting her, I’ve already agreed to help. The coffee machine hisses again, and she licks her pale lips. The freckles dotting her sternum rearrange themselves before my eyes into tracks that lead my eyes lower and lower. I close my eyes and think about roots—roots keeping me strong, anchoring me deep. I’m thinking roots. Only roots.

Back at home, I sit at my kitchen table—the lone piece of furniture I’ve managed to buy in the seven months I’ve lived here. I leaf through some of my son’s old drawings. A house in gray crayon with a red smokestack on top, and three stick-figures holding hands in front. We never actually had a house, but that didn’t stop Oscar, my son, from

drawing one. I shuffle through the stack, feeling rough tempura on the brown newsprint. I'm looking for a certain picture, and here it is. Oscar's picture of his mother with long hair and a dress, and black dots up her arms. A picture we hid from other parents. Cynthia and I had been clean about three months, and that's when things like what happened happen, when you're not used to it anymore. The phone is right next to me on the table. I could call my mom's house in Minneapolis—talk to Oscar—but I don't. Four years after the accident and I still haven't found my way to that place.

Instead, I pull the recorder out of the closet and start listening. My son singing "Happy Birthday" and counting to thirty, and on some of them I hear my wife whispering to him, and it's those soft messages she whispers to him—like voices on the wind—that I want to hear very badly. I listen to every breath as Cynthia whispers, "there he is, give him a big wet kiss" and after a pause, Oscar's lips smack on my cheek, and she giggles. "Was it scratchy?" she whispers and I hear myself laugh on the tape, and I wonder how a sound as careless as that as ever came out of my mouth. I was another person. It's the past that I want now. I have four-feet of recordings and I listen to them late into the night, with a roll of toilet paper nearby. In *Nordic Wicca*, Haggoth says that pain is only weakness leaving the body.

I lie skyclad on my futon, close my eyes, and try to visualize true darkness and a ghostly image of myself floating out of my body. Imagine my spirit tethered by a blue cord, but the rush of air in my ears is replaced by Cynthia's whispers—"was it scratchy"—while in my mind's eye Brigit, the woman from the gift shop, yanks her sweater up over her head and she's as white as sugar underneath. Sleep is an impossibility. What I could really go for is tracking something through the woods.

I agree to take Brigit to UTS—Universal Tracking Services—classes. After taking, say, six more of these courses she'll be considered an intermediate tracker, and after another fifteen to twenty she might achieve master-tracker status. Money is no problem—her father directs a public relations firm in LA that represents Smittie Oil, the company that operates many of the off-shore rigs dotting the coast. We start by sitting with the rest of the class in Weed, California, at the base of Mount Shasta—which they say is about to go off, volcanically. The class, all six of us—mostly rural sheriffs and drug enforcement guys in charge of finding hidden gardens in northern California—sit on what seems like the lone patch of ponderosa pine forest not absolutely full of timber rattlesnakes. On all sides is trackless forest and heat-tracers rising off the pine needles. A hawk cries and Brigit whispers to me that he's looking for a mate. He's scared and his foot hurts. When I turn a questioning gaze, she taps her forehead. "Psychic," she says.

"Psychic," I repeat. I watch her learn—khaki-colored safari outfit, on all fours and perfectly tracing a track with the tip of her finger. Later, I watch her side step a snake, and then the knot-headed little rattler scurries off into the duff and I have to sit down.

She can't sit still after completing the weekend class. She looks out at Mount Shasta on our left as we drive. She can't stop smiling and suggests we stop along the way for beers. I tell her I don't drink.

August is not much better. Sea animals wash up regularly, and in greater numbers. I'm nervous on searches, convinced people are watching. Brigit found me that article about the wolf of Mount Tam. Three eyewitnesses swore to seeing a large wolf-like thing through the trees. One said the wolf allowed her to pet it and then followed her home. One witness, the man—said that it attacked. The other woman said she's decided to track the wolf, "find him where he hides."

Driving to searches seems to take longer and longer and I start not showing up for some, until one day there I am pushing my hands against the tree trunks at the edge of the forest, and nothing happens—the wind that used to come into me seems very far away, and maybe gone forever.

Three tracking classes later Brigit tells me that her mother drowned while swimming in the ocean. We're walking in the Redwood City mall sucking on fruit smoothies. Brigit needs some black candles—for a harmless protection spell, she says—and the easiest place to get them is at Yankee Candle. "Maybe you really are a wolf," she says, swinging her bag, with the candles poking out hard. "Maybe society's fear of the werewolf is its fear of sex?"

I glance at her. "You believe that?"

"Sure," she says, bringing the straw of her drink toward her parted lips. "Why not." And that place where my energy pools, just under my sternum, begins to throb.

She only works twice a week at the park, so we begin going up to Weed more. Sometimes every weekend. Her father has been working around the clock at the PR firm, she tells me. Environmental groups and citizens have got up a proposition to shut down some of the off-shore oil rigs because they use underwater sonar to communicate.

"Is that what's killing everything?" I say, holding my palm out toward the ocean, invisible off to the right somewhere.

She puts her hand on the back of my neck "I doubt it," she says.

My apartment's an embarrassment—the single table and thin futon in the corner—and all my books piled around the futon like castle walls to dissuade attack. She lights the black candles whispering words as she does it. Not a proper spell or incantation, and I suspect love magic, which is borderline gray magic. But in this particular instance, I'm not against it. The flickering candle light illuminates her white skin, and I can see her freckles extend from neck to all the way down.

It's nice to feel her skin against mine, but it takes me some time to get into the thing. It's so different than I remember, clumsier.

"Were you scared the first time," she says. My lips are against the fuzz on her right ear lobe and I smell the sweat in her hair.

I tell her about walking into the woods on that first call out in Ross. I do not mention how strange I felt that foggy morning of my first call out—my crushing depression as I stood in the forest listening for something, anything. My wife's voice on the wind, a voice in my head. What I wanted was to strip out of my new gear, drop the Osprey, and not ever, ever come back to humanity. I wanted to walk out into the woods and die. Anything to numb the deep sadness that was—even months after the accident—consuming me whole.

"But why did you start?" Brigit says. "I mean, why do search and rescue at all?"

I sort of shrug and yawn. I don't tell her about that night four years ago when I came home after work and found Cynthia blue and stiff in bed with the our son asleep in his room. And what did I know about emergency aid or Naloxone for opiate overdose or any of that? My wife and I had only just come out of the wilderness ourselves, so to speak—just started getting our life on a certain kind of path for the sake of our three-year-old boy.

But what I really want to tell Brigit is, I'm not one of those tree-hugger types. Nature is the conqueror. Nature is brutal and deadly—she really is. I've seen a young bird plucked out of its nest by a crow—so it's important for me to see death as atoms and molecules moving from form to form—from soil to cell—and in a very real sense every

living thing is built of what has died. My wife is in me. But that night I don't say anything to Brigit, and when I close my eyes my roots are shriveled and gray, and they won't reach even as far as the floor, let alone into the black dirt under all our feet.

The next morning, I sit in front of the phone with my mother's number echoing in my head. My finger hovers over the numbers, but I replace the receiver in its cradle and sit there staring out the window at the concrete dividing wall.

Brigit wants me to come home with her, meet her old man—she's got something to show me. I have an idea what it might be.

But I go, and her dad is a real nice guy. Except he doesn't meet my eyes. He asks me what I like to do when I'm not working on computers, and I tell him I like bird watching. Brigit and her dad glance at each other, and I see no likeness. Different noses. Her nose is longer. He turns back to me with his wet, half closed eyes—as though he'd just been reading, or crying, and I remember that he lost a wife last year.

The backyard is composed entirely of raised beds shaped with mechanical precision. Tomato plants jut out of each bed. I kick at the gravel path. "Brigit," I say. "I don't think you should join the SAR team."

She stares at me and I go for one of her hands, which she yanks away. "It's too dangerous," I say. "It really is,"

She steps back and puts her hands on her hips, and I know there won't be anything happening in her childhood bed tonight.

"What?" she says. "You see how good I am up there in Weed? I'm better than anyone." She takes her hands off her hips and crosses them over her chest. "I'm better than you." Over her shoulder I can see the father watching from his place at the kitchen table.

"You don't have any wilderness survival training. There are bears out there, snakes, rocks to twist ankles. I don't want anything happening to you." What I really want to say is, *I cannot stand to lose another girl I love.*

"No. I'm going and you can't stop me," she says. "I'm going." She drags me into the house and down the hall to her room. Brand new gear is lumped in the middle of the floor, and the air is flowery and flat—close with the smell of young girl.

"This is the big surprise?" I say.

Among the brand-new gear is a pack—an Osprey Backside, this year's model with two compression straps. Color: gray. "It's the same as yours, right?" she says, turning to me. I can feel her eyes on me. "Will you help me? Will you help me pack it?"

"Don't make me do this," I say. "Please, Brigit."

She closes her eyes just a touch, her arms are still crossed. "You think you can take me and leave me?" she says. "I've already joined. I can pack my own pack or I can ask someone else on the team to help me." She touches my arm. "I'm doing it anyway," she says, putting one palm on my chest. "But I trust you."

I sigh.

I squat and slowly start arranging her gear by weight. The trick is to pack from light to heavy, so all the really cumbersome gear (the radio, the GPS, the white gas, the oxygen tank) is at the top, and she can carry it high. First her synthetic bag, followed by rain pants and jacket, rolled to the thickness of a limp sausage. I look over my shoulder and there she is sitting cross-legged behind me, watching with a smile. Next, her one-person tent. It's barely anything at all—a few sad poles and some folded fabric—but I can barely breathe as I roll it tight. All I can imagine is her huddled in its folds and how the red of its rain fly might look attractive to a bear newly shuffled from the undergrowth.

I make sure each item is in its own heavy-duty Ziploc—packs are never truly waterproof—then I zip up the center seam and draw the compression straps across, and pull them tight.

She comes around to sit next to me. “Thank you,” she says, kissing me on the cheek.

She sleeps in her room that night, and I get the living room couch. I spend three hours sky clad in the dark, mentally germinating myself—trying to coax out my roots. Nothing.

To join our SAR team, the applicant must complete a twenty-four-hour term on Mount Tam, unaided. It’s a silly exercise fit more for the boy scouts than the premier search team in California. Anyway, Ralph St. Germaine is there waiting at the trail head, smirking. I take Brigit aside. It’s mid-day, and overhead is that clear, water-color blue California sky. She’s not wearing a stitch of cotton, I hope—cotton absorbs water and promotes hypothermia—though I sure didn’t get to check her underwear this morning. Her boots are new and I imagine the hell of blisters she’ll have when she comes down off the mountain tomorrow. If she comes down.

I look up at the mountain like a giant breast, and I’m reminded that *tetons*, as in *Grand Tetons*, is Spanish for “tits.” There is a tuft of white on the horizon.

“It’ll rain on you,” I say.

She looks up at the mountain. “I have a tent,” she says.

“Hypothermia can—” I say.

She frowns, and takes a step toward Ralph St. Germaine standing at the trail head.

“Here goes nothing,” she says.

“Don’t say that,” I say. “Say something proactive.”

“Proactive...Well, what do you say?” she says.

I confess, sheepishly, “The Goddess is alive and magic is afoot.”

“Got it,” she says, walking toward the mountain, keeping her face set, her eyes steady—being tough.

“Brigit,” I say.

She stops and turns. There’s a look in her eyes that I don’t recognize, until I remember her father sitting at the kitchen table asking me questions with that distracted expression on his face. When I see this on Brigit’s face, I realize what drew me to her in the first place, and what is compelling her to do what she’s doing.

“Brigit,” I say, coming closer. “You’re wrong if you think this will make any difference. Fill any void. This is just another thing, another distraction.”

Her eyes go vacant. “What are you talking about?” she says. “Where do you get these ideas.” She turns back to the trail head. “These crazy ideas.”

The mountain looms overhead, with vultures drifting lazily in the thermals. No wind rises to me.

She begins walking into the woods. She stops and gives me a weak thumbs up, a strained smile. “Tomorrow,” she says, and steps between clumps of manzanita that close in around her, leaving only swaying branches.

I run to the bush hoping to grab her sleeve. I want to tell her that there are so many paths and, you see, even if you get home safely—how can you be sure you’ve taken the right one and aren’t, in fact, forever lost? But she’s gone by the time I get there.

Before humans came along, this part of California was mostly underwater and these valleys and mountains would have barely protruded out of the water. Fish would have swum above the roads. But the oceans receded and now the bay water is murky and

dying and what was the ocean floor is a gravel lot where I park my car the next day—one sleepless night later—feeling like I haven’t moved an inch.

In the clearing, she’s hunched against a rock shivering in the first rays of the rising sun, her hair falling in rusty strings over her face. No pack, no gear anywhere—just Ralph St.Germaine’s truck idling in the lot. I can smell the rain that fell the night before, and I can feel the mountain overhead as I walk to her. She’s shivering and won’t say a word.

She won’t talk to me in the car, either—but devours all five Cliff Bars I brought. She won’t tell me anything, and I don’t push for details. It’s hard being alone on a mountain, thinking in the dark, and I suspect that what scared her wasn’t outside the tent. When she does speak again it’s to make me promise never to go out with the SAR team again.

I buy a futon filled with cotton so organic that the tag promises it is ‘almost wild.’ I buy a frame for this futon, so I’m off the ground. Brigit puts more towels in the bathroom than we could use in a month, and she burns cones of patchouli incense until the apartment smells like her. I put my pager in the closet wrapped with three towels so I cannot hear it.

I try to show her how to meditate on the bounty of the Goddess, to make protection sachets from comfrey and blackberry leaf. But she starts sticking pins in hers and giggling. Then she wants to read my tarot cards and my palm, and she starts tracing her finger down my palm, telling me I have a long love line and all that. In a matter of minutes we end up getting down on the new futon.

I go to work early and leave early. Many times I sit in the server closet, turn off the phone, and I press my hands on the plate glass window and consider the green bump of Mount Tam framed between two skyscrapers. When I ponder the Wiccan belief that all things come from and return to the Goddess, I feel very light in the center of my body, like I might float up through the building and into the black space above the world. I wonder about my bond to the world. What if humans have grown irrevocably apart from nature? We sleep in houses and work in buildings and eat tomatoes grown in greenhouse fiberglass. I consider that we are independent animals that exist outside of the natural world’s rules—that we have evolved away from our animalistic selves and into something else—something that controls the earth, not the other way around. Perhaps there is no truth in nature, no sentience—maybe everything is killing and dying and composting and then doing it again, and that’s it. Below, the bay is gray and the fog has already started moving in off the ocean.

My apartment doesn’t smell like my apartment anymore—it smells like one of the new age shops on Haight Street where Brigit gets her incense and soap and her yarrow stalks for I-Ching reading. My small kitchen table still has the phone on it, but my son’s paintings are stashed in the closet now. I have to think hard to remember my mom’s number. My mother answers, and after talking to her for awhile, she calls Oscar to the phone. My little boy. I can hear him breathing on the line, but I don’t say anything—can’t say anything.

“Seen *Rambo*?” he says.

I’m shocked by his voice, it’s deeper than I remember, and mushier—I have an idea of his bigness by how it vibrates over the phone wires. “This old movie?” he says. “Slyvester Stalone?”

I absolutely can’t say anything.

“He wastes guys with nothing but a knife. He comes out of the trees and cuts their necks and he’s gone.”

My mom must have told him about SAR. “Rambo’s a sad little man,” I manage to say, and I know how this must sound—the same way that my dad sounded to me—boring, square.

“What movies do you like?” he says, and I can hear him working a wad of gum between his molars. Can almost smell the grape.

“Have you read *Call of the Wild* in school yet?” I say.

“Nope,” he says, snaps the gum. “Oh yeah, can I have the pocket knife I found in the closet in your old room?”

“What’s your favorite subject in school?” I say.

“Gym. Recess doesn’t totally suck.”

“You don’t like science?”

“Science?” he says.

“Dissecting frogs?” I say.

He chews his gum.

“Cutting up frogs?” I say.

“Oh, yeah,” he blurts. “I love that.”

There’s a certain glee in his voice when he says this, and I feel a shutter pass down my spine, spreading goose flesh as it does.

“Science—” he says. “That’s how babies are made.”

“I guess,” I say.

There’s no sound on the receiver for a couple of seconds.

“How are babies made?” he says.

“Science,” I say.

Later, my mom says Oscar’s inability to pay attention is landing him in the principle’s office. She mentions anger, disruptive behavior, and fighting—he’s larger than the other children, she says. The subtext of everything resolves to one thing: bully. She says I shouldn’t feel bad. I don’t feel bad. He’ll be the one to suffer, not me. My son the bully. As I hang up the phone, I have a sudden flash of my boy living the ecstasy of nature: yelling, hitting, hurting—everything that comes naturally—eventually landing himself in the wildest of wild kingdoms, jail.

Now things begin coming unraveled.

Now I find hiking boots in the back seat of Brigit’s car and a book on tracking under the passenger seat. And one day a brochure for The National Search and Rescue Conference appears in the mailbox with her address on it.

She comes in wearing a long dress, with her hair thrown over her shoulders and her too-thin arms showing like bone.

I shake the brochure at her. “Tell me you’re not thinking of going to this?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “No sir. Not thinking of going to that,” she says.

“Didn’t we agree not to have anything to do with SAR? You made me promise. Didn’t you make me promise?”

She nods and walks out of the room. I follow her into the living room where she throws herself down on the new futon, the one she made me buy.

“Look, you don’t have to do anything that makes you nervous,” she says, gazing out the window at the concrete building next door. She seizes the TV remote and flicks it on. Canned laughter fills the room, drowning out any hope of conversation.

My thoughts keep returning to the image of Brigit with a twisted ankle and no radio communication watching the mountain sun go down. Hypothermia can take a person very quickly. And as she lays dying, the forest comes more and more alive—the birds chirp louder and the plants grow big in anticipation of her nutrients. Searchers show up, but by that time something has eaten her fingers away—and when her body is rolled over it's Cynthia's blue lips I'm confronted with. My face suddenly itches in a way it hasn't since I kicked heroin.

That night I sleep on the floor and dream about roots.

The summer aspect of the Goddess sleeps while the land slips to autumn reds and yellows. The first card I draw from Brigit's tarot deck is The Tower, which means "Failure, ruin, catastrophe," according to a book I find.

I tell Brigit we shouldn't see each other anymore.

She starts yelling right off. "Why? because you're scared. Could that be it?"

She's trying to anger me but I can feel my long roots extend out the balls of my feet and deep into the earth, and my pulse is the slow gulp of an infant at breast. "I can't be there to see you die, Brigit."

"Die?" she says. "Who's going to die? People don't die at conventions."

"Eventually," I say, calmly. "And I can't be there to see it."

Her flushed chin juts at me. "You're really a piece of work, you know that? Look at yourself—you're a nut job."

My roots grow deeper into the cool soil beneath the city. I am bedrock saturated in cool, glowing water. "I can't lose even one more person," I say.

"You're dumping me so you don't have to lose me?" she says, and her question hangs in the air between us.

There's no way I can make her understand my reasoning, so I don't try. She calls me a little man, an impotent and balding man—a fraud. She says I feel threatened by women who don't do what I say. She says my whole life is a hoax, that I use belief and routine to shield myself from the world around me—and that's the definition of a coward. I'm like a recovered drunk, she says. I don't stop to say goodbye.

I've started flying fairly regularly to Minneapolis, where I rent a car and drive to my mom's house. But I don't go in, or even make myself known—instead I spend a great deal of time parked across the street reading Doreen Valiente and doing crosswords, listening to classic rock on my little radio, and keeping watch. I rarely think of her anymore.

I know my son's routine, so I'm surprised to see him one day walking home from school without his henchmen—the kids who follow the bully around. His hair is long and unkempt, the way he likes it, and his clothes are various shades of black with a bright picture from a comic on his tee shirt this particular afternoon. He's just a kid, but I notice with a little guilty pride that some adults cross the street when they see him coming. Today, walking home alone, he suddenly drops onto his hands and knees for a better look at something I can't quite make out on the sidewalk. I roll the rain-spattered window down and train my binoculars on him. I spin the focus wheel, and a picture snaps into focus of my son holding a black, hairy caterpillar in the palm of his hand. He brings the thing that will one day transform itself into a butterfly nearer to his face—has a good close look as his other hand creeps up and hovers over the hairy thing. Then he gently strokes the caterpillar, and the smile on his face is soft and real. He puts the caterpillar down in the grass and walks on, and through that caterpillar I see my son, maybe for the first time ever, with true clearness.

I take the pager out of the closet.

A call out comes at two in the morning, and I'm ready. I'm at Mount Tam in forty minutes, strapping my gear on and moving off into the forest with the other searchers. I don't look for her. The moon has already risen through the rain clouds, and the forest looks submerged and milky. As soon as the other searchers have moved away, I sit on the ground and take a deep breath and wait, and soon the energy comes into me—the energy that comes along the jet stream that I thought was composed of the dead. Now I know that the dead are somewhere else, not in the sky looking down, that my wife is somewhere else and she does not need me tuning into her frequency.

I stand and begin taking deep breaths, and my heart is banging to escape my rib cage. I know this is because of what I am about to do.

I think I can hear the lost jogger's panicked breaths and smell the blood from her broken leg on the breeze. I start to run through the woods and the dry leaves crackle under my boots. My pack is heavy, so I let it slip off my back. I do the same with my helmet and head lamp, and my heart beats even faster when the gaiters come undone and flap off my ankles. It starts to rain. But my skin is a tent, and I huddle inside.

I stop momentarily to kick off my boots and pants.

Now I am running through the woods, following a lost person's sign. I will find this person in this dark forest, and I will save her life. I run through the forest with the moss and twigs underfoot. Leaves whisk the tears off my cheek. Inside the tent of bones there is a fire, and I warm my hands, and burn.

The Goddess is alive and magic is afoot.

TEEN MEDIC

It's 2:13 in the morning when the dispatch call comes down—three monotone beeps followed by “Dispatch with an Echo response 743, 6th Street.” Lawrence tips his roast beef-on-rye out the window, knocks the ambulance into drive, and bang—we're going code three, flashy and loud down Mission Street with the cars swerving out of our way and the wind hammering my face through the open window and it's real, I mean real. No kid's stuff. Echo response—for full-on coding patients or for non-breathers—is serious. I mean, can you get any more serious than dead?

“Hey boy,” Lawrence yells over the wind. This'll be a double-glover.” He points at the skyscrapers we're speeding toward. He means we're heading to the Tenderloin District where the drug addicts and prostitutes live, and die.

“Double Glover, check,” I yell. He smiles at my snappy reply. My mom will not be smiling. She's always nagging me to work closer to home where the heat attacks are because of too much filet mignon. I'm like, ok Mom. Sure thing.

I look out at the city speeding past. I like the city at night. At night the skyscrapers rise up and the business people disappear. At night you see the real buildings. I'm all about real, and not the kind you see on TV. Otherwise it's like the dances they have at my high school. You go into the gym and they've hung crape paper and balloons and that disco globe thing, but it's the same gym. It's a big lie. They've only tried to fool you by draping the bleachers and changing the look.

Lawrence pulls up next to a black Chevy Impala. In the car I see a man hunched over the wheel. The back door of the car is unlocked and I slip in, and sit for a moment in the butter-smelling stillness. I lean over into the front seat and very gently take the pistol that has not drifted far from the man's right hand. No breath. No pulse. There are scuffs where he'd tried to knock the underside of the steering column open with the butt of the gun, to hotwire the car, and that must have accidentally discharged the pistol. I cut his shirt open and there is the hole, like a tiny belly button, in the upper left quad of his chest—about where you put your hand to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Bullet holes are always smaller than I think they will be, and I stare at that pink-rimmed hole for a minute. A band aid could cover it. Then I put my gloved hand on the man's chest. My pinkie worms closer to the bullet hole. I'm doing something I shouldn't and I feel my heart thumping fast enough to circulate a dead man's blood as well as my own. I work my pinkie finger a little way into the hole. It feels good in a snug way, warm and tight, and I push it all the way to the second joint. And it's like being under the bleachers at the school dance, away from the drapes and crape paper lies—and all the kids who want to stay kids are out there dancing, and I'm behind the scenes seeing the facts of life.

“You give him the once over, short stuff?” Lawrence yells from the ambulance. He opens the ambulance door and steps out. Out comes my finger. “Check his airway,” Lawrence says. I take a deep breath. I was fifteen when I started interning on Lawrence's ambulance. A year later, he still treats me like a kid. Anyone can see how responsible I am.

“Empty mouth,” I say.

He pushes his head into the cab and looks in at me for a long second.

“Ok, boy,” Lawrence says, peeling the extra pair of milky gloves off the blue tattoos on the backs of his hands. “If you're sure.” He eyes the people milling around in the street.

“But he hasn’t expired, has he?” Lawrence asks.

“Still alive, check,” I say.

You don’t pronounce somebody dead in situ—it means about ten times more paper work. It was Lawrence who taught me this. That’s why people are always dying in the ambulance en-route to the hospital. He taught me this and he taught me to tuck a person’s hands under their butt before hitting them with the defibrillator so they don’t flail you a broken nose. He also taught me the trick of holding down the button on the CB for a few seconds, with the ambulance siren blaring in the background, before calling in to request a place in the emergency room, “Medic 477, code three traffic.” The siren screaming over the radio motivates the nurses to take you immediately when you arrive. But that’s all he taught me. That’s it. That’s all the fatherly wisdom he’s ever imparted.

We extricate the body from the car, lay it out on a stretcher, wheel it into the wagon. Inside, under the bright light, Lawrence gives the body a hard right punch in the cheek.

“See that?” Lawrence says, shaking his hand like he’d burned it. “Dead, right?” But he doesn’t wait for my reply. He rolls the body on its side and starts patting his hand around. The stethoscope slips from around his neck but he doesn’t stop to pick it up.

“What’re you doing?” I say, through a smile.

He only looks up for a moment.

“Don’t start that grinning thing now,” he says, patting the body’s front pockets. “See if there’s anything good in his wallet.”

Last night I was sitting at the kitchen table, watching my mom wrestle a fennel bulb the shape of a human heart onto the cutting board. Most of the time we eat spaghetti from a can, and the spattered gore of it shows all over the top of the stove. But last night she’d bought the fennel at an expensive grocery store, even though fennel supposedly grows wild all around northern California. It makes a sort of sense that my mom would decide to buy something that she could have found growing in her backyard. I watch her almost slice her finger off trying to cut a vegetable they eat in Italy, which she thinks we should eat here. Working hard to cover up her Ohio roots, my mom. It wasn’t a problem when we had the cash—when Dad managed the ambulance company—but now Mom’s wearing those horrible business suits and teetering around on high heels. She’s had to take up real estate, and she’s had to take up being strict as a snake—I can’t make or receive calls or leave the house except to go to school or work. So, I’m just staring at her wishing I knew everything she doesn’t, starting with what fennel looks like growing wild.

“Why are you always frowning at me, Danny?” she says. “I’m not your principal.”

I shrug.

“And why are you still wearing that ambulance uniform?”

“Uniform makes the soldier,” I say.

“It’s vile,” she says, shaking the fennel bulb at me.

“It’s real,” I say. “I’ll wear it until you start leveling with me.”

She slaps the knife down on the tile countertop. Her eyes are all the way open and her nose is crinkled like she’s just found me under the bleachers with a girl.

“Hi. Why should I level with you?” she says, blinking fast, good and angry now. “Why should I level with my child? There is no leveling with children. You’re a child.” Her phone chooses this moment to go off—a merry little rendition of “Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”

We've had this exact fight once or twice before, and it always ends the same way. This time, I stand up and begin unbuttoning my uniform shirt. "Want me to take it off?" I say. I open my shirt to reveal a bright-white undershirt which a factory worker with a severed brachial artery had sprayed earlier that day. It's a cold move, showing my mom that bloody undershirt, but it works—at the sight of all that bright arterial spray, the grownup in front of me drops her fennel bulb and grabs for the kitchen counter. She stands there gasping, and I know she'll be super pissed as soon as she recovers. She's really funny that way.

So I do us both a favor and leave the vicinity. I go out the front door and onto the sidewalk. As usual, our suburban street is deserted. All cars are stowed in garages. All doors are locked. The fathers are back from work and dinner's in the microwave. I walk down the sidewalk and hear kids laughing and playing everywhere, but I can't see anyone—they're all behind the wood privacy fence every house has around its back yard. I'm thinking about my dad as I walk. He was always working the night shift dispatching or taking calls, and hanging around when I got home from school. Everybody was always telling me how good a paramedic he was. Once when I was in fifth grade Tia Smoler came to school and told everyone that my dad had saved her mother's life after she fainted in the pool. I bet he could lay an endotracheal tube with one hand while setting an IV with the other, and be gentle doing both. I think he was kind, but to tell the truth I can't remember.

I was still just a kid when he joined the a private security firm with a medical division, and a bit older when they transferred him over there. He used to take me to this sad little playground near our house, and because every house in our subdivision seems to have a full jungle gym in its back yard, that playground is always deserted. Now the wind blows around the swings making this moaning noise. As I swung, Dad told me stories from work. Real stories. He never mentioned anything gory, but sometimes that made the thing even more real. Like when he told me about a decapitation—he didn't say laceration and separation and artery blood and all that—the victim's head just "came off." My mom hated him telling me work stories, I remember. Who knows why. She said she thought they'd give me nightmares but they never did. I think she was afraid I'd become a paramedic and get shot or something. But my old dad knew. He knew I liked the truth, that I could handle things.

I was pretty nervous when I first interned on Lawrence's ambulance. I'd finished my first EMT class, the one offered at my school—Memorial High—and had to do a little time riding along in a real ambulance to complete the course. That was the only reason my mom let me ride with Lawrence, because if I hadn't I'd have failed the course. That was last year. I don't know how I ended up with Lawrence—he was the most senior paramedic at that company, I guess. Whatever the reason, he picked me up at my house that first night, honked the horn until I came out, which made my mom push her lips together until they were white. It was dark and I saw Lawrence standing in the bright ambulance with the back door open. I don't know why he had the back door open, maybe to air the ambulance out. I remember the profile his belly cut as it ballooned out over his pants. He was drinking what I then thought was can of Coke. First thing he did was stare hard at my crotch, and then at his own hairy hands.

He turned and walked through the ambulance to the front, and I followed to the passenger seat, getting the dead-real smells of old air and disinfectants, latex and hot plastic, under-arm deodorant and diesel exhaust.

That first night Lawrence leaned over and opened the glove box, brushing the tops of my knees as he did it. This is how we met.

“You want some?” he said, shaking a bottle of No-Doz he took from the glove box, shaking it like a rattlesnake’s tail. He was around my dad’s age—late fifties—I can tell by their rounded shoulders and the way their cheeks puff, but I noticed the tattoos on the backs of Lawrence’s hands, cracked and dripping hearts.

“No thanks,” I said to the No-Doz. But I liked that he offered me the pills. I take them now. But then I was just a kid who’d never had blood on me.

“Skinny boys make me nervous,” Lawrence said, matter-of-factly. “Their knees look like grinning skulls.”

I glanced at the Coke can he’d been sipping off. He started the ambulance, and away we went.

“What’s that,” Lawrence said later, pointing at my lap. We were at a stop light and he’d taken a tone like whatever was in my lap could be anything.

“My jump kit,” I said. Picking up the small bag containing a paramedic’s basic gear, dad’s old stethoscope and blood pressure collar. The collar was new-ish and crappy, but the stethoscope was a work of frigging art. I didn’t know where Dad got it—I still don’t—but I think it’s more of a collector’s item kind of thing, or he would have taken it with him. The sound receiver is inlaid with mother of pearl, and the whole thing is heavy and big. Too big to fit in my ears, actually.

Lawrence shrugged. “We got everything you need here in the wagon,” he said. “I’ll teach you everything. You’ll see all sorts of crazy things,” he said, glancing at me. “Nudity, Sex gone wrong, missing body parts. Parts you never find. Parts that should be inside are suddenly hanging outside, like hot-water bottles.” He looked down at his Coke can and gave it a decisive little shake. “And, and,” he said, “I’ve seen the truth—seen souls shooting out of their bodies. I really have.” He emptied what was left in his Coke into his mouth. “After this, you’ll know everything about bodies and how they die, everything you’d ever want to know.”

“Everything about this mortal coil, huh?” I said, trying at a witty sort of whatever.

Lawrence stared at me.

“Just show me everything,” I said. “I want to know everything.”

“Of course you do,” he said, looking out the window at the dark city spinning past. “Of course he does.”

That night we got my first ever dispatch. The victim put a shotgun to his chest and pulled both triggers. But his attempt didn’t quite work. He was still sort of alive when we got there. And what was showing through his shattered ribs looked nothing like a fennel bulb. Lawrence set an IV and with both hands started massaging the man’s heart, until it miraculously started beating again. The police were milling around the hallway, trying not to look at the red gore. But in his hurry, Lawrence forgot to check the victim’s pockets. So, when the guy regained consciousness, when his heart was beating again, he pulled a pistol out of his back pocket and shot himself in the eyeball.

A jarring moment, to say the least. The blood looked fake somehow, like on TV. The way it was splattered out against the floor and wall looked planned—except that it smelled like a wet piggybank. For a second he was a GI-Joe doll with spaghetti-from-a-can smeared on it. The real shock was seeing the man’s sadness. The real shock came from seeing his desperation, and knowing that to get dead he would not have hesitated to hurt me. Then the guy’s sphincter loosened and we had to go into the hall for a breath of fresh air. After that I was hooked. Talk about being behind the bleachers.

“Did you see his spirit?” Lawrence yelled over the ringing in my ears. We were in the hall, the cops looking sideways at us. “Shot right out,” Lawrence boomed, shaking one of his big hands in the air. His eyes showed too much white. “This mortal coil stuff,” he suddenly yelled. “Truth is they never leave. They’re always zinging around our ears. That’s the truth.”

I waited a couple of seconds before opening my mouth. “You want a Coke?” I yelled, over the shot gun still ringing in my ears.

He turned toward the stairwell and said, “I think I’m ready for that.”

That was my first night riding with Lawrence.

“You handled that right,” Lawrence says, when we’re in the ambulance, his eyes have been wandering to the glove compartment box and then back to the Coke in his hand. He looks up at me. “Want a job?”

It takes me a second to realize he’s talking to me. “Is it legal?” I say. “I’m only EMT-1?”

“The age of consent is sixteen,” he says, looking hard at me.

“Great,” I say.

He gives me a ride home. When I get up the next morning my mom is in the kitchen with an electric juicer and a bag of oranges. I wonder what the occasion is. She’s managed to cut one of the oranges in half, and is pushing it against the spinning cone. The inside of the cut orange is the dark brown of an old bruise.

“Blood oranges,” Mom says, too brightly for that time of morning.

“Nothing’s coming out,” I say.

She sighs, nods.

I cut the remaining half orange into small pieces. “Inside’s too dry,” I say. “There’s not enough juice.”

“But they looked so good,” she says, drops the mangled half of the orange on the counter and walks into the living room, leaving the juicer running. I follow her, though I don’t want to.

She’s just turning on the Home Shopping Network as I walk in. The camera is focused in hard on a wedding band. My mom turns up the volume.

“Do you think I should get married again?” Mom says.

I scrunch up my face.

“I love wedding dresses,” she says. “And I’ve noticed that Mister Norton next door seems quite interested—.”

The phone rings.

The words “Robert and Mary Coover” flash in the lower right hand corner of the TV screen. Caller ID wired into my mom’s cable TV package. For the longest time we couldn’t figure out why names flashed on the screen just as the phone rang. The TV flashed “Number Unavailable” when Dad used to call from his job overseas. Dad told us they barely have phones over there. But this isn’t Dad. This is Grandma and Grandpa, my Mom’s parents, and Mom gets flustered suddenly.

“Oh honey, don’t answer it,” Mom says. She still has one half of the blood orange in her hand, and she’s squeezing hard. “I haven’t talked to them...,” she says, “in a long time—not since before your Father had his accident.”

The phone rings again.

“I’ll tell them about work, then,” I say, reaching for the phone.

“Don’t,” she says.

Something about her tone of voice stops my hand. The phone rings again.

“Why?” I say.

“They don’t know quite everything about your dad, yet,” she says.

“Like, how much ‘everything’ don’t they know?” I say.

“Well,” she says, takes a deep breath. “They don’t know he’s gone.”

I stare at her. She watches the TV—but I can tell from her eyes that she’s only pretending to watch. The phone rings twice before anyone speaks.

“Honey,” she says, suddenly turning to me. “Will you tell them about your dad’s accident? Will you be the one to tell them?”

It takes me a second to hold these words down in my head, to get the juice out of them.

“No fucking way,” I say, sputtering a little. “No.”

I run to my room and slam the particle-board thing that passes for a door. It’s like everything in this house, an imitation. But I’m too keyed up to think about anything except my dad’s old stethoscope. With shaking hands I unzip the jump kit and take out the heavy stethoscope. Then I put the sound receiver to my chest and one of the earpieces in my ear, and listen to my heart hammering away. I hold the stethoscope against my chest until my heart slows and the rush in my ears lessens, and I know it’s my mom’s lying that’s bothering me.

So I flop on my bed on the evening of that first day and think about my lying mother. I sort of let my thoughts go as I stare at that hole my door knob has knocked in the drywall. I wasn’t home the afternoon “Number Restricted” flashed on the TV screen, but I can imagine it. I can imagine my mom answering the phone, listening, and chirping “Thank you” after the representative for the company he’d worked for over there used every stock phrase and canned condolence on her. Things like, ‘He died for freedom.’ And then I can see her telling me that dad’s contract had been lengthened a bit. He’s having a great time over there, she told me. He’s working on his tan. I can’t believe I ever bought what she was selling, but I did. And then I can see a certain day at school—back when I used to show up every day—and some wise-ass kid with big, shiny eyes asks where my dad is buried—and he asks it in the locker room, so everybody can hear. His dad had just gotten back and this kid’s dad and my dad had been friends, both worked for the same security company. And I could see the honesty on this kid’s flat, white face, and my own shocked reflection in his wet eyeballs.

I know that I’ll never see my dad again. He’ll never be home to tell me if I should work at such a young age on the ambulance. He’ll never help me patch the hole in my wall. My eyes are still on the hole, and I can see part of a wall stud and fuzzy insulation pushed back in there. It totally occurs to me that my bedroom wall could do with more holes. The whole house could. This hole is the only blemish in my mom’s house, the only part that doesn’t look *perfect*. And before my dad died, I thought that the world was how my mom saw it. I was just a boy. What did I know of truth and reality?

Truth as I saw it was working on an ambulance with Lawrence. I rode weekend nights and then a couple of afternoons—sometimes when I should have been at school. Honestly, the blood never bothered me. I saved a man in a Nob Hill steak house by getting him down on his back and shoving my hand against his belly, and the meat popped neatly right out of his throat and I caught it in the air. The patrons in their business suits watched the whole thing go down, and I felt like telling them that this is real, that this is their body in my hands. Then Lawrence and I had a highway fatality—a woman who flipped over on the 280 and found the weight of her Cadillac SUV resting on her ribs and heart. In the Excelsior District, we were helping an unconscious guy with a

diabetes bracelet when he surged up, blood sugar low—adrenaline high, and I watched his lassoed-horse eyes fix on me. I ran. He turned on a parked Toyota Celica and picked up the front end. Picked it up off the ground. The guy was like Superman, and then he collapsed and we went to work. Lawrence scribbling drug calculations on the palms of his gloves, and after we'd saved the guy's life, Lawrence beat him up pretty good in the ambulance.

Which brings me to this morning. I'm sitting on my bed staring up at the white ceiling. Sometimes I have trouble sleeping. Nightmares. Or I just kept thinking about my dad lying on the sand. Finally I get off the bed and go right to my dad's old stethoscope on the dresser. It's heavy in my palm, and I remember how one night he showed me how to listen with it. I was only a little kid but I remember how the chrome branch tube looked against the black stubble on his jaw. His eyes were rimmed with red, and the sun was down. I listened to his big heart and it sounded so solid and steady, like a train hammering over trestles, that I giggled. But Dad didn't smile. He was teaching me something. "You try," he said, placing the warm receiver over my own heart.

I listened to my own heart plop-plump away, and the seriousness of that sound wiped the smile right off my face. It was dark outside, and dad pointed out the window. "Look at those stars," he says. The sound of my heart was in my ears and the stars filled the window. "Some of that light is coming from dead stars," he said. "Dead, but the light is still coming."

He smiled. "Go listen to your mother's heart," he said. "See if there's one in there."

So I ran over to the couch where my mom was looking at a magazine.

"Don't touch me with that thing," she said, without looking up. "My heart might stop while you're listening."

"Dead," Dad said. "But the light is still coming."

And now I'm sitting on the bed holding the heavy stethoscope, and I can imagine it in my dad's big hands. But he never took it with him, and I wonder why. Why would my dad leave his favorite stethoscope? I don't like a mystery. A mystery is about as far from the truth as a person can get. But I drape the stethoscope around my neck like the doctors in the ER.

I begin pulling on my uniform. My mom is in her robe when I come into the living room. She looks up from the TV, and her eyes flash on Dad's scope hanging around my neck.

She blinks a couple of times, then snaps her fingers.

"Right. Your father left you a note," she says.

I look at her. "What?"

"To go with that horrible thing around your neck," she says.

"But I've had this for years," I say.

"Sorry," she says, shrugs—looks back at the TV.

I wait. "Well?" I say. "Where's this note?"

"Right, honey," she says. It takes her a second to tear herself away from the TV and get me the damn letter from the bedroom.

It's in a pink envelope, weirdly enough—the kind designed to hold a birthday card. I haven't seen my dad's handwriting in years, not since he went away, really—and when I tear open the top, the writing on the folded paper inside looks like a jumble of veins and loose spatter. This makes me feel sort of funny, I guess. The note says he wants

me to have the stethoscope. There's more, but I can't make it out because of his bad handwriting.

"Right, honey," Mom says, without taking her eyes off the TV screen. "Was it a nice card?"

I don't say anything and Lawrence honks from outside—an ambulance horn can give anyone a heart attack. But this time my mom only smiles at the TV.

"You want the truth?" Lawrence says. I'm snapping my seatbelt on, and what's coming out of his mouth stings my eyeballs. The air in the ambulance seems to be composed of half vodka vapor. "The truth is I'm a bit tipsy, how's that for the truth? You could drive. That's the real truth."

I hear empty Coke cans knocking into each other somewhere in the ambulance as I drive. For the first few calls Lawrence is attentive enough to run along with me, pinch an artery and dress a bad burn. But he seems to get paler and weaker as the night goes on. Finally, he's just barely conscious in the passenger seat, moaning when I go over speed bumps. I stop at our normal break spot, Steamer Burgers—a hamburger joint with a neon sign featuring a blinking steam engine pulling a gigantic hamburger. Lawrence sort of sits up when he smells the hot grease.

"What do you make of this?" I say, handing Lawrence my dad's card—damp and bent to the curve of my butt cheek.

He closes one eye to read it. "Says your grand father was in Korea and the stethoscope was his," Lawrence says.

"You can read that?"

He looks at me for awhile, until I feel a little nervous about how long he's been looking at me.

"You want to know the truth?" he says finally, slurring. "Something I've never told anyone?"

"No," I say, making sure I know where his hands are. "No I don't." And I mean that, too.

But he smiles at me. "Truth is, my dad died in Korea, just like your grand father," he says. "Died for freedom."

I can't think of anything to say, so I don't say anything at all, and that's when we get the call. Another serious Echo response. Car wreck on Interstate 80 not two miles from the burger joint. And don't you know that Lawrence's head is against the headrest, and he's snoring by the time we get on scene. I give a nudge and he slides against the door and doesn't move again. I can't wait, so I'm out the door running with my kit.

To a smashed-up Nissan pickup, flipped upside down. No gas smell, only tire burn and hot, spilt antifreeze. The horn is stuck on, and I notice with an uncomfortable prickling in my scalp that the cops are not here yet. It's all me. Even at this time of night there's highway traffic—cars creeping by filled with wide-eyed people—one passes with a pimply kid about my age. With my dad's stethoscope looped around my neck like a real medic, I give the kid the thumbs-up and squat to have a professional look into the overturned truck.

Pretty bad. One adult male not wearing a seatbelt. I can smell the alcohol in the air and the sweet tang of pennies. The steering wheel is flat gone. Suddenly the horn is really loud in my ears, and I forgot the earplugs, and the gloves, I'm supposed to have at all times. The man in the ruined truck is lying on his back on the ceiling of the cab, and it's obvious there is plenty wrong with him—he smells like he's cut bad, and he looks like a tossed marionette. He's not breathing. His rib cage is smashed and, like with my

first call out, I can see his heart and yellow fat nestled between gray lungs. I'm in that cab in a second and trying to figure how I'm going to make this man, who looks to be about my dad's age, breathe again. I squat there for a moment imagining that the car horn is bullets zinging overhead. I can feel my own heart bounding in my chest at what I am about to do. I reach out and carefully take my father's heart, the color of the inside of a blood orange, in my gloveless hands.

The heart in my hands will never beat again, I know the second I touch it. This will be a dead-on-arrival patient. It is already cool, and it feels lighter than I ever would have thought, as light as fennel picked wild at the side of the road. Suddenly, the heart starts pounding hard in my palms, spasming and booming, and I almost drop it. The truck's horn is blearing and the BART train hammers by on its own tracks, about to plunge into the tube that will take it under the bay. But just as suddenly as the heart started beating, I feel it slowing, faltering. I move my thumbs and squeeze like I saw Lawrence do on the suicide that first day. I can see the stars through the torn away passenger door. And I hope that this will mean something someday—all this—as the heart continues slowing, and then stops altogether, just like that.

BIG MEAT

Everyday I feel less strength left in me. My wife works double-shifts over at the mint, cutting sheets of printed paper into dollar bills—she’s out there making money, literally, and I’m here in the living room eating apple fritters and watching the daytime talk shows. I don’t feel good about this. The kids are at school, is where they are—my wife and kids do what they’re supposed to do, and I watch TV. On our kitchen table is a pile of bills that scares me profoundly—my hands shake even thinking about them. My hands have been shaking for a while now. I’d like them to stop shaking now, please.

I hear this banging on the front door. When I peer out from between the blinds, there’s this older guy in a wheelchair—fifty-five let’s say—and he’s leaning out to bang on my front door. Big arms, big hands—grinning like a butcher. He’s holding a plastic bag of something, and his refrigerator truck is idling in my driveway.

“How do you drive?” I say. He’d just given me his spiel, and I was enjoying looking down on him a great deal.

“That’s for later,” he says. “How about buying some steaks, buddy?”

“Come right in,” I say.

I want to watch him get up the front steps, you see. How he does it is, he turns around and muscles the wheels up, balancing the whole way—he faces the street and goes up the steps backwards, carefully, slowly, like a man climbing a high ladder with his hands full. I watch his arms work and his neck stiffen. When he’s up, suddenly I want to shake his hand. I consider offering my hand, but it’s as pale as a subterranean fish. I sure wouldn’t want to shake my own hand.

“Drink?” I say, when we’re in the living room.

“Gin, buddy,” he says, out of breath. “Why not gin?”

“Gin?” I say. In the kitchen I look out at the noontime sun blazing on the driveway. But I pour that man the best gin I have. Something itches me about him all the time I pour the gin. I can’t quite figure what it is, until I come back into the room and take a general sniff of the place. He’s musky like my father had been, the same dried sweat smell.

He sort of pushes himself up out of his chair to take the gin glass. The muscles in his arm snap and swell gigantically in that moment. “Cheers,” he says.

“Don’t you have to wash up?” I say, sipping my coffee. I can’t imagine how he will navigate our bathroom, which is the size of a broom closet. I’d like to hear him bashing around in there.

“Negative,” he says. “But, buddy, what about this?” He holds up something. I look closely at what he has pinched between his fingers, and it takes me a couple of moments to recognize it as a glove. I glance over at the book shelf. My wife has the last pair of gloves my father wore before he died. She has them exhibited on the bookshelf next to the TV. This guy must have wheeled over and snatched it when I was in the kitchen, sly devil.

“Let’s see that,” I say, and he hands the glove over. My father was a roofer his whole life. That was his profession. He put shingles on houses. He left early every morning and returned at sundown—weather made no difference to him—I can still remember rain dripping off the handle of the big hammer hanging on his belt. I run my hands over the glove’s grazed leather, over the palms and fingertips, the places that are

worn thin. The places my father seized the heavy stacks of asphalt shingles and hoisted them one handed up the ladder. He could have pulled Human Resource's door right off its hinges if he'd wanted to. His hand never went fishy in this glove, I'll put it that way.

"Ok," the guy in the wheelchair says. "How about that bathroom now?"

I nod.

He waits a beat.

"Where could I find it?" he says, suddenly.

"Oh—down the hall there."

"Ok buddy," he says. "Ok. Here's something to feast your eyes on while I'm gone." Fishing in the little pack he has strapped to the back of his chair, he pulls out a large styrofoam plate which he places on the coffee table between us. Then from out of the plastic bag he produces a dripping slice of meat, which he arranges on the plate.

"How about this, buddy?" he says, and carefully snake-handles out of the bag a longer, limper cut of meat—roughly the thickness of an axe handle. I mean, it's an impressive piece of meat. There haven't been beef tenderloins in this house for a long time.

He doesn't say another word, but wheels his chair down the hall and disappears into the bathroom, leaving a bloody imprint of his big hand on the door. After the appropriate amount of time, I hear him washing his hands—no banging, no crashing. He wheels out of the bathroom with a carefully folded pad of toilet paper, and makes to wipe the bloody print off the door.

"No," I say. "Leave it. Leave it there."

He nods and smiles like what I said reminds him of some funny-as-hell joke that I wouldn't appreciate.

"There are some and then there are still others," he says. "Right, buddy?"

I don't know what he means until I look away from the handprint and see his eyes are on the pieces of meat.

"So you piss sitting down?" I say.

"That's beside the point," he says, tucking the folded up toilet paper into the breast pocket of his work shirt. "Let's keep things together here."

I'm still holding my father's glove as the crippled man veers into the middle of the living room. He stops, leans back to execute a sort of spin on his back wheels—holding the left wheel still as he muscles the right forward. But he's looking around the living room the whole time. He stops spinning at the empty place our stereo and speakers used to be. The ones being sold on consignment at the audio store down the street. I jump a little when he comes down hard on his two little front wheels.

"Don't have anywhere to go during the day?" he says, as though to the room at large. Then he sighs, smiles at me. "That's very tough, buddy. Very tough."

So, there we are. He takes his place across the coffee table, behind the big meat, and looks at me like I'm something steaming beside the fire hydrant.

"More gin?" I say.

I go back to the kitchen and pour his glass all the way to the top.

"I found a tennis shoe in the street last week," I say, just talking. "You in on that by any chance?"

From the waist up he looks sort of like superman dressed in flannel, the same muscles and pompadour. Then he leans forward. "See, buddy, I don't *lose* things," he says. "And I don't need things like *feet* to get the job done."

“No,” I say. “Sorry. Just trying to empower conversation.” I reach out to adjust the styrofoam plate of meat. But my hand is shaking so badly I pull it back. Usually I’m watching the talk shows by now. The talk shows help.

“A little jumpy lately,” I say.

“I know all about it, buddy” he says. “Take away a man’s job. Am I on the right track? Me, I lose both my legs, my job—my wife and kids—and I’m out here showing you this fine meat—how much can I mark you down for?”

I glance at the bloody handprint on the bathroom door.

“Do you have any tenderloins in that truck?” I say.

He takes a clipboard out of his backpack. “Twenty-two,” he says.

“Give me one,” I say.

“You want one?” he says, looking over the clipboard at me. “I don’t take credit cards, you know.”

“One,” I say. “Give me one.”

“Of course you want one,” he says. “You’ll do just fine, buddy. I was just like you. I used to be a father I’ve got a room, an oscillating fan—I’m happy as can be. Watch John Wayne movies all the time. My wife and kids cleared out after the factory fired me. They hate seeing you loaf around on the couch, you know.”

I stand and pick up his empty gin glass and my coffee cup.

“I’m glad they got cut off,” the man in the wheelchair says, looking where his legs had been. “I’m glad they cut them off.”

He sort of moves his leg stumps. He’s wearing khaki pants that he’s folded over the stumps and safety-pinned down. I look for a long time. I don’t look away. I look at where that guy’s legs used to be.

“Great doing business with you,” he says, holding out his hand. “I’m sorry about the job. Now, if you’ll follow me out to the truck.”

He’s not balancing on his back wheels anymore. I have to help him down the front steps, and push him over the uncut grass. He opens the back of the truck and there is the meat. The long tenderloins are piled on the right. I look at them and I think about my dad dying in the hospital. At the end, he squeezed my hand until I thought it would break.

“How much for the whole kitten-ka-poodle?” I say.

“Four grand and change, but it won’t help,” he replies, snappily. “It won’t change a thing. You’ll still be sitting around eating donuts, buddy. My condolences on your loss of pride and all that, buddy.”

I go inside to the bookshelf and find the envelope where we keep the money to pay the rent and to live off. I take it all back to the truck parked in my driveway.

“What will this get me?” I say.

“Plenty,” he says. “But, hey buddy, why not buy one tenderloin and go back inside with your money? You’ll find something else, you will.”

I insist.

We understand tenderloins then, he and I. He pulls them out of the truck, and I hurl them on the front lawn, one cold thing after another. I watch his arms ripple and move. It feels good working, taking the loin from him and throwing it hard into the grass.

“Ok, that’s it buddy,” he says. “What now? Where to?”

I look around and see the card table my daughter uses to sell lemonade. I pull it around, and one of its stools. I can see the stool is too low, so I go inside and come out with a dining room chair with a seat my wife embroidered with images of roofing hammers.

The man in the wheelchair watches as I sit at the table.

I take my father's glove from where I'd hung it out of my back pocket. My heart is hammering, and I know what's next. The glove is heavy in my hand, and I open it and peer inside. The inside appears to be smooth, and there is no visible tag. I can imagine my dad buying it at the old hardware store, and I wonder if his hand was the same size as mine. In the photos my wife keeps, my dad looks like another species. He'd never been to a gym in his life, but his shoulders were thick and shaking his hand was like gripping an oven mitt. He was raised on a farm in Maine, clearing granite rocks from fields with a horse-drawn wagon, using the right hand that fit this glove. I can feel the blood tapping against my temples, and a slowly increasing pressure crouches behind my solar plexus.

I take a deep breath and put the glove on the table, thumb down. I pinch the leather with my left thumb and first finger, holding it as I slowly push my right hand in, just as my father did every day of his working life. The glove feels thin as paper at the finger tips, and the joints bend easily. When I close my hand, the tacky leather bonds to itself and I have a rock for a fist. I feel like I could punch a hole in the Human Resource office door, but instead I lean forward. All my upper body weight rests on my elbows, and one elbow, my right, pushes foreword. It feels very good and right, this arm-wrestling pose.

The man in the wheelchair wheels himself to the card table.

"Prove it," I say, wiggling my fingers in the glove. "Prove your condolences."

He gets into the same pose I am in and puts his thick right palm in mine. And then we are pushing our wrists against one another, this crippled man and I. He is very strong. The veins in his arm stand out. But I am stronger than I thought, and this is where I will do the work that matters.

CLOUD SPLITTER

My wife and I live in an apartment eleven-hundred-twenty-seven feet closer to the stars than just anybody. These days, in the stars is exactly where I want to be. But I'm stuck in 9 p.m. traffic on the 495 trying not to glance at the never before used Britex baby seat in the back. A gust of wind rocks the Mercedes. I wonder how the new high-rise building I designed will handle the gusts. I'd studied "dancing building" phenomena in architecture school, of course, and I know that high towers flex in the wind. That they don't collapse, not in any kind of wind. I relax in the Mercedes' leather seat, crunching roasted peanuts, shells and all, between my teeth as I inch along in the slow-and-go. My co-workers tell me I'm a shells-on kind of guy.

When I reach my building, I drive around the garage six times looking at the baby seats in the parked cars, seats with brand names I can rattle off from memory: Britex in the Ford Minivan, Peg-prego in the VW, and the Graco in the BMW. Finally I pull into the parking space beside my wife's unused Honda. I cut the engine and listen to my car click, and wonder what kind of mood I will find her in tonight.

The building moves ever-so-slightly in the wind as I travel up the elevator. I have to balance an architectural model in one hand as I turn the doorknob to our apartment. The model design won me my first American Architecture Award five years ago—five years ago today. Inside the apartment, my wife sits cross-legged on our oxblood leather sofa. Shadows from the TV make our living room lunar. I wonder whether the rocking building has made her so pale and moon-eyed.

"Hi," I say. I shift the model into the cradle of my left arm, like I might have to shake someone's hand.

"Hi," she says, not looking away from the TV—Nova is on. Nova is always on, it seems. On the TV screen I see a red, smooth-shelled shuttle flying through space. "But at this rate will our interstellar ambassador ever return to Earth?" the voiceover is saying.

"How are things?" I say.

She does not look good, my wife—she hardly eats, sleeps. Over her left shoulder, out our living room window, I see the aircraft-warning beacons pulse red on the Lafayette Building. My wife opens her mouth, closes it, and opens it again.

"Well, space has no center," she stammers.

I plop down next to her on the couch.

"It goes on forever, or it ends," she continues. She suddenly notices the model in my arms. "Nobody knows which."

I don't know what to say. I look at the hub of blood vessels in my wife's wide eyes, and very slowly reach over and touch her hand, and she doesn't pull away. I inch my fingers up and find the hollow place in her wrist, just above her thumb. Her pulse thumps at my fingertips and I think about the spaceship-like red blood vessels that traveled to the tiny baby in her belly. Then I am counting the tiny, throbbing heartbeats. The doctors had given the thumbs-up to a fetus we'd named Nick. We were happy, and my wife was back to calling me Tommy. And then one day, suddenly, Nick was gone. There was no reason and none of the doctors could say why. I didn't know what to say to her after it happened, but I might know what to say now.

"Honey," I say, glancing at the TV and then back. "Honey, I think...."

She shakes her head once, then stands.

"I'm tired," she says.

I reach for her hand again, but she pulls it away.

“Tired,” I say. “Sure.”

She is off the couch and up the circular stairs in a second, and I hear our bedroom door shut, and the lock snap down.

In the kitchen, I find the trashcan packed full of the toys and clothes I didn't know we still had. A hobby horse's wooden pole jutted out of the pile like a telescope.

Here in the kitchen I look out on the city, with various spotlights and spires shooting concentrated beams into the dark sky. Watching satellites blink in space, with the building rocking beneath me, I think how I must look from up there—such a tiny speck. In High School astronomy, Mr. Luffer said that the light from a star can travel forever through space—that the stars we see might already be dead.

As a boy in Waycross, I enjoyed lying in the grass, eating peanuts and counting the regular throb of satellites in the heavens. My mother told me to look for crucifixes, but I found my own shapes and wished upon them. I connected the stars into human outlines and I have remembered and used some of these people shapes—the pitch of a shoulder, the slope of a hip—in my best architectural designs. Stars represented a curve or a corner, and helped me design my first buildings from the inside out—perhaps the way Da Vinci animated his sketches by visualizing the bones and muscle under the skin. I got into a good firm in New York City, where I now work exclusively on what the Germans call *himmelscraper*, heaven-scratchers—skyscrapers.

But then we lost Nick, and for two months my wife did not look at me. She isn't her old self yet—she never calls me Tommy anymore—but she likes my reputation as a good architect, I think. Because I work late, she is not compelled to see me. I hope someday she will massage my temples again—and that I will be able to touch her, and to be her husband again.

My architectural models sit on shelves in the living room. Most of the towers are tall and thin. My latest, Patria Tower, is a round skyscraper that only last week was chosen for the new World Trade Center complex.

I place the Atlanta University Observatory, the model I came home with, on the table. It looks very small to me now, beside other achievements. But it was the very design I'd been working on when Nick flew away, and it is especially precious to me. I pick it up off the table and am surprised at its lightness—the weight, perhaps, of a small light traveling through space. I put the model down gently on the coffee table again, and see that it looks more than anything like a pile of blocks, with a observation dome shaped like a baby rattle.

I feel the building rock in the wind. I sit on the black leather sofa so like the seats in my Mercedes. I extend my hand and stroke my damp fingertips over the smooth observatory vault of the model. I lower my face, turn the model toward the moonlight, and look inside a hole only I know is there. I am peering into the model's dome, and I see one corner of Nick's ghostly sonogram that I hid there the day after the we lost him.

My heart pounds. Its beat feels too firm a to be part of me.

A deep breath and my pulse slows. I move my face until it is positioned above the dome, and the epoxy that holds the model's joints together fills my nose. I open my mouth and take a bite out of the brittle top of the observatory dome. I chew and swallow, and bite off more of the observatory dome. The polyurethane foam pushes back against my teeth, and the paint and sealant tickle a place in the back of my throat. But I keep chewing and swallowing, taking my boy back into me.

I reach down with two fingers and tweeze the sonogram from the open cradle of the vault. I will walk up the stairs to my wife's room and place my hand on her belly and tell her what I now know. Her skin will be warm and I'll listen to her breathe in the dark. She will expect me to say things that don't matter. I will tell her that we are all made of light. If the deep space above our heads has an end, then starlight reflects back and continues. And if space has no end, then the light of our little star lives forever.

MOTHER WAS A LOVELY BEAST

After the divorce, my old man the nature photographer left Milwaukee and went back to the field station in the *Goualougo* Triangle, and got himself killed. We didn't talk about the divorce before he left. He peered out from under those eyebrows and told me that juvenile chimpanzees resolve conflicts over females by kissing, which is their way of saying, *I could be biting you but I'm not*. Adult males, he told me, hold one another's testicles after a fight over a female. The message would be clear, *Let's all calm down and no one will get hurt*. Big times down in the jungle before the Congolese rebels got him with their Kalashnikovs.

I guess you could say I'd rather be holding testicles. Give me nuts to hold—I want to be an adult. As it is, all I got are these stubby little fingers. I can't hold anything real with these fingers, anything big. Of course, I don't tell anybody here in Milwaukee about holding testicles and kissing chimps—but I do tell my friend Gordon that I wish I was big, that my damn hands were big-ass and strong. I tell him I dream at night my hands can crush stones. Gordon understands, he's way older than me, but short and fat—people fail to see him all the time. Being short, he says, lets a person go unnoticed, lets a person *see* things. Easy for him to say—he uses an adult camera with a big lens, whereas I'm stuck with a camera phone with a crappy little lens built in. It's about all my hands can hold, this little phone. I could use a disposable camera—but with the phone I can send the pictures back to Gordon. I guess the phone's not that bad really, if all you want is to take pictures of flies mating on your shoe. Thing is, I get mad every time I look at my little fingers wrapped seriously around something as weak-lensed as a camera phone. You can't focus, you can't zoom. It's like a driving permit—kid's stuff, and you have to wait until you're sixteen to even get the kid's stuff. And here's the thing—I own a really good camera, but can't use it. After my dad got killed in the Congo, what was left of the government over there sent us a trunk of his stuff, including his old Leicaflex. It's a shock nobody pinched it. Say *Leica* to anybody who knows, and their eyes'll go big. This is the best camera the world's ever seen, right here. It's like I'm looking through my dad's eyes. Leica's been making cameras for a long time, my dad once told me, and they're still making them, but not as well. He would never—as my mom points out—have given me this baby when he was alive. He never gave me much of anything, but then the rebels got him and, poof, here's the camera. With this old camera, its like before there was a driving age, when the only requirement was that you could see over the dashboard. The lens in this Leica can *see*—it can see real far. Problem is I can't hold the thing steady.

Earlier today I was sitting on the basement stairs watching my mom, still in her zoo-keeper uniform, fiddling and folding the laundry like she'd bought each thing at Gucci, not Goodwill. There hasn't been a man spooking around for awhile, so it's just Mom and me. I'm just sitting there clenching and releasing my baby fingers, trying to get them stronger. Mom turns, “Ed,” she says, looking at me, “why are you always sitting around watching me? How 'bout helping?”

“Waiting for you to offer me a ciggie,” I say.

She goes back to folding.

“You're only a little boy,” she says. “When did I ever give you a cigarette? Never.”

“Dad smoked,” I say.

“Not when he was eleven years old, and not with his mother.”

“Why?” I say.

She thinks for a second. “It’s against natural selection,” she says.

I wait a pause.

“Can I watch you smoke, then?” I say.

She looks at me as if I have the ebola virus. We’ve had similar talks before, and she always goes a little crazy, flies way off the handle. “Let me tell you this, little boy,” she says, almost yelling. “I was there when you came into this world.” She blinks her eyes real fast. “You were this long,” she says, holds up her hands. The size I hope my schlong will be by the time I get to high school.

“You’re a *little boy*,” she says.

And now I’m looking down at my little fingers, all blotchy from squeezing. Little fingers meant to hold lollipops and half-sized hamburgers, kid fingers.

“Be still,” I say to my mom. It’s all I can think to say when I’m super mad. It’s from *Where the Wild Things Are*, and I can hear how stupid the words sound coming out of my mouth, how puny and high-voiced. “Be still,” I say again, anyway.

She’s at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at me—and she doesn’t say anything. I know it’s time for me to leave, but somehow I feel sad as I stand.

“Where you going?” she says.

“Going out,” I say.

“Don’t Ed,” Mom says. “And don’t skip any more school. Stay home at night. This is a big city and you’re a little boy.”

She’s up the stairs now, standing in front of me. She’s a couple of stairs lower, actually, but we’re eye-to-eye. I can see her brasserie straps through the uniform, and she must sense this—she sort of backs a step down. Her tiny little fingers are balled together into a laughable little fist, like a wad of spaghetti.

“Shut up Mom,” I say. “Adult males of our species are highly mobile,” I say.

I’m up the stairs and out the front door of our apartment building in a second. On the street are potholes and the whole world leaning on their car horns, and a couple of juveniles of the species in a Coup de Ville across the street, going at it. There’re even some yew bushes against my building—the best for observing from, maybe getting some pictures—but I forgot my phone camera back in my room, so I start walking along the sidewalk. Then I’m thinking about my old man. Thinking about how quiet he was, which was probably because he spent so much time hunched in bushes watching primates mate. Tends to make a person introspective, trust me. When he did talk, it was about chimps and gorillas. Once he gave me some advice about the importance of mate acquisition—told me that without a *trustworthy* mate, the male chimp finds no entrance into the group, and he wanders the edges of things until he dies. I was only a little guy then, six maybe, but when he said “wanders at the edges,” I was sure he meant the Congo.

We went to the playground at King Park and sat on the see-saw. The see-saw howled like a monkey when it rose and fell. My old man told me about Africa, like how the first thing a chimp does when he catches a colobus monkey is gouge its eyes out and eat them like hard-boiled eggs. I wonder what really happened to my dad in the Congo. I don’t believe none of that crap that he’s dead—there’s no way the Congolese government guys would have sent a Leica back to us. Someone would of sold it and fed his own mate for, like, seven years. No, my old man sent it back so I’d know he’s alive—it’s sort of a farewell gift. My mom didn’t want him around, that much was obvious from the men she

brought home. I bet he stayed in Africa to do some mate acquiring of his own. The facts of life and all that. Tough tittie.

I'm not embarrassed to say that I was scared the first time I did what I do for Gordon. I was just a kid. It was last year, right around my tenth birthday, and I was walking around the park at night, over by the public bathrooms. I was spooking around and Gordon invited me into his van. I had a broken toy camera I'd found in someone's trash can, and I was trying to scare people by pretending to take their pictures as they came out of the bathrooms. That's mostly what I got up to back then, kid's stuff. Then this big voice from a parked van says, "Hey, kid, come 'ere."

I know the streets, and I see straight off that he doesn't seem to be your typical sick-o—his van is new and none of the windows are tinted. I open the passenger door and climb in. "You smoke?" he says, gesturing at the pack on the dash board.

"No," I say. Course, when he asks me now I say yes, but back then I'm only a kid, still eating popsicles and hamburgers.

Gordon has a funny accent, and I tell him so in the van.

"From Africa," he says.

"Africa?"

"South Africa," he says, holding up a pale hand.

He takes binoculars from under his leg and looks at someone coming out of the public bathroom.

"Ever been downtown, little man?" he says.

"I know how to get there," I say. I like it that he calls me 'little man.'

"You like girls?" he says, looking over at me. "I mean white girls, of course."

I'm not sure what he means by this, so I don't say anything.

He looks back through the binoculars, but I can tell he's considering something.

"Think you can keep look out for me," he says, "at a brothel?"

"A brothel," I say. The name makes me think of a place that has pots of soup and broth boiling. "I guess."

So I started to take pictures for Gordon. He showed me how to sight and that was super easy, just raise the phone's lens and push the button. He showed me how to send the picture to him with another pressed button. He pointed out the best bushes to hide in. He never talked to me like a kid, and he gave me cigarettes—though they tasted like crap at first.

Lots of things are hard to do the first time. One Thursday I took the bus downtown to the brothel. Downtown is a funny place—tons of storefronts and buildings but half of them abandoned, which makes the open restaurants look alone in the dark, it really does. Downtown's in a small valley, and before the bus goes down, I see the Mitchell Park Conservatory, three glass domes bulging at the skyline. The domes are about one-hundred-feet high and shaped like beehives. Each has a different part of the world in it. I like the jungle one best. There are huge trees in the jungle dome, really old trees that I like, not puny little ones. I was pretty little when my dad and I went, I guess—it was the same day as the sea-saw, I think. He lifted me up and sat me real high on one of the tree's huge branches. I held on tight and looked down at my dad standing off the path, with the jungle falling in around his legs. I felt like a chimp looking down at him—that's how small I was: I still thought chimps lived in trees. From high up he looked small and vulnerable himself. From what he told me, everything in the jungle can hurt you—everything wants to eat your eyes...even the humans. Even as I looked down at him standing in the fake jungle, I knew that something would get him eventually.

I hung around across the street from a brothel for Gordon. The whole time I was thinking about my old man in the jungle. Earlier that day Gordon sits me at a back booth at a burger joint. The seat has words and pictures cut into it and Gordon sort of puts down a napkin before sitting. I don't know if he's worried he's going to infect the seat, or vice-versa. He's got a huge chocolate shake and three hamburgers unwrapped, lined up, and waiting on his tray. "That's all you want?" he says, pointing at my tray.

"Yes," I say. I've got black coffee. A man's drink.

After a couple of good-looking hamburgers go down his throat, he coughs into his hand and says, "So this is a big day, right?"

I look at my coffee, a drink which tastes mostly like crap.

"The boy becomes the man," he says. "Rite-of-passage situations."

"Seems to me hanging around a brothel makes me sort of a sad, little man," I say. "I mean, if I was a real man I'd be out with the ladies, or jet skiing, or watching dangerous animals in the jungle, right?" It all comes out fast, and I don't mean to cut into him so hard. But I didn't like him saying I'm not a real man already.

He looks down at the remaining hamburger. "Were," he says, correcting my grammar, like my dad or something. "If I *were* a real man."

"Were," I say. "If you were a real man."

Gordon throws his wadded-up napkin down on the last hamburger. "Kid," he says. At first I think he's mad, but when he looks up he's smiling. "Kid, you're going to be very good at this."

"Great," I say, letting the 'kid' thing go. "Good. Who's the guy I'm looking out for?"

"Well," he says, leaning in a little. "You've heard there's this investigation into that big company downtown?"

I nod, but I have no idea what he's talking about. He puts a hand in his pants and pulls out a photo of some old guy in a suit. District attorney, Gordon tells me, goes to this brothel Thursdays. Apparently, he's a mean guy—yells at people. He accuses this big company downtown of all sorts of mean things, and he wants them to pay money for things they didn't do. "Those people could have gotten sick from anything," Gordon says. "The government men come with guns and start giving orders." Gordon is suddenly watching me very closely.

I look out the window and yawn at the passing cars.

"And the government men threaten the company wives, when the husbands are away," he says. Then, when he sees I'm still looking out the window, he adds, "And forces them into monkey business in their own homes."

I sniff, imagining my mom folding her goodwill clothes in the basement as the government men in black suits come spooking down the stairs toward her. That's no good. That's not right. But I don't say anything.

"The government men will send the company men off to jail, they might shoot them, and their families will never see them again."

I know how that feels. That sucks, that's worse than anything, so I turn back from the window. "Here I am and I'm ready to do the job," I say. "Just be still and tell me where to go."

And then I'm downtown walking along the abandoned street, with a lit-up restaurant at one end of the block, and cars stopping in front of it like it's the last place on earth. Otherwise, the street is as dark as a forest. I pass an old bookstore called *Renaissance*, and a place called *Busy Time*, which used to be a wig store—I can tell by

the white-Styrofoam heads lying on their side behind the plate glass. The brothel should be on this block, Gordon told me to walk inside and snap a good picture. The darkness and the sound of breaking bottles starts to scare me. I'm feeling like a hunted colobus monkey, and then I see the marquee. Just as Gordon told me, there's a side door down an alley beside the abandoned theater, and I sidle up behind a horrible smelling little bush and commence watching that door.

A couple of hunters wander by on the sidewalk, but I'm in the bush, and they have no idea I'm watching out for my own colobus monkey. After a while a car pulls up and someone gets out and walks down the alley and into the door. It isn't my district attorney guy, but soon another car pulls up, and this *is* my guy. I see him plain as day and he looks younger, and way smaller than in the photo. Sort of shabby. I guess you could say he doesn't look quiet as bad as Gordon made him out to be.

I wait for awhile, and being careful not to step in the wet potholes, I cross the street and walk down the alley and through the door. By the time I'm walking down the stairs, I'm blaming this guy not only for sending all the fathers away, but for making me sit in that pissy bush for more than two hours. I'm pretty mad about it, so I go stomping right past the guy sitting at the bottom of the stairs. He just watches me pass, and then I'm in a big room with a bartender behind a small bar at one side, beside a small dance floor with a brass pole in the middle. No soup, or broth, in evidence. There is loud dance music, but nobody's dancing. There are a couple of males talking to females at the bar, and they're trying hard to ignore me. The place smells like cherry air freshener and I sniff as I walk toward the small hallway with the doors, one of which must hold my guy.

The first door is empty. So is the second. But there he is behind the third door, with a naked female, and up he jumps.

I raise the camera and nothing about this is exciting. Mister Government Lawyer is panning his eyes over my head, like he's expecting someone else, a grownup, to be behind me. That pisses me off, and I snap a good one of him holding out his hand, and the female staring blankly into the lens, with everything she's got in clear evidence. The camera flash strobes the room for a moment and I notice, of all things, a drain in the middle of the floor. Like in the monkey cage at the zoo.

The people in the big room are very still when I turn and start walking toward the stairs. When I'm near enough, the bouncer guy stands and lunges at me. It's so easy for me to spin away—he's large and I'm small. When I'm halfway up the stairs I turn and hold up the camera, and he stops dead in his tracks. And in that moment I sense the power of this thing in my hand. The bouncer stays where he is, and so do all the other people down there. Nobody moves and nobody calls me kid.

"Wonderful," Gordon says in his van, after that first time. He shows me how the picture looks on his phone. Two bedraggled, naked humans in a room—but he smiles as though I've discovered a new species.

"Keep the phone," he says. "And here, for your trouble." He hands me two one-hundred-dollar bills, and it seems like a lot of money. The bills are so stiff and new that I feel weird folding them four times so they'll fit in my jeans pocket.

"I'll be calling you with more jobs," he says, pointing to the phone.

So it's back to my mom's apartment, but now she's in the bathtub. The door's closed, and I try to sneak by, but I should know by now how sharp her ears are when she's drinking wine.

"Come in and wash my back," she cries. From the squeak of flesh on enamel, It sounds like she's not alone in the bath.

“Ma, get out of the bath,” I say. “You’ll dry up like a prune.” It’s all she ever does at home: she’s either washing clothes, or in the bath drinking white wine from a box.

There’s a pause, and she says in a different tone, “I’m curious, are you the new man around the house?”

She giggles and then I hear a small, low-voiced grunt—and I know there’s a man in there with her. A new man.

Then it’s off to my room where I slam the door so hard that I hear one of the candles in the bathroom fall off the sill. The walls are thin and my room’s crap, it’s puny and useless—I couldn’t even fit a dresser in here if I had one. What I’ve got is a mattress on the floor and some cardboard boxes to hold my clothes. No self respecting man would sleep in a room like this. There’s not even a closet door to hang my pants from. I open my one window, then slam it shut. My hands are shaking and I know it’s because of the new-man-around-the-house crap my mom just spouted.

I lie down and in a second I’m thinking about mister monkey-man himself, my dad. When he was around he’d suggest really great things like me going to Africa with him, or taking a hot air balloon ride, and just when I was starting to believe, he’d laugh and say he was only joking. On the other hand, he held me real tight when he gave me a hug, and many times his eyes were wet when we broke. He told me he hated going to Africa, but the money was good. He hated going, and could I be his eyes when he was gone? He hated going, but would I watch to see who came and went, be the man-around-the-house? So I did. And, as a man, I watched my mom bring men home, guys she worked with at the zoo. She carried on with them all night and into the morning. These males were what they were. Some were asses and some were nice, but they meant less than nothing to me. I wanted to be with my dad in Africa. When he called, I told him Mom was great and we both missed him. I lied and then my mom divorced him, and now he’s never coming home. He hated going, but maybe he would have taken me with him if I’d been a man to tell him about Mom. And it’s like he knows I lied to him, and he’s showing me up by sending me his eyes, his Leicaflex.

And my dad had his chances. One weekend, the last time he was home, Mom went to visit her sister in Sheboygan and it was just dad and me. I wished he would go out and find a lady of his own, I’d been watching my mom move steadily through the zoo staff—the only mature male she hadn’t brought home yet was Chako, the man who dresses up in a monkey costume on Saturdays at the zoo. But my dad didn’t go out, he took me to the playground and to the see-saw, and that was the day we went to the domes. *King Kong* was on TV, and we watched it and my old man didn’t even start bagging on its inaccuracy. Later, he told me all sorts of great things about primates. He told me that some chimps use tools to fish termites out of logs. He told me colobus monkeys have no thumbs.

But I sure have thumbs, and I go on three more photo expeditions for Gordon, and prove just how well I can grasp and hold. When I’m about to take a picture, I stop feeling nervous and it’s like I’m taking a picture of someone I know real well. Some rich guy’s wife likes to steal Gucci bags at the mall even though she doesn’t need to steal, and I’m there taking pictures of her doing it. And she smiles for each picture. A man is naked in a motel room with a naked lady, and I’m outside the window taking a picture through the blinds. No man is braver than me. I walk into some office downtown like I’m somebody’s kid, and open the boardroom doors and snap a picture of two groups of company executives having a meeting they’re not supposed to be having. And those old guys in suits all stare up at me, and I bow—*last real man at your service*. Find me a

braver man. And Gordon pays me for this bravery—soon I got eight one-hundred-dollar bills tucked next to my dad’s Leicaflex in the box with the balled up socks over it.

I wake up this morning feeling funny. All last night I hear glass breaking in the street, and people yelling. I dream of bad things I can’t remember. Also Mom carrying on with her new man. Problem is I never remember what I dream, so the next morning I feel strange without knowing why. The dream must have had something to do with my old man, because the first thing I want to do is hold the Leicaflex, and I dig it out from under the balled up socks. It’s way heavier than the camera phone, of course, and I can barely get it up in front of my eye. But if I hold it from the bottom, I can sort of level it off and even sort of touch the shutter release with the tip of one finger. Sort of. The world through the Leicaflex has little squares that shimmer and the colors are different somehow, brighter. And it’s like I am my dad back from the Congo and taking a look around my room. This makes me feel good. I remember the night before dad went back to Africa for the last time. He was in a funny sort of mood, and we sat at the kitchen table as he laid out all his lenses and equipment and cleaned them all with a spray bottle of compressed air. And I was right there watching when he got to the Leicaflex. He told me about how his own dad was the first guy in his family to go to college. Grandpa gave my old man the Liecafex for graduation from university, a place we both knew I would never go. And this all must be what I was dreaming of.

“This is the rewind motor,” he said, tapping the black box at the bottom of the camera, “this is what makes the film wind fast, for the action shots.” He was talking in a tone of voice like this was the last thing he’d ever show me. “Loading the film can be tricky,” he said as he popped open the back.

“Did a gorilla ever charge you?” I said.

He didn’t even smile. “Yes, but I’m trying to show you something here.”

I shut my trap and listened to my daddy teach me how to load film into the Leicaflex.

“Standing off the film advance like this,” my dad said. “Takes the advance lever out of the way of your head.” The words meant nothing to me, but I watched his smooth hands thread the end of the film through the spool, and make sure the teeth at the edge of the film alighted with the holes. I watched him focus on me and push the button, and the jolt of the shutter surprised me. Then the machine in the camera wound the film, and he started snapping shots of Mom sitting on the couch next to the phone, leafing through a small black book she kept in her purse. After about the fifteenth shot she looked up with a bored expression.

“Oh, run off back to Africa monkey-boy,” she said.

And now I’m holding that Leica which came to me from Africa with the largest lens my old man owned, a thing as long as the space between my mom’s hands when she showed me my birth length. And if I focused this lens on two flies mating on my shoe, I’d be able to see each black hair on the male fly’s back. I lift the camera to my eye and the viewfinder is separated into squares. Everything in the room is wobbling through the viewfinder, like the sunlight through the panels at the Mitchell Park Conservatory domes, and I can feel the tears coming down my cheeks and against the camera. And I know it is because of me that he never came back, because I wasn’t man enough to tell him what Mom was doing. And he already knew, I bet. By me not saying anything he figured I wanted to stay with her.

From the other room I hear my mom vocalizing and the man with her is grunting with effort. Where are their thumbs now? Where are their beautiful opposable thumbs as

they screech and thrash? And my pulse pants at my wrists as I stalk down the hall toward my mother's bedroom, with the Leica dangling from my neck by its strap. The door is parted and clothes are thrown around, mostly the parts of a monkey suit the man in the room must have shed. I'm as silent as a chimp as I slip into her room. The air smells like the monkey cage at the zoo—I half expect to see a drain in the middle of the floor—and there they are on the bed and he's hunched over on top and his back is absolutely covered with black hair. The room is full of bright light. The windows are open and the curtains, *snap, snap, snap* in the wind gusting off the lake, and all the stuff on the dresser is blown on the floor, and the picture frames are blown on their faces.

And then he sees me and stops and rolls off my mother, who sits up and stares at me.

I wait until I can get a good breath, and then I raise the camera, and it's wobbling around and I catch my reflection in the vanity mirror, and my little hands are balled like stupid little wads of spaghetti around the Leica. The hairy human stands and takes a step toward me with his palm out, as though I might bite. That's no man. The room is jumping around in the viewfinder, but I steady the camera and manage to get the tip of one of my opposable digits on the shutter release and take a picture of the naked man, and my mom sitting next to him with everything she has in clear evidence. The film rewinds in half a second and I take another picture and another, and then I'm moving around the room taking pictures of them with the rewind motor cracking, and the camera sounds to me like an AK set on full automatic. And my heart feels full of blood and growing larger and larger, and the camera is as light as chimp testicles, and I know with the money from Gordon I will buy a one-way ticket to the Congo. And these pictures will guide me home.

RED NECKS

Plus, the nursery job wasn't supposed to be a forever thing anyway, more of a stop gap—but a broken condom yielded twins, and then the same thing happened again—and now the young man's pregnant wife and two boys are slumped in the living room laughing at a TV show called, ironically, *Persistence*. The AC is off to save money, and North Florida's late summer humidly hangs around everyone's ears like ghosts.

"Well," the young man says to the older man sitting with him on the porch, "little Tommy really loves one of the girls that lives over there," he points to the Bordean house across the street. "He loves Sandy. She's twelve, I'd guess. Little Tommy's three. He stands at the very edge of the yard and talks to her across the street."

The older man, whose name is David, looks down at his hands.

"Her shirts are always unbuttoned one extra button," The young man adds.

"Saucy," The older man says, "Real saucy." He begins thumbing at the corner of his beer label.

"I like her," Pete says. "I like her a lot."

"And what about the father?" David says. "What about him, huh?"

"You haven't seen him?"

"How would I have seen him?"

"He's got that—" Pete holds his hands out from his leg, as through it were very fat.

"Gigantism?" David says.

The young man shakes his head.

"Elephantitis? Blue balls? What, Pete?"

"Ya, that one. But only in the one leg. I mean—that pant leg is filled. It looks like a sausage."

"Oh, *that* guy." Dave's face rearranges itself into a grin. "I see him at the grocery store. He can walk, right?"

"Can he walk?" Pete says. "He's a better walker than I am." The young man keeps his eyes on the Bordean house as he speaks, "Well, his little girl Sandy invites us into the back yard. Little Tommy's crazy to go, and he runs around the side of the house after her. The dad's pickup is gone, but I figure nobody would mind me going into the back yard. I wouldn't mind. So I cross the street after Tommy, but the first thing I do when I'm over there is have a look at my own house—from the Bordeans' point-of-view, I mean. Let me tell you, our house looks funny. Like I don't know who lives here, and I sort of wouldn't want to," the young man points at a flower bed next to screen door. "See all these sunflowers planted here? Well, from over there they look sick—like they're already dead, really. Made me think. Standing there looking at my own house. Know what I mean? I was over there thinking."

David nods uncertainly. He and the young man are the only nursery employees with college degrees, and this has led to a friendship of a sort. David is a manager, and he sometimes follows Pete home for after-work beers. He's old enough that the bones show through the backs of his hands.

"Anyway," the young man continues, "that back yard is mowed, not like the front. The father is one of those guys who mows people's lawns for a living, you know?"

"Bet he's rolling in cash," David says.

“I don’t think he wants to be doing it for a living,” the young man says, turning sharply. “I think it just worked out that way.”

David says nothing.

“Anyway, he’s built a pond in the back yard with a little waterfall. It’s nice. And there’s an old toilet with red salvia growing out of the bowl,” Pete says. “And little Sandy has her own dog. One of those with no hair and all the wrinkles—a Chihuahua, I guess. And that one day I went around the back I watched as she scooped that little dog up and held it out to Tommy, who squealed he was so excited to see it. I told him to be careful. ‘He doesn’t have to be careful,’ Sandy tells me, ‘Daddy says she’s real tough, Mister Candy.’ Sandy’s always calling me ‘Mister.’”

The older man peels more label off his beer bottle. He says, “Wait until you’re not around, then see what she calls you.”

“I watched that little dog shake in Tommy’s hands, you know how those little dogs are about shaking. And this dog was *shaking*. It really was.”

“It’s probably an atheist,” David says, without looking up. “Scared for its life in that house.”

The young man stands. “More beer?” he says. He goes into the kitchen and gets two bottles from the refrigerator. Out the kitchen window the sun is setting behind the Bordean house. A TV-laugh erupts in the living room.

“So, I’m standing in the back yard,” Pete says, handing a beer to the older man. “And that Sandy says to the dog, ‘If you don’t stop shaking I’m going to beat your butt so hard,’ then she turns to me and says, ‘he can stop shaking anytime he wants to. He just doesn’t want to. He shakes all the time, even when there’s nothing to shake about. I take him to bed, and he’s shaking.’”

“She takes him to bed,” David says. “Hmm.”

But the younger man keeps talking—there’s sweat dotting his upper lip and he keeps talking. “There’s a falling-apart jungle gym in one corner of their back yard and Sandy climbs right up and stands on the swing, something I’ve told Tommy never to do—.”

“Where’s old fat leg?” David says. “Where’s he this whole time? Collecting unemployment?”

The young man shrugs. “Sandy yells at Tommy to watch her, but he’s paying attention to the dog in his arms. She jumps off the swing, comes over, and slaps the dog right out of his hands. For a second Tommy tries to walk to where the dog fell, but Sandy says his name in this certain way she has, and he turns and watches her get back on the swing.”

“Barbarians,” David says. “Strictly cretins.” But he leans forward to hear more, his thin fingers pinching the stem of his beer bottle like a nipple.

“Sandy swings,” Pete says, “and little Tommy is laughing and trying to touch her foot. And the whole time the little dog is shaking and whining. Sandy yells at it to stop crying or she’ll jump off and give it something to cry about, but the little dog keeps shaking, and its leg-bones are thin enough to break in a second.”

The older man raises his half-full bottle to his lips.

Pete says, “I remember asking Sandy why the dog shakes so much. And do you know what she said? She said, ‘Daddy says I’m like the government to her—she’s afraid I’m going to come down there and whip her butt. Daddy says that I can. She’s a real tough bitch.’”

David coughs. “How old is she?” He says.

“Don’t know, twelve?”

The older man shakes his head. “Saucy,”

But Pete hasn’t moved. His beer bottle is still full and dimpled with condensation. Laughter erupts from the TV in back. “That dog shook,” he says, looking off somewhere. “That dog shook the whole time I was there. Everything scared it, everything about life scared it.”

“Are the boys sniffing around Sandy, yet?” David says. “Are there lots of boys coming for dinner over there?”

“I don’t think they always eat, over there. They don’t look like they always eat.”

A TV laugh bursts into life in the back room.

But the young man is staring at the Bordean house. “Our house looked so dumpy from over there,” Pete says. “And I look down and there’s that dog shaking just like it’s the one worrying about money.”

“But what about Saucy Sandy?” The older man says. He’s drained his beer, and he’s leaning forward in a way that means it’s close to time to leave. “Seems like I know a way she could make some money for the family.”

“Wait, here’s the weird thing,” the young man says. “Tommy and me came home, and I sat right here on this porch and looked at the Bordean house. I didn’t eat anything. I didn’t tuck anybody into bed. I just sat right here smoking cigarettes and looking at that house, and I was thinking—you know, trying to put it all together.”

“What?” David says, stands. “Put what together?” He pats his back pocket to see if his wallet is still there.

“It’s weird,” Pete says. “But I was thinking about how thin that dog’s leg bones must be, and when I was a kid we lived near a slaughter house—sometimes we’d go down to the river and see what we could find on the shore. You know—eyeballs, stuff like that. Once we found a pig’s head with a neat little hole between its eyes. But most other times it was just bones. We always made these trips at night, and we’d sit there smoking and watching for bones. Now it seems like they were floating in the water, but bones don’t float, do they?”

David scrunches up his face. “Uh huh,” he says. “Ok, then. What were you smoking?”

The younger man shrugs.

“Thanks for the beer,” David says. “You work tomorrow?”

“No.”

“I’ll see you Thursday, then.”

“Ok,” Pete says. “Drive crazy. Take lots of chances.”

“You bet,” The older man says. He walks out the door to his truck. The Bordean house is close, but he can’t look at it. He turns the key in the ignition and drives away. The night sky is cloudless. The old man takes Seventh to Madison, sitting alone at each late-night intersection waiting for red lights to go green. he takes the Hobarton Bridge over the river. Below, the river is flowing south, into darkness. And in a moment his hands are shaking. Suddenly he’s thinking about bones bobbing in the star-reflected water, and then the river below is churning like a waterfall into emptiness.

LAMBS WERE CHILDREN

My wife Jane said plenty of guys were handling it better than me. On the other hand, she still had her copywriter job, while I stumbled around the apartment in my robe all day tipping Red Stripe stubbies. What did she know about loss and healing? Didn't she dye her hair blonde, and suddenly trot her mom out the weekend we were going to salvage our marriage?

We'd been planning to address our "issues" on a marital getaway at the lodge where my job mates—my former job mates—went for summer retreats. I remembered my way there and the quick little kick to jar open the stuck front door, although I knew Jane no longer believed I had any secret knowledge. When I told her the getaway plan, for instance, she rolled her eyes. But if I could manage to rest my hand on the smooth river stones that lined the lodge's hall entrance, and suck in all that pine air I remembered from the time before the accident, when I'd been a whole man, the tumblers would click back into place and I'd be able to feel my old life snap back open.

So, I tried to put it all together. I loved that lodge in the Sierra Mountains even at the end of November, with the threat of early winter and nighttime temperatures dropping below freezing.

We hit SFO traffic a little after two on our way to pick up Mrs. Lumpt. At 2:35 we saw her wandering the arrival curb looking like she'd just washed her hands and couldn't find a towel. She'd lost her bag, of course, and the top button of her blouse sat in the wrong hole—a pattern repeated all the way down.

And to make it worse, we had to be at the lodge by 7:23 pm, when the almanac said the sun dropped behind the mountains and ice bunched on the blacktop all the way from Truckee to Placerville.

"Go get her, jobless," Jane said. "Get earning." She put her bare feet on the dash and wiggled her toes. "How'd I get so lucky?" she said, and I had a look at her. I used to love this woman's hard tone of voice. I waited for her wise cracks the way other people anticipate love letters. She used to come in close for a kiss and call me a jackass just before our lips met. But for a while now she's forgotten the kiss.

I double-parked and attended Mrs. Lumpt, getting her over to the baggage carousel where we waited until everybody had what they wanted. It was just us and ten bags nobody cared about going round and round. At last, she pointed at a frayed red and black suitcase. "I'll take that one," she said. I should have guessed by how ratty and Minnesotan it looked. I wanted to call her out. Tell her to tote her own Samsonite. But I remembered Jane's clenched jaws saying to expect anything with early-stage Alzheimer's.

"What time is it?" Mrs. Lumpt said, as I buckled her in the back seat. "Where are the clocks? We walk around not knowing what time it is."

"We?" I clicked off the hazard lights and toed the gas. The face of her chrome Timex, big as a silver dollar, eyed me from her wrist.

"Don't drive crazy," she said. "I might barf. What time is it?"

"3:30, Mom," Jane said. "Remember Lake Tahoe Lodge?"

I felt my pulse thump against my wrists at the possibilities of the lodge. You see, Jane and I didn't talk after the accident—we closed our mouths, and somebody else's

voice came out when she opened up again. She spent more time at work. I was unemployed at the time, still am, and one Tuesday I bumped into an old work friend. I was tired of being alone and I went with her to her apartment and got naked with her. I lied to this girl that I was working at another design house, making more money, but I told Jane the truth. Who knows why. I told her how high that woman's breasts were, how her teeth were as white as orange pith. Maybe I did it to make everything hurt again, the way it had when we lost our son. Regardless, after that day, Jane looked away when I spoke. The way she thrust and wound her knitting needles drove me to sleep some nights on a Thermarest mat in the locked bathroom.

A BMW honked, and I veered right to avoid scraping paint, my pulse thumping at my wrists. Neither my wife or her mother seemed to notice. Mrs. Lumpt said, "Last night there were these men in my house talking, talking, talking about the unemployed out here. Finally I said to these fellas, 'You guys gotta go. It's bed time.'"

"TV news," Jane said. She stared out the windows at the harbor cranes next to the bumper-to-bumper traffic. Something about the poise of their steel legs reminded me of a pack of stray dogs staring at my progress.

"But these guys wouldn't go," the old lady said.

Four hours to get into the mountains wasn't much. I rolled the window down and watched the suburbs slowly recede in my side mirror. There would still be wild trout cutting the current in Eel creek, and fly rods propped behind the lodge's front door. I thought about slapping something down on the dinner table that night—a stringer of brookies if not a paycheck—and hearing someone gasp over it.

"Where we going, you?" Mrs. Lumpt said to me.

"Tahoe," Jane whispered.

"Some woman called about that yesterday," Mrs. Lumpt said. "I turned her down."

"That was me," Jane said. "I called."

"Her husband's a good-for-nothing."

"So they say," I heard myself say. "How was your flight?"

"You'd like to know," Mrs. Lumpt said. "Pull over, Ward, I gotta pee."

Ward? I thought. *Ward Lumpt?*

I stopped at a pre-pay place with four old gas pumps. Jane left me for coffee, taking Mrs. Lumpt. I walked past a chugging old pick-up, its tail pipe wound to the fender with bailing wire. Some gun riding the rack.

Inside, the pick-up's owner was counting dirty pennies one-handed onto the counter. His other hand held a huge plastic cup. Over the bill of his cap, I saw bottles of Black Velvet, Maker's Mark, and Old Crow lined up along the wall behind the cash register.

"Damn fool," Mrs. Lumpt said under her breath, standing behind him. "Don't lose count again."

Forgetting his pennies, the guy turned on his heel and threw Mountain Dew across Mrs. Lumpt's white blouse. Then he ran for the door as though he expected she'd chase him.

He was past me in a second, through the door and gone. It took longer than that for Mrs. Lumpt, who stood blinking and looking down at her blouse, to notice me.

"Ward?" Mrs. Lumpt said, blinking at me. "What happened?"

I shrugged—it seemed like the most natural thing to do, given the circumstance.

But the old lady's eyes were clear and focused. She jabbed a finger at me. "You're my husband—do something."

"What could *he* do?" Jane said.

Again, the shrug seemed most appropriate.

I tried to think of a manly thing to do. My eyes settled on the whiskey bottles. I chose Maker's Mark because of the wad of red wax jizz-ed on its neck. Jane stomped out of the store.

And I drove hard. There weren't many trucks but it was Friday so every single Marin County SUV was crowding the foot-hill road. I saw some guy in pressed khakis working a tire jack under his red Lexus and thought about stopping, but I could see the guy's breath and the size of his golden wristwatch. Besides, I was wearing ankle socks.

As if to punctuate this, the sun dipped behind a hill and didn't reappear again.

"Hope you brought warm clothes," I said.

"Clothes? I got what's on," Mrs. Lumpt said. "You try taking ten bucks to the laundry mat in Duluth," she said. "They give you back five." She sniffed the Mountain Dew on her sleeve. "And you can't go on Sunday because we're all at church. If you take ten dollars on Sundays, people there spend it."

"That so?" I said.

"Hey jobless," Jane's lips pursed. "Got the foggiest where we are?"

"Turn here," Mrs. Lumpt said. "49 to Placerville. 49 to Placerville," she suddenly chanted. I remembered the map—49 meant 30 miles further from the lodge. In these mountains, that's another hour. But one look at Jane's crossed arms and I took the turn.

I knew right away I'd made a mistake listening to Mrs. Lumpt. The State Highway was pitch black. We were in high mountains suddenly—pointy Monterey pines and snowy crags outlined against the black sky. Rags of snow cluttered the edge of the road. We could have slid anytime.

And Mrs. Lumpt wouldn't stay quiet. "Hang Town," she said. "Placerville's called Hang Town. I remember."

Jane turned in the seat. "That's great, Mom," she said. "You remember."

The old lady took a deep breath.

"Saw a crash, 'round Placerville," Mrs. Lumpt said. "Guy hit a, ah," I watched the outline of her hand against the starry sky. "The things that have points in their heads."

"Devil," I said.

"Just a deer," Jane said, a scold.

"Course we saved that fella what hit the deer," Mrs. Lumpt said. "Ward here broke the pointy things with a hammer. They were all through that poor Indian."

"Daddy was braver than most," Jane said. *Most* meant *me*.

"A good man," Mrs. Lumpt said. "He does what needs to be done, does Wardie."

"He," Jane looked over at me, "thought of doing First Responder class to be a paramedic," She paused. "Thought about it." It took a few seconds for me to realize she was talking about me, not her father. "He thought about it after he got fired," Jane said.

"Fired?" Mrs. Lumpt said.

"Laid-off," I said.

"Ward was never fired," the old lady said. "Bite your tongue."

"Him." Jane pushed one pointy-nailed finger into my arm just above the elbow. "This one." But then she put her hand on my shoulder and rubbed. "Really, it wasn't his fault."

But before I could agree with her, I came around a hard turn and we all saw the car with its rear wheels up off the ground, its hood twisted around a fir's trunk. The driver's head was jerked in a crazy way and the wreck's horn echoed off the peaks all around.

"Wardie?" the old lady said.

Only when I exhaled did I realize I'd been holding my breath.

"Go break off the pointy things," the old lady said.

"Do something," Jane said to me.

But I couldn't do anything, my hands felt chiseled on the wheel. We crept right on by. I let up on the gas, but I didn't stop.

A couple of miles down the road I pulled up to a payphone in a campground turn-off. "Closed for the season" a sign hammered to a cedar said. Outside, snowflakes meandered out of the black sky. My fingertips went numb pushing the graveyard-cold buttons of the phone.

Nobody spoke when I got back in the car.

"They're sending an ambulance," I said. "Told me the right thing was driving on." I took the Maker's Mark from under the seat, broke the seal, and sloshed some into my coffee cup. "Good job. That's what they said."

Jane sat with her hands in her armpits and shot a look at the bottle. Mrs. Lumpt stared out the window at the dark mountains. From somewhere behind the campground's Douglas firs I heard a scream, like two stray dogs fighting.

"Ever tell you about that graveyard in Prague?" I said.

Jane sighed. She'd heard all my Prague stories.

"Graveyard?" Mrs. Lumpt said. "*Père Lachaise* where Jim Morrison was buried?" She reached out her Styrofoam coffee cup and I splashed the bottom with whiskey, but she moaned until I poured more.

The wheels spun as I pulled away. Which made me remember that I'd forgotten to buy tire chains, and with the snow coming sideways into the headlight cones, it was only a matter of time before we'd need them.

"So, Prague," I said, glancing over at Jane, who looked straight ahead like the headlights. "The gravestones are all pressed together over there, some have crosses and some have Stars of David. Some have scraps of prayers on them held down with stones. Others have carp fish, or lambs, chiseled into the head stones. "I don't know what the carp symbolized," I said, glancing at my wife who had her hands squeezed between her knees. "But lambs were children."

Jane closed her eyes and didn't say anything for a while.

Mrs. Lumpt didn't reply.

The bright snow flakes twinkling down.

I reached over and took the bottle from between Jane's legs, drank until it burned like crazy. She looked over and I got the impression she didn't like what she saw.

"Did we get gas at that old campground you called the ambulance?"

"No gas," I said. "Lodge's only a couple of miles."

"They say it hits suddenly, you forget fast," Jane whispers. "I want it to hit suddenly."

"What?"

"Alzheimer's. But I don't think it hits fast at all. Mom's always been wacky. I mean, when I was thirteen she threw her Diet Tab on me because I got the wrong kind of toilet paper."

I drove as fast as the blizzard would let me—about 35.

"So, Prague," I said.

"Prague," Jane said. She tipped the bottle to her lips. I clicked on the bright beams, and the headlights cut wider tunnels in the falling snow. We came down a hill and at the bottom—just after a huge fir tree—I found the road. Or what I thought was the

road. I turned the wheel hard, not knowing what to expect, but the tires gripped and we swung onto the slush and snow covered mud road that I hoped led to the lodge.

“There I was sitting on a granite slab in the graveyard,” I started again. “In Prague.” I looked over at Jane, and her eyes reflected the tiny green and white glints from the dashboard.

“We were smoking and laughing,” I said. “and I laughed so hard sitting on that grave that I rolled off the slab. There were other people there—we were having a good time.” I glanced in the rear view for Mrs. Lumpt. “So, I get off the ground and there’s this old woman watching us, carrying a bunch of flowers upside down the way Czechs do.”

My wife waited a beat, and I wasn’t sure what she’d say next.

“Who was she?” Jane said.

“Who, the old woman?”

I could feel Jane grow suddenly serious. I glanced in the rear view mirror at Mrs. Lumpt.

“The girl on Valencia Street?” Jane said.

“No one,” I said. “Really. No one.”

I stopped at the end of the road. The lodge’s white river stones showed like ice in the head lights. Rocks shaped like huge eggs and small gravestones. Jane didn’t move and she didn’t tell me to move. In the mirror I saw Mrs. Lumpt propped up in her seat belt, asleep.

The car sputtered a couple of times. Jane slid over the seat toward me, which was good, but through the influence of the whiskey I started to sense the truth of our situation. Eel creek was far too cold for trout to bite. There’d be no firewood in a summer lodge. No running water, no blankets, no food. A car without gas. I scooted closer to my wife and gently slipped my hand under her sweater.

“Have we forgotten?” she said. I can feel her warm whiskey breath on my cheek.

“No,” I said

“And the lambs were children?”

I thought about that graveyard in Prague, about the little gravestones. The blood in my palm pumped hard. Then I’m remembering the sonograms of the little baby in Jane’s belly—the tiny, ball-fisted baby. Gone—even with all the machines and drugs. All gone.

The snow was falling harder now, and I looked out. And it seemed to me, just at that moment, that the lodge opened up before us like a white flower.

SON OF GOD

I am a human male. An American citizen. My skin is as pale as the inside of a banana. Once I walked using my knuckles, and all I can remember of my life before Natalie are smells: the wet huddle of chimps in a downpour, the pink, swollen rump of a receptive female. Edgar Tuten found me twelve-years-old and naked in the Republic of Congo, in the Goualougo Triangle region of the *Nouabalé-Ndoki* National Park. Natalie's yam-colored hair lured me that day. I stood picking my nose while Edgar and the guide bound me with nylon cinch-strap. The chimps in my community howled and threw feces and sticks down on the expedition's Jeeps.

"You human," Natalie said to me in the Jeep. I could not speak. I know now I was lost from my parents before I learned to speak. I understood many words and all inflections. I could not speak when I saw the way one corner of Natalie's mouth made an indentation in her cheek, I wanted to be near her. And speak. To be human and to be a whole person.

I made no sound in the three days we bounced down the red, rutted roads to Brazzaville. At the American embassy, Edgar Tuten learned that I was most likely the son of a missionary couple lost years earlier. Last name Lee. I was American, and this seemed to make Edgar happy—he showed all his uneven teeth in amazement. I had lived through an ebola outbreak I could remember nothing about.

Edgar was a primatologist. He'd been collecting data for his dissertation on chimpanzee tool use in termite hunting. Why would he interrupt that to take me back to his home in California? Perhaps he had hopes of locating my family. Perhaps the civil war made it necessary for all of us to leave the Congo. Or, even—and this is what I dearly hoped—Natalie, his daughter, had proposed such a program for me. Whatever the reason, he tranquilized, straight-jacketed, and buckled me on his Brazzaville Air France flight to San Francisco International Airport by way of Charles de Gaulle.

I remember I was briefly shaken awake in panic by the whine of jet turbines as the plane pitched in a storm. Natalie, who looked about my age, put her small hand on my brow. She whispered in my ear, her lips tickling the small hairs. I saw the whites of her eyes flashing in the dark, smelled the fear in her sweat. What a human, I thought. In the storm she was quiet and still, and looked straight ahead—totally unlike a chimp. She did not react to the expressions of those around her. She did not pick or scratch like a chimp. Her high brow and long face was all human, but at same time something about her was chimp. She had a plumpness that made the backs of my arms tingle.

In California, Edgar Tuten took me to the Laguna Honda Hospital & Rehabilitation Center—the only place able to handle a wild-human animal. When I woke terrified from the tranquilizers, I shredded the blankets and sheets, and yanked up carpet to reveal nail-studded plywood. Sounds, loud sounds that made my ears feel heavy, were everywhere. They came through the walls. Every automobile, generator, and diesel truck worked into the city's droning growl. The sound of electricity ringing in my ears terrified me. I clawed down the blinds and tried to shove out the glass. Fingernail divots in the window's painted frame showed me I was not the first person to try this. My howling was not even the loudest. All around me I heard terrifying and unmistakable cries of pain.

After three days I grew calm enough so that Natalie Tuten visited me. I was lashed to my bed with a network of sweat-buffed leather straps with large brass buckles. I

could move only enough to smear my own excrement along my thighs and watch the leaves on the trees knocking into each other.

Natalie appeared. She brought a portable stereo. “Music,” she said, “hello.” She pressed *Play* and a strange and confusing sound rattled in my ears. I listened hard and picked out the many little sounds that made the big sound. I now know the *National Anthem* from school, but that day it sounded strange and big to me.

I remember that Natalie looked very excited by the anthem. Her eyes moistened at the sides, and I wanted to be as excited as her wide-eyed display. I understood that this song was in some way part of her, like the old mahogany tree was to my chimp group. I wanted to have a song that did that. I wanted to understand.

She left me a sticky *National Geographic* magazine. Pictures of Africa. I felt like a gray parrot hovering above the herds of zebra or surprising a lioness stretched under a fat baobab tree. Pictures of mating lions made my palms wet. When my restraints were loosened, I leaned so close my nose grease smudged the pages slick.

The pictures reminded me of a certain rainstorm in the Congo. The other chimps laughed when the jojoba nuts fell on our heads in the forest. Later, I squatted on the lower branch of the mahogany tree with a young chimpanzee with six toes on one foot. I could smell the tree’s chewed bark and sourplum rinds thrown away to rot around its base. This young, six-toed chimpanzee and I found a hole full of orange termites we sucked in mouthfuls with a waterberry twig until our lips stained blue. When his mouth was full, my six-toed friend spat the termites on me. I did the same until the sun fell in the sky like a ripe custard apple.

After a while I became calm enough to leave Laguna Honda Hospital & Rehabilitation Center. Edgar Tuten allowed me to live with him. This was very good for me, because Natalie also lived in the house.

I lived in Edgar Tuten’s attic. I had a bed and a stack of old *National Geographic* magazines that smelled like the masking tape he used to cover the sexual organs in the pictures. But no Natalie, who seemed never to be at home. Out the window stood the far off trees of the Berkeley Zoo as small as Yim Yim seeds.

I had nightmares every night, or I dreamed myself home in the mahogany tree eating orange termites. In the morning I woke to the sound of lions roaring in the zoo.

One Monday Edgar Tuten took me to school, and I saw Natalie. She was with the other juveniles standing around under the oak tree in the playground, eating from their bagged lunches. Edgar left me with her when he went into the school. The juvenile males and females gathered around to smell me. Smell one another. To me, the females’ nipples smelled like night-blooming orchids. I didn’t feel fear of the humans around me—the meeting was exactly like my chimp group greeting a newborn. They stared as they touched my shoulder and back. The males pushed up their shoulders to show how worthy of respect they were—more worthy than a newcomer who couldn’t speak. One male stood taller than the rest. He pushed through the crowd, grabbed my hand, and squeezed hard. “Me, Simon.” He pointed at my forehead. “You, Monkey-boy.”

In my chimpanzee community, this would have been my cue to scream and cuff at his eyes and nose, to defecate freely. Then the bystanders would comfort the loser—Simon of course—with embraces and caresses. An attractive female would sit between us and we would both pick fleas off her. At some point she would move, and we would find ourselves grooming each other. Simon and I would kiss, the chimp way of saying, *I could be biting you but I am not*. Or, if we were older males, we might gently grasp one

another's testicles. The message would be clear: *Let us all calm down and no one will get hurt.*

But that did not happen. Simon would not release my hand even though he saw I was not interested in challenging his position. Natalie pushed between us and smiled at me.

Then the days turned cold. Rain knocked each leaf off the withered oak under my window. One Saturday morning, I opened my mouth and spoke for the first time. "Edgar?" I said. I wondered what Edgar Tuten would think of me with words coming out of my mouth. "Edgar!" I shouted. I banged on the wall. "Edgar, come here. I want you." He came running, showing his uneven teeth in confusion.

Soon, a wind and frozen rain blew the oak down to the ground. I asked my first question. "Hello Edgar, how are you?" I said carefully, like choosing my footing in mud. Forming the words was akin to emptying myself in the toilet after my favorite meal of raw hamburger and Cheetos.

I was attending school, though for a long time I had no idea what I was doing in the claustrophobic classrooms. Most of my time was spent in the basement with a speech pathologist whose name I could not pronounce. I also had special classes with people who wore bicycle helmets. But I did get to take the class called Civics with Natalie. Edgar wanted me to learn more about my land, but I spent all my time staring at the world map on the wall, and the fat-topped continent someone had said was Africa.

One rainy day after Civics class I went outside and stood under a tree. I had not realized I was waiting for Natalie until she stepped out through the door. This time she was alone, and she came over to me.

"Isn't it great living in America?" she said. Her breasts were like two ripe yim yim fruits. They made my head buzz with mud bees. "It's crazy when you hear how other people live," said Natalie, "It's like paradise here."

No, I remember thinking. Paradise is where the Yim Yim fruit grow.

A bell in the school rang and students started running so they were not late for class. Simon stepped into the doorway. He also took Civics. His eyes looked about until he saw us under the tree, and I saw his brow pull down over his eyes like a baboon. "Monkey-boy!" he yelled, pointing at Natalie. "Mine," he said. Natalie must have heard him, but she gave no sign. "See you at home tonight," she said, and walked back toward Simon.

And now I sit on my bed in the attic and watch the sun fall behind the treetops. When Natalie arrives, I will show her the star shapes in the sky: The Great Ant Hill, The High Tree, The Fat Custard Fruit.

I hear a tap at my door and I say, actually say, "Natalie?"

She steps into my room holding a leather-bound portfolio to her chest. I feel good about saying her name, so I say it again. It sounds correct coming out of my mouth. But it means more than it sounds, *I am very glad to see you Natalie, gladder than a normal person.* She displays her straight white teeth and opens the portfolio covered with buffed leather that smells like the straps at the Laguna Honda hospital.

"You want to be human again, don't you?" She says. Her voice makes the blood run out of my legs. My heart stops beating for a moment. I want to tell her that I love her. That I am a human male.

"Ape," I say, pushing the air out of my mouth. "No." My tongue feels as thick as mud, but I am trying to say, *I am human and want to be something to you, Natalie.*

“Clean,” I say tapping my forehead. *I am not a dirty ape, but a thinking human being.* She smiles at me and looks down at the portfolio in her lap.

“The Declaration of Independence,” she said. She pats the portfolio twice.

“Good,” I grunt, meaning *I love you. I will be good with you and love you always. Love only you. We will sing together and eat the fruits of the jungle.*

“Can I?” She holds up the portfolio and licks her lips.

“Good,” I say—meaning, *I am a good person. Ready to give the love you must want in life.* “Good,” I point at her.

I think she understands. I repeat what I’ve said so she will look into my eyes,

“Good, good,” I repeat.

“Our country *is* good, isn’t it?” she says, and takes my hand.

“Natalie love,” I say. “Boy love.” I think anyone can understand that I mean *I love you, Natalie.*

But she smiles a little smile. “I love America too,” she says. “All men are created equal and all that—”

For a moment I think she has understood me the whole time, and is trying to not understand how I feel inside. I hear footsteps on the steps and see Edgar Tuten creak open the attic door. Natalie runs her finger down the page, then back up to the top. She squeezes my hand before letting go.

“Good. Ape. Clean. Boy. Love,” I say.

She sees Edgar in the doorway and automatically places the smaller book on top of the Declaration of Independence. “And this,” she says, stroking the small book, “this is the Bible.” I reach out and touch her wrist. For one heart flutter, before she shows her even teeth, I see her upper lip curl at my touch. But she opens the book and reads seemingly at random, but I can tell it isn’t random, “Then the Children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, they served the *Baals* and the *Ashtoreths*, the gods of Syria, the gods of lesser men...” Natalie reads. I listen to her rhythm speaking, like water through reeds. I hear my own voice grunt like a barking hyena’s. As she reads, I began to see myself the way the American Embassy must have, or the doctors at the Laguna Honda Hospital. Bad ape. Lesser man.

Natalie closes the book and stands without glancing at me. She smiles at Edgar Tuten standing in the doorway. “He’s a good boy, isn’t he?”

“Yes, yes, my dear,” Edgar Tuten says, smiling. In the next instant he looks at me like I might bite him. “We take the myrrh with the spice.”

Natalie smiles at Edgar Tuten as they walk out my door. I hear her thick-soled shoes on the attic steps. From downstairs I hear the television program Edgar had been watching, laughing followed by a monkey screech, and more laughing. I listen to the foot steps at the bottom of the stairs and the television, and understanding comes into my head like a mosquito flying in my ear hole. I can feel my own heart beat so fast it might explode. There was no way I can ever make Natalie see me the way I want to be seen. She nests in a bed of silkworm blankets at night, smells like guava juice tastes. I live alone in the attic. I can’t talk.

I open the attic window and crawl onto the ledge. Over the rooftops like square tree canopies I see the beginning of the Berkeley Zoo.

I am not stupid like a baboon. I stand with my toes on the edge of the sill until I can hear the far-off roar of the caged zoo lion. I know that to step off the edge of the sill will mean the end of me. I also know this: when I step off this ledge I will fly like a gray parrot over the zoo and back over the trees and the ocean to Africa. I take a step, and I

imagine I will go back home. The wind howls around my ears and the ground jumps at me. And I do.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brook Steingass was born in Hanover, New Hampshire on Halloween, 1970. He was raised in Madison, Wisconsin, and attended The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington—where he received a Bachelor of Science with specialization in botany. He lives with his wife, Linda, and their two children, Oak and June.