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Garbage and Marble

Emily Rae

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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GARBAGE AND MARBLE

A Thesis Presented

by

EMILY RAE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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MAY 2010

ENGLISH

CREATIVE WRITING

GARBAGE AND MARBLE

A Thesis Presented

by

EMILY RAE

Approved as to style and content by:

Noy Holland, Chair

Chris Bachelder, Member

Sabina Murray, Member

Sabina Murray, Director
M.F.A. Program in English

Joseph Bartolomeo, Chair
Department of English

DEDICATION

Thank you to my parents, Maryellen Bric Rae and Thomas Rae, and Jonathan Black.

ABSTRACT

GARBAGE AND MARBLE

MAY 2010

EMILY RAE, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Noy Holland

I'm interested in writing stories that make me as author disappear. A little. I'd like for my stories to unravel themselves while I sit just barely visible, maybe on a porch across the street.

I'm also interested in playing with unusual phrases and syntax to achieve authentic voice in my stories. This sets up a conflict because while I want to develop small, fairly simple stories, I also value some language trickery, which might come off as authorial. I want nuanced voices that don't feel editorialized. I want the stories to be authentic in an off-putting way. My biggest challenge has been monkeying with language in ways I find interesting while still maintaining a cool distance. It feels like training a service dog without getting sentimental.

I like these problems though. I like the tiptoe-ing.

My goal is to be able to drop readers in the middle of a situation: childhood, a factory, the grieving process, and carry them through it, without them knowing I'm there, without having to rely on explanations of characters' thoughts, their motives.

I am drawn to stories with little exposition. As a reader, I like making my discoveries through characters, how they navigate the world. I like to read stories that are revelatory in an interesting way – without having to be told outright how a life got so raw, or why lying can be

the greatest relief, or how come it's heartbreaking to see up close how much makeup a woman wears.

I've heard this advice over the years: "Write what you know." I've tried this with dull results. I've decided that I disagree. I'm working to write more stories about lives, jobs, concepts, illnesses, joys and sadnesses that I *don't* know. I like trying on the other: a housewife, a man, a teen, a liar, someone forgotten. By writing what I don't know, I want to stir up the reader, deliver something familiar yet jarring.

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THERE IS NOWHERE TO REST YOUR BACKBONE

I had a letter. To mail a letter, you have to walk from my apartment to the end of the street where the post office is. You do this if you have an envelope which I did. So on went my boots. Nothing to it.

At the post office was the whole town. All 28,978 of us were there. We are 22 people short of being 29,000 strong I said to myself.. I counted fast. It was just heads, heads, heads. The post office is a zoo today I said to a troop of boy scouts. They looked around for their leader.

I said this place is a zoo to the veteran in a wheelchair I had seen in the newspaper that month. He was writing a book on courage I knew.

It really is he said.

I smiled at him too hard. My best guess is that the whole town did.

There was a woman in navy holding two plastic bags of cookies, limping, yelling cookies cookies all these free cookies people. Gotta get rid of 'em. Some of us reached in for a gingersnap. Not me.

Imagine the viruses in there I said to the boy scouts. I wanted to swat the mushy tops of their hands. Viruses I said.

I had a sore back from digging my pet mouse's grave. Every kind of stand I tried that day gave a pinch. The boy scouts stood like it didn't hurt them an iota. One sneaked a gingersnap by me, got the starts of a cold or a staph infection. I hunched, erected myself. My back was a lit match. I heard the gingersnaps. Krrrrrrrr, krrrrrrrr. What a real zoo this is I

thought. I wanted to lean. I was jealous of the ones in wheelchairs, the babies, the seeing-eye dogs. My back was too hot, too full of my blood. There is nowhere to rest your backbone at the post office.

At the post office that day people were not bothered by the long lines. No. People got itchy about having to say hello how are you to all those other people. People got nervous they forgot your maiden name, why your husband moved to Albuquerque. Adults with braces were not smiling at children.

I for instance didn't know what to say to the nun who taught me to play piano last year when I was happy. What if she asks about my music, what if she already knows I'm in a band called Martyr Sauce I thought. What's so wrong with this year I asked.

The day before the post office I took a nap in my car. It was the best place to listen to the rain, the best place to sleep I speculated. I wanted to see if I was right. I was right. Besides the dream I had I was right. I dreamt about a white horse made black by mosquitoes.

There was a knock that woke me up from that car nap. A boy knocked on my window.

Hey lady he said.

I woke up. I looked at him. I didn't have a thing to say. I said what.

He said okay well that's good. I thought you were dead.

Things like that you just have to laugh.

Before I left for the post office, my friend Missy called. She had to tell me about this old fuck's parking spot.

I said hi Missy how're tricks?

You won't believe how long I have been waiting for this old fuck's parking spot Missy said.

I said oh no how long? I did my softest voice. I did my nicest little whisper.

A day and a half I've been waiting Missy said.

Maybe the old fuck died I said.

Post offices are of course not large enough for 28,978 people. A line of people went outside, around the corner, into our town park. I wished to be at the beginning of the line. At the beginning of the line was sunshine, a bench, an ice cream truck. At the front was coughs, an old man who'd gotten a pant leg stuck in his black sock, fluorescent lights zapping off my beautiful tan. You can't leave when you're that close to the finish. Would just be pitiful to give up.

At the post office I saw a teacher I had one time. He made diagonal red lines through every page of my *Moby Dick* essay. His pen ripped through the last page, my conclusion.

He wrote you are wordy and too conversational in this book report.

You spelled too wrong I said. I said it to him after class. You spelled too wrong in your remarks.

He said simply an oversight. He said rewrite it please.

I took the F. I'll always be wordy dickwad I said.

The post office stayed open late that day for all of us. There was a barbecue for its employees in our town park after they closed it down. The next day was declared a state holiday. All the employees could stay in bed. They could watch television, have sex with each other. They deserved it we said. We toasted them with champagne, with sparkling cider in sippie cups. The high school cafeteria donated yogurt parfaits. We slurped, we gulped. We had our stamps, our letters were mailed, our p.o. boxes emptied. We went home to sleep, brains tick tocking slower on booze. We were people of stamina that day, and many others.

MADAME LANDLORD

There's a knock on the door: Heat's off, onionhead!

I let my sister in and she's narrating letters to the landlord:

Dear Madame Landlord,

Our hands got colder, then cold. We heard you swum to Chicago, did they give you a bag of air when you got there? Respond to this soon or we'll hammer these surfaces. Four fists one forehead.

Well actually maybe we should start with small talk, what if she's the unkind kind? she asked when I read it back to her.

Okay write this down, she said.

I write everything she says, I keep it all in a drawer. I call my mom, the landlord, on my way to work, I let her know the hot water heater broke. I read her some of our better stuff:

Dear Madame Landlord,

How is it all? Wish you were nearer. Don't you think of how we all, *all of us*, have won our bones? Bones! A hundred percent fifty-fifty, we're climbing over phone books, standing up on switchboards, mapping avenues to mailboxes and we've *earned* it.

How is she, Madame Landlord always wants to know.

Still great, I say.

RE-GENERATION

My problem began on Labor Day when I was coerced into crushing a beer can on my forehead. We host a Labor Day party each year, all the neighbors from the dead end come, our four boys and their wives come, we order some of that expensive sweet Italian sausage from the Italian butcher. After many bottles of beer, guests don't remember our ashtrays, they flick their filters in our flower beds - that kind of get together. You can act this way if the hosts run a landscaping company, apparently. It's as if they think we have a grounds crew on call, I swear.

My boys were intoxicated and asked me to crush a can on my forehead, just to try it. Show everyone how strong those big hands are, ma, they said. I'd had several of Mr Fitz's Long Island Iced Teas and I was overwhelmed by the attention. Am usually bustling around re-filling mustards at this party, hardly ever have I been stopped, entreated for entertainment. My son Brian crushed a can on his head to demonstrate and offered me one. My fingers wrapped around its length and I mashed the thing quite easily in my hand as I connected with my face. Our guests were thrilled so I did several more. Didn't even leave a pink ring on my forehead, they said, that's how good I was. You can only do that with mitts the size of yours, ma, they said.

Soon after this, my enthusiasm for all things domestic, all things marital sort of waned. Mr Fitz always seemed in the way. I got overly frustrated when my sleeve snagged the back of a chair in the dining room. And I lost interest in all types of cooking, more so baking.

I kept stacking our bills in hidden places, sure I'd remember to pay them once American Idol was over. But I kept forgetting, I kept hiding them in sneakier places, until our house got piecemeal shut down around us. Lights were out, cable turned to snow and the Poland Spring jugs stopped arriving. When Mr Fitz scolded me, I wised up and logged into my online banking accounts. I paid everything and apologized. I assumed it was a hormones-thing.

But when my husband and sons reminisced about my can crushing, calling me Mrs Mittz, I stopped going to church. I offered my role as Eucharistic Minister to my understudy, Mrs Rinella. She was so thankful, she extended her gratitude with a week of homemade pizzas. She'd bring them over each night, hot and bubbling, and take our request for the next night. I was so jazzed that I didn't have to cook, I considered offering to pay Mrs Rinella for this service indefinitely.

*

I remember in grade one, I was told to trace my hand, color the tracing in like a turkey, and give it as a gift to my mother and father. This made no sense. I recall looking at my hand, trying to make any connection to a turkey. Then I noticed that my fingers grew shoots of black hair. I saw that the skin between my fingers stretched halfway to the knuckles. I was webbed. My fingernails, bitten down to the half-moon of each nail were rimed with dried blood. I looked around at other hands, all fat and petite. The backs of my hands weren't pudgy, they were veiny. When I made fists I saw the blood pump. These looked nothing like turkeys, and they were enormous. I cried.

When I got home from school that day, I cried again telling my older brother how my huge hands looked nothing like turkeys and he said, well at least *you* can palm a goddamn basketball, how do you think *I* feel. It was something he'd been working on for months.

*

Mr Fitz felt that getting a job might sharpen my faculties. I never understood what he meant by my faculties. All the times he'd catch me crying, he'd shudder and yell, "Woop! Someone's faculties aren't intact," then sidestep out of the room.

Mr Fitz got me this job sitting in a cubicle congratulating pregnant women on their imminent offspring. I asked how swollen their feet were, agreed that dressing up was an absolute *bear*. I asked had they picked names, were they registered at Bun in the Oven™? I explained if they banked blood from their umbilical cords with our company, they'd have their own personal stash of stem cells if someday Aiyinsleighe or Prometheus were to get a life-threatening illness. We were *the best* storers of stem cells, I promised.

But I was a lousy saleslady. I hadn't gotten a family to enroll in the first three and a half weeks on the job. Until I traded my Los Angeles moms with an even newer co-worker for Texas moms, on a hunch. The Texas women were the nicest of all the moms was my hunch. I was right. I got an enrollment and was so jazzed I swigged a little rum on the drive home.

*

The day I married Mr Fitz, I got my hair done at the beauty parlor near my mother and father's house. My mother had died by then so it was just me at the parlor, waiting for my father to come back and pick me up. In those days, we didn't do bridesmaids, maids of honor.

I had two thick plaits bumping against my back, a white ribbon woven through each. My eyebrows looked heavy and my chin was greasy with pregnancy spots but my cheeks flushed well. I didn't even mind the woman fussing over me until she plucked my hands from under my thighs. She had a goldeny pink polish set out on the vanity. My hands, gaunt and sallow, draped over hers. She furrowed her nose at my scabby fingernails, and said, oh sorry my dear but there really just isn't enough here for me to polish. But aren't they terrifically large! And she fetched the other girls to have a look. I went palm-to-palm with the hairdressers, eclipsing all their hands with ease. You should play basketball, I was reminded.

*

The first Texas enrollment kickstarted me. I learned that my words didn't matter – it was my noises. I gasped, I tsk-ed, I groaned. I whispered and I effervesced. They loved it. They called weeks later to chat while the newborns napped. I learned how a horoscope-curious mom's tone changed when talk of birthdays arose. I memorized facts about each zodiac sign. You were safe saying a kid would be “stubborn, intelligent, and kind.” It felt like I had women friends.

And then I made women friends. The gals at work invited me to a hotel bar to drink wine on a Tuesday night. I called Mr Fitz and told him about a secret pizza from Mrs Rinella I

had stashed in the freezer, explained it cooks best if you preheat the oven *and* cookie sheet to 425°. It killed me that I wouldn't get to try a slice. Leave that man alone in front of the television with a pizza and he doesn't remember to stop eating.

I had been getting a little saucier with Mr Fitz. I would get home from work with no words left in me, all the pretend joy drained. That lilt I typically offered had been used up on phone calls to women in Texas. He'd tell me about a moron landscaper and I'd just look at him. I had run out of something.

I handed the bills job over to him. I'd managed our money for years, the mortgage payments, the electricity, the gas, the cable, the Visa, the Mastercard, the Macy's card, the car insurance, the boat insurance, the water jugs, the cell phones. I showed him the online banking, I pointed at the file cabinet of receipts. Godspeed, I told him one night, I'm going to sleep. But I've had an exhausting day, he told me. So they'll be late, I said. This is your goddamn job, I don't know where to start, he said. You'll figure it out, plus I won't be around to do this forever, I said, and don't forget to mow the lawn this week.

That Tuesday night I went out with the work girls was fantastic. We talked about our Chinese boss, how we thought he was a communist, we berated our prissy clients and accused the new gal of dating Sergio from the mail room. I had five glasses of wine and a chop-chop salad. They got crass, I sipped and trilled. Maureen from Accounts told us she never got good head anymore. Ruby, who I now know is a lesbian, said she'd be willing to "pinch hit." Our bill came and the manager put it all on her expense account, said that's what communism is

about anyhow, right, that was your rice ration for the week. We were uproarious. I even smoked a few cigarettes with them on our walk to the cars.

The pizza was of course gone when I got home. I balled up the tinfoil in the cookie sheet and threw it at the cat.

I slept in fits that night on account of all the pinot gris. Every position exacerbated my headache and every adjustment twisted my nightgown. Mr Fitz snored, mentioned something about how vines were growing all over him. I elbowed him to stop the nonsense talk.

I dreamt I was a seahorse. I did all my work pulling a chariot behind me, full of my belongings. I ran into old friends, and having no hands to wave with, we talked. We talked about the big stuff, our children with drinking problems, who from high school was on dialysis, a niece in rehab. We made jokes too, we laughed at the one about the penguin. Instead of shaking and waving cumbersome hands at each other, we used words. I was happy.

Mr Fitz's rider mower woke me up. I dug my fingers into my forehead to relieve the pressure. Groaning helped. I reached for the glass of water I had set out the night before and whiffed. It slid from the bedside table and shattered against the claw-footed base. I made fists and released, trying to shake the morning weakness from my hands.

In the kitchen, I poured myself another glass and guzzled it, water rushing over my face, down my neck. I was at the sink, looking out at Mr Fitz doing his perfect lines on the John Deere. He was sweating. He had his noise-cancelling headphones on. A dark spot revealed

the sweat pooling in his navel. I watched him mow with my palms pressed over my ears. I remembered the bills and looked at the counter where they lay, envelopes still sealed.

Out in the yard, I waved my hands over my head. I tried getting Mr Fitz's attention this way, I needed him to turn off the rider mower and come talk to me. I made a visor with my hand to protect my eyes. The sun made my hangover shake. I waved more but he didn't see so I walked across the lawn to get closer.

I didn't see the knee-high wire fence staked down by Mr Fitz. It was there to contain a newly planted tomato patch. I tripped over it as he rounded a corner and began his next line of grass. I splayed out in front of him and my hands went under the mower.

The thing about going into shock wasn't as true as I thought it'd be. I remember the whole scene following, what my wrists looked like. It was a messy cut. I don't think Mr Fitz nor I could believe it. I held the stumps between us, bone mixed with blood and fluid. The torn skin glittered.

I was in and out of consciousness for a bit, and that's when the pain started. I cried when I came to because of pain. I cried when I came to each following time because of confusion, because of morphine. They kept my hands on ice at first but re-attachment wasn't an option - I'd lost too much blood. I imagined my hands getting tossed into the incinerator in the hospital's basement. I felt good about it.

Mr Fitz claimed I threw myself into his path as he mowed the lawn. He said I hadn't been myself lately and was acting erratic. He talked about the drinking problem I had because he found airplane bottles of rum in the car. He said I probably had a mood disorder my whole life, it had just gone untreated. He said he didn't feel safe with me and I shouldn't feel safe with me, either. He did his homework.

Mr Fitz arranged a 60-day psychiatric evaluation slash rehabilitation therapy getaway package for me. He found this quaint women's center off the highway, next to a slaughtering factory. It's voluntary, of course. I have women friends here, we've watched more movies in our first two weeks than I've seen my whole life. *Goodfellas* being my favorite. I pick my meals from a menu and don't need to give any instructions on how they should set the oven. I got my first pedicure this morning. I picked a warm, pink polish.

/all typing done by Lillian Keefe, R.N., B.S.N.

THE ONE THING

I work at Johnnie's Foodmaster, the only carpeted supermarket. I do the register. My bagger Doreen lives by the Voc-Tech and has two boys. We light up the *12 Items or Fewer* sign toward the end of our shifts and we show teeth, we get nice. We ask do you want your gum out of the bag? We complain for your benefit but will also smile our sore feet away if you look embarrassed. Doreen and I always like festive dangly earrings.

I counsel Doreen on her adult acne, inventing some year, oh you know way back, I worked as an aesthetician. I tell her which season her complexion is.

A summer, I fumble.

Today I back into the banana rack and apologize, thinking it's Doreen. She laughs loud, can't wait to tell her boys.

By the end of today I'll be fired, and Doreen will bring me a box of teabags and a mini-succulent before I'm escorted outside.

"You'll find something else, doll," She'll say. I'll sniff through my teabags and nod.

I went down Harris's hardware store this morning for a Phillips™ head in anticipation of my boyfriend ending it with me. I realized I'll have the screwed-in air conditioner to remove and take with. I also had to see Harris's gray kitten zagging shelf-to-shelf and the bushed dog that looks dead before I get the heave-ho.

The dog's frame blockaded the sandpaper aisle and he didn't lift his head when I nudged him with my foot.

"He is so tired most of the time, but occasionally will jump up and then just yip like crazy," the new shift woman told me.

"I'd like to see that." We each gave him a soft poke.

"And at who knows what he's yipping," she said.

Her nametag read MaryAnne and she seemed like a mom. She moved like her body had once or several times created something better. She watched me feeling around the sandpaper section from the mild scruffs to the 20-grits.

"Whatever you're doing, babe, just go middle of the road." She picked one from the middle of the road and gave it to me.

"Seems like good advice." I took the sandpaper. I kicked the dog in his shoulder after she dispelled. I put my middle of the road sandpaper back and found the small tools aisle, the hammers, the screwdrivers.

My boyfriend will kick me out because I lie more than I tell the truth. I'll say that it's open to debate and he'll stare. I'll explain that it's easier my way anyway, that lying is more fun, and he can lie to me sometimes if he has the creative aptitude. He thinks honesty is a best policy and then how will I argue without telling the truth? So I'll go with my magazines, a lamp, my calendars, several almost empty tampon cartons. I'll tell him I wish I'd never met him and that he actually *didn't* bring me to my sexual peak. I'll tell him I can carry the air conditioner, I'll say you're going to fail your CPR exam, I'll tell him I never want him to call me.

Sue Greenberg a woman less pretty than me will answer my ad. She and I will rent a bungalow across from a Ukrainian nail salon. The floors will be slopey and the air will have that gluey potato thing. But we'll keep finding the best left-behind trinkets in the walk-in closets and cedar-paneled drawers.

This is what I'll tell Sue Greenberg when we move in: "Beware of Indian food for the next two months."

I'll point at her middle. It could happen down in those soft guts. Her eyes will get big and she'll cover a spool of sweated abdomen. I'll look away, like there is something else I need to assess. The oven's sticky analog clock, a loose drawer knob. I'll adjust a left-behind **He Cleans Fish - Why Not the House!** magnet on the fridge. She'll go to her bedroom to unpack and I'll put away my holiday-themed trivets.

I have never lived with another woman except for when I lived with my mom. I am hoping for a lot of dinner parties where we drink several red or white wines, slip into our slipper-socks, trade sassy penis jokes.

I'll help Sue get ready for dates, the way I've seen the women prepare on reality TV shows where a millionaire man chooses *the one* based on her bubblyness and her very real desire to start a family. You don't want to look dowdy, no man likes a mother hen, and not too much tit either, they'll just be after the one thing. Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free. I'll warn Sue about men. She'll nod and do what I say, because she is a virgin and chubby.

Some night I'll get Sue prepped in an A-line skirt with buttons, a navy boatneck blouse, a chipped barrette she likes to use for luck. We'll wait for the honk.

"Do I look okay?" Sue will ask me.

"To die for. What was his name again?"

"T.J., short for something."

"*Last* name."

"Williams."

"Miss-Iz-Sue-Wil-Yums!" I'll clap out the five syllables.

She'll thump her feet and I'll clack wine against her Lemon Crystal Light. We'll use left-behinds - Speedy Gonzalez jelly jars.

"Gotta keep your wits about you," I'll say.

The nail artists across the street from our row house will probably leave banana peels and cigarette butts all over their parking lot. I'll picture a brown vending machine that sells just Chiquitas and Newport Lights. These Ukrainian nail techs will stand at the dumpster always looking to their feet, the young ones complaining about diets, the old ones' death. All winging peels.

When I get home late some night, they'll look over at me as they toss nail clippings in the trash. They'll watch me, car keys ringling, heels tapping and I'll hear their hushed Russian consonants, their laughs. I'll tell Sue about it and she'll say only low lifes wouldn't even attempt to learn the home language.

I see myself gravely telling the nail tech teens how I remain a size two with room, their Moms how I get discounts on prayer cards. We'll all get blushed from vodka and we'll make jokes about the owner's lech husband.

I'll tell Sue how my first best friend was also named Suzanne. I never called *her* Sue though - I didn't know Suzanne long enough to call her Sue. My mom took me and Suzanne bowling in honor of how we learned the letter B that day in kindergarten and when Suzanne wound up to roll her first ball, she let it go. It whizzed back and cracked the plastic bench where my mom sat. I'll tell Sue how I cried, and I cried more when the Sprite burned my nose. You just can't trust a girl like that, I told my mom when she tried planning a zoo thing.

If Sue Greenberg stays out too late with T.J. Williams, I'll be a red wine and slipper socks party-of-one. No penis jokes. All I do all night is look at my split ends under the lamp and gray out my front teeth with shirazzes. Sue will get home from her date with pink ears and pina colada dribbles on her A-line skirt.

"Looks like something else," I'll want to say. I'll want to hug her, tell her she is doomed. Throw out the control top nylons, Sue. Fuck it.

"So! How was the *outing*?" I'll sit up and pummel the cushion I've flattened. I'll be all for hearing.

T.J. Williams took her to a calypso band; they ate beef skewers and sucked frozen watermelon until their foreheads hurt. He was married one time, no kids though thank god, rough hands but not like, hairy, and his jaw popped when he chewed which was *precious*. She'll

talk about the fact that he could dance, how he asked when her birthday was and then *remembered* it hours later, and other highlights. Sue will talk until I am too drunk and she will rub my feet with oil in exchange for my being such an incredible help.

I won't wake in time to see Sue off to work. There will be a shrill note on the table about it. I'll shower with her cellulite soaps and watch *The Today Show* with a bowl of carrots, thinking of what things to do. My nose will be cold from a draft so I'll unscrew my air conditioner from the window finally once the Florence Henderson interview is over. The thing about that is not bashing a foot or finger so I'll take my time.

After a few squat thrusts and lunges, I'll open the window, I'll pull the air conditioner against my hip so it can't tumble out. I'll pinch out four tube socks from where I stuffed them into gaps. I'll toss them behind me.

Some nail techs will be watching and the tiny one will walk over to help. I'll start heaving it quick, up and in, pounding it slow as I can to the floor. She'll watch from the ferns below. A fast headache will shoot to my forehead and I'll think about frozen melon, how nimble I am for not crushing my finger or foot.

"Looks heavy!" She'll yell in my window.

"It wasn't!" I'll slam the window so she can't see me huffing, puffing.

HOW TO TALK TO MOTHERS

I kidnapped the last good-looking bagger and sat her down between the whole peeled tomatoes and chicken noodle soup to tell her how sore my feet were. She made a run for it.

I hired a car. The driver told me just how fat is her boyfriend, all he eats is italian subs, you wouldn't believe! I didn't listen I pictured ants marching up between neck moles. I never got to complain about my eyebrows or my paycheck or my hangnail. Hurry this shit up, I said.

I interrupted at Talbot's and Curves, I really looked at those earnest types, asked why they bother. I made them hold still and they watched my mouth go. I got an A twice and the pills do help but I lost my cat, I said. My room is vacuumed and smells like sidewalk, oh and I gave up smoking. Take me to a luncheon, tell me how I got freckles and that I'll never hydroplane.

They explained their credit card terms, they offered me a student discount on Pilates. I excused myself to the powder room.

PRZYBYLSKI'S TRAJECTORY

Year 8.

I got a hamster for Christmas and named her Thunder. I thought she was great, I sat and watched her do nothing, she watched me do nothing. Then she bit til her mouth slot stained red. I kept holding her. I thought I could tame her.

My dad came home in-his-cups one night and I remembered I had left Thunder out in the living room in her roly ball. I was supposed to have put her in her cage for bedtime but forgot because I was too sleepy. My dad and friends saw the hamster roly ball next to the couch. They thought it was a riot to kick her back and forth like soccer and I heard her cracking from boots to baseboards.

I woke up congested from holding the feather pillow over my wet face and went to the kitchen to see if I dreamed it. Thunder was stilled in her roly ball. From the couch, my dad said she'd probably had a seizure in the night. He said maybe we could get a guinea pig for my birthday, call it Lightning, and that hopefully my bad luck with pets wouldn't go on. I was relieved he forgot about this when June rolled around.

Year 12.

When we were living in Amarillo, I played out back of our apartment complex after school. There were some few other kids in the building but they'd get called in for dinner at five sharp nightly. They were from Chihuahua and were always good at keeping a strict

schedule. Very un-Mexican, my dad said about them, for lots of reasons, but mostly their timing.

One night, just me out there, I was hanging on a low tree branch, bouncing, seeing if I could snap it clean off. I heard these puny mews when I stopped to catch my breath. I looked up in the tree, wondered if we had the number of the fire department. I let go of the branch and mewed up in the tree. The mews were from behind, they were coming from the storm drain. I lay in the street on my stomach, looked down the drain at a black kitten on its hind legs, needling his claws at the cement wall. We mewed back and forth for a bit and I went inside to rig something up.

I found a done tub of harlequin ice cream and rinsed it. I made a hole in each side and threaded some of my dad's twine through, for a long handle. I knocked on the Vasquez's door because I knew they had a cat - Elvis.

"Jeff-uh-rey!" Mrs Vasquez added a syllable to my name, everytime.

"Hi Mrs Vasquez, sorry if I interrupted supper but I heard a kitten down in the gutter, it was meowing, and I wanted to pull it up with some cat food but we don't"

"I got you, Mister P." One of the Vasquez teenagers scooped me a Dixie cup of crunchy cat food from a huge bag.

The teenager only gave me 23 crunchies in the Dixie cup so I lowered one crunchy at a time until kitten crawled in. I pulled him up the storm drain, put the lid back on the ice cream tub. I brought him in the apartment and named him Michael J. Fox.

My dad was having a good week that day, had gotten a bunch of overtime and he showed me how to make a sloppy joe for the nights he'd be home late. I planned on eating with the Vasquezs those nights, but let him show me anyhow. Then I showed him the ice cream tub, the pulley system I thought of and then, like I was a magician, the sleeping Michael J. Fox. He said he was proud of me, I was like an inventor. I was using my enterprise for once, he said. They were doing free rabies shots at the Amarillo Cat Hospital and we took him in that Saturday morning.

Year 22.

I was in veterinary school for a year and got two Fs. The first was in Clinical Correlates One and the second was in Clinical Correlates One when I retook it. That class eluded me. The dean was unwilling to let me take something else in its place. So I left vet school and Texas for good. I moved to Jersey and got a certificate in Live Animal Handling from the University of Phoenix online and sold my anatomy book to throw a graduation party.

Year 24.

I turned off the apartment at one in the morning. The most important thing is making sure the electricity doesn't keep on. Write yourself a cute note "Remember, you don't have stock in Edison," they told me at orientation. I had written myself several cute notes and skimmed them as I moved through the place, pulling plugs, tapping switches. I turned on Michael J. Fox's automated feeding slash watering system, gave him his meds. I showered tepidly, too slowly, and ate graham crackers. Still sleep crazy and puzzled, I turned off the aquarium heater instead of the aquarium light. All my neon tetras were dead when I got back.

They told me to be at the airport by 2:15 a.m. There were some few more things to go over before I started handling live animal cargo. They'd only made room in the budget for a domestic handler and I was determined to be great so I could move on to the international circuit then spend some time off in France. My hair was looped into a neat low ponytail, my neck beard shorn by request. I had a parking spot, Bose headphones to drown out potential beagles and all my shots were up to date.

When I met Rosa the stewardess, she was doctoring up an iced coffee in the women's locker room. I was in the women's locker room because my eyes were rheumy from a couple yawns and I didn't notice the sign. I didn't encounter any nudity, thank god, I would have been canned, but Rosa was pissed off all the same. She knocked over her coffee and called me a shithead for scaring her.

"Shithead! Aw, this is the last of the milk, too."

"So sorry, I didn't see the women sign," I kept my eyes down in case even she was preparing to change clothes or maybe had unbuttoned a button.

"Wow, that is some name. How do you even *say* that?" She pointed at me, my nametag.

"It's tough, yeah, it's pruh-BILL-ski. Jeff Przybylski."

"That shouldn't take too long to learn... HA!" She leaned back to get the whole laugh out.

"The 'z' is silent. That makes it a little easier." I have explained this silent 'z' more often than I've put on shoes.

“How about this Jeff – how about you offering to go replace this iced coffee?” Her wink was professional.

I wrote down how she took her iced coffee and left to replace it. I said make it two when I ordered. Turns out I got them perfect which made her irritated again, she said it was typical that a man got good attention paid to him at this shithole and she didn't. Rosa was pretty, dark, washed over.

The flight left at 6:20 a.m. that morning. My first animal cargo was a rooster, a ferret, six dogs and two cats. The rooster was a prize winner going to Wisconsin to compete in a fair. It was an Appenzeller Spitzhauben with a mop top and a Dalmatian's coat. The owners told me it was “certainly not a lap chicken.” The cats were tabbies and the dogs were Pembroke Welsh corgis. I joked that the Queen of England must have brought them on the flight, but my manager said no way, that couldn't happen. The ferret was black and tan, whatever ferret kind, I don't know ferret breeds.

I was wound. I buckled in the ten cages and waited sweating for the pressurized air to crank. I was in charge of the first state-of-the-art pets' cabin, there was the front page *USA Today* story, the picture of me walking a Weimaraner up the ramp. I buckled and unbuckled, going through the specific names for groups of birds to calm myself. The engines roared over meows, sighs, whines. Parliament of owls, rafter of turkeys, unkindness of ravens. Peep, a group of chickens was called a peep. I felt better, adequate.

The End of Year 24.

Rosa and I carpoled into work in the mornings because we both lived close to the airport. She was getting nicer, and since I'd pick her up and have her iced coffee waiting for her, I was a necessity. I couldn't believe how much iced coffees were, I spent \$2.26 each morning on them, was outraged. But I liked her, she had guts. She cussed loud, she laughed loud, inhaled my air freshener tree deeply every time she got in the car. Mmmm, mountain berry is so good! she'd say. She wore more makeup than she needed but so does everyone.

Year 25.

After handling sixteen successful flights, I got sick. I was sweating and shaking for two days so I stayed in my bed. My next flight was coming up, to Maryland, so I kept sleeping to restore myself. There would be a seven greyhound puppy cargo on that flight and I loved greyhounds. When on day three, I got a fever of 104.3° and had a seizure through my coffee table, my nosy neighbor Joanne busted in and called me an ambulance to Newark's University Hospital.

End of Year 25.

I woke up in the hospital like it had been a life. All I could smell was scalp, my arms under sheets looked like pipe cleaners. I sucked on dry lips.

There was a TV on the ceiling and I watched a nature show with a man named Bear Grylls who could survive anywhere they dropped him from a helicopter, with just a few tools. His cameraman must have done all this too which was never mentioned, never explained. They

didn't even use his name. I was *outraged*. Made me think of Fred Astaire, this best dancer ever, but what about Ginger Rogers doing all those same steps backwards? Why isn't she the best dancer of all dancers? I asked the nurses and doctors what they thought while they stood around me, writing on paper, tapping each other's papers. Talking to me with big eyes. What about *fucking* Ginger Rogers?? I kept asking.

I watched Bear trap, kill and then warm his hands in a reindeer. One minute it was running past, some minutes later torn open, steaming, its eyes open. Bear's tricks fell short of finding a way to drag 220 pounds around so he had to leave it in the snow and move on. He cursed the injustice of nature. The whole thing made my head smoke. I did a big spit on the floor and let myself back in to sleep.

My favorite nurse came in later to tell me news. Big controversy, she said. She said that the flight from Maryland, with the greyhounds, that didn't have me on it, had a 2-hour layover in Austin. The handlers wheeled the luggage out on the tarmac but didn't know to get the animal cargo too because no one told them, apparently, she said.

The greyhounds' cabin de-pressurized while the plane idled in Austin for two hours and that shipment of puppies sweltered. The one that survived was heard whining by a traffic controller and grabbed just in time. He saved it with a puddle of bottled water and pile of trail mix.

I had just been induced to do a shit in a bedpan and was feeling especially forlorn when Rosa rung me up. The painkillers had really done a number on my regularity, the nurse explained. I wasn't so mad like usual, more forlorn.

I thought through what to say, I hadn't told the story yet: I had a bacteria from some chop suey I got at the food court in Atlanta's airport. Rosa was there too but she got a chicken sandwich and a Sprite. Chop suey, she said, was too acidic. I wish I pretended I agreed and ordered a chicken sandwich.

But Rosa didn't ask the questions that I'd practiced answering. She wanted to talk about whether or not I'd get fired for being gone so long, or fired over the dead greyhounds, maybe just why I'd been gone so long.

"Jeff!"

"Hi Rosa, how's it going?"

"Ugh, terrible. Do you *believe* all this shit?" I could hear her pacing.

"I know, it's sad. I, uh. I don't know, what do you think?" I wasn't clear on what we were talking about.

"Will you get fired for it? For all those dogs?"

"I don't think so, I'm pretty sick and all..."

"Wait, so - you're really sick huh? How is it *going*? Do you have enough sick time for this? It's been weeks!"

"Months. Worst case of food poisoning they've seen, is what they said. Remember when we ate at American Bandstand in Atlanta?"

“Shit. Boy am I glad I got chicken. *Shit*, Jeff. Think you’ll be out soon? What exactly is the thing?” She was making me feel worse. I slapped the lentil soup off my tray.

“Rotten meat made my kidneys get an F, Rosa. They failed. I have to go now.” Oprah was on.

“So sorry, Jeff. I’ll come visit if I can get a ride. Listen, hang *in* there, call me when you’re feeling better.” She smooched the air and hung up.

My doctor arranged a “Practicable Methods for Mitigating the Effects of Immobility” meeting with me a few days after Rosa called. I had been steaming on her more and more, her creamy breath, her yellow fingernail, the joke about drinking Schlitz on the beach. I thought of her thumbing rides to work. I thought of the way she always slammed my car door, the time her orange cigarette berry burned my roof. Being annoyed was the smoothest feeling I’d had these months.

The “Practicable Methods for Mitigating the Effects of Immobility” meeting was brought to my room, to my percocet smog. It was short when you’d think it’d be the longest meeting of your life. Thought this would be a lot longer, I told them. I caught on that my legs wouldn’t walk anymore. My kidneys had shut down when I had the seizure, good thing Joanne found me, more seizures on the way to the hospital, so they put me under into a coma, I went septic tank, I had a little amount of brain damage which was why I kept getting so mad and swatty. I swatted his clipboard away when he got to that part. It was my thing at that point, all the swatting. Felt great on my scorching hands.

They upped my demerol drip and I was gone again, goodbye! I think I said. My hands cooled while I fell to sleep and I was with Michael J. Fox the kitten in the gutter. We pawed at the wet cement together, waiting for an ice cream tub. I was tiny too, a cat but not a cat because I had sneakered feet, toes. The harlequin ice cream tub appeared over our heads and dropped to us. I couldn't see by whom. On our hind legs, we looked in for crunchies, but it was just a match-sized Ginger Rogers, dancing around in circles, yelling, oh what the fuck, they should have just left chumps like us down in the gutter, let us fucking *be!*

She makes good points, I told Michael.

I woke up relieved and punched the pitcher of apple juice.

The next meeting they brought was titled "Reparations" and I had a lawyer standing next to me. He was a fat old bulldog.

There were two other fat bulldogs from "Dick Clark's American Bandstand Grille" where I got my bacteria in Atlanta. They offered their deepest sorries and wanted to settle the score. They had it worked out so I would receive eight-hundred-something-something in a lump, and all my care would be paid for forever. I nodded too and the bulldog on my side had me sign up.

Year 26.

They got me in my wheelchair this month and a volunteer took me to the hospital museum. There were watercolors of ships, posies, street signs. There was a sculpture of Linus Pauling who I thought invented Charlie Brown but apparently did not. She showed me

butterflies pinned to paper in a frame which made me hopping mad, so she took me to the bookstore. It was newly enormous. They had a whole section of just calendars.

I started wheeling around on my own last week and went back to the bookstore. I found books about Ginger Rogers, about how you train a puppy and I made a small dent in my reward.

HOW TO LOOK

My dress was gray with nineteen orchids and no sleeves. I chose it close to the mirror, shoulders peaked, arms hanging limp like tinsel. I sat on an upholstered bench with my ankles crossed, waiting for my mom's okay. She said yes it was absolutely appropriate and picked a gown in Morton Salt blue with a sequin jacket. The damp salesman pinned an American flag to her lapel and my mother smiled. I asked for one too and took it off when she turned her back.

After Nordstrom's, I insisted we go to Cinnabon. It was on the way out and we should totally treat ourselves, I said. My mom bought me a bun and we sat at a small table facing each other. She looked at the Nutrition Facts while I chewed but she didn't tell me about bleached flour or partially hydrogenated soybean oil. When she caught wind of her reflection behind me, she swivelled her chair to my side. I finished the bun, our shoulders grazing, those dresses crinkling in a bag squeezed between my mom's knees.

At the wake, I stood next to her in the receiving line. I offered a hot hand to be squeezed. I allowed people to kiss me on the face, I guessed who could smell my armpits. At last my Mom hissed *go freshen up* so I found the bathroom and dusted clouds of baby powder under my arms. I mouthed *yes, we're still very much in shock* at the mirror, pulled the sweaty nylons away from my underpants a few fantastic times and walked back with cakey armpits.

My friend June came and we stood at the autograph book awhile. She hurried down some words and told me she coveted my new flats. She was wearing more makeup than I'd ever seen and her iPod earbuds hung from the pocket of her cardigan. The look of her, the idea that she was listening to music a minute before - it made my throat plug. She noticed and took me out to sit on her car and smoke cigarettes.

"Do you actually have to talk to all them? The mayor and shit?" June lit me up.

"Yes and they are all kissing me which is fucking disgusting."

"Is that actually the mayor in there?"

"Yeah, that's him. Is he fat as you thought, or what?"

"Sorry, Verona."

"I know. Let's have another cig please - a real fast one."

At the end of the second wake, my mom sat in an armchair the funeral director brought out especially. She asked me to fan her and she re-applied some lipstick. I could see the tip of my dad's dead nose. My head and feet throbbed, one end at a time. I stooped to rest my hip on the arm of the chair. She shooed me off: *I need some air please*. I felt the mourners looking at me, *tsk*-ing, biting their lower lips. My cheeks smoldered and plumped.

When it was finished, just my mom and I watched them shut the casket. I imagined the mayor. Eating ribs at a bar with his brothers, a gingham bib tucked into his tight collar, telling one of my dad's jokes about blondes to the bartender. What a firecracker this guy was, I am telling you, he'd say, you don't even know. And that daughter, he'd say.

When we got home, I stripped the sheets and down comforter off my bed. I lay naked on my stomach. I imagined the fat mayor on my back, pressing all my air out. I spread my legs, gripped the headboard, and bit hard on one of the thirty-two mattress buttons until my jaw throbbed too.

* * *

There are jobs I could do in the classifieds. Pipe fitter I could do. It's all just numbers, circles, pi r squared, et cetera. I'd have to do the coffee runs at first but then I'd learn how to whittle down the tubes. Being a bank teller doesn't seem lively but I know I can keep an even till. I'd wear thin polyester suits with pink oxfords underneath. I'd get an insulated lunch box and always have Werther's Originals at my station. I'd make female friends fast, go to their parties and drink down their rum. Hang my flimsy blazer on a lamp and dance to Top 40 hits. I'd have an affair with the married branch manager. We'd make love in the vault on my days to balance the ATM deposits. There is also a listing for a canoe sales person that I circle.

Personals follow classifieds. The personal ads are codes and I can't find a decoder. In my mind sits an old man with a carpenter's rectangular pencil coding that he likes feeding the ducks, *ILFTD*. His wife's dead so he goes to the bench with the least shit on it, eats a double popsicle fast and throws crusts. Soon he'll wish the female ducks dead, from this or that, so the blurry trails of baby ducks end. Then a serene pond with only the harsh color of males and eventually he'll bring poison, to end their celibate misery.

There are no photos in the personals, no real words. I see a lot of *ISO*. I Smile Often. I circle the shortest ad:

ISO DDF, SF, WAA

I Smile Often, Don't Date Foreigners, Swim Fast, Will Always Abide. I decode personals while I wait for my mom to get home for dinner. I find a businessman's confession: *FWB* (Fisherman Wanna-Be), a message: *TDH* (Today Didn't Happen), a pathetic plea: *CH* (Come Home), and a shit poem: *YCFP* (Your Cinnamon Freckle Pile). I imagine these people meeting, laughing on errands, making each other's beds with hospital corners.

Over pan-seared scallops and diet ginger ale, my mom and I are busy acquaintances. We pass utensils, move newspapers, get up for ice cubes, remember the pepper grinder is out of corns and why not just fill it now.

She moved my dad's chair out to the garage yesterday, and it feels like the table is perched on a cliff. There are lasagnas, parmigians and meatballs in the freezer which we don't eat because we don't know how to heat two pieces without defrosting an entire pan. I remember we have zesty garlic pickles. I stand to get one.

"Honey, just finish up, we have plenty of pepper now." My Mom says, making the pepper grinder motion. It looks like a vertical Indian sunburn.

"Oh listen, I spoke with Phil at the network today about getting you on air. He says Caterina DeWitt is due to give birth in a couple of weeks so they'll be looking for a new interim anchor while she's on maternity leave."

I sit down.

“Well, I looked at the classifieds in the *Bucket* today and there are so many jobs in there that I could do, I thought I could apply. If you help me with a resume.”

The central air whirs and she looks at a baseboard.

“But while Caterina is still working, Phil says you could be an art display, of sorts. There is some artist coming through Featherton who does these shows where a person sits on display, doing something they’re good at, a skill, and people come to watch. You’ll be behind glass. And the artist just got a write-up in the *Times*.”

I imagine myself in a room bench-pressing weights, eating a pancake, clicking around an abacus and being watched by precise Swedish men in turtlenecks.

“But what would I do? Just sit and-”

“Remember when Dad taught you to fix those old circuit boards in the basement? Your tiny cities, you called them?”

Yes.

“Yes.”

“I was always amazed. You’ll be Featherton’s pretty little wizard. And it’s just four days.”

“What’s the artist’s name?” I ask.

“I forget. It’s a mouthful. He’s from Virginia. I guess he just finished a photo exhibit of cats and dogs he called *Pet Nudes*... supposed to be funny, apparently.”

“I’ll be in the nude?” I hope.

“No, dear, fully clothed. So, that’s a yes?” She tocks her head left.

It doesn't matter what I say, what I don't say. I pepper my last scallop, both sides, swallow it whole. It bobs and fizzes in diet ginger ale. My mom holds an asparagus hat on her fork and reads *Real Simple*. I bare teeth at her to see if her peripheral vision will register me.

When I'm done my scallops, I go to the garage for my dad's chair. There is a golf bag and a pair of ski boots on his seat like it might float away. I tip them off and carry the chair inside. I pound his chair back to its old spot, push it in. I sit down with my mom but after awhile I am tired of her saying nothing. I wash my dishes and decode the rest of the personals in a mineral bath with a wet pencil.

* * *

My dad got me employed as the payroll clerk at City Hall. I wrote myself fat checks - he sighed and signed. When my dad died it was *time for a real job, Verona*. But I liked City Hall. People didn't talk about car interiors or engagement parties at City Hall. I shared an office with Mary who worked there for 42 years. She got a day in August named for her and my dad ordered big pastel sheet cakes for an all-employees-welcome party. Mary's husband came and stood smiling at her. He got purple frosting on his collar. She made a big show of wiping it off as he shrugged comically.

And I liked the office stuff. We had a mini-tv and a mini-fridge. We had a paper cutter. I liked our mail chute that sent anything to the basement. Sometimes I'd pluck a hair off my head, tie it in a knot around a baby carrot and slip it into the chute. My black hair made soft

slits in the carrot's bright skin and I imagined Thomas in the mail room lifting it out of his bin like a bar of gold.

* * *

I drive my dad's car to the gallery. I have his tool set under a blanket in the trunk. The gallery is a renovated theatre with two rows of seats replaced by toilets, empty and bolted to a scuffed floor. An old man is on a toilet, eating a Danish. He is bearded, bald.

"I'm Irving Magog. And you're my muse? Verona?" Magog curtsies.

"Yes, hi, I am. Good to meet you, Mr Magog."

"Can I give you a tour?"

Magog shows me the set, asks if I know the reason for the toilets, tells me they confront the difficulty of being too comfortable as an observer. The toilet, he notes, should remind the viewer to be self-conscious as well. I nod at him, I tolerate the occasional touch on the wrist. He is pleased with himself and wants me to be as well.

A small wood-paneled office on the stage is mine for four days. I have an oak desk, a static-y folding chair and a plant which Magog says is "impossible to kill." He fetches a small circuit board for me, he wants to know what I think. I think it looks familiar enough. I show him my toolbox for the diddling and Magog hands me a notebook.

I take it all in.

*

Day 1, 11:16am

I don't think Magog is here. But I was instructed not to look out at the crowd so I'm not sure.

There are so many people. I'll guess 30 heads. Some are taking pictures of me. Fucking idiots don't realize the window will reflect their flashes.

1:39pm

I'm constructing the inner layer of my first city and naming it weaseltown. Thinking of replacing a dry cleaner's with a sex shop to shake up the inhabitants of weaseltown. I'll also relocate the Cellar Pub next to the Presbyterian Church on South Street of weaseltown. I wonder if June is here.

4:37pm

I get a break from 12 – 3. It must be nice to work these weird gallery hours. Probably better than a banker's or pipe fitter's hours. I went home, took a nap and ate Burger King. It was so nice to eat alone. And to eat shitty.

5:40pm

I asked for more filter capacitors because I was running out of things to put between the pins. Magog went out for them immediately because he doesn't want people to think I'm a fake.

I heard people speaking different languages through the glass. I wonder if they like my dress or if they notice my hands are shaking.

8:47pm

Maybe around 7, a little kid knocked on the glass. I could see that he was waving. His parents grabbed him, scolded him for trying to get my attention. He cried – humiliated is my guess. How's he supposed to understand this?

We are closing at 10 and I am going to ask for a more comfortable chair for tomorrow. My feet are tingling and my cheeks itch like when you sit too long in your wet bathing suit.

9:51pm

I built and named three tiny cities today: weaseltown, Eartha and S-10.

Day 2, 9:06am

The circuit board they brought me this morning is tiny. I think the whole thing will be an abandoned auto factory.

3:12pm

For break, I went with Magog to a diner. He had coffee and pie, I had the two hot dogs platter and a beer. He heard about my dad and he said he is sorry for me, and that he is an orphan so he knows how I feel, a little. I have never heard an old man call himself an orphan.

We had a lot of extra time, and Magog suggested we find a cobbler. I didn't realize cobblers still existed. He paid to have my right gold sandal fixed because it was fraying. The sandals cost me \$7 and the cobbling cost \$40 but I didn't tell Magog. I said I'd fix the button on his coat in return. He suggested I bring the button into a tailor and ask them to make a new coat around it.

I still don't know how old he is but I am guessing seventies. No, sixties. I don't know.

9:12pm

I just finished soldering an unemployment office in this tiny city, and realized Magog is the dumbfuck who's been taking all the pictures with a flash.

Day 3

Today I'm building Chickentown. This circuit board is big enough to put in the kinds of things every city should have. It won't be like the others, or like Featherton. There won't be any chain furniture stores or churches. I want there to be a meatball sub shop, only meatball subs. And I want them to have a state-of-the-art City Hall. Will put a swimming pool out back for them if I can figure out how. And public transportation. That's how people get to know each other. Or maybe some kind of outing club for old people. For the man from the personals on his bench poisoning the ducks. I see Magog as that man, am hoping he has a lady.

Day 4, 10:12 a.m.

I'm almost finished Chickentown. It's got a public swimming pool, the meatball sub store, a well-lit train system underground, a no-kill animal shelter and I want there to be a warm space where we hold the weekly Bingo and Boiled Dinner Night for the senior citizens.

Day 4, 6:17 p.m.

After break, I added some Chickentown subsidized housing to be realistic and walked up to the glass. I looked at them all looking at me.

I saw June whispering into a guy I didn't know, his hand on her lower back. My Mom being interviewed by the News Anchor at WRTE, the cameraman doing a close-up on her wedding band. I saw that crossing guard with a perm who tried to kiss me on the lips once in third grade. I saw my godfather who got me my first and only set of monogrammed stationery, my best birthday gift ever. I saw the mayor using a toothpick between molars.

I saw that no one was sitting on the toilets except for that bipolar vet. I gave a wave. He waved back and left.

I saw a bathroom line and I saw a bar set up on a folding table, selling Heineken and wine by the glass. I saw two people by the entrance, the girl's head on the man's shoulder.

I made the point to look at every person.

I watched this whole room evade me and squirm - some tied their shoes, ladies searched through purses, a man turned to find a recycling bin for his Heineken. June shimmied out of her friend's grip. The mayor palmed his toothpick and my mom's left hand slid into her plaid blazer's pocket.

Those people writhed, they frenzied under my gaze. I pressed my hands on the glass, I took them all in. I stared them down. I turned them away.

I watched and waited until I was sure that no person looked at me. I returned to my desk to solder the roof of Chickentown City Hall.

THESE THINGS DON'T HAPPEN TWICE

At the factory, I've been hammering bolts looking for soft spots. Maybe not for long since every bolt I try to ding is diamond-hard. My palm is thick enough now to hold a small black coffee straight after ordering. I get a small black coffee every morning and watch it smoke in my grip. The canteen woman drops my coins in her apron, points to the next guy.

I get paid in paper and take one six-minute smoke break per shift. I don't smoke but that second hand smell is fantastic.

A girl lives in the row house across from our factory. I go sappy thinking what she's up to. She reminds me of Olivia Newton John but not so blinding pretty. She has great posture. She'll leave for days, then come back to pour pickle water over her segment of porch or laugh real hard on her cordless phone with her foot up on the banister. When she gets home from a place, she sits in her car for a long time, organizing or gathering up her things, the way a woman does. My aunt is like that, has to hear the end of the deejay's sentence and bunch up some straw wrappers in her fist. Incremental tidying is the way to go, find some trash Mickey, she'll say.

Once I saw the girl spit on a tissue, clean her bumper and rub on a red bumper sticker. She stepped back and smiled at whatever it said.

I'd like to ask her things, e.g., do you realize there are paw prints all over your car, won't that brine kill your marigolds, and do you have *any idea* how good you're looking in that pantsuit? But she's gone again, like that.

For my first day of work at the factory I took the wrong bus in the right direction. I was reading in the paper about this man who burned up another man's cat. They hated each other about a woman. I had to go back to the town hall where I started and was one hour and ten minutes late. These things happen, the foreman said, but they don't happen twice. I nodded with extreme gusto.

For my first twenty-minute lunch break, I ate with Joseph, Marcus and Toe. They all brought bologna on white in paper bags. I had salami and provolone on spelt bread with whole grain mustard in a sandwich-shaped Tupperware. After I ate it, I held the Tupperware under the table in my lap. I was supposed to remember to save it. I listened about the Patriots, Marcus's girlfriend's mustache when he got up for pretzel rods, and what's the best place for getting haircuts. They wanted to know what my haircut was called, they said black barbershops only had two options: a fade or a Caesar. All three got theirs faded. I didn't know what to call my haircut, I thought maybe it was called a pompadour. They thought this was hilarious.

I told them the joke about the three-legged dog that walked into a saloon looking for the man who shot his paw. They looked at me and Toe said he guessed it took all kinds. I listened about the foreman's breath and agreed that the new cigarette tax was fucking absurd. The red shift bell pealed and I asked Toe if I could get a ride home.

I decide to change my sandwich sitting around the crammed house with my aunt and our dog. Our house is crammed with art made by the strangest of friends and the friendliest of strangers, my aunt says. When I complain about stuff always being in the way, she says it's not her fault because the ones *she* paints never pile up because they sell before they cram. The ones she did of my uncle are in the attic and not on sale, but I don't mention these, how we could make room up there. She is no small potatoes, she's always reminding me.

"Will you buy bologna and white bread?" I ask her.

"What's wrong with the salami? Didn't you pick that one out?" She is drilling a screw into the wall to hang an elephant sketch. She's in her bathrobe with a clothespin clipped to her pocket.

"Nothing's wrong with it, I just want to make a change."

"Do you still want mustard on it?"

"I think. Does mustard go with bologna though?"

"Baby, mustard goes with *everything*." She stomps her foot on *everything*.

"Yeah, okay, I still want the mustard on there then."

"What other changes you after, Mickey?" She drills.

Some other changes I'm after would be finally getting my license, learning to snowboard and moving my room to the basement. I'd put my bed in the nook under the stairs and have a lot of yellow lamplight. I'll save money to create a theme, make it real slick, and maybe buy a hookah. The place would be like a room MTV designs for a reality show, bright, vinyl, never used before. There wouldn't be a story behind anything.

But when I imagine me with the girl from the row house, it's different, there's less plastic. We are adults. She wears dresses, never turtlenecks. And there are *always* tureens of buffalo chicken chowder in the industrial sized kitchen. There is a wing in our Tudor home for my aunt, a Savannah chair lift to get her up there, and a boom-box in her bathroom the way she likes. We take people in off the streets and make sure they have transportation to wakes. Our gym will be open twenty-four hours and our indoor pool will offer free baby swimming lessons, where you just toss the infant in the deep end and it breathes, like it did on the inside.

After picking my new sandwich, I blow up the inflatable pink and purple Easter eggs for my aunt. It's her favorite holiday and it has nothing to do with the Resurrection or the Crucifixion, whichever happened then. It has to do with the pretty pastels, the fantastic candy, the smell of dirt. Every year she has a new reason.

We ribbon the eggs up tightly in the dogwoods out front and at night we eat dinner by the window so we can watch them blow around. She orders the best dark chocolate from a Swiss organic foods web site and we each eat a hunk with breakfast til it's gone, usually sometime in May. This year my aunt likes Easter, she says, because spring is starting. Boring, I think. Easter is my favorite holiday because spring is springing, sweetie! she yells at me from the porch as I tie her eggs on the branches.

Toe gives me rides to and fro work now. His car is neater than a church and he smokes with the windows up. He isn't the type of driver who allows you to touch the radio or adjust the vents. I want to tell him he is as nervous as a fart in a mitten.

“You’re as nervous as a fart in a mitten.” I tell him.

“Now what the hell does that mean?” Toe doesn’t look at me, just turns down the talk radio with his pinky in the air.

“I was *listening* to that,” I want to say but I haven’t been listening to it.

“Are you married?” I ask Toe.

“Yeah, but don’t wear the ring after my fingers getting so fat.” He waves his left hand, taps the cigarette over the ashtray with the right, knee steering.

“Did you give her presents at first or just start it right up with talking?” I re-fold the paper bag in my lap containing my bologna and mustard on white so it comes to a point.

“Christ, reminds me... I think I did give her a plant at Easter back when we worked at the dog track.” He presses the button for washing his windshield and turns the radio back up. He sucks his cigarette, doesn’t notice the ashes spiraling to his lap. Toe looks glad about the plant he gave the girl he married.

The girl from the row house came home yesterday after being gone for five nights and six days. I was standing with Joseph, Marcus and Toe while they smoked and talked about how Marcus had just dumped his girlfriend. Joseph and Toe were saying things they’d probably regret, they admitted, but damn, they said, fine work.

I watched the girl take three trips into the house with a paper bag of blankets, a tall lamp, a round mirror, books carried in a crotch-to-chin stack, one big mug swinging from her pinkie. I betted the guys she just got dumped too. They agreed, we made guesses about what else she’d be carrying in. A shit ton of shoes, is all we could come up with.

She came out on her porch to dump out a jar of roasted red peppers. She noticed us, waved for the first time.

Next to her porch, I looked at the hedge covered in wet red lumps, slick peach slices, a brown glump of lettuce leaves.

“You trying to kill your hedges?” I asked her, my tongue ungluing from its roof.

“I’m trying to do a compost heap, actually.”

“But everything’s just sitting on top of the hedge.”

“It’ll fall through. When it rains, probably.”

I looked through the hedge, saw a gray lime. I balled lint and a receipt together inside my pocket.

“Hey, what’s your bumper sticker say? I was trying to read it the other day.”

“It says *JELLYFISH ARE DANGEROUS*.” She shrugged. Smiled.

“That’s pretty funny.” I liked the gap in her teeth, it was a consolation prize.

“Not funny when you get stung. Fuck *that*.” She shook her head.

I said how I had to get back, I’d see her later - a balloon in my chest inflating.

My break went over so Toe told the foreman that I’d had bad mayonnaise. He didn’t want to know much more than that.

I went back to my station, pounded bolts and found the first damaged one. It felt like I’d finally done the job. I wanted to kick back. I went to Toe, told him thanks for covering, about the bolt I crushed and he laughed, alright man, he said, clapped me on the back.

After work, I treated Toe to the deli where I get my buffalo chicken chowder. It was so spicy, he had to get a second milk. He liked the place a lot and said he couldn't wait to take his wife.

Yesterday was like this one day of third grade. I wrote a story about a gang of blood-sucking nuns from the swamp. I titled it *Creatures of Habit*. Sister Kathy gave me a zero and then read it to the class while I stood next to her. She called my grade *the big fat goose egg Michael deserves*. I forgot my coat and walked home with an empty face. My aunt got a phone call from school while I sat on the porch clipping my toenails and pushing the nailbits between the boards. She yelled some and hung up. My aunt asked to see the story and then framed each page and hung it in the hall. She apologized if her cussing scared me and we watched *Sanford & Son* while she held my clamping hand.

I felt the color swim back up my shoulders, into my bare face. I felt the ringing in my ears stop. I was proud.

WHEN IT IS ACCEPTABLE TO EAT THE GARNISH

Amy,

To finally answer your question (sorry!) it's Terro brand and it's an aerosol. The lettering is orange and blue – some italics, some *not*. It's got a blue cap. It was full of sixteen ounces (453 grams) of pressurized poison – now maybe four ounces. Maybe three ounces. I would send you mine, but you should have a full one. It “Protects up to 12 Weeks” (Protege hasta por 12 Semanas) and the goodly people at Terro advise that children should not be able to reach it. Its active ingredients are: pyrethrins, piperonyl butoxide, and permethrin. Permethrin is not plural so I know there is only one permethrin. I put a pink Post-it note covering more than two-thirds of the front portion of the label, with a 5.5” piece of scotch tape wrapped fully around to keep it in place, should the Post-it adhesive fail. It is effective against scorpions, ants, cockroaches, and crickets, but its ability to kill spiders is paramount. The spider model on the can is most likely a wolf spider (Lyosidae) and should never be visible in order that the weapon be accessed with the least amount of emotional trauma to the executioner!

Keep it under the sink with the other indispensable household fluids, but kept (at *least*) a foot's distance away from whatever good booze you have left over from your birthday. Don't store it near your aquarium either, as it is lethal to fish.

The spray is hazardous to humans and domestic animals and researching the ingredients reveals that mice who were fed permethrin developed tumors in their lungs and

livers. This is just so you have the facts. You're not eating the stuff, though, you're spraying it, is what I tell myself.

Yes, there are environmental consequences if you crop-dust your apartment any time you see a daddy long legs on the shower curtain. If you think you'll have this problem too, avoid getting a shower curtain covered in leggy algebraic equations (gag gifts to yourself are never really that funny anyways). A spider can suction himself there, see you naked, look just like an integer. Should you get concerned when the stuff thickens up like an inverse pile of whipped cream on the ceiling over your bed, specifically the 4.5' x 6' area where you expose your nasal mucosal cells during sleep? Yes, girl.

You should have *several* concerns. Don't you still babysit that little fat kid? And what if you give *birth* to your own little fat kid? (aaagghhh). And what if the two of you wanted to play trains on the rug or roll a grapefruit back and forth? What if you have a boyfriend, and you two want to take a shower together in the morning, and the steamy shower denatures the quarternary proteins of piperonyl butoxide, and they toast the space between your curls and it all breaks down into your scalp? What if you spray it on some eight footed bugger, squash it up real good with a paper towel, put the soggy lump in your trash, put your trash in the dumpster, and the dumpster leaks into that river out back? What would that hippie mayor have to say?

I still recommend getting some. I like checking under the sink, getting a toasty feeling in my chest when I see the blue cap, the orange tube, the pink Post-it. I know that if the spider I dreamt up last night (cream colored with shiny, bulbous legs) strutted out from under my

fridge while I looked for pudding, I could put him under a vegetable drawer-high pile of pyrethrins, piperonyl butoxide, and permethrins. I think I've used it too much in areas close to my pillows (headboard this summer, saw a cobweb), but my panic doesn't leave much choice. I think I'm getting better though, I looked at a dead tarantula from South America in a case at the insectarium in Montreal. He was dead of course, so maybe I'm not.

Anyways, I got the spray at Costco, I'm sure they still have it.

So what else is going on for me is that I started a psychic business. You remember that weight loss study going on at the hospital? Well the overweight women in it get recreation time, and they'd be wandering by and I'd be looking at them and I could tell they were just *totally* beat to the boards, so I thought why don't you look up some tarot stuff, park it on the steps, see if you can get them to sit down for a ten dollar reading. The online certification was only \$40 - you should look into it.

These women, they're really down at the mouth. Imagine never getting flowers? one of them said to me. No, I couldn't imagine. And I get frustrated with them, how sad they look, when will they get it that it's all about *portion control*. Of course it isn't that simple, but I think if I got fat I'd just live off my bulk til my jeans fit again. I read this book about a really heavy gal who learned to do guided imagery and see mold and rot growing on all the food she was about to consume. This made her nauseous so she could barely eat. It ended up with her having even worse issues with food, became bulimic actually. But there's got be a way to use that skill to some degree without going bananas, am I right. I tried it the other day on this big cinnamon

roll I couldn't put down, but I've just never seen a moldy pastry, just couldn't picture it, so it was senseless.

So for these women, I've been coming up with some pretty general stuff. I want them to feel okay about what's to come. You kind of get that urge to send each one of them flowers to the clinic, from a secret admirer or something. But that just seems too cruel! Hard to say, not knowing.

I was walking Showbiz in my neighborhood and I saw this tiny old woman walking across her front lawn and open an empty mailbox. She kept her hand on there for a few seconds before going back in the house. It made all my ribs pull up. I'd like to send her a Valentine's Day card, but how would I sign it? Anyways, same problem with my clients. Don't roll your eyes, why wouldn't I call them clients.

Then in the car, I heard this man talking on the radio, about a civil war somewhere, I only caught the tail end, but his point was that we're in pieces. Each person, I mean. We're each a mix of two pieces. Some say people are innately good, that we have kindly intentions. Then there's the nihilists, saying we're just nothing. We have no intentions. These maybe aren't the best examples but I didn't take philosophy so I don't know the different ways of thought. But so this man on the radio was saying how each of us is "half garbage, half marble." I thought it was great. And I had just read this terrible short story in a waiting room about teenagers. How the popular girls would ask someone from a lower *caste* practically, that's how bad it sounded, to come sit with them at lunch. The girl would be thrilled, bring her things

over, her apple and yogurt I imagine, the way girls eat these days, and as soon as she'd sit, they'd get up and run to another table, leave her alone, point and laugh at her. And the story ended with one of the girls having so much regret about the way she'd acted as a youth, that she became a volunteer at a youth center, teaching teen girls about respect, how to be nice. Like I said, the story was terrible, I think I groaned the whole read, but do you think that's an example of half garbage half marble? Did that girl have any marble? And what about the girls who were fooled by that, even worse. Girl, you got a lunch table in high school, you just stuck with it. That's how I remember at least. Are you bored yet? You even remember high school, you clunker?

Anyways, I tell the ladies this, that we're all half garbage, half marble. Either I believe it or I don't. I need more time.

Did you ever get that hot dog cart up and running? I heard it's really hard to get a permit for those, cause of food poisoning whatnot, or is it zoning? Well I hope it worked out. Wow, if there was a hot dog cart in this neighborhood I would be big as a house. Did I tell you I went up a size in jeans? Yeah, I'm a 6 now. And who can I complain to about this? I'm the petite-est one around. Now I just wear stretch pants which is pretty mortifying to actually put down in print. Moving on.

I had a new idea for my next business: why couldn't I make really hokey t-shirts... I was up on the roof deck the other night having a smoke, and thinking how it was Boss's Day, wondering who actually celebrates that, what a bunch of horseshit, then was thinking maybe

Bruce Springsteen, and then I thought of a great t-shirt. In all caps, you'd have THE ONLY BOSS I LISTEN TO: and under it, a picture of Bruce Springsteen. If I saw that for \$15 in my size, I would not leave the store without it. I could just get a bunch of cheap white undershirts and bring them to a copy shop for silk screening. Oh but actually, would you need the Boss's permission to use his likeness? See my ideas sound great til I come up against something, then I just roll 'em off a cliff. If you know how that works though, let me know.

Thought of something else you will need for your apartment: this book I found, *How to be a Lady: A Contemporary Guide to Common Courtesy* by Candace Simpson-Giles. It's full of little adages about how a woman should behave in all these different situations. People love to flip through it and read them out loud at a party. Makes everyone feel so evolved. The chapters' names are great, my favorite is "A Lady Experiences Real Life." I'm interested in what real life means to Candy Simpson-Giles. (Of course her name is Candy.) I'll copy down some of her lady definitions:

"A lady knows when it is acceptable to eat the garnish."

"A lady does not hug other people after she has been working out or running unless she explains what she been doing and her friend insists anyway."

"A lady is mindful of her appearance at all times."

Have you ever known when it's okay to eat a garnish? I never eat the parsley but I'll always eat the orange slice.

I finally got rid of that striped couch that had a mushroom growing under the cushion. I never believed you about that mushroom, by the way. I got a great tax return so I went to the

furniture store to get a whole new living room set. They were having some huge sale. So I was testing a lot of them out, especially the leather, which were just pipe dreams, and I ended up on this giant chair called The Marshmallow. It was basically just an enormous squish, felt like you were a flea in a cotton ball. I loved it. It had an ottoman too, so I kicked back a little, shut my eyes. I fell asleep! Next thing I know there are two security guards going, mam, mam, we're closing down the store, it's eleven pm. I fell asleep for three hours! Talk about embarrassing. Talk about something a lady doesn't do. "A lady does not take a three-hour nap on a floor model at Jordan's Furniture, a Dr. Pepper can spilling all over her." And the best part is, they found me with infrared sensors! Apparently they have video cameras hidden all over and at night before they shut down, they can sense heat. No homeless people hiding away in there, boy.

Got me thinking, where else are the cameras, right? I've been scanning around. I feel like I see those little cameras everywhere now. Every round light in a ceiling, those slanted mirrors above displays at CVS. They stick them in teddy bears now to catch masturbating babysitters. We're coming into a future of surveillance, girl. I bet in the future, there will be cameras in your home, you won't even know where they are. I think it's all turning into a police state, swear to God. Wait til it gets so bad they don't even let you commit suicide. I was thinking of that too. I imagine in psychiatric hospitals, they keep a close watch on people who have lost their marbles (marble again!) and put cameras in their rooms, probably run down and scoop them up if they're trying to lurch out the window, right. Well what if your home was bugged and you made a xanax and gin smoothie and they saw you drinking it? They'd send a cruiser right out. We're on constant suicide watch.

And what do you think it means that I had to look up “commit” when I was trying to spell it? Too funny. I’m actually a pretty good speller, or was, I suppose. I won the spelling bee semi-finals in the first grade, on the word “choice.” I remember thinking, what a joke, easiest word. Look at that, choice I have no problem, it’s commit that stops me up. Maybe there’s my garbage.

My bus has arrived, buttercup. Maybe send me some pictures? Your first apartment, girl, this is big stuff!

Love, love, LOVE,

Mom

STOP SMILING

Before I got here, I had an artfully weathered house and some boys I paid to keep my grass green. I had a woman who borrowed my last name. We had matching Ducatis and a dog that barked by request. We walked the dog around the neighborhood at night and had our own jokes. Hers funnier. We left small surprises in each other's boots.

When snowflakes under my tires tipped me, my white helmet drew a curved lane on our road. The hand-painted shamrock scraped off. That helmet! Thank God for it! everyone said. Then the casted-arm and tinkered-with-brain inside my shaved skull meant I was okay. I was happy. I was too happy. No one liked it. I didn't remember that our nephew blew up in a war or that my wife's best friend, Lynne, died a month before my spill. I only recalled what pleased me. I asked my wife when she wanted to start having kids. I asked why we never invited her dad over. Then I stopped asking. She changed her mind about me.

It's not right living with someone who doesn't know your sorrows, she said.

If I could remember them, I would, I meant to say, but she looked so pretty.

Stop smiling, she said.

The things I remember are useless: a bathtub, a gravy boat, a clothesline. Breasts.

Our aides take us on errands and trips in the house van. This summer they took us to Bar Harbor and we had a lobster picnic. They made a fire in a rock pit near the ocean. There was a boiling bucket of lobsters and corn cobs. When the lobsters were red, our aides dumped

them out on the rocks. I cracked a lobster body and smattered my belly and trunks with hot green paste. Spilled my Coke down the rocks. The aides made me a lemonade with vodka, smiled at the hairy folds of my stomach. I sucked buttery meat and let the green paste dry in my navel. I threw the shells in the ocean and watched them float back.

Now I sit with Lucy in the home where everyone is missing a faculty or two. She thinks my malfunction is best, that I'm luckiest. She thinks my new brain is how all brains will be in the future: "happy-memory bins."

She drags her fingers over surfaces, lips twitching. She's got the TV loud, listening to mass at the Vatican: *the tiniest nation in the world*, she tells me. Lucy grew up and then old in this home. We're sitting at a TV tray, sharing a bunch of grapes. She plucks them in pairs and rolls them to me. Our Christmas tree is next to her: pink-tinseled, pink-bulbed, artificial, white. It's so ugly I want to be blind too.

"These grapes taste green," she says.

"Yup," I say.

We lost privileges so we get fruit instead of ice cream.

We lost privileges when I got impatient on my day to do library duties. I was waiting for the aide to drive me. I went room to room, collecting books to be returned. All romances. I had a book on reserve to pick up. I sat in the living room, waiting. Our aide was snoring on the leather couch. He was twenty-three and had a girlfriend he brought to the house three times. She smelled like the scented pads in the women's room. The aide didn't feel me unclip the van

keys from his belt loop and said, *oh, grab the olives*. Lucy turned the TV up so he'd stay asleep and I went outside to warm the van.

My wife and I had Ducati Monster S4RS Testastrettas. Her best friend, Lynne, had an SUV with a movie screen in it: "for kids someday." Once I borrowed it to pick up an arm chair. I lent Lynne my bike and showed her how to ride it. After half a lesson, she took off around the block. I remember my wife laughing when Lynne said she didn't know our little scooters went so fast. I remember my wife laughed and clapped when I told Lynne her car handled like a keg on wheels.

I walked Lucy out of the house and put her in the van. The radio deejay told us that a local old couple donated their 45-year old blue spruce to the town Christmas display. He said they planted it the day they got married, 45 years ago. Lucy fingered through the glovebox and I adjusted the mirrors.

We went to a convenience store for coffee and porn. Lucy sat in the van while I got two black coffees, one *Hustler*, and a pack of cigarettes. I lit two cigarettes in my mouth and handed one to her. We sat in the parked van as I thumbed through my *Hustler*, pretending it was *Newsweek*.

"Four whales rescued off coast of Rhode Island; Homeless man finds three-carat diamond in field."

"Those pages sound thicker than *Newsweek's*," Lucy said.

"Hmmm? Dog saves child from burning tree."

Lucy and I spent part of my money on a blanket for the movies. The movie was a documentary about a kid who played his harp in playgrounds. He learned to play requests, like “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and a Spice Girls ballad. I got Lucy a popcorn with extra butter and described the better parts. She rubbed her buttery fingers on the blanket and we left it behind.

Lucy told me my memory flub is like a litmus test of what matters most. She said it wipes out the grey areas. She asked did I remember my first kiss, the day my wife brought me here, how much my watch cost? I didn’t. We assumed my first kiss went badly, my wife sobbed viciously at the pain of leaving me, and my watch was worth a lot. Lucy was there when my wife dropped me off but I don’t need her to confirm the scene. I have already pictured it.

“How much do you think, for your watch?” Lucy asked.

“It’s a Movado, which is expensive I think.”

“That means you bought it for yourself and felt bad about how much it cost. If it was a gift, you’d remember how you got it.”

“Well, then I have great taste. It’s real nice. All gold, no numbers.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s four. A little before four.”

“We should get back soon.”

Since it was a Sunday, I took Lucy to the four o’clock mass. I barreled our van into the last parking space and hid my *Hustler* in the glovebox. I didn’t tell her where we were but she

slapped me hard on the back when she heard the bells. We walked to the front, my arm across her shoulders. I helped her into the first pew. She knew all the words and pinched me when it was time to stand or sit or kneel. I mouthed along, sweating in my coat. She asked me what the priest looked like. I said, *a plum with arms*. She pinched me to kneel.

We went to the library to drop off the romances and pick up my reserved copy of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* by Marlon Brando. I'd explained before that women loved him and she wanted to know why. I'd promised I'd read it to her. I would learn his charm; she would understand the fuss.

"So what did he look like?" she asked on our way home.

"He looked mad. He looked like he wasn't listening."

"And that's what women love?"

I didn't remember.

At the house, we heard our aides yelling at each other in the kitchen. They were all there. We stepped quietly into the dark living room and took our chairs. I plugged in the Christmas tree. Lucy felt the light come on and asked me to describe the tree. I described an imported Alaskan blue spruce, a mature, scentless hybrid - decorated with wooden garlands and glowing white bulbs.

CANOEING WITH PEARL LAGAT

I'm a widower with a face the color of pepperoni. I was married thirty-eight years and then while she was cleaning the VCR, she said she was having a panic attack. She hadn't had one in years so I put down my newspaper. She had just bought a *Snatch* vhs at a yard sale and we had one of those new boxes of red wine ready to uncork – the ones they say are actually full of decent wine. I never tried that wine, I threw it out the next day into the creek behind the house. But I had the boxed merlot recently and it was decent.

My wife and I made a lot of jokes about how we were always drinking to celebrate one thing or another thing - the cat's declawing went fine, we left the car unlocked overnight in New York City and our matching t-shirts weren't stolen, she wasn't allergic to cinnamon after all. I'd end up looking like Charles Bukowski and she'd end up looking like Anne Ramsay. These were the days when we rented a lot of movies and googled up images of sauce-loving celebs, laughing at potato noses and burst capillaries.

Julia never turned into Anne Ramsay; she developed instead that Anjelica Huston poise. She'd sleep late, then swing around the house in linen dresses and I'd be up at 5 for spinning classes and detailing the Escalade. She always wanted me to make my famous macaroni and cheese but I'd have to refuse - a meal like that would do my gut no favors.

Her anxiety about elevators, her sensitivity to America's Funniest Videos and blooper reels, her bad driving – it all seemed to just sift through her, disappear. She got a basket for her bicycle and let the car get messy. She went to Burger King sometimes and subscribed us to a

porn dvd mail-away service. *Netflix for the depraved*, she called it. I thought she should write a sitcom because she was always cracking me up. But then, probably everybody thought that, it irritates me to think. And now she's dead and I'm the color of a hot dog.

I mention all this in our Cabin 12 Guest Book not for sympathy but because it has a lot to do with why I'm here and it feels good to admit it. I'm sixty-four, I have rosacea, a toupee and hearing aides.

I have a directive and I've worked hard for it: I came on this retreat to meet a woman, any woman, preferably a southern woman.

(Plus I think future guests of the cabin will be pleased to know who exactly of the Citizen Speakers were in their midst.)

I'm in Cabin 12 for a week on a retired Citizen Speakers singles retreat. In case you've been living under a rock, the Citizen Speakers are the ones who get chosen each year, lottery style, to address the country for forty-five minutes on any topic they want. It's a federally funded honor. One American chosen at random per year to get on the soapbox and preach to the world. "Destined To Be Heard" is the banner they hang behind you.

No one's ever turned down the chance to be Citizen Speaker. You get noticed, you get talked about, you get lots of shwag. The paparazzi get involved and you can't help but want to see what they write about you, how the picture turned out of you leaving Auto Zone. Did they get a shot of you delivering a box of paperback dictionaries to the prison? Did they please not get a shot of you cutting off that funeral procession when you needed to get to a toilet?

I made Julia cancel our tabloid subscription after I saw a picture of myself wearing a clingy undershirt raking leaves in *Star*. “Dominic Subie has MOOBS!” Our niece explained what that meant: Man Boobs. I couldn’t touch toast or beer for months. (This made the macaroni and cheese requests especially insensitive.) But I’m in great shape now - a BMI of 19%.

*

There are two people I knew for sure would be on this retreat. One is Rose MacMillan. Her speech was a few years back - mostly about why we should all be worried about saving the whales and the obesity epidemic. The humor in that must have escaped her. She didn’t bring up any other issue - just back and forth between whales and obesity. I loved it. She was chubby too, but that cute, polished up chubby. Hydrated skin, gleaming hair, teeth as white as Denzel Washington’s. A broach with pearls and a whale on it.

The other is James Henson. He spoke the year after me. James Henson talked on and on about building faster trains run by small wind turbines on their roofs and putting fences around all the cities. The trains would have to go under the fences, he said. All the trains would go underground. (We all thought he was either ad libbing or high.) The trains would be much faster, you’d feel like you were on an airplane and it could even be like old days and the train pilots (he called them pilots) would hand-pick all the stewardesses (he said that too) by their aesthetic potential. Long and lean for Chicago to New Orleans, miniature and curvy for the eastern seaboard, kind and slutty on your trip to Mexico or Montreal. He got a lot of flak

for this – all the women saying how chauvinist it was and whatnot, the gifting of women, etc, etc.

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I took the ten-hour drive down here through such hideousness. Everything cheap and level. A pocked highway you could only go fifty-five miles per hour on. Lights every hundred yards and then you'd stop and look at sunken roofs, the unsettling Tyson chicken plant, thousands of Arby's, check cashing businesses owned by reverends with names like Daddy Deveren Otis. The cunning billboards: Church Is A Gift – Some Assembly Required.

I drove onto the Virginia Beach strip last night. The hotels were tall, boxy. The restaurants were buffet style, fluorescent, iffy. Eight dollars and ninety-nine cents for unlimited ribs. I had hoped for a nice piece of fish. A grilled tilapia with a crispy Belgian beer. I pulled into a strip mall to look at the dining section on the reverse of my map and saw three teens vomit, in tandem, outside a bar called Cheeko's. They were laughing between heaves which I couldn't make sense of. One looked at me looking – I knew I'd be recognized, the Citizen Speaker who hated taxes. But he was too drunk and just gave me the finger. I decided to go directly to the retreat.

I imagined walking into a warm log home, the screen door swinging behind me, the cheerful, peach pie baking nail technician Citizen Speaker from '88 (whatever her name was)

sitting cross-legged on a cooler, jumping up to give me a hug with that maternal ease of southern women.

But the “quaint log home” they advertised in the brochure was essentially a college dormitory for old people. There was a double bed in my room and no alarm clock. A living room with *Reader’s Digest*, a couple of large print Nicholas Sparks novels (one of which I immediately snuck into my bag for bed reading), and a basket of knitting supplies. The walls were made of cinder blocks and the floors cement covered in a thin, brown rugskin. I found a laundry room with a painted sign over the dryer: Not All Who Launder Lose Socks. The place was silent – everyone asleep or praying. My options were either: go back downtown to throw up six pounds of rib meat outside Cheeko’s or tuck myself in at 9pm with a romance novel that reminded me of my dead wife.

I unpacked my things – some dress slacks, hiking shoes, a few hopeful condoms (in case a water balloon fight erupted!). I remembered the Citizen Speakers representative telling me the kitchen should be fully stocked so I went there with a frozen pizza in mind. *Consoles himself with pizza*, as Julia used to say at dinner parties in my chubby days. The kitchen was dark and clean. It seemed no one had used it yet. A binder on the table was labeled “Welcome to Cabin Twelve!!” and a few wildflowers were arranged around it. A note for me was under a shoot of lavender. Someone had written Dom instead of Dominic.

Hi Dom!

We apologize earnestly, as a group, for having to depart without you... Because of the scant dining options we saw downtown, we thought it would be fun to head into Norfolk for some Thai food. We hope you will be awake to join us in a nightcap when we return. There is champagne in the bathtub across the hall – please indulge. And if you must do a bubble bath, the third floor is equipped.

Warmly,

Your “bunkmates”

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The crew got home from their trip to Norfolk, complaining about how terrible was this “cartoon map” they had been using from the Chamber of Commerce. There were soft laughs and whispers. I heard a familiar woman’s voice say, “Shh – in case Dom’s asleep.” I came from the kitchen to greet them and got hugs from the women and hand shakes from the men. We stood there smiling at each other, all talking at once, until the woman who had spoken, the Pearl Lagat, offered to go upstairs and grab some champagne.

Pearl Lagat was the one who wrote the note to me, and the first Annual Citizen Speaker the country ever had. She spoke about prison reform and the justice system. Her son was in prison for ten years, between the ages of 17 and 27, for breaking and entering. How *Draconian*, Julia had said. Probably just heard the word on Jeopardy.

Pearl was tall, with broad shoulders, a long thick blonde braid. Her eyes were small, maybe too close together, but her mouth was wide. She always seemed relaxed, benevolent even toward paparazzi. She used the speaking opportunity to work as a well-known activist for years,

arranging free legal aid for prisoners, volunteering with reintegration centers, picketing an immigrant detainment center in Mexico most recently. She was the biggest celebrity among us and had just been featured in a Tag Heuer commercial. I would have killed to get a high-end watch endorsement.

Pearl still has the blonde braid, a little darker now, and her eyes did not look close together like I remembered them. That southern woman Speaker wasn't there, hugging me tight, bracelets jangling, but there was Pearl. Pearl Lagat!

After dawdling around Pearl for awhile, I thought I should play it cool, so I made my rounds with the other singles, toasting champagne flutes, occasionally running my tongue over my new veneers.

Jim Henson (he's okay going by Jim now) admitted that he had been into mescaline pretty heavy at the time of his speech; he'd lost his job and got mixed up with an Iranian neighbor who sold hallucinogens. His brother convinced him to get help after he converted to Swedenborgianism and started thinking he was the robot from *Short Circuit*. He works as a graphic designer now and lays off the heavy stuff but still likes weed.

Rose MacMillan was still thumping about whales and she protests Japanese whalers now. Rose has lots of convincing statistics - none of which I remember as they came up while we were drinking. She hit it off with Peter Winters, a passport adjudicator from New Hampshire. His speech had to be about ten years back - all I remember was that he wanted the

virtual fence between the states and Mexico to be an *electrified* fence. Julia had made jokes at his expense for years. Peter apologized for anything we may have remembered about his time as Citizen Speaker; he assured us that he had very much calmed down and his divorce at that time had made him a “very bitter person.” I could see Julia rolling her eyes, possibly mouthing *moron* to me through a smile. I did like him very much though. He is much more intense than anyone I know. We have plans to go shooting at Smith & Wesson this fall.

The fourth man was Luis Vargas, a computer programmer and amateur chef who works at a community college in the Midwest. He reminded us his speech was in support of stem cell research but no one could remember it because it was technical. After his speech, he got some investors to help him open a restaurant. He decided on Vietnamese and wanted to call it “The Shit.” Peter Winters and I laughed a good deal at that - I suppose no one else got it. The restaurant tanked after the investors backed out. Luis confided in me that he didn’t want to come on this trip but couldn’t “forfeit his stab at the piñata, either.”

Sara Forbes and Lori Spano have been close friends since they spoke consecutive years in the late nineties. I remember their speeches well because they were both buxom knockouts with PhDs. Sara spoke about the faulty business model for education, and Lori stumped about her involvement with after-school programs to decrease gang membership and violence. One of her memorable ideas was gardening classes and daytrips to farms for inner city teenagers. I remember I nodded in agreement and Julia burst out laughing. Julia accused me of having crushes on them, saying, Dominic, come *on*, they’re lovely but so *foolish*! But I imagined them as serious thinkers trapped in the bodies of pageant girls – gleaming and buttoned up to the

chin. Probably jungle cats in bed. Ponytails and tight smiles, high cheekbones, gesticulating like crazy. Women like that must have to practice to be taken seriously. And their worst enemies are other women, calling them fools.

While at dinner in Norfolk, they thought ahead to order me a Pad Thai to go – veggie – but with a side of shrimp and fish sauce, which I was very thankful for. I nuked and ate that while the seven of them took turns asking me questions, do I still write my column in the *Herald*, do I still live in Boston, how'd I lose the weight, and didn't I look *handsome* with a beard (Pearl). The women offered their condolences about Julia; Pearl said she read my write-up in the *Herald* and the photo of Julia had reminded her of Anjelica Huston. Everyone agreed.

We stayed up last night for hours, eight people between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four (I was the oldest – a quiet disappointment), drinking different wines, playing cards, Jim Henson drinking root beer and being emcee with his iPod.

I tried sussing out connections around the table. Rose and Peter's interest in each other was evident; they sat side by side and I think he tickled her in the ribs a few times. Luis and Jim gravitated toward each other, talking about a band called the Talking Heads. Sara and Lori came in and out of the cabin, smoking cigarettes, discussing how they were *both* bloated. Pearl saw me eavesdropping, elbowed me and winked.

"Sometimes I think those gals are in love," she said.

"I wouldn't blame either of them," I said.

Pearl cracked two wine bottles together to get the group's attention. She had a joint she wanted us to smoke. We were all in, even Rose and Peter. I thought for sure they would have snuck off by now. We spent the next hour smoking Pearl's "government green," as she called it, until Jim put on Tibetan chants and I got an enormous urge to get out of the cabin. The walls felt close; I almost expected Nurse Ratchett to bring me some thorazine. I excused myself to go for a moonlit nature walk and Pearl asked if she could join. Of course she could.

We crossed through a pine forest with a lot of overgrowth and fallen trees. She was trying to tell me a joke she had heard about a penguin in the desert but each time she started, she forgot what happened next. This was evidence that she didn't smoke much, she assured me. I agonized over every word that came out of my mouth, wondering if she might take it the wrong way or think I was stupid. We eventually stopped talking and she insisted we would feel better if we just held hands.

"Hold my hand, Dom. We're too old to be paranoid."

I didn't answer, just squeezed her hand. We came out of the woods to a carless highway and crossed it to the beach.

I wish I had more to report but a gentleman never tells.

We've been moving around the cabin quietly, grumpily, as people unaccustomed to hangovers. I've been up since 5am when I went down to check the itinerary for the day. I came back up to my room in a panic. I've spent the past three hours writing this Guest Book entry.

We're going canoeing today and all I can think about is my hearing aides. Canoeing got sprung on me. I expected our day to consist of a guided nature hike, bagged lunches with soggy turkey wraps, an explanation of what kinds of mushrooms grow in Northern Virginia. Sterile, safe. But there I was, looking at the itinerary in our Cabin 12 binder this morning, forehead pounding from drink, trying to determine what a man does with his hearing aides when he has the opportunity to get in a canoe with Pearl Lagat. I would rather be electrocuted than be hollering, "*What, Pearl?? Was that left or RIGHT?*"

I think I will leave today; I got an email from *People* about doing a photo shoot in my office overlooking the Charles. I haven't been in a legitimate media source in awhile and it feels like kismet since I've just had my teeth done.

LOW HANGING FRUIT

Church wasn't on purpose but expected of him. To get his first communion, the kid confessed a sin he made up: picking his cat up by the collar. He didn't really do this, and God will know that, his mother told him, but you gotta say *something* to the guy, she said. The kid said God would also know the sin was a fib, and fibbing was a sin, and his mother said oh forget it, just think about the party afterward.

The kid devoured books about shapes before he could read. He sat in the laundry basket; he took it very seriously and hoped his brothers would notice. The cat whom he had not sinned against was nearby, convalescing from getting fixed. He traced the shapes with a wet and wrinkled thumb.

Six years later, the kid went on a mandated retreat so he could become grown up in the eyes of the Church. He sat in a creaky arena, in the front row, next to a Loudmouth Lime, muscled and compensating. The Loudmouth's face was covered in hard bumps like tomato seeds, pale and shiny in the red. The ripest ones were around the Loudmouth's lips. The Loudmouth squeezed these, sponged the blood with the underside of his tongue. The kid watched but didn't wretch.

The priest in charge made them all wait, then whooshed in, robe and ropes swinging. He was a top-notch performer, all threats and sass. He locked eyes with the front row, made them look down at their lumping hands. He asked the Loudmouth a question about what

marriage meant and the Loudmouth said he'd already had sex so he didn't even *care*. The audience oohed and ahed. The priest came close to the front row. He pointed at the Loudmouth's face, he said he was surprised, a boy like this - having such bad pimples! The audience, loyal to the popular, was silenced. The Loudmouth took a walk at break time and ate his bagged lunch alone.

The kid made friends with a girl there whose face was like the Loudmouth's, but smeared over with tawny makeup. That was just another indication of how girls had it easier - he told his dad later - covering up.

She had a lot of brothers like the kid did and she said one of hers could drive them to the crap mall sometime. The crap mall was closer, easier to get rides to. This was a plan and on the bus ride home she fell asleep on the kid's shoulder, smearing orange gunk on his white sweatshirt.

Months later up in Anaheim, after spending a day in Disneyland with his cousins, the kid's mom called his aunt up, got him on the phone to tell him the girl got hit by a train. She had been trying to cross the tracks on her bike but didn't look *both* ways, and after she waited for the one train to pass, the train coming from the other direction got her. It felt like he was trying to get oxygen into his chest through a skinny straw and his aunt made the kid put his head between his knees.

He felt better via telling his cousins a poignant story about their day at the crap mall. How kind and poor the girl was, how selfless, how her parents were probably farmers. Later in

bed, the kid remembered getting impatient with her because her shopping bag kept hitting his leg as they walked, telling his brothers how much worse her acne looked in the sunshine. It was hard to get air again and he sprinted to throw up in the kitchen sink.

The kid started winning spelling bees. When words stood out to him in a sentence, the kid's right thumb and index fingertip came together, drawing cursive on his knee, an arm of a chair, the dog's back. K-A-Y-A-K, V-A-C-U-U-M, N-I-C-H-E. The right arm of the sofa wore down. The table's sheen in front of his dinner plate dulled. The kid's brothers made him sit on his hands when they were watching television: Quit fucking *scratching*, for once. F-U-C-K-I-N-G, S-C-R-A-T-C-H-I-N-G, O-N-C-E. The kid bit his nails so his brothers couldn't hear the sounds of his spelling.

The kid went on his third date with a girl he met at the tri-state spelling bee championship. He beat her with *paraphernalia* in the final round. He took her to a beach for a picnic - his mom's suggestion. The kid and his mom spent the morning rolling ham cold cuts around strawberries, skewering them with toothpicks. His mom told the kid she read they served this on overnight trains through Europe. He also brought a jar of jelly for dipping.

The two walked through the surf, picking sand off their kebabs. The girl said she felt like she was in "one of those bodice-ripping romance novels." The kid saw a blue crab leg washed up on the beach and tricked the girl into smelling it. That was *horrendo*, she said, and head butted him in the shoulder. The kid couldn't imagine a better third date and didn't want to ruin it with a fourth.

The kid wrote the girl letters from college, told her how easy his courses were. He was simply sick and *tired* of his dumb classmates, how he couldn't even dignify their comments in class by participating himself. The kid tried new words on her. He "needed to delineate the circumstances of his living space" and he was "wary of a lack of hapax legomenons in collegiate speak." In each letter, he made sure to mention female names in passing to get the upper hand. The girl was bored by the letters, embarrassed for him, too busy trying sex with theatre majors. She stopped writing back.

The kid found out that his picnic food was meant to be prosciutto wrapped around melon, not deli ham wrapped around strawberries. He called his mom and made vicious fun of her.

He changed his major from philosophy to business. The kid hated logic but the business classes were common sense. The kid made dean's list each term. He'd come to class late, wrinkles all over his face from sleeping on a balled up sweatshirt on his bed. The kid learned how much he liked sleeping.

The kid took bong hits with his RA and got involved with the slow, twirly-eyed kinds of girls who called each other 'man.' The kid lost his virginity during a threesome with two of these types visiting from Canada. He contracted two curable STDs. The kid felt proud and alive. He spent a lot of his time guessing who gave him which. He associated rashes with brunettes, oozing with blondes, painful urination with buck teeth, fevers with glasses, orange bottles of penicillin with women, and all of the above with Canada.

It occurred to the kid that he was smarter than most women his age. He started drinking and going to job fairs buzzed. He ironed shirts and jackets and ties, stuffed wads of grape bubble gum in his mouth. He listened to the men running the booths at the fairs, he watched how they swaggered. He kept his nails short and bought new shoes.

The kid spoke to his tallest, most put-together, ponytailed classmates at the job fairs. He used their names in the middle of sentences (“It’s so funny you say that, Melissa, I was just going to ask where *you* grew up.”) and aped some of the jargon he overheard (“It’s Staci, right? What do you say we ditch all this low-hanging fruit and go grab mimosas?”) The kid learned to laugh loud enough to be noticed and sustain eye contact. He dated a thin-lipped sorority girl who wore matching sets of bra and underpants everyday.

A job was offered to the kid working in entry-level sales at a chemical corporation in Texas that made adhesives. He took it and moved what he had to Dallas. Dallas was like a crap mall – dehydrating, bright and full of despairing stores.

The kid learned how to do sales calls and ate lunch in the office cafeteria, schmoozing. He ate with different people each day, telling fake anecdotes and commenting on sharp ties. His favorite anecdote was about golfing at St. Andrews with his dad, how long it took them to understand the Scottish starter warning them about a “doag - laaag” on the second hole. He exaggerated long vowel sounds to do a Scottish burr. The kid’s dad taught phys ed at a high school and tore ticket stubs at the dog track - he thought golf was for fairies who had spare time.

The kid went home at night, cranked the air conditioning and read Bret Easton Ellis novels. He thought they were garbage and couldn't put them down. After he finished them, he looked at catalogs of high-end furniture and tried reading the titles of novels stacked by the side of the elaborately made beds. He ordered more catalogs and a magnifying glass.

A few promotions later and the kid had a wife. He took her on a cruise and tried not to look at other women, but made the occasional body assessment so she knew *he* knew what happened to women after they got married. He used the group dining opportunities to make business connections but found it difficult to tell peppy anecdotes with his wife around. She listened and picked grapes off unfinished fruit salad plates. The kid stepped on her foot under the table. The wife drank four glasses of chardonnay at dinner and slinked away to buy cigarettes at the casino. When he found her later on the top deck drinking vodka next to a lumpy ashtray, he did a big sigh and sat down with her. He finished the pack and relayed how classy the men's wives were. She leaned into him, snored loudly with her eyes open and walked back to their room barefoot.

The kid and his wife had their first baby in Pennsylvania. The baby looked rounder than she did long and the kid wondered how a baby could get so fat. The wife was so pleased with the baby that she stopped drinking wine at night. She often had patriotic anthems in her head and she initialed the baby's clothes tags.

The wife carefully wiped gray smear out of the baby's neck roll before bed each night. In a surprise moment of tenderness, she offered the kid a turn. He put down the remote

control and picked up the wet washrag. The wife handed the kid the baby and smiled at them as he lifted the baby's chin. Between the folds of flesh, the kid found a crushed black spider. Startled, he fumbled the baby and she slid off his lap, landing on her shoulder.

The wife didn't believe in accidents and added this to her inventory of grievances.

The kid became president of a food coloring company that specialized in pastels. Oh phew, no more of that pesky neon frosting plaguing people at Easter, the wife said. God forbid I figure out a way to make a buck, the kid said. God forbid you did something meaningful, the wife said.

The kid extended the two-car garage to fit three cars and got the wife a little white Benz. She asked if she could also get a vanity plate that said LOL.

The kid spent a summer evening pushing the baby on her swing set. The wife was birthday shopping for the baby. The baby talked about how much she liked the cool wind up her skirt when she swung forward and the kid got a knot in his chest. She was in a skirt-lifting phase because she liked "getting the air on there." He changed the subject to what the baby wanted for her birthday. She changed the subject, pointing to something she saw on the edge of the yard. The kid took the baby out of the swing to go see what it was - probably a fallen nest, he guessed, what do you think? She ran ahead and squatted down next to it. It's a man, she told the kid. The kid sped up; the nest was a head of hair covered in flies. The baby tickled the man's armpit and flies dispersed. The kid picked the baby up and took her inside.

They cancelled the baby's birthday party to go to Disneyland. The kid packed the baby's bags because the wife wanted to be the one talking to the police. He packed all pants, no skirts. The kid heard the wife on the telephone say *fucking mafioso???* over and over. He scratched M-A-F-I-O-S-O on the bedspread.

At Disneyland, the kid hated the monorail zipping over their heads and gripped the baby's left hand for most of the day. He talked about inefficiency and evacuation routes and hell on earth, until the wife plucked the baby from the kid, told him where the bars were, and the two left for a pirates ride.

The kid sat at a Bourbon Street themed bar and didn't know what to order. As a business man, he'd always order light beers and then refilled the bottle in the bathroom with water. Here at a Disney bar, he wanted something special. The bartender suggested a mint julep, if he didn't mind getting knocked on his ass. The kid took it as a challenge and ordered one. He paid and didn't know what a bad drink it was. Small plastic cup, heavy with syrup, one melting ice cube - \$9.50. The kid hoisted it and smiled at the bartender.

The bar was edged by a small manmade canal, littered with pirate kitsch. There were plastic treasure chests, cracked open to show simulated pearls, emeralds, rubies. There were hooks scattered around. A big-breasted, life-size woman statue was hanging out of a window above, holding a red handkerchief. Tinny accordion music buzzed off hidden speakers.

A packed boat appeared in the canal, little voices shouting *Dad! Dad!* to the men at the bar. The kid looked for the baby and the wife but didn't see them. He ordered another.

In the endless parking lot, the wife and baby scanned for famous animals. The baby wore a personally embroidered mouse hat and checked left, right. Maybe they don't come out to the parking lot, baby, the wife said. A cab pulled up and they slid onto the cool backseat.

The kid described the wife and the baby to the man next to him. They'd be floating by soon, he said. He had to pee so bad. Backing away, he asked, please would the man watch for them and when the kid got back, let him know? He sprinted to the bathroom.

Relieved, at the mirrors, the kid considered growing a beard.