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"Drifters"
by BARNEY CURRER

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Drifters

BARNEY CURRER

It's always darkest before the dawn.
Even in outer space.

"OK, WE'RE ABOUT TO HIT," SEAN SAID. "SO hold on tight." Eva wrapped both arms around her distended belly and leaned into the restraining straps. The pegs on their junky little runabout no longer lined up with the contacts on the newer spun-off living quarters. Linking up meant ramming the patch head-on, then hoping one of the contacts would stick and hold. Every link-up bashed their vehicle a little bit more, but there was nothing much they could do about it.

On impact a stabilizer fin crumpled. One of Eva's restraining straps snapped, jerking her out of the seat in a vicious arc. But she held on tight, protecting the fetus, and when Sean cut power they were linked up with the most promising jettison quarters of them all.

"Shit, lookit this, Eva. *Ward unit.* This used to belong to the fuckin' hospital! It's a fuckin' sign, is what this is! We're due for a spin of fuckin' luck!"

Eva just sat there, lips pressed together, praying for the best. The baby was due any moment now. She'd lost count of the days and months long ago, when her day-hour correlator busted. It'd be so much easier down on planet: sun up, sun down, one day and you count them just like that. Out here in the junk ring they'd be searching out jettison and she'd see sunup and sundown behind planet half a dozen times in ten hours. Her body was the only thing knew what time it was, and it wasn't giving any advance notice.

Sean worked the provisions sensor, followed the read-out with growing excitement. "Lookit here! Contents: Oxygen, ten thousand hours; water, five thousand gallons; freeze dry, seven-fifty kilos; human inhabitants, nil. No one onboard! Eva! We just hit the fuckin' mother lode!" He jumped up from the console and did a little dance in the aisle.

That was the thing about hospital jettison: it always got spun off long before it was anywhere near used up. The medical error margin. Another drifter had told them about it, early on. Dirty and blue-fingered from oxygen deprivation, he'd crawled out of a freeze dry locker in an old orbiting crew quarters they'd hooked onto. Given the two of them a lot of tips, too. Like how to rig up propellant cells to run the oxy unit. How to pulverize freeze dry so it needs less cook-up water. How to spot jettison most likely to have something left onboard. "A hospital ward unit, now that's whatcha want to find," he'd croaked. A dozen hours later they'd found him dead, in the locker. How long ago was that? Five thousand hours? Six? Memory was getting harder to come by.

The spot they were in now, it was also a luxury. Just getting out of the vehicle and into the jettison was a death risk. Eve was so big she barely fit in her oxy-suit. It needed splicing at the shoulders and knees with their last roll of duct tape. During transfer she'd have to float motionless, praying it didn't unravel; Sean, who did all the door-dogging and pressure-lock busting, needed the tougher suit. All she could do was hold her breath, and wait. By now, terror was little more than an old familiar ache.

Dirty and blue-fingered from oxygen deprivation, he'd crawled out of a freeze dry locker in an old orbiting crew quarters they'd hooked onto.

When she heard the entry door clank shut the ache transformed itself into a bulb of joy. She'd be alive a little while longer, after all.

"It's beautiful, Sean, innit?" Everything white and rich and clean. Sheets and beds; lights and power and magnegrav that kept you from floating helplessly all the time. Even nicer than the subsidy quarters back in Industrial Orbit.

"We'll get a thousand hours outta this place, min." Sean rubbed a callused hand over his stubble jaw. "I can scavenge up some little jettisons we see come by, empty 'em right into here. This could be our home, Eva, and I mean a *home!"*

When the sun passed behind planet they gorged on freeze dry, then took a water shower and climbed between fresh white sheets. With gravity, Eve discovered she had to sleep on one side not to be suffocated by the baby's weight. It was a little more complicated than weightless but in a way she liked it: it let her know the little one was really there.

In the dark Sean said to her, "We ain't gonna always be junk ring drifters. We're better than that, we are. I could retrain. I mean, I'm willing to retrain and that's half the battle, innit? I'd start out for three grand an hour. I mean, depending on the opportunity. I'd work for three grand, sure. It ain't so much the money so much as it's…getting back control of your own life, you know?

It was a comfort for her, hearing him talking like this again. In all the thousands of hours they'd spent drifting he'd grown frighteningly silent. Brooding. Sometimes she was afraid he blamed her for what had happened. Or

blamed the baby. Everything had started to go sour from the moment she found out she was preggers. Until then things had been—well, if not perfect then comfortable enough for what they were used to. And that was life as zero-grav assemblers on the Industrial Orbit.

They'd both been born to it. Eva hadn't been planetside in her life, although she knew it from videos. Same with Sean. Just a couple of I-orbit yokels who bought the company line about loyalty and letting management take care of you. The two of them had met on the line, fitting five-kilo spheroids. He'd taken her out to a beer party at the Level 5 hall and shown her off to all his pals and the next thing she knew the date was set. Everybody their age was doing pretty much the same thing.

For a while they rented subsidy, outboard of the factory. Living near Sean's pals, commuting to work in a little second-hand runabout Sean had gotten from his uncle. They did sex games at home and watched video and life seemed to be going OK. Next she was standing at the shift boss's desk: "Sorry, Eva, but we're putting through some new production techniques that have made you, uh, redundant." The flash of nausea that washed over her was not from the bad news—as she'd thought—but from the baby. When Sean came home fifty hours later and told her the news about his own layoff she was in the bathroom being sick.

Things came apart faster than she could have imagined. They hadn't saved; nobody in Assembly ever did. Sean wasn't about to work for less than seven grand an hour, which was what all his Level 5 pals were getting. Then they were behind in the rent and the power was being cut off. Eva couldn't quite believe what was happening even when they were packing what they had left in the vehicle. They had to go somewhere: another factory, other housing. Somewhere. They weren't going to be living out of a beat-up orbit commuter with a hundred thousand hours on it.

Even when they slipped I-orbit and picked up the junk ring it didn't seem possible, what they were doing. Only when the blue-fingered derelict crawled out of the freeze dry and babbled at them and died and began to stink did it begin to sink in. And it sunk in deep.

IN THEIR FIRST TEN HOURS ONBOARD, SHE ALMOST lost Sean for good.

He'd been spending time by her bedside at the window, watching for jettison with salvage potential. Sean spotted an abandoned transient crew quarters, and was into his oxy-suit and out the hatch almost before she could stir from bed.

The minute the runabout detached from the ward unit she knew he was in trouble. A stabilizer fin was completely wiped out. The thruster was either banged up or out of fuel. Half the bank came on and swung the runabout in a cockeyed circle. He couldn't get it to travel in a straight line. Eva watched as that one bank flicked on and off, on and off; the runabout wobbled towards the TRQ, then nudged back toward the ward unit. It began to occur to Eva that the vehicle might be beyond repair. That they'd be stuck onboard until Sean managed to fix the runabout. Or made contact with some other drifter with transportation. Or until the provisions ran out.

These thoughts were in her mind the instant the runabout shifted sideways and slammed the TRQ into the side of the ward unit.

Spewing air and water supplies made a sparkling haze around the runabout. She could see Sean struggling to free the vehicle from the debris. Watched him carve a humpbacked path away from the bristling metal. Watched him miss the ward unit entirely and follow a lazy parabola away from her window.

Now the vehicle was floating back towards her quarters, unpowered. Eva sat up in bed and stared out the window, as if the force of concentration could draw it toward her. It did seem to be approaching. An hour passed, and another. She would weep and scream, grow silent and exhausted, then watch and wait and weep and scream all over again.

She sensed that the shock throbbing through her might bring on the baby. The runabout was close enough now for her to see Sean's face, ashen and bleeding.

She would not let herself have the baby now.

Fifty feet between them. Thrusters flared briefly, swinging it in a half-loop towards the contact pad. The jolt from the crash nearly shook her out of bed. The power blinked out for a moment, then returned. Eva held her breath, listening for oxy leaks. The hiss she heard … was from the pressure lock.

Here was Sean, alive, at her bedside. She took his head in her hands and held him, close to the baby. Held the both of them.

ACCORDING TO THE CHRONOMETER THEY'D BEEN onboard 100 hours. To conserve power and oxy, they'd spent much of that time sleeping with the lights off. Awake, Sean had ransacked the quarters, searching for tools. The surgical supply closet was packed with forceps, scalpels of every shape and size—plus stethoscopes, sonoscopes, snips, sutures, and a huge array of unknown chrome-plated things. Nothing of use in rehabilitating a crippled space vehicle. The largest hammer was eight inches long and weighed maybe ten ounces. The biggest wrench was good for tightening nuts on agurney. He found a trunk full of brand new, first-quality oxy-suits, but until there was reason to go outside they weren't any more useful than the sonoscopes.

They were awakened by the sound of a connection being made outside. No crude ram-and-jam: a legitimate four-peg link.

Sean climbed warily from bed. He pulled on a surgery smock and advanced to the pressure chamber with the largest scalpel he could find. The chamber door opened, and the whole blinking, bleating, one-eyed monstrosity trundled in.

An unmanned remote news gatherer from industrial orbit's Channel 52 had found them.

Once the sensing lens picked up evidence of human life the red light above the camera transmission lens came on. Over the speaker system, distant voices competed with one another. This was the unit they dispatched whenever a job was too dangerous or too distant for a news crew: one big bristling self-propelled electronic vulture.

"Greetings. This is Channel 52! We're working up a piece on drifters on the junk ring. Are you, by chance, a transient in these quarters?"

He could find one of the surgical hammers and bash out its lights and lens. But they'd probably just send another.

"Yeah. Just temporary, this is. I'm an Assembler. I also do light spacecraft maintenance." Sean looked into the lens. "We're both of us willing to retrain, you know."

The red light blinked. "We?" Fifty-two asked. "Someone else on board with you?"

"My wife, Eva. She's in bed in the back. Baby's due any day."

"Baby?" Static rumbled through the speaker. "We'd like to meet her! We'd like to talk to you both!"

Sean pointed the way. The remote news gatherer wheeled past him. Painted on its side was a huge plum-and-orange *Live at Five* logo. Its nose-for-news heat sensor guided it to Eva's bedside.

"Tell us, if you would, a little more about your situation," Fifty-two prompted.

"We both got laid off within 100 hours of each other," Eva said. "And then, well, money got tight…"

"Fuckin' offed us, is what they did," Sean interrupted. "Fuckin' management. The ones with all the juice."

Fifty-two made the sound of tape being quickly re-run.

"We weren't sure whether we'd find quarters with enough air and food left for me to have my baby. We were just lucky, you know, finding a whole hospital ward out here."

"Yours is a tragic, touching story," Fifty-two said. "We'd like to add it to our video reel."

Sean and Eva looked at each other helplessly. Finally Sean said, "Right now?"

"We're set up for right now. And tell us, how soon do you think your child will be born?"

"Twenty hours. Ten hours. Five minutes. Your guess is as good as mine."

"Who's going to deliver it for you?"

"Who else the fuck is there but me? I done it once before. With my sister-in-law, when she had her kid. I helped tie off the—that cord thing, you know? All I hope is nothing goes wrong. You got any better ideas?"

"Here in segment one of *Junk Ring Drifters* we'll find out how and why Sean and Eva Hogan are in this situation."

Fifty-two burped electronically, paused, said, "We sympathize with your situation, uh…"

"Sean. Sean Hogan. This here's my wife Eva."

"Uh, Sean and Eva. But you're right; you're too remote for help in less than a hundred hours. Maybe something can be arranged for you in the future. For now, we'd like to take a little video bite of the two of you here at bedside. And, uh—Sean? We understand the sources of your hostility, believe us. But here's a tip: this interview will be so much more *effective* if you can tone down the anger, clean up the language, and project the uncertainty and helplessness we know you're feeling right now."

Sean pursed his lips. He looked down at Eva, contrite, took her hand, said, "Well, maybe your news gatherer could stay, until after our little one's born, and…"

"Yes!" Fifty-two enthused. "Yes! What you're projecting just now, Sean—is perfect! Try and hold onto it!"

"I think I can."

THE COMPLETED VIDEO BITE WAS A WORK OF ART.

"For most of us here in industrial, the Jettison Orbit—the junk ring—is an economic fact of life. To some of us, it's an ecological blight.

"To a few of us, it's home."

From a wide shot of weightless trash in orbit, the camera pulled back to reveal a window—and two homeless wanderers looking helplessly out to space.

"Meet Sean and Eva Hogan. Just a few thousand hours ago, they might have been your neighbors. Might have worked your same shift. Today they're scavengers, wondering what happens next.

"Here in segment one of *Junk Ring Drifters* we'll find out how and why Sean and Eva are in this situation.

"It will make you think. It will make you feel. And it will make you weep. But first, these messages."

Following the commercial break, the RNG established a second tableau: Eva propped in bed, her swollen belly

visible. Sean at bedside, holding her hand. Behind them, the abandoned nurse's station. During the voiceover the camera tightened in on the two of them.

"A scene to make most of us smile: a young couple anticipating the birth of a child in a maternity ward.

"Except that we're not in a maternity ward. What was once I-O General's Ward 7881 is now a junk ring spin-off. With maybe 300 hours of oxygen left. One last, desperate refuge for drifters Sean and Eva Hogan.

"Sean, can you tell us what comes next?"

"Well, we want have the baby here, then stay on as long as possible. After things run out here—I suppose we'll have to find our way to some other jettison."

"And who's actually going to deliver the child?"

Sean's chin began to tremble; he shrugged his shoulders. The camera tightened on his reaction.

"Me, I suppose. We got no one else. I keep telling myself, babies used to come natural all the time, back on planet. I read that once, in a book."

The camera panned down Sean's arm to his hand, linked with Eva's, then up to Eva's face.

"And how do you feel about this, Eva? Frightened?"

"Yes, a bit." Her eyes welled up with tears; the camera zoomed in on them. "Everything'll be right with us, though. I hope it. I pray it."

A cut to the distant tableau of the two of them: "Sean and Eva Hogan. Part of a sea of human misery—all but ignored out here on the junk ring.

"Will their child be born normally? What are their real chances for survival? I'll have the answers in segment two of *Junk Ring Drifters.* Until then, this is Fifty-two Remote, reporting from Ward 7881, Jettison Orbit.

"Dave and Wendy, back to you."

They could hear the howls of delight at the first edited-tape rollover.

"Sean and Eva: that was very, very nice," Fifty-two said. "And yes, we definitely want to keep the RNG onsite until after whatever happens with the child. There's going to be plenty of interest in our followup report."

"Right," Sean said. "And maybe you could even… have the news gatherer uplinked at the time of the birthing…?"

The sounds of an anxious discussion seeped out of the speaker. At last a single voice said, "That would be powerful. But we can't be online thirty straight hours waiting for something to happen. I suppose we could tap in every six hours—"

"I tell you what," Sean said. "I know assembly. I know light repairs. You tell me how to do it, I could activate the camera from here. Then back-link when the time comes. How about it?"

"Deal!" Fifty-two said gleefully. "Manual override's in the back. Tools in the lockbox to the left. The combination's 13-right, 23, 31. Check the operating manual in the jacket below the camera."

"Gotcha." Sean fumbled the combination and the box sprung open suddenly. Wrenches and screwdrivers bounced on the deck.

"What you need to do is convert it to manual mode," Fifty-two said. "Position the camera where it'll get the best show when the moment arrives. Leave it there—and half-an-hour before she's due, back-link to us. Then switch to auto and we'll take over from there."

"Right."

More buzzing on the line: an argument. Finally, Fifty-two said, "Maybe it'd be a good idea to try a rehearsal run-through right now. Ready, Sean?"

"Whenever you are."

"Oh, and—Sean? Stay close to that ops manual, will you? You're working with our latest generation RNG. Self-propelled, heat-seeking, multi-lens, the whole three-trillion package. It's must-recover hardware for us, you understand?"

"I'll take care of it, don't you worry."

SUDDENLY, TIME WAS VERY SHORT, AND THE BRAND new oxy-suits Sean had turned up were worth their weight in gold. He'd told Eva their luck was due for a change, and here it was: the stabilizer fins matched up exactly with his runabout. Even the bolt holes were identical. The propellant came in the same snap-in canisters, but with a difference: the RNG's XB-3 packed triple the punch of the mouse milk they had been using. The camera even had its own detachable gyro.

Ten hours of frantic labor. Then, returning through the pressure lock after dry-testing the thrust rockets he heard her feebly calling his name. Between her legs, the bedding was wet.

Forceps. Water. Linens. Sutures. Sean tried not to sweat. The RNG jacked over the bed, ogling down through its single zoom-lense eye. He had her crack one of the painkillers between her teeth and when the contractions started he booted the unit and back-linked to the station.

"Who the hell is this?" asked an irritated voice (apparently a second-shift super). Sean told him.

"Seanie, *please*," Eva whimpered. "It's coming. It's coming."

"In segment two of *Junk Ring Drifters* we're going to explore the problems of growing a family in spun off carriers. The last time we talked with Sean and Eva Hogan they said the baby was due to arrive at any moment. As you can see, that moment is now."

Sean's total concern narrowed to the liquid white sac slowly emerging from the dilated orifice. He was just barely aware of Eva's breathing and her moans, the

idiotic jabbering from the RNG over his shoulder. How slathered and packed in jelly-like translucence was this glorious new package; somehow much more wonderful than the one he'd seen emerge from his sister-in-law. Free of the mother, now, linked only by the lifegiving pink cord. He cut it and tied it and slapped the newborn. It was awake and screaming now. It was alive, a female. It was his.

He brought it to Eva and laid it in her arms. Fifty-two was still yammering away. Mechanically, he fetched it from the back of the foot of the bed, keyed it tight on the tableau of Eva in bed, with the child. "In the wasteland of Jettison Orbit, the miracle of human life casts its glow," it was raving.

Sean managed a lopsided smile.

"Sean, how does fatherhood feel to you?"

Rolling his eyes earnestly to the camera, he wagged his head back and forth.

"It's like I can't describe it. So many feelings are going through my head, I mean, all it's like is… I feel wonderful."

"Do you have a name picked out?"

"If it was a girl I wanted to name her Rosalie. Always fancied that name, you know. I'll have to check with Eva, though, and I haven't done that yet."

Fifty-two made a wisecrack he missed, then asked Eva for her reaction.

"I love her. Things will work out. We can stay here a while. Sean has a plan. I think … we're going to make it."

"And Sean, what's next for you and your family?"

"Next is getting out of the Junk Ring and back to work. I've already got me a firm job offer."

"You do?"

"Sure. And I want to take this moment to say thank you to Channel 52! For offering to start me as your newest Life-At-Five Assignments reporter, and most of all, for—"

Again, the sound of tape being rewound frantically. From the RNG's speaker came a disappointed voice. "Sean, Sean. We're sorry, we're going to have to redo the last twenty seconds, here. Starting back to where we cut from Eva."

"How come we got to do that?"

"Sean, we haven't promised you a position here at the Station."

"No, but you're going to."

"Hello, Sean? This is Syd Cole. Station manager. Look, even though all of us here are extremely sympathetic to your situation we're simply in no position to—"

"Right! And I'm in no position to worry about your fuckin' three-trillion electronic vulture here after we'd headed off to another piece of fuckin' jettison."

"That's no problem, Sean. Just back-link control to us and it'll fly back on its own."

Sean tipped the camera down ninety degrees, to give them a look at the stripped base. "Not without thrusters, it won't. Not without stabilizers, or fuel. See, we borrowed them things for our runabout—didn't think you'd mind or nothing."

Fifty-two sat there regarding itself mutely. The infant made little lapping noises at Eva's breast.

"If I cut off your trace, you'll never be able to find it up here in fifty million fuckin' tons of orbiting space junk!"

"We'll send a recovery vehicle, Sean."

"Not if I cut off your trace, so you'll never be able to find it up here in fifty million fuckin' tons of orbiting space junk!"

"Sean—"

"Tell you what." He wrenched the camera back to eye level and stared into it. "I'll disassemble this unit, pack it in the runabout. I can do that. Maybe cart it back to I-orbit for you."

A resigned voice said, "That would be helpful."

"And you can't say I don't know about appearing on fuckin' video. I done it just the way you wanted, first time out, and it worked perfect, dinnit?"

"Sean…"

"Dinnit?"

"Sean…"

"We're halfway through segment two and you know you got a fuckin' treasure on your hands. Tell you, just clear me through the station when we get back and I'll give you a wrap-up that'll have 'em crying their bleeding eyes out. What do you say?"

"Sean, we could take you on as a video tech. That's a possibility. But on-air talent's something different. The station has an agreement with Equity."

"What's Equity?"

"It's like a union."

"Fuck the fuckin' union. I'll fuckin' join the fuckin' thing. I'm already on this fuckin' tear-jerker you're taping so what the fuck's the difference?"

There was a long pause. "Stand by, Sean."

THE WIDE SHOT INCLUDED A TABLEAU OF THE NEW father, his arm around his wife, the baby at her breast. Their eyes glittered with gratitude and relief. As Sean spoke, the camera slowly focussed tightly on his careworn face, his gentle eyes.

"It's like a dream come true. For Channel 52 to give me this opportunity, I don't rightly know what to say."

Briefly words stopped as Sean struggled with a throat thick with tears. The camera panned to Eva, gazing up

towards him with reverent dependency, then down to little Rosalie, her alabaster head feathered with downy brown hairs.

"Sean and I are looking forward to a second chance at life. It means so much to the future of little Rosalie."

"I know it ain't going to be easy for me, either, at the beginning. I never been anything but a working stiff, a guy who speaks his mind without hiding what he really feels. But that's gonna help me get close to the stories I'll be covering: lives of the I-orbit's working class. Robotechs, welders, transporters. Assemblers, like Eva and me. I'll be giving viewers a look at what we do. What we want. What we're afraid of.

"And along the way we'll be giving you updates on Rosalie, as she grows up. Seems fair enough—since all of you helped with her birthing.

"And so for now, reporting live from the junk ring, this is Fifty-two 's newest on-the-spot reporter, Sean Hogan."

"That's a wrap, Sean."

"Fuckin' A," Sean muttered, and unscrewed the camera lens. It was time he and Eva had a little privacy.

"And Sean, can we get an idea of when you're planning to return the—of when you're planning to arrive here at the station?"

"I'm gonna take another 750 hours out here, make sure Eva and Rosie's up to the trip before we set off. Maybe longer, if I have to. Just keep a lid on. You'll see the bunch of us soon enough."

"All right, Sean."

"G'day," Sean said, and pulled the backlink plug. The excitement of the possibilities ahead flowed through his chest like electricity.

"I always had faith in you, Seanie," Eva said. "I knew all you needed was a chance of your own."

Sean squeezed his wife's hand, gazed tenderly at his child. Then looked out the window at the junk—beyond it, the Industrial Orbit; beyond that, planet; and back of it all, the sun. It was thrilling how control was flowing back into his own hands, as though it had never left.

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Moral Minority

CERI JORDAN

An average man lives 72 years.
But what about the *average man?*

IT WAS ALL A QUESTION OF BALANCE.

He called himself Henry this week; formal Brit-style names were on the upswing, according to the figures. Next week he might be a Joshua or a Mohammed, depending on who was winning the breeding race down in the 'burbs—or a nickname, Chilli or Turbo or Elex, if the summer swing towards youthCulture held out as it usually did. The only thing the trends didn't change was the number on his account, and that was how the government referred to him, so his roving nomenclature didn't bother them any.

017394782394-Henry prided himself on being the sort of guy you never looked twice at. Part of the job specs, of course. But he elevated it to an art form. He could have been thirty or fifty, Hispanic or Pacific or Native-A, you just couldn't tell. When he went into the Hendrix Burger Bar—once a week regular, to order "Whatever you've sold most of this week"—he often had to clear his throat a couple of times before the tired-looking cyberheads behind the counter slouched over to serve him. People bumped into him on street corners and blinked into his face like there was nothing there.

No one ever noticed (temporary)Henry. That was exactly the way things should be, he mused, chomping on a vegan WatchtowerBurger while wild guitars climbed heavenward on the permanent soundtrack and teenage Next Big Things cruised by in open-tops, blaring their beauty at an indifferent world. With so many bright and glorious individuals shrieking for their attention, why should anyone notice Mr. Average?

With so many bright and glorious individuals shrieking for their attention, why should anyone notice Mr. Average?

And that's how he got careless, how he ended up sitting with his back to a door both real and metaphorical, and that's how he ended up where he is now—free, happy, and totally and utterly screwed.

IT STARTED ON A WEDNESDAY, THE MOST AVERAGE day of the week. No one ever did anything wild on a Wednesday—and if they did, they were statistically irrelevant—so Henry didn't either.

That particular Wednesday, he was sitting on a bench uptown, watching the rainbow-colored pigeons pecking crumbs in the square. It wasn't fun, but, for reasons that eluded him, a lot of people spent a lot of time on benches. Consequently, so did Henry.

There was a big session going down tomorrow. A market test for a new soft drink or something—the company didn't release details in advance, in case the competition tried to bribe or infiltrate. Which was stupid. Average people didn't take bribes. Anyway, a big session; all fifty of the averagers, men and women, were being called in. There'd be a bonus payment, to keep their lips sealed until the product hit the marketplace; and since it was perfectly average to blow any bonus on something unnecessary and probably useless, he'd be free to spend it how he chose. Maybe a personal massager, like on the TeeVee. He might even consider a holiday. A real holiday. It wasn't entirely unusual for lower-middle income males to jet off to Europe and do the sights, not these days—and with Venice going down like the Titanic, he ought to go this year, while you could still sightsee without scuba gear.

Fishing in his pocket, Henry extracted the Probabilator and tapped in a few variables. Seventy-three percent probability of someone in his social bracket selecting a cheap guided package, only 24 percent prob that they'd go solo. Pity. He didn't like guided tours much. Well, that's the downturn of the job, as they'd told him when they signed him up.

He sat and watched the pigeons for a while, waiting for his perfectly trained, perfectly average attention span to expire. When it did, he got up, shook out his trench coat, and moved on, pressing buttons on the Probabilator as he walked. Go to a movie, 83 percent prob; get something to eat, 79 percent. Near enough to make no difference. And he took in the only decent movie of the month last week.

Turning left into Dissolution Avenue, Henry started scanning the luminous shop-fronts for somewhere suitable.

He'd done this a lot when he first signed up. Wandered around town, staring in the windows of the outfitters and the plastic surgeons, wondering how long before he could spend his money in there. Day never came, of course. They'd hired him as a B3 white-collar working stiff, and that was exactly how he had to stay. He even had to work still, to keep abreast of the tensions and camaraderie of the workplace. Only three days a week, so he could stay sympathetic to the increasing number on Assistance as the ArtiFlects ate up their jobs. He never did much; shuffled papers, drank coffee, listened to everyone else in the office complain. But that must be just about what an average working guy did. If he was straying too far, the Probabilator was programmed to protest.

No new suits, and no new face. They'd let him sign up with a whole bundle of bright shining illusions, when you came to think about it. There had to be laws against that.

The window in front of him was darker than the others, smoked glass, giving him glimpse of movement and candle-flicker within. Turn Of the Century Tearooms, real oldieQuaint. Thirteen percent prob, said the overgrown calculator in his hand, and he ought to be keeping his averages bang on so he'd be ready for tomorrow, spontaneous and natural and reacting like that mythical man in the street.

Hell. It was average enough to do something unusual sometimes.

Pushing the brass handle down, Henry opened the door.

IT WASN'T AS GLOOMY AS HE'D EXPECTED; RECESSED lights in the wooden beams of the ceiling spread a gentle glow, and the candles burning on the tables and the windowsills were just there for atmosphere. Pretty busy, too. Moneymen at that table, in their flash suits, glancing automatically at their hand-held stock analyzers every few words, can't take their eyes off the markets. A gaggle of trophy wives in the corner, preening and giggling, watching him in a vast oval mirror on the rear wall.

A B3 white-collar ought to feel nervous as a rat in a lab, coming in here. But he didn't. He liked it. The mud-red tiles on the floor, the oak paneling dappled with years of wear. A passing waitress gestured for him to take a seat, and he picked a small table by the window—two-seater, modest and unobtrusive—and sat down.

The woman at the next table looked up and smiled.

QUONDAM-HENRY SMILED BACK. THAT'S WHAT people do, after all. People are polite. They smile and avert their eyes so they don't have to say anything, don't have to engage.

"Looks like I've been landfilled," she said, waving her hand at a street full of people, and none of them whoever it was she was waiting for. "May I join you? I feel so conspicuous sat here alone."

He didn't want this. Didn't want to be bothered with small talk and lies and trying to think of ways to avoid giving her whatever it was she wanted—sex or money or just time and attention, he kept it all jealously guarded so it didn't make much difference.

"I guess so," he said, one eye on the Probabilator balanced in his lap. Say yes, 93 percent. Get away as fast as possible, 99 percent.

She shimmied into the seat opposite and smiled again. It was a spontaneous smile, Henry felt, or a good imitation of one. A child's smile, not bothering to hide or to guard. From the way she was dressed, he decided she was a medium-income housewife. With expensive shoes. Maybe with a side job or a moneymaking hobby. That swirly gold jewelry she was wearing, the necklace and the bracelet, maybe she made that, small-scale, to help the budget along.

"Lori," she announced, and he realized that was his cue.

"I'm Henry. Pleased to meet you."

"You know, Henry, I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before…"

It was a sorry excuse for a conversation-spinner, but she looked like she meant it, so he shrugged and offered, "People say that a lot." Which they did. "I have a pretty average sort of face." Which he had.

"I wouldn't have said so," Lori observed, swirling the dregs of her coffee in the tiny porcelain cup. "You have a nice face. Too clever for whatever it is you do for a living."

Henry shifted position, gripping the Probabilator down between his knees where she couldn't see it. "Oh," he said, for want of anything better; and then the waitress was there, and he ordered tea and scones in a panic, without a glance at the probability, and offered Lori more coffee, but she said no, she was fine. And then they were alone again, and she said, "You're a collar-and-tie, for sure."

"I'm sorry?"

"Collar-and-tie, an office worker. Paper-pusher, people used to say. My father called himself that. A paper-pusher."

"That's… accurate. That's about all I do."

Probability of accepting an offer of sex, 89 percent. You are reminded that all sexual activity engaged in is at your own risk. The company accepts no responsibility for—

The tea arrived, in a dainty little pot with a handle he couldn't have got one finger through, and a cup with no handle at all.

"Allow me," Lori smiled, and poured for him. "Sugar? Milk?"

"Milk," he conceded. He preferred it black, but he had to get these averages back on track. The scones arrived while he was waiting for it to cool, and Lori accepted the offer of one with another riveting smile.

Probability of accepting an offer of sex, 95 percent.

"So, um," he said, looking for a way to distract himself from the hint of lacy vest below the neckline of that blouse, and thoughts of taking it off. "That jewelry's nice."

"This?" She pinched the necklace between finger and thumb, as if reminding herself what it looked like. "I stole it."

She looked at him and laughed, but he knew she wasn't joking.

"Are you shocked?"

He started to look to the Probabilator for guidance, but she was watching him too closely, she'd wonder what he was paying so much attention to down there. "Yeah," he said. "I guess."

"Haven't you ever done anything crazy? Just because you felt like it?"

"Well, I… not something against the law."

Probability of accepting an offer of sex, 89 percent. All sexual activity engaged in is at your own risk.

Lori shrugged. "Never mind. Couple more sips of tea, and you'll see what I mean."

There was a little gap in the conversation, while Henry realized that this was evidently the point that any normal person's alarm bells would start bringing the roof down—and that his were, self-evidently, not.

"Oh," he said.

Lori began to laugh.

Setting the teacup aside, Henry looked sternly at her for a moment. Yes, she could have had time to slip something into his cup while she was pouring for him. He'd been buttering her a scone, ungrateful woman, and he wouldn't have noticed. Perhaps she even had an accomplice in the teashop, drugging likely customers for robbery or organ theft or anything at all. He looked at the Probabilator screen, but it was wittering something about the probability of accepting that as a joke—which it quite obviously wasn't, what was wrong with the machine?

"Don't blow a valve," she grinned, her tone shifting abruptly toward some street slang or other. He could see now that she didn't belong in those clothes. The jewelry didn't belong, either, though with which image, he couldn't tell.

He was tired of sitting here talking.

"Let's go somewhere else," he said.

The Probabilator squealed like he'd sat on it—which he hadn't. It was still safe and sound on his knee. Maybe it was malfunctioning.

"In a minute," she said, smiling. "I want to finish my scone first."

Henry thought about what he wanted. It was a word he hadn't used, not properly, for a long time. He wanted to buy a bottle of wine, then climb up the face of the black granite Mother Of Suffering on the riverbank and sit

there, drinking and throwing litter at passers-by. No, maybe not. Maybe he'd go down to the park, hang around watching the artists defacing the walls and plaiting rubbish into the tree branches, let them laugh at this plump, aging collar-and-tie for a while, until they'd maybe offer him a swig from those illegally-brewed bottles and try to explain their work.

The Probabilator was bleeping away like a cardiac monitor, and people were starting to stare. He picked up the cup and took another couple of gulps, almost draining it, and then said, "So. What did you put in the tea?"

"Specialized psychoactive. Knocks out social inhibitions. Don't worry, it'll wear off in about 72 hours. I'd hate to rob anyone of their livelihood, in these troubled days. After all, you've got one of the very few jobs that an artificial intellect can't do." Lori finished the scone, wiping her butter-smeared fingers on his napkin, and reached into her pocket. "You're going to be having some fun over the next couple of days, my friend. Why don't you allow TermaMarlCorp to express their gratitude in a… financial fashion?"

The Probabilator was going crazy. At this rate, he was going to have to sit on it or something. "Gratitude for what?"

Slapping a wedge of credit slips onto the table, Lori stood up and began buttoning her coat. "Screwing up the tests of our competitor's new wonder product, of course."

Of course. It was all starting to sound perfectly logical, Henry thought, spinning one of the credit slips on its gold-coded corner for a moment. He couldn't think why he'd been so worried about having tea with this nice woman. Damn machine, that's what it was. Ruling his life—or trying to. He'd show it who was boss.

"Have to rush," Lori confessed. "Lots more people on the employee list to be tracked down and invited to tea. Or beer, or a forced injection if that's what it takes… you'll be all right on your own, won't you, Henry?"

Lifting the lid on the teapot, Henry dropped the Probabilator inside and watched the firework display.

"I'll be just fine, thanks."

CERI JORDAN

lives in mid-Wales. Her work has appeared in many U.S. and UK magazines, including The Third Alternative, Kimota, The Zone, *and* Not One Of Us. *She is currently working on an experimental hypertext novel, and will be SF news correspondent on the new online magazine* At The End Of The World. *Her first novel is* The Disaffected *(Tanjen Books, 1998).*

Passing the Torch

JOHN GERNER

What a symbol represents depends entirely on your point of view.

I TOOK A LONG DEEP BREATH, STOOD UP, AND BOWED. *"Wu an.* I'm Mike Dorian, chief architect at Talex Entertainment. We're excited to be a finalist in this design competition for the world's greatest theme park, to be built right here in Shanghai; one that will be better than Tokyo Disneyland." Everyone liked the comparison—a guaranteed crowd-pleaser.

I stood on a small stage in one of the meeting rooms of the Shanghai Imperial Hotel, which did night-duty as a karoake party room. The air had the faint smell of stale beer and tobacco, suppressed by lilac air freshener. There was a slight chill, the result of overworked air-conditioning. Top managers from the Chinese development company, along with some banking and government reps, sat at small cocktail tables.

The large projection screen behind me was normally used for sing-along videos. The first time I'd stood on that stage, I sang along too, surrounded by my drunken Chinese cohorts, teaching them the words to "New York, New York." But that was so many years ago—back in the twentieth century, before the Second Depression, before the world got turned on to Sino-Pop.

"The only reason you'd *have* to go full-scale," I chuckled, "was if you were going to use the *real* Statue of Liberty."

This time it was business, all business. I started my presentation by recapping the lessons we'd learned while designing smaller theme parks in Southeast Asia, emphasizing how the new Fantasy Wonderland would build on these experiences. It's important to name-drop your past successes; it provides reassurance.

And I needed reassurance too. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it wasn't a slam-dunk. We were competing against two Chinese design firms—one from Hong Kong, one home-grown. The Hong Kong firm was known for its cutting-edge ideas. I had to persuade them the American approach wasn't old-fashioned and outmoded.

I began leading everyone through my computer-generated 3-D model of the new theme park, Fantasy Wonderland, briefly describing the major proposed components. The basic approach was to whet their appetite, not bury them in detail. I'd learned some time ago that theme parks are sexy projects, enticing everyone to go into child mode and play dream-maker. That's okay. I'd intentionally left little gaps for them to fill, knowing they'd be more likely to buy into my design ideas if they were actively involved in its creation. I couldn't afford to be a prima donna. If I came up dry here, I'd be back beating the bushes again. With the U.S. and European economies in shambles, that would mean Asia—and I wasn't Asian.

I pointed out that the overall layout of the new theme park would follow the popular "hub and spoke" approach originally used in Disneyland, with the five themed sections of the park surrounding its visual centerpiece. At Tokyo Disneyland, that visual centerpiece was Cinderella's Castle; at Kings Island it was a one-third scale replica of Paris' Eiffel tower. At Fantasy Wonderland, it would be a replica of the Statue of Liberty, which would also serve as the anchor attraction of the American section of the park. During preliminary discussions over the previous few months, everyone had agreed it would be a great symbol of China's progress. Decades ago, tanks had torn down a small home-made version built by protesters in Tiananmen Square, but now it would be the centerpiece of China's premier theme park. I took comfort in their initial reactions. Of the three finalists, my firm had the only design with the Statue as the park's centerpiece.

I had a much more personal reason for picking the Statue of Liberty. When I was a kid, Granddad Dimitri would pick me up in Alexandria on his drive back from Miami each year and take me to his townhouse in New York for the weekend. We'd spend two whole days there seeing the sights, just the two of us.

The first time we took the Ellis Island ferry and passed by the Statue of Liberty, he smiled and put his arm around my shoulders. "Look, Michael, isn't she beautiful? Except for your Grandmother Maria, I think she is the most beautiful woman in the world. When I was a little boy like you, in 1943, my whole family came to America. Nobody wanted us in Greece. So we got on a big boat and sailed for days and days. There was nothing but water around us. Water as far as you could see. I was afraid, Michael. But then we saw her in the harbor. Her torch was bright, showing us the way. She wanted us and I was no longer afraid."

So my choice of the Statue of Liberty as the visual centerpiece for the new theme park was my personal tribute to Granddad Dimitri, for all the fun times we had together.

"Mike, what size will the Statue of Liberty be in the new theme park? I can't tell from looking at your computer model," Li Cheung asked.

Li, head of our prospective Chinese partners, was wearing an impeccably tailored dark gray suit. Stanford-educated, incredibly self-controlled. Shanghai's jade dealers wore dark glasses because their pupils would involuntarily dilate when they saw a real find. Li wouldn't need the glasses. He was one of the few people I couldn't read, and I admired that.

"The Statue of Liberty replica would be half the size as the original, the same scale as the landmarks at Shenzhen's Wonders of the World park."

"I'm sorry, Mike, but the Statue has to be full-size."

I started shaking my head. A change like that would be more than tinkering. "Li, if we go full-size, the Statue would dwarf everything around it. We'd have to double the size of practically every building near it and that'll really increase the construction budget."

Li was insistent. "We understand, but it has to be full-scale."

I tried a little humor to get everyone back on track. "Look, the only reason you'd *have* to go full-scale," I chuckled, "was if you were going to use the *real* Statue of Liberty. Otherwise, the extra cost needed to…"

At that moment, Li was static, as expected, but the two associates at his table suddenly got fidgety. One quickly locked his right foot behind the back of his left leg—a definite defensive position. Feet don't lie. The other started biting his fingernail. Subtle movements, but to my feelers it was like watching jaws drop to the floor in an old cartoon.

I tested the waters again by bringing up the indoor coaster, one of the park's top thrill attraction, planned inside the replica of the Statue of Liberty.

"Scrap it," Li said.

The coaster had been Li's idea. Something had changed in the last few days. But if a deal had just been ironed out, it would obviously be secret, on a "need to know" basis. And, frankly, I wouldn't need to know. As long I assumed a full-scale Statue of Liberty with nothing inside, it could be a replica or the real thing.

But I wanted to know. I decided to take the direct approach. "Li, have the Chinese somehow worked out a deal to get the real Statue of Liberty and move it to Shanghai?"

Like the sphinx, he answered without expression.

"Yes. I must now remind you and your associates of the confidentiality agreement your company signed."

My boss, Barry Sloane, was squirming in his chair next to me, giving me the "let's move on" look. He didn't want me to say anything that would jinx us getting the project. But I was just stunned and blurted out, "Why'd you do it?"

Li answered, "Our government sees this as an historic coming of age. The British took the Parthenon's Elgin Marbles from the Greeks. The British sold the London Bridge to Lake Havasu in the U.S. And now we've acquired the Statue of Liberty. It's a symbolic passing of the torch from one superpower to the next."

Silence. I didn't know what to say. Then Barry stood up next to me and said "Well, this is certainly a surprise. But since the high top brass wants to do this, I'm sure we can make the necessary adjustments in our designs. Can't we, Mike? Mike…"

I was remembering how the Hanson administration blamed recent immigrants and minorities for America's social and economic troubles, but I'd always figured that was just political posturing. I was also aware the government was desperate for hard currency since the dollar recently took a dive. Who wasn't? But this?

Li added, "Our top government officials are very excited about this arrangement. They couldn't justify the cost of acquiring, repairing and restoring the Statue unless it's part of a commercial enterprise. And since the theme park will be financed by government-backed loans, we're excited too. The U.S. will receive debt forgiveness on some major loans. Even the French have agreed to this arrangement. And I don't have to remind you that your company has the only design with the Statue of Liberty."

I felt a sharp pain. Barry was giving me his typical "stop what you're doing right now" signal by stepping hard on my left foot, hidden by the podium.

But I just couldn't go back to talking about theme park designs. After a few seconds of awkward silence, I leaned forward to the microphone and mumbled "I'm sorry, I have to take a quick break, sorry," and walked off the stage. A pained expression would buy me a few minutes of privacy.

Barry caught up with me in the hallway. He had this uncanny ability to look both happy and pissed at the same time—he was demonstrating it at that moment. "Mike, you heard Li. We've got it, so let's get back in there and clinch this thing."

"I don't know if I want to. You heard what's happening."

"So what? Let them have the Statue of Liberty. It's just a relic of a time long gone. Keep your eye on the prize, Mike. Can't you see this is our ticket out? We can finally get our papers to move here to China."

"I'm not ready to leave."

"Why not? Don't you get it? It was the European century during the 1800s, the American century during the 1900s and now we're in the Asian century. I want to be where it's happening. Not moping and whining about the good old days. Don't you?"

"It was the European century during the 1800s, the American century during the 1900s and now we're in the Asian century."

I stopped arguing with him, it wouldn't have done any good. I'm not the arguing kind, and honestly, I would have had a hard time debating him.

Barry's tone then became more like a parent than a boss. "Look Mike, you've always said you hated the business side. So just do your job and you'll be fine."

I hesitated.

"Well, Mike, what are you going to do?"

When it comes to decisions, I'm not someone who ponders, carefully weighing out each option—many times I wish I had. I know people and I know ideas. So at that very moment, by instinct, I looked down deep into the depths of my own soul. And I knew what I had to do.

When we passed the men's room, I darted inside. The stall partitions were stone-tiled from floor to ceiling—sound-proof—a luxury hotel perk. With my back pressed up against the stall door in case someone tried to get in, I used my cellular phone to call directory assistance in New York. I got the number for the *News Leader* and called their informer line. I began telling the guy who answered what I knew about the Statue of Liberty deal.

"I don't want to hear this," he interrupted.

"It's true, you've got to believe me. I'm risking everything to tell you this," I said.

"No, I don't want to hear this 'cause you're telling me what's in today's local section. The story was leaked last night."

"What's the response?"

"There's some protesters down there, and some people are squawking."

"Will they stop it?"

"Nah. Done deal. I don't know how things are over there, but people have a lot of things to deal with here. We've got a depression going on if you haven't noticed. Thanks for calling."

Dial tone. So much for heroics. A hero was not required at this time. And I, looking like some two-bit spy, just felt foolish and old.

When I walked out into the hallway, Barry was waiting for me. He could tell from the expression on my face that something was wrong. I can read other people pretty well, but I never could hide my own feelings.

"What's going on, Mike?" he asked.

I wasn't going to lie to him.

He thought for a moment. "You called someone, didn't you? Talked about what's happening here."

I stood there, speechless.

Barry shook his head. "Stupid move. You know about our confidentiality agreement. You've just put the firm at grave risk." He now just looked pissed. "You're fired."

I didn't say anything; there wasn't anything to be said. I thought about going back to my hotel room, but I didn't want to be alone, so I headed to the lounge, found a small empty table, and had a beer.

After I'd finished my second Tsingtao, a voice came from behind me. "Mike, can I talk with you for a few minutes?"

I turned around. It was Li. I almost told him there was nothing to talk about, but I didn't. I just motioned for him to sit down in the chair next to me.

"I just spoke with Barry," he said, sitting down. "Why didn't you go along with the Statue of Liberty arrangement?"

"It's personal," I answered. And then I told him about my Granddad Dimitri. The whole story. How much the Statue had meant to him so long ago. I ended by saying "I thought the Chinese understood about honoring ancestors. But maybe capitalism has changed a lot of things."

Li hesitated before answering. This wasn't like him at all. In past talks, he'd been like a chess grandmaster, always thinking many moves ahead. But not this time. Silent.

Finally, he spoke, his voice a bit shaky. "My father helped build the Goddess of Democracy, modeled after the Statue of Liberty, that stood in Tiananmen Square in 1989."

"Was he one of the protesters who…"

"Yes. Having the Statue of Liberty here in Shanghai will reassure my mother of why she was left alone."

Li had been so good at hiding his feelings, I'd sort of assumed he was like a desert. But at that moment, I realized his facade was really more like a dam. Holding back an ocean. And there were tiny cracks under his eyes.

He handed me a plain manila envelope. Inside were some typed pages describing a new themed attraction in Shenyang that was still in the early concept development stage. I looked up, puzzled.

"It's not as prestigious as Fantasy Wonderland," he said, "but it needs your touch. It's yours if you want it. Sole source. The first project for your own design firm, perhaps."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Hey, let's get out of here. I hear there's this new karoake bar down on Nanjing Lu."

As we walked out of the hotel, I turned to Li and said "Don't get too attached to the Statue of Liberty. You know the Greeks finally did get the Elgin Marbles back from the British."

"Yes. It took about 200 years."

"But things change so much faster today. Don't they?"

Li smiled. "Yes, they do."

JOHN GERNER

likes to think of himself as a writer-songwriter, though the IRS considers him a consultant who does planning studies for new tourist attractions. He was a Clarion West '97 attendee. More of his creative efforts can be found at <http://www.richmond.infi.net/~jgerner/creative.html>.

Something in Between

GARY CADWALLADER

The houses of the Zodiac may offer guidance—just don't forget about the homes here on Earth.

I WAS FIFTY BEFORE I CAST MY FIRST SPELL.

"You have the power," Cleo had said. Cleo is my astrologer. And he knows things, but then he always has. "You have the desire," he had said.

Oh God, did I have the desire! Three really bad years had beaten me up. A divorce, eleven months of purposeful celibacy—not even dating—and then two love affairs that ended badly… oh yeah, I had the desire!

So I made my cast. Just a little thing. And what could it cost?

I wrote down everything I wanted in a woman. There were fifty items, all on green spiral notebook paper. A list.

- *Great sensitivity*
- *Good looking*
- *Loves me*
- *I love her*
- *Is faithful*

—and so on, becoming more complex as I went:

- *Talks things over with me*
- *Comes to me with her troubles*
- *Knows when I'm having trouble*

—and sometimes kinkier:

- *Number 35*
- *Number 36*
- *Number 37*

—and ending with:

- *Makes me feel like a hero*
- *I make her feel like a goddess*

That sort of thing. I put the list under my pillow. It was a new pillow, big and fluffy. I had bought new sheets and a comforter. The comforter was pink and green, but nice looking and not too feminine… just enough, I thought. And I was sleeping on this old black sofa that made into a full-size bed. There was a red indoor-outdoor carpet on the concrete floor of the basement. I could make the bed up and have a little living space.

No one had ever been here but Cleo. I wouldn't ask anybody else over. I looked up at the bare wooden beams that made up my ceiling. I thought I should get some cardboard, paint it white and draw the Sistine Ceiling up there. I could lie in my bed and admire Michelangelo. Life would be better.

And I slept on my spell for a month. I was trying to draw the perfect woman to my side. Cleo said, "There's no difference between making a list and praying. You're talking to God either way."

As I look back, I wonder if the list should have been longer.

CLEO COMES OVER TO THE HOUSE I SHARE WITH my sick father. We're a strange mix. I'm fifty, white, and down to 132 pounds. I make a decent living as an artist. *Very* good, for an artist, but I give half of it for child support. Cleophus Brown, my old schoolmate, is a black man. He was a lineman in football. Now he's a professional astrologer. Pop, who everyone calls "Darn" because he won't swear, is eighty-one. Retired. Waiting to die. You can see it in his eyes. Nobody knows what color they are anymore.

I wrote down everything I wanted in a woman. A list. As I look back, I wonder if the list should have been longer.

Cleo and Darn don't get along that well. Cleo has opinions. Darn doesn't tolerate them anymore. Age made him arrogant. I remember him as Pop, the good guy. The best man I ever knew.

I won't disagree with him. I tell myself it's out of respect. Maybe it's love? I don't know. I know he taught me to play golf when I was eight. He gave me a five-iron to use for every shot. He was a great golfer, and he had to put up with this little kid who shot 101 on the first nine and 99 on the back. I spent more time in the woods than on the fairway. But he didn't care. He appeared to be the most patient man in the world.

I didn't inherit his patience. I'm his opposite, like Mom was. The other half of his soul. Lack of patience is probably why I cast a spell—conjured up the perfect woman. But then, I look at Pop and know time is short and meant to be lived.

As men go in the singles market, I'm not much of a catch. My weight's down to my high-school days, that's true—it's nice to have no gut. And I've drawn myself a new chin using my beard for a drawing pencil. That works. But younger? Nope. That isn't going to happen. Richer? Well… not until Pop dies. Which I hate to think about, but it's always there in the back of my mind.

I have serious doubts about the future.

It's November now; football is in full swing. Cleo and I are remembering the old days.

"You're looking good," he says. "Old number ten! Sitting on the bench again," and he laughs. I know he's talking about my relationships, but I ignore that.

"Yeah, but I got in once, remember?"

Three hundred-pound Cleo was only seventeen years old and already weighed two-twenty. He could bench-press four hundred pounds without warming up, and he was the trap blocker on *my* play. Coach had drawn it up just for me. I was on the left. Everybody came toward me like it was a run around left end, but it was a delayed handoff up the middle. Cleo was supposed to pound anybody who didn't fall for the fake. There should be a hole up the middle big enough for our yellow school bus.

The play starts. I set up like I'm blocking people trailing the ball carrier. Cleo backs a step off the line and parallels me.

I get to the quarterback. He gives me the ball. I see the hole in the middle just like Coach said. It's huge! There's a pile of guys on the left, another on the right. But in the middle? Jeez! Nobody's in the middle. The hole is five yards wide. All I gotta do is run.

"Dammit George, if you'd just been patient," Cleo says.

I look at my feet. Patience never was my strong point.

"But noooooo, you see that hole and just *take off!"* He laughs about it. We still laugh about it. Good lord, it was thirty-three years ago.

One of the defensive linemen gets through on the right. Cleo is waiting for him. He won't even see him coming. Cleo will lay him out.

But—

I see the hole and just go. I'm feeling good. I have the ball. I run.

Cleo screams something and points. I look right. There's the lineman from the other team.

Bang!

Cleo and the lineman collide. I'm in the middle. Then, while I watch someone in the stands wave a flag and the cheerleaders talk among themselves, everybody falls down. My foot is underneath. Everybody falls.

Snap goes the ankle. I hear it. It's not a bad sound, just interesting, and I'm detached from it. Later the pain comes, and I lose my detachment.

Funny thing is, I end up learning to paint while I'm sitting out the rest of football season, and win a scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute. Things change quickly. I'm an opportunist.

"Moon in Gemini," Cleo says of that time. "Mr. Versatile. Mr. Changeable. Act now and ask questions later?"

When he's being catty like an old woman, he trashes me like that. "Oh, sorry," he says. "Sentences too long for you? George bored? George go home now?" He says it like he's talking to a cave man.

I give him my ugliest look—the one that means, "You're just puke on toast." It always makes him laugh.

He *is* puke on toast, but that's another matter. Besides, he calls me "White Slime Ass"… and that's when he's in a good mood.

His good moods are more frequent lately. He's doing well for himself.

It took a while. When we were in high school, he sent off to New York for an astrology chart. He was amazed. The mail-order astrologer pinned him to the wall. She told him things about himself that no stranger could know. Then she went on to tell him when he'd marry. She told him he'd divorce. He'd have one kid—a boy. Everything.

Funny thing is, I learn to paint while I'm sitting out football season, and win a scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute.

He lied to the astrologer. He said his name was Marcus Purcell. Doesn't matter. Everything in his chart had already either happened just like she said it would, or seemed so reasonable— so likely to happen, and happen only to Cleo, that he swore he'd found the truth we all are looking for.

Then!

Then she has the nerve to call him "Puke on Toast." Hey hey hey.

Cleo shoulda known we set him up, but for some reason, it didn't matter. He began to study astrology like it was the Bible. I told him, "Cleo, be reasonable, the football team and I told that woman everything about you. It was a joke!"

He didn't listen.

He studied, he worked. He began to draw sentences from the symbols he saw.

Dammit, it shouldn't have worked. *It was a joke.* But Cleo made it work for him.

"I'm gonna do this stuff," he said. "I'm gonna study astrology."

Today he's living in a condo and running off at the mouth about his stocks. And his charts *work.* His charts are not fakes. They are not so generalized that could fit anybody: they are as specific as warts on a pumpkin. Turns out he had a gift. Jeez, we were just fooling around. The guy bases the rest of his life on one practical joke—and makes it work?

"You should put five hundred in AQCT," he says. "It's ten cents a share right now. It'll hit two bucks by August. Where you gonna get that kind of return?"

"You're a greedy little black man," I say. "Besides, what happened to *you were gonna die in August?"*

"Okay, I was wrong about that one." He looks sheepish. He did his own chart. He saw something coming in August. "You can't always tell what's coming," he says. "There's the high road, the low road, and something in between. I could meet the girl of my dreams. I could get killed on the highway— but now I think I'll just make more money. The middle road is the most likely path, after all."

"The world wants us to be mediocre," I say.

"Now you just sound silly."

"Ah Cleo, I thought you were infallible."

"Silly, silly, silly. You were always the one that believed in me. But nobody's infallible. I calculate my angles, draw my charts, and make sentences. I see Venus in Virgo and think it means one thing. It could mean something else. Soon enough you see the real meaning. Besides, your own chart is the hardest to read. The sentences you draw up are always colored with wishes, you know? Or fears."

I could remind him it was all foolishness in the beginning, but he'd just say it was God's way of showing him his calling. Besides, look at him now. Look at me. I do believe in him.

He's always talking about *drawing* sentences. He makes me study my glyphs, the symbols that represent the planets and the signs. He makes me study house meanings. Sometimes I can draw up a pretty good sentence myself.

"Pop's gonna die in March," I tell him.

"You want me to look at it?" He doesn't like to look for death. It's really hard to find anyway. Serious health problems? That you can predict. Death? Not so easy.

Besides, as he says, "The stars impel, they don't compel." He says that all the time. It's caused us many an argument.

"I'm not going by the stars," I say. "Mom died three years ago in March. He always gets depressed then. I don't think he'll make it through another one of those."

We get on the computer to look.

Thump, thump, thump.

It's Pop banging on the floor. I'm up the basement stairs before Cleo can move, but then, I always was fast. And I'm feeling like a kid again since the spell worked.

Cheryl Ann is forty. She's five-foot-two and ninety-eight pounds. She has gray eyes when she's pissed and green eyes when she's horny. She's got honey-blonde hair—Clairol Maximum Golden Blonde, in fact—and the bone structure of a model. I could paint her for the rest of my life. Hands, feet, eyes, arms, legs—everything is perfect. I can't figure out how she's had four kids and still has such a body. Yeah, there're stretch marks—she won't wear bikinis anymore—but the skin's tightened up and the stretch marks are now tiny lines that glisten in the sun. They are battle scars you come to admire.

And:

- *She's incredibly sensitive.*
- *She's faithful.*
- *She's beautiful and sexy.*
- *I love her.*
- *And old number 35 is her favorite position.*

"Let's do thirty-five," she says. "Thirty-five. Thirty-five!" For I've shown her my list.

She wasn't shocked. She was flattered. She put it in a scrapbook with our movie stubs. She calls it our "suvie book."

She is everything I've ever wanted. She makes me happy. Cleo says we don't marry for happiness; we marry to be complete. I feel complete with her. She brings me the joy I've never had. In bed she licks her finger and sticks it in my ear. I can't help but laugh. Nobody else would dare. We are like kids.

Cleo doesn't like to look for death—it's really hard to find. Besides, "The stars impel, they don't compel." He says that all the time.

Fat, black Cleo was right. I had the power to cast spells. And I did. I don't know what the cost will be, but I don't care. I've never been so happy. For a visual man, she is the ultimate prize. I buy her double-zeros off the rack and they fit like blue paint.

It's amazing how much I've calmed down. But, then, life isn't through with me yet.

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.

I run upstairs. Pop's calling me again. It's December now—my daughter's fifteenth birthday. She's already pissed at me because of Pop. I canceled our dinner together because he thought he was dying. Right now she can't see it. *She'll be self-centered for another year or two*, I think. *But no one's brighter, or more beautiful. She'll be all right.*

Pop won't be all right anymore. The arrogance of growing old, when you think you know everything, but you won't *do* anything about it. And the depression that fear of dying brings about. It makes a nice man into something else. And you begin to wonder if you still love him.

"I'm feeling bad," he says.

"How do you feel. Tell me?" This is a problem for us lately. He won't answer any of my questions. I remember when he made a four-inch telescope and we took it out to

the driveway. "There's Saturn," he would say. "There's Venus." And he would explain the mythology of the constellations. He was so smart, he could explain Einstein—and make you understand.

"I just feel bad." He's lying on his bed, which he hasn't left in days. The walls are covered with old black-and-white pictures from his youth. Somehow, it doesn't help. It only looks depressing.

"Dammit, I need more details."

"Georgie, I can't give you any more. I just feel bad."

"Well, are we going to the emergency room tonight?" We've been five times this year alone. That's why I canceled on Jennifer. You can tell when the ER visits are sneaking up on you like thieves.

"Don't know. Don't want to. I'll try to get through the night."

I try to get more information. He gets snippy. I'm pulling teeth—but if I did, his dentures would come out in one piece. I know he feels terrible. I also know he sleeps better in the morning. Nights are hell for him.

"Getting old isn't for sissies," he says.

Then stand up and fight, you old bastard, I think. *If you'd just eat!*

But he won't eat. Last month Cheryl Ann brought him a plate from Thanksgiving dinner. He ate one bite of potatoes and one of peas. Two bites total. Two! That was his food intake all day.

I'm going crazy. I don't like exchanging places. I don't like being the parent. "Eat," I tell him. "You gotta eat. You're gonna die."

Nothing.

It's only later I realize he is committing suicide the only way a Catholic can. It's the constant mumbling, the Hail Marys when he's out of his head, that make me understand. He's praying for forgiveness. He's committing the ultimate sin.

"Hail Mary, full of grace…. mumble mumble mumble." No one can make it out except me. I know what he's doing.

"Hail Mary. Hail Mary. Hail Mary."

THREE YEARS AGO, WHEN I MOVED IN, WE TALKED of fear.

"I worry about what it's doing to you," Pop said. He was sitting on our worn out dirty-gold couch. I put a two by three-foot piece of plywood under the cushion—support needed for aging bones to stand up. It matched the two ugliest chairs in Pleasant Hope, which, of course, were also in our living room. Along with a rug the color of brown pond.

Fear of dying. Fear of not dying. Fear of not dying *well*.

"Hey Pop, I made up a budget. Guess what? I've got a whole forty-four dollars left at the end of the month. That's good, right? I figured with my child support, I'd be in the hole."

So, he raised my rent forty dollars. Because he was afraid he'd live too. Afraid he'd live and not have any money. Get it while you can, I suppose. Mom left me some money in the will, but I never asked for it and he never offered. I knew why. He was scared.

I claimed the damned basement for some privacy. I was broke. I go through a period of five girlfriends in five months. Nobody stays. They think I'm cute. They'll go out with me. A couple of them even let me spend the night at their place.

Then it would end.

And that is what brought me to my spell. My case of desperation. The constant endings. Shelly left. Angie quit on me. Tracey thought I wouldn't amount to anything. Yada, yada, yada.

But I knew I had the power.

Cleo told me. "Pluto is approaching your ascendant. You can do anything you want over the next three years." And much of it is true. My finances improve. He introduces me to Victoria, an interior designer. She gets me a contract to paint two hundred small still lifes for Holiday Inn. I've got all the work I can handle for a year. I can move out, except I can't move out because now Pop is really sick—dying, in fact. Only I don't know it. I don't realize his heart's like a flat tire that can't be fixed.

"Then I'm gonna make me up a woman!" I say. "By God, if I can do anything, then that's what I'm gonna ask for."

"The Bride of Frankenstein." Cleo giggles. His belly rolls. I think he's gonna fall out of his chair.

"No one likes you," I say.

"Somebody has to be wrong." And he laughs again.

ON JENNIFER'S BIRTHDAY—DECEMBER 21ST—THE emergency room is full. I go through the list of medicines. I repeat the diagnosis I've been told. "Congestive heart failure. Kidney failure. Diabetes." It never sounds good. And then I add, "And he won't eat."

"You've gotta eat," the triage nurse says.

"I'm just not hungry," Pop says.

Liar, I think.

"Besides, I can't breathe."

They try to get the fluid out of his chest. We're there until 4 a.m.—finally they decide to admit him. "He'll stay here tonight and then we'll see what we see."

I go home. It's dark and lonely. Depressing house. Grandma's heart burst here. Mom had a stroke here. Pop may not come back. I'll sell this son-of-a-gun if he dies.

It all started with that spell.

It changed things. First, Cheryl Ann came into my life, then Pop started getting spooky. He took me to the bank

and changed his bank account into a joint account with me. It should have been a sign. It should have stared me in the face like Saturn opposing Mars. I should have read the symbols.

A bigger sign was when he ran into a smoky glass partition at the bank. Just flat out didn't see it. Knocked the shit out of himself. He didn't fall, which he's been doing a lot of lately, but jeez he was stunned. I could see it in those colorless eyes. I've looked at them long enough to read them. Yeah, they're dead like slate, but *I* can still read them, a little.

When we're done at the bank, he wants to go to the eye doctor. He thinks he has an appointment. I tell him he doesn't. He insists. God, he's my Pop. I drive him there. Of course, the damned place is closed for the weekend. He feels stupid and confused. He won't admit it. He tries to make up something about the eye clinic got the dates wrong.

"I'm sure that's it, Pop. Those secretaries don't always get things right," I say not believing a word of it but making an attempt to sound sincere. All I can do is try to keep his morale up. Pump that self-image like I don't know this is the end.

THE FIRST TIME CHERYL ANN CAME OVER TO THE house, he tried to be the old Darn Poke. He tried to be polite, and stand up when a lady entered the room. Jeez! He fell to his knees and I had to help him back to the couch.

He was so embarrassed.

"Bless his heart," Cheryl Ann said later. She didn't know how right she was.

I got her out of there so Pop wouldn't have to feel less of a man. I'd give him some time alone… then pretend it didn't happen.

I gave myself a break and spent the night with her.

When I got home, I find out he went into the garage. He had to get past two steps. He caught his toe on the top one and fell back into the kitchen. He couldn't get back up. He fucking crawled to the phone and called Charles next door.

"From now on," he said. "We can't lock the front door."

"You got it, Pop," I said. He was always scared somebody might come in and get him… then he's scared he'll die on the floor. *You just gotta eat*, I thought

"How about a pizza," I said

"Nah, I just want Jello."

"Christ, what flavor?"

"Raspberry."

I made it. He ate maybe half a cup.

"I'm full… thanks, Georgie."

"Pop, you *gotta* eat. This isn't funny anymore."

He started telling me where the safe deposit box key was. And how many CDs he's got. I knew what he was doing.

"Maybe I should put the house in both our names," he said.

"Not necessary," I said. "You're gonna live here another ten years, right?"

He didn't answer.

The first time Cheryl Ann came over, he tried stand when a lady entered the room. Jeez! He fell to his knees and I had to help him back to the couch.

THE DOCTORS ADMIT HIM TO THE HOSPITAL AND they're planning on keeping him a week or so. "Are you eating?" I ask, standing in his room. There's a white curtain separating him from the next patient. I've brought his overnight bag. We keep it packed all the time. His extra razor is in there; socks, pajamas, crossword puzzle books. We're always ready.

"Oh yeah, I ate," he says. I can see the full tray pushed away. Looks like he took two bites of mashed potatoes… and he downed the whole damned Jello square.

At home, I find his stash of candy. That's what he's been eating to keep the hunger pains down. Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Cherry Mash. Snickers.

He's gonna die, I think.

I toss the whole stash away. *By God, when you come home, you're gonna eat right*, I think.

A week stretches into two, then three.

People wonder why I've got an attitude. Ha! "You try living with someone who can't make up their mind to live or die," I tell Cleo.

"Georgie?" he says and I know I'm in trouble because nobody but Pop and Cheryl Ann call me that.

"Yeah?"

"I found a date."

I know what he's talking about. "Just tell me the details and I'll say if you're right." It's arrogant, I know, but I'm pissed. He goes along with me because this is it.

"Okay, I found it in *your* chart, not his. Sometimes a close relative, lover, family member, whatever… is where you find these things."

"Yeah, yeah, get to it!"

"Right. Anyway, you moved in here three years ago when Saturn hit the cusp of your fourth house… family, living area, *et cetera.* Saturn hits your fourth house cusp and you get divorced. Your living standard lowers. You change residences." He hesitates; his big old lips are

stuck. "…so… you see, Saturn leaves your fourth house January 12th."

"Well, that's a good thing. Get the devil out of my house."

"Georgie, you don't understand. Saturn opposes your Sun at the same time. Natal Sun represents Father. Saturn is hard lessons, restrictions; it's called the greater malefic."

"I know, Cleo. Hard times facing my Pop. January 12th… that's four days from now. Hell, I could guess that, he's in the hospital, he's not eating… what do you want, a medal?"

"Georgie, there's more. Saturn is also commitment. It's moving towards the cusp of your fifth house, romance, creativity, etc. And, Saturn tends to reward as it leaves one house and enters another. It's leaving your family and home sector. It's opposing your Father. It's already rewarded you, as it moves towards the fifth, with Cheryl Ann. Now Saturn will get serious. Your relationship will get serious. How many times have I heard you say you won't get married again until your father dies?"

"Shit."

"Further rewards, Georgie. A new girl, a new life… your father dies and you finally get your inheritance, which you've put off asking for… now there's no asking. You are the only heir." He pauses. "There's only one way you get an inheritance, George."

"And there's only one way I'll ever leave this house," I say. I look at him and he looks sorry. He doesn't need to look sorry. I don't want to kill the messenger. I'd rather be warned than surprised. Besides, I'm the one that cast the spell. No spell is perfect. Spells are just changes. They are catalysts. You throw every thought you've got into making the spell work… and *boom,* it does!

"Thanks, Cleo," I say.

"But it might not play out that way. You'll just have to see, ya know?" He tries to look hopeful. To me he looks like a big black Friar Tuck.

"That's right. There's the high road, the low road and something in between. In between happens most often. Maybe he'll move to a nursing home for a while until he gets back on his feet. I take power of attorney so that I can pay his bills. He lives, I see Cheryl Ann… yeah, yeah, it could play out that way, right?"

"Sure, Georgie. Sure. That's probably it."

MY BEEPER GOES OFF. I'M AT CHERYL ANN'S. We made love and have been asleep for maybe twenty minutes. We both jump up. She looks at me like she knows.

"What the hell number is that?" It's a hospital number, but I don't know which one.

I call. It's the nursing station outside Pop's room.

"George," the unknown nurse starts. "Mr. Poke passed away about ten-thirty. I'm sorry. I thought you might want to come down."

"Yes, yes," I say. "I'll be right down. Gimme a minute. I don't know how to act." *Pop passed away while we were making love.*

"I understand, Sir. You just take your time."

My breath is gone. The adrenaline is flowing, but I know it has no where to go. It's a hole so big you could drive a yellow school bus through it, and my feet won't move.

I look at Cheryl Ann. She's so pretty. She has on a long silver gray nightgown. Her shoulders are bare. Hair down. Golden curls are spilling all over her shoulders. My dad is dead and I'm thinking about Cheryl Ann's permanent.

"I'll be right there," I repeat and hang up the phone.

"I'll go with you." I'm not sure how she knows.

"You don't have to, Baby."

"I want to," she says. She's dressed before I am.

It's a strange drive to the hospital. I don't remember it, but the car goes on automatic pilot. Weird thoughts keep going through my head. *I'm rich*, I think and am immediately sorry for it. Cancel that thought. Cancel, cancel, cancel.

Too late. It's already in my mind and it'll never go away.

Everyone is so nice when we get there. They get the on-call priest. They take me in the room and show me Pop's body.

Damn, he looks asleep. I try to wake him up, but when I touch his body he's cold. Cold is the only way I know he's dead.

"He passed away in his sleep," the nurse says. "I checked on him at ten. By ten-thirty he was gone. I don't think he felt a thing."

It really looks that way. There is such peace on his face. Not like the last few days when he was out of his head and mumbling his prayers so loud they had to move him to the end of the hall—he had his own private little monastery.

I didn't even go up to see him that day. The last one to see him was my daughter Jennifer. I think she's forgiven me for blowing off her birthday dinner. Cheryl Ann wants to take her out for lobster. Jennifer has never had lobster.

Somewhere in the last twenty-four days since he entered the hospital, I said, "Watch what I do here, Jennifer. You'll have to do this for me someday."

Fuck!

Not good. Not good at all.

The last time I saw him, he said, "How many people we got to take care of?" He meant, when you send me to a nursing home, will I ever come back? Or will you and Cheryl Ann get married and leave me here?

I told him, "It's just us, Pop. Just you and me." And he smiled.

Now, I look at him at peace and wonder if telling him made any difference. It's January 13th. Cleo was off by only one day. Incredible! How could he draw such an accurate sentence from such malleable symbols?

"Could you all leave us alone, please?" I ask. And the nurse and Cheryl Ann leave the room.

I sit in the chair next to his bed for awhile. We say nothing. I wait for him to speak, but he won't communicate. *Life wants us to be mediocre*, I think. *You step on a Ladybug in Missouri and a kid falls dead in Afghanistan. You cast a spell—ask for change? You never know what's gonna happen.*

"Was I a good son?" I ask. "Did I do it right, Pop?"

He doesn't answer. I guess that's okay.

GARY CADWALLADER

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What I Found

GREGORY DURHAM

People can try anything to fill an emptiness inside. Maybe that's no better than trying nothing at all.

THE SUN HAD SET SOMEWHERE BETWEEN Richmond and Roanoke. My mother stood on the platform of the Greyhound station, back to the wind. Cigarette smoke trailed away from her. The brakes squealed and bucked us to a stop. I wanted to get up and off, do what I'd come home for, but I stayed in the seat. Mom's eyes scanned back and forth and then back again, finding me. She waved with her smoking hand, palm parallel to the ground, raising and lowering, as if she were trying to keep something down that wouldn't stay. The ash of her cigarette blew off and rolled over a coat sleeve before evaporating into the whip of a gust. I waved back, my fingers shaking.

Mom pressed the cigarette between her lips, freeing her hands for a hug that came hard and quick. By the time I'd let my backpack to the ground, she had backed away and was running toward the parking lot.

"Come on, Tammy Jean!" she called over her shoulder. "This wind is cold."

The interior of her Nova was a clash of tobacco and air-freshening pine. The passenger's seat was littered with manila files, a pair of L'eggs and an empty milkshake container. Mom picked it all up as a bunch and tossed it to the back seat, scattering the paper contents of the files.

"Sorry about the mess."

I pitched my bag to the floor.

"That's okay." I smiled. "I don't even have a car to mess up."

"Mind if I smoke?" Mom lit another cigarette and then reached up to hit the dome light button. "Is that a rinse?"

"No, of course not!" I laughed and reflexively tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "You're just used to seeing my hair lighter in the summer when you come to Philly."

Mom tossed manila files, a pair of L'eggs, and an empty milkshake container to the back seat of the Nova. "Sorry about the mess."

"I don't remember it so dark. Whose side of the family do you get that from?"

Mom revved the engine and peeled out of the parking space, sending up a wild screech. Two white-haired ladies in matching sweat suits grabbed one another in fright and declined when Mom motioned them in front of us at the crosswalk.

"I can't believe we finally got you down here, city girl," Mom slapped my knee, accelerated, and laughed a smoky laugh. "To think, Tammy Jean Thomas returns to Virginia, of her own free will no less. If it takes me

moving to get you down here then I'll have to do it more often." She coughed abruptly and took a drag. We were quiet for the ride home, and I watched the sooty shadows of the Appalachians race us off to the right of the car.

The American flag I helped Dad install one Fourth of July was still attached to the front door frame. The flag had faded to pastels now—pinks and baby blues, the colors of a child's room. Mom ground her cigarette into a planter outside, under the flag.

"I've stopped doing it in the house," she whispered. "Larry says the smoke'll kill him." Mom flipped on the entryway light and tossed her purse to the floor. A blusher compact slid out and clattered against the fake stone.

"Do you want a Tab, honey?" she asked, moving down the hallway toward the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

"No, I ate tons on the bus," I lied, putting my backpack down. I'd only eaten a miniature pack of raisins given to me by a woman that boarded the bus in Aberdeen.

"Helping your mother move. Now, that's a tough one," raisin woman had said. "I did that a couple years ago when my mother had a stroke and had to go into a home. You know, you throw the stuff out, but…"

She didn't finish the sentence, but I knew what she meant.

Later, I watched her sleep, face forward and erect, like a Catholic school girl at attention, her top and bottom lip separated.

"If you have to pee, use the commode on the second floor," Mom called from the kitchen. "I broke the handle on this one down here."

The living room was hardly lit. A ceramic lamp my grandmother made in the mid-'70s flickered on its lowest setting. Cardboard boxes piled onto each other in one corner, but nothing was packed into them.

"I see you didn't pack anything yet." I took a tentative step onto the carpet. This had been a forbidden zone as a child, Mom's "entertaining" area.

"I was waiting for you, young lady."

Her sudden reappearance startled me. I backed off the carpet. Mom held out a glass of water and then clapped twice, fast. The overhead light in the stairway popped on.

"Isn't that great?!" Mom giggled, wrapped her arms around her middle. "Larry gave it to me last Christmas. It's called The Clapper."

Two decades of Thomas family photographs led to the second floor—my parents' wedding, everything in between, ascending to my junior year in high school. Mom had lost her interest in photographs after that.

I WAS IN A FIRST, FRAGILE SLEEP WHEN THE FRONT door jolted me awake. Uncle Larry's voice rasped, "Where is she? Where's my Jeanie-girl?"

I rolled onto my stomach. Mom's flip-flops slapped the soles of her feet, rushing to the entryway from the kitchen.

"Larry, please. She's trying to get some sleep." Then a more consoling try. "You'll see her in the morning. She's here for the whole week," putting the stress on *whole*.

An hour passed. Shadows through the venetian blinds stretched and moved across the ceiling. Every once in a while I caught the ice-blue numbers of the digital clock change. Mom had not touched the room in ten years. The walls were still painted maroon like the seats of our old Pinto.

She tried to keep quiet a little while later, bolstering Uncle Larry up the stairs, but the wall beside my bed thudded and scraped.

"Lord, I have to quit smoking if this is going to keep up," Mom said. "Thank God we're moving to a rancher."

Their combined weight lay heavily on the floorboard in front of Uncle Larry's room, sending up a wooden whine. I'd always been careful to avoid that floorboard. I could hear Mom whispering instructions—your clothes, the lights, the alarm—and then good night. I turned onto my left side and watched the door, the knob reflecting the bare light from the clock. I hadn't moved when the doorknob jiggled quietly and slowly. Turn, stop, turn.

"Tammy Jean," Uncle Larry's breath rustled softly through the gap between frame and door. "Unlock it, honey. I want to see you."

I was still as stone. Five, ten, fifteen minutes.

"I love you, Jeanie-girl." His voice seemed to circle my room and I held an inhalation for a second. The floorboard creaked; Larry was gone. I exhaled.

MOM HAD A WHOLE ALBUM OF PICTURES TAKEN at state borders. It was Dad's thing. We measured our progress as a family and in the growth of me and Jeff, my brother, in those photos. North Carolina 1967, Maryland 1970, Pennsylvania, Christmas 1972.

When I was ten, Uncle Larry became an addition to our everyday lives and our vacation pictures. Aunt Sheila had filed for divorce and sent my uncle on a drinking and drugging binge. When he lost his apartment, Dad took him in and joked that he'd wanted three kids anyway. Larry didn't appreciate the joke, but he appreciated the roof over his head and so laughed with the rest of us.

Dad and Uncle Larry switched places on the highway on New Year's Day 1973, driving home from Aunt Mary Ellen's. Dad was coming down with the flu and couldn't concentrate. Mom sat behind with me, reading *The Stepford Wives*, her panty-hosed feet curled up on the seat beside her. Jeff slept in a makeshift bed in the back of the station wagon. I watched the Maryland and Virginia state

signs pass, but didn't say anything, returning the camera to my backpack.

Uncle Larry skidded out of control on an icy patch near Harrisonburg. Jeff was thrown through the back window glass, landing fifty feet from the car. Dad died from internal injuries four hours later. The rest of us got out of it easy compared to that.

The first birthday without my father was my thirteenth. He and Jeff had only been buried three months, but they were both withering for me. Dad's college friends stopped calling, the bills came in Mom's name, and their smells—in Jeff's room and in Dad's den—were disappearing into the carpet and walls forever. I took a *Virginia is for Lovers* t-shirt Dad had worn on road trips and stowed it under my bed. Mom cleaned one Saturday while I was at the mall and when I came home the shirt was gone, along with the rest of his clothing, to Goodwill.

"Spring cleaning," Mom said over the drone of the vacuum, not looking at me.

My birthday fell on a warm night in April. I lied to Mom and Larry, saying I was spending the night at Bonnie's house. I packed an overnight bag and pulled myself into a pair of hip huggers, saving the covert halter top I bought with my allowance for later, safely out of view of the house. I was in the bathroom, trying to straighten my hair with a comb and spray, when Uncle Larry arrived home.

"Going over to Bonnie's tonight?" he asked, a Slim Jim in hand, poised at his lips.

"Yeah." The comb jerked through a knot. I glanced at him in the reflection of the mirror. His overalls were smudged with grease from the garage where he'd been working as a mechanic.

"Is Bonnie a good girl?" Larry squinted his eyes and chewed. "We don't need our Tammy Jean hanging out with nasty girls."

"Uncle Larry!" I squealed and rapped his arm with a brush. "My friends are not nasty!"

Larry grabbed his arm in mock pain and I pulled the comb through once more, popping hairs out of my scalp.

"Well, good." He stepped up to me from behind and draped his arms around my shoulders. "That makes me feel better." Planting a kiss on top of my head. "Hey, want a Slim Jim?"

"I'm not hungry," I giggled and rolled my eyes. He knew I hated Slim Jims.

Later, Kenny, Bonnie's brother, drove us to a Roanoke College party.

"Look what I have, girls." Kenny tore off two Black Labels and threw them to the back seat. They landed between me and Bonnie, bouncing against each other on the vinyl. Just one of those little beers made me unsteady and we weren't even to the party yet.

Within two hours we'd been picked up for speeding and ended up at the Catawba police and fire station. When asked how much I'd had, I couldn't answer. I heard Bonnie say "four" and the officer filled in a blank space on the report.

"Where is she?" Uncle Larry's voice had an edge of frantic in it.

"Just relax, Larry, she's fine," Ronald Bupp, Bonnie's cousin and the Catawba deputy, said. "She's back here."

Uncle Larry leaned forward, lifting my chin gently. "You don't have to worry. I won't say anything. Not this time."

I pushed my palms against the chair seat, out of my slouching position, then casually folded my hands in my lap. There was no pretending I wasn't drunk, though. Larry said nothing, but I felt myself lifted under the armpits. I leaned close to his chest as he carried me to the car.

"I hate you," Bonnie hissed at her cousin as we left.

"I have a headache," was the first thing I said after arriving home.

Uncle Larry led me to the rec room couch and turned the lamp to a low setting. I groaned and hid my face, horrified by the embarrassment of being drunk in front of my uncle, terrified of what Mom would do to me.

"That was a stupid thing to do," he said finally, sitting on the edge of the couch. I accepted a mug of Nescafe from him. "You could have been killed. They clocked you all at 78 on Trindle Road."

I put the mug to my lips and tested the coffee. Too hot. "I'm sorry, Uncle Larry. Mom's going to murder me."

Larry leaned forward, lifting my chin gently. "You don't have to worry. I won't say anything. Not this time."

"You mean, you're not—"

Larry put a finger on my lips to quiet me. "We all have secrets," he said. "And it's important to trust someone. I know your Daddy was important to you and I know you miss him." A brief well of sadness pulled up in me. "I miss him, too," Larry continued. "He helped me out of a lot of trouble—took a chance on me. He and I shared a lot of secrets."

"Mom never talks about him. It's like he didn't even exist."

"It's a peculiarity," Larry sat back. "People deal with things in funny ways. We both lost someone, though, you and me. That puts us in the same boat." Bitter steam wound up out of the mug, under my chin and nose. "This isn't what you were wearing when you left the house." He fingered the shoulder strap of my halter top.

"I didn't think you'd let me go out in it." For my drunkenness, I could feel blood rising in my face. "I think I left my coat at the party."

Larry leaned into me close again. "Your mother won't know any of this. You're growing up fast into a woman. It's natural you'd want to look like one. Just be careful of the guys who would take advantage of a mature girl like you."

"I can handle them, Uncle Larry." I managed a grim smile.

He laughed. "I'm sure you can." He wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully for a moment. "I'll tell you what. Since it's mostly you and me here alone in this house with your Mom working the night shift, how about if we make a deal?"

I crossed my arms, anticipating one of his jokes. "Okay. What?"

Larry held up one finger.

"First and foremost, we have to trust each other. So I promise I won't keep anything from you." Another finger. "And you promise to do the same. No secrets, and it all stays between you and me." I said nothing, but leaned forward for a hug. "Just say you'll always take care," he breathed warm on my neck. "It'd kill me if anything happened to you."

I SLEPT FOR FOUR HOURS THAT FIRST NIGHT HOME and woke with a cool shower just after dawn. I've never been a good sleeper, having lost the ability as a teenager, and every night I looked forward to morning and light. I stood naked in the mirror after the shower, watching water evaporate off my skin, crossing my arms across my breasts when a chill came through the window. My legs were taut, the thigh muscles sinewed and strong, the lower part of the quad making a defined arc over my knees. I had taken up running in the past year at the suggestion of a clinic co-worker and it had removed any hint of baby fat I may have had left.

"You should wear skirts, Tammy," she said to me on a jog through Fairmount Park one morning. "You have great legs and you hide them like they're the crown jewels."

Two weeks later I took a skirt into the dressing room at Wanamaker's. It was a light cotton blue, cut several inches above my knee. It was a strange vision of myself and my body—"laid open," I remember thinking. With no warning, I burst out crying.

"Are you okay in there?" a clerk rapped the door.

"Fine, thank you." I fished for a Kleenex in my purse. "Fine."

MOM'S PENS WERE IN THE SAME DRAWER THEY'D always been, mostly red ones lifted from work, wherever that happened to be at any moment. I wrote a short note saying I wouldn't be long, and took the keys.

Mom had been making a decent living—her words—as a temp for eight years now. Good enough for a down payment on a new rancher five miles away. She was leaving the home she'd bought with my father, but hanging on to it as a rental investment. When she sent a letter saying she'd be moving, I wrote back that I would help her. If she was surprised at my easy willingness to suddenly return home after so long away, she didn't say.

Driving in daylight now, the neighborhood had a barren quality I didn't remember. The sidewalks were empty of people and rust edged the siding of several houses I passed. Trees planted during the '60s had stunted and were barely blossoming now in the early spring. In cruel contrast, the mountains in the distance were already green with new growth. When we'd moved there from a smaller house near the city, the houses were shiny, the lawns still dirt and seed. Behind our house had been fields of corn and soy on alternate years, stretching to the edge of Jefferson National Forest and Brush Mountain beyond. When I looked out my bedroom window this morning, I couldn't even see fields anymore. A sea of bi-levels rose and fell instead.

The car bucked up over Clifton Hill, my foot a little quick on the clutch after all the years away from the wheel. The Clifton Hill Lutheran Church came into view, with a considerably expanded parking lot—but today, Saturday, it was empty.

The dewy ground squished under my sneakers as I wound up one row of graves and down the next. Daddy had been in the last row, but time had passed and the cemetery went deeper now. By the time I found them, morning moisture on the grass had seeped through my canvas sneakers. Tiny pools of water sat in shallow grooves of the headstones. Jeff's said "Just sleeping…" and Dad's, simply, "Beloved Husband, Father, Friend." Uncle Larry had written the epitaphs when Mom couldn't bring herself to do it.

"Hey, Daddy." The stone was cold on my fingertips. I plucked a couple twigs off the top. From here, there was nothing to interrupt the view, though there would only be a few more years until the developments stretched to the church boundaries. A southwest breeze came off Brush Mountain, on it the moist odor of oak and elder. Hot, humid summer would be here on those winds soon.

"Not a bad place to spend eternity, right, Jeff?" I tossed the twigs to the ground in front of my brother's grave.

I squatted in front of my father's plot. The carved dates were as deep in the stone as the day they were made. I ran my fingers over and around them, the sharp bottom-curve of the *J* in January, the tragic, trailing end of the *2* in 1972.

A car door closed in the parking lot and I glanced back. Uncle Larry stepped onto the grass, waving. My runner's legs tightened, ready as at the beginning of a race, five seconds before the starting gun fires.

He stopped a few feet from me, tears in his eyes. His hair had moved back on his forehead since I'd seen him, losing some of its sandy color along the way. The grooves under his eyes were deeper and darker in the daylight.

I smiled toward him, but my eyes looked past. I wondered if tears would come. They did not. Blood pounded suddenly through my temples.

"Good God almighty," he drawled slowly and took a half-step closer. "You are alive after all."

"Uncle Larry—"

But he had his arms around me, mine momentarily useless at my sides. His hands on my back held me close into his denim jacket. He smelled like car oil and wood. His pulse raced through the fabric, against my cheek. He was high.

MOM WAS UNPACKING GROCERIES WHEN I GOT HOME, thirty seconds ahead of Larry.

"There's little Miss Mysterious." She folded a paper bag. "Where'd you go?"

"Good morning," I said and went into the bathroom. I locked the door and sat on the bathtub edge, pacing my breathing, practicing the relaxation techniques I had been teaching at the clinic.

The front door opened and closed.

"Where were you?" Mom was standing outside the bathroom. "Tammy, you can't flush that one."

"I found our Tammy at the Clifton Hill—" Larry started.

"I went to see Daddy and Jeff." I opened the door and slipped past my mother.

Larry hung his coat on a rack in the hall. Mom followed into the kitchen on my heels, agitated.

"I don't see why you have to upset yourself with only a week here." She slid Coffeemate across the counter. "Besides, there are *living* people that'd like to see you. Your uncle obviously couldn't wait."

I pushed the Coffeemate away. "I'm not upset, Mom. It was just a visit."

"How are they?" She crossed her arms and looked incredibly young for a moment, her bottom lip curled under the top.

Larry popped the top off a beer.

"They're fine. The church has grown a lot, though."

Mom returned to the groceries and resumed unpacking with a new energy, slamming cans of vegetable medley onto the table. When she looked up again, there was a tremor that tore across her face.

"You could have asked me if I wanted to go, too."

"Sherry, you never went even—"

"I'm not talking to you, Larry," Mom cut him off. "And you're never here." *Slam.* "When I let Mary Ellen take you to Philadelphia I didn't know you'd never come back. I would have thought better otherwise."

"I don't see why you upset yourself with only a week here. There are *living* people that'd like to see you. Your uncle obviously couldn't wait."

A can of snow peas hit the table. We stood in a silent triangle, the coffee machine drip-dripping behind me. I poured the contents of my mug into the sink and watched a woman quickly swat her daughter's bottom once in the next yard. A wail went up.

"I'm sorry, honey." Mom came up behind me, leaning into my shoulder. "I got my period this morning."

MOM WORKED THE LATE SHIFT AT RED LOBSTER for four years after the accident. Back then, Uncle Larry would get home after five and we'd eat leftovers, the two of us, that Mom had brought home from the night before. Sometimes we ate in front of the television, Larry reclining back in Daddy's La-Z-Boy, letting the effects of a joint take hold, laughing at the shows. I was a quick study in inhaling, but Uncle Larry always made sure we had Cokes just in case I started coughing.

In warm weather, we lay in the yard to watch the sky, perpendicular to each other, my head on Larry's stomach, him running his fingers through my hair.

"We're not alone," he'd say in his spookiest voice. I'd laugh and close my eyes, the weed spinning me tenderly. "And if there is someone else out there, we'll be taken first to that extraterrestrial paradise, because we believe and we'll be the only two, like Adam and Eve."

"You're crazy, Uncle Larry." I moved closer to him for warmth.

"Crazy about you, little girl," he said always.

Mom was still a regular at Red Lobster, even now. She'd gotten a taste for popcorn shrimp that nothing but a trip down the pike would satisfy. We went to dinner there my second night home. She walked in ahead of me, passing out hugs and blowing kisses, waving to someone at the salad bar.

"Hey, Sherry," they all said.

"Smoking," she said back. Mom led us through the main dining room to a booth, giggling when the night manager told her she was keeping mighty trim. "It's my Salems that keep me slim, Troy," she said, flirting, "because I have the appetite of a horse."

"Amen to that," Troy, a smoker himself, replied.

Uncle Larry took our jackets to the coat rack and then headed toward the bathroom. Mom already knew what she was having, so she chattered while I skimmed the over-sized, laminated menu of shrimpboat variations and seafood lover's platters. I hadn't eaten anything since the raisins, twenty-four hours earlier.

"He's snorting up in there," Mom said and nodded in the direction of the bathroom. "Glass of chablis, please," to the waitress. "Oh, hey, hon. I didn't even recognize you with that short hair. You look great."

"I'll just have a coffee." I handed the menu to the waitress.

Uncle Larry's good old boy laugh carried over the tops of the booths as he returned from the restroom. He was teasing a waitress who said, "Larry, you are *sooo baaaad,"* drawling it out in flirtatious emphasis.

"Well, he should come back with some energy." Mom rolled her eyes.

"How long has it been since he's been off the wagon?" I turned slightly to see if he was getting close.

"Since you started calling again," Mom said in a hushed voice, leaning across the table.

"Sherry, you know I hate cigarettes," Larry said, lowering into the booth.

"Oh, Jesus, Larry, relax." Mom tipped her ash onto the bread plate. "If you can…" Her voice trailed off as she inhaled deeply and blew smoke sideways out of her mouth, away from us. "Never mind."

Mom drank four glasses of wine through dinner, and Larry had six beers while I sipped first coffee and then a Lipton tea. They were telling stories about growing up in Asheville, laughing and arguing over who knocked who out of the front yard tree and who was responsible for breaking Grandmommy's heirloom vase. Mom finished her shrimp and pushed the basket away, letting her head rest back against the seat, eyes closed.

"Mmm, those were the days, weren't they, Lar?" she sighed and pushed a fountain of smoke straight up in the air.

Larry reached across the table and settled a rough-skinned hand on my arm. His fingers trembled on my skin. From the drugs, I told myself.

Mom sat up all at once. "Larry!"

Larry jerked his arm back, knocking over a beer. "What? What?" in rapid succession. "Shit, you scared me."

"Nothing," Mom said, watching me for a moment then grinding out her cigarette. "I think it's time to go home. I'm feeling dizzy."

"YOU BETTER DRIVE." MOM TOSSED ME THE KEYS IN the parking lot before I could even answer, and headed to the passenger's side. Uncle Larry caught the rabbit's foot chain with his right hand and my forearm with the left, turning me toward him. Mom was already stepping into the back seat.

"I've missed you something fierce," he said low, across the top of the car as we got in on opposite sides.

"No games," I said back.

Mom prattled from behind during the ride home, down and around darkened, bumpy roads to Catawba. I cracked my window a half inch to breathe. Her voice filled up the car, filled it up with nothing. I felt like every bit of oxygen was being sucked outside. I was suddenly a teenager again, sailing over quick rises and around edgy curves. I hadn't driven these country roads sober, probably ever, but I knew the way home.

"There used to be a farmer's market there," Mom tapped the window with a red nail at the fleeting, black landscape. "They're going to build a Wawa. I guess it'll be more convenient for milk and soda on the way home."

Larry sat silently, buckled in beside me. I only caught his face by accident, when we came to a stop sign and I had to look right for traffic. His hands gripped his legs as he watched the road pass under the headlights, early spring bugs careening toward us.

UNCLE LARRY SUGGESTED THE COLOR FOR MY ROOM, the dark red. We had driven to the Home Store on a Friday night, smoking a joint on the way, Larry squeezing my hand to keep me from laughing wildly at the other customers. He negotiated a custom color, a mix of red and brown. We waited twenty minutes while a clerk mixed three gallons.

It was sundown when we got home with the paint, brushes, and mixing sticks. I ran ahead of Larry, skipping steps, and flipped on every light in my bedroom. The juvenile yellow that I'd loved as an eleven year old was garish all of a sudden, unbearable in a moment. My father had picked out that color for me. I wanted to get rid of it.

"Let's throw the paint on!" I pulled a gallon from Larry's hand.

"You smoked a little too much." Larry nipped at my cheek with his thumb and finger and then wrapped his arms around me, tripping us onto the bed. We fell, laughing. "Here. I have something that will focus you," he said.

The plastic bag was small enough it sat in his shirt undetectable from the outside. He extracted it slowly, like a magic trick, and he was savoring his audience reaction.

"Cocaine," I said.

Larry cut it with a new razor and I did my first line of coke on the marbleized formica of the bathroom counter. He went first, demonstrating how to press on the left nostril and draw the powder in through the right, using a

straw from Red Lobster. The first line was like a ricochet. My eyes teared bitterly and I couldn't stand up straight.

"Are you okay, baby?" Uncle Larry supported me, his hand on my back, as I crouched over the sink.

I held my nostrils together and inhaled through my mouth for a minute. My forehead resting on the edge of the sink, I was hit with a clear energy that I'd never known before that moment. Larry had a vague, concerned look.

"Let's paint, goddammit," I said.

We took a break every half hour to get loaded up until midnight. I was a natural. Larry ran out for a case of beer and I did a line on my own.

"You're getting sloppy," Larry said later when I dropped my paint brush.

It was true. I leaned into my roller for support as I painted.

"Here. Come on." Larry took the tools away from me and placed them on the newspaper we'd spread over the carpet. He led me to the bed, where I sat momentarily and then allowed myself to lay back. The ceiling seemed closer than I'd ever noticed.

Larry lifted my legs onto the bed. His finger, rough on the end from the constant turn and grip of mechanic's tools, drew the edge of my ear, and an evening air hovered over my bed from the window. Someone had mowed their lawn and I could just make it out, mixed with the newness of the paint. I counted in my head the remaining days of my sophomore year—fifteen.

"I think I found a treat you like," Larry said quiet, almost in a lazy way.

"Yeah." I was exhausted.

"Does that feel good?" He massaged my head lightly.

"Feels great. Dad used to do that while I watched TV. He'd play with my hair."

"I remember."

I awoke at 5 a.m. in my jeans and t-shirt. Someone had turned off the light. I rolled to my right side and propped up to the window. Mom's car sat in the driveway. I felt heavy and it took a moment to get myself up off the bed.

The carpet was cool under my feet, crossing to the bathroom. The light flickered on and I closed the door so Mom wouldn't hear the shower. White residue covered the counter. I ran my finger across it and tasted, bending to pull off my right sock. Bitter.

I slipped under the covers naked, after drying off and pulling my hair into a ponytail. I watched the digits on the clock change for a half hour. At 5:42 the door knob turned.

"Jeanie," Uncle Larry whispered into the dark. "Are you awake?"

"I just got out of the shower," I whispered back.

Larry ran his hand along the freshly painted wall, coming to the bed, and stepped into the pale blue light of the clock.

"I want to talk to you."

He tasted like an orange when we kissed that first time. The next morning I found rinds on a plate outside my door. He told me he'd been waiting all night, thinking of what and how to say what was inside him—if he even should.

I pulled the covers over him and he buried his face in my chest, kissing my breasts, nipples, saying over and over, "I love you, Jeanie-girl, I love you."

I was not a virgin, but it was the first time that I let someone in who loved me.

MOM WAS STILL DRUNK WHEN WE GOT HOME FROM Red Lobster. I sat on her bathroom counter and watched her puke. She'd only gotten her blouse and one shoe off when the urge hit. I'd been lying on her bed looking at a photo album and watched her run past me.

Mom studied me. "Sometimes I forget you remind me of your father. You have his skinny butt. And you're both stubborn as you are smart."

"Shit! That was an expensive meal." She leaned forward and across the toilet bowl to flush. I handed her a Dixie cup of water and a folded section of toilet paper for her mouth. She rinsed and spit into the toilet before flushing again.

Mom put her hand, fleshy and cool, over mine as she walked by, and squeezed. I followed back into the bedroom and we both lay on top of the bedspread. It was the same cover she'd always had. By now its seams were loosening and the flower print had frayed. Mom pulled up against a pile of pillows and sank back, her face relaxing into a half-smile. Her red hair matted around the ears and hairline, with cold, puke sweat, but she was fine now.

When she opened her eyes again, she said, surprised, "Well, Lord, look at me there. I must have been thirty years old at most."

I'd left a photo album sitting open at a trip to Luray Caverns we'd taken. There was one of her, diminished in front of a stalagmite, a quarter mile underground where everything glistens orange. I had taken the picture, Dad behind me, bent over, his arms around mine, demonstrating the proper method. Jeff just barely made it into the right edge of the frame, his back toward us, listening in on another tour group off-camera.

Mom pulled the album onto her lap and lifted a page to the light from the nightstand. "Your father was so handsome." She ran a finger over the page. "Sometimes I forget. You remind me of him."

"Really?" She'd never said this before. "In what way?"

"Well, you have his skinny butt." She studied me for a moment and then looked at the photos. "The same squared-off chin. And you're both stubborn as you are smart." She closed the album and pushed it toward me. "You should take this back to Philly with you. It's good to have something from home. Besides, I already have enough to pack around here."

Mom turned, squinting, to the bedside lamp and clicked it off, leaving half of the room dim.

"Why'd you come home, Tammy Jean?"

"What?" I raised myself up on my elbows and looked at her. She was sunk into the pillows again, expressionless, so peaceful she could have been asleep. I wondered if maybe she hadn't really said anything.

"Why'd you come home? Really, I'd like to know. You volunteered yourself, come down here for the first time in eight years. And you haven't said two words while you've been here but I still get the feeling there's a whole lot you want to say."

I put my face to the pillow. Mom's hairspray had gotten into the cotton case and it conjured a life I had almost forgotten. Sitting in the backseat behind Dad, picking at the scab on his elbow; his arm resting over top of the seat, fingers brushing Mom's shoulder while she read; the Appalachians trapping us in on both sides of the highway; the scent of her hair drifting backward, Jeff's sweaty head on my lap.

I squeezed my eyelids together, refusing tears. It wasn't what I had come home to do. I'd come to help my mother move.

"I came to give you a hand packing."

"No, you didn't come back here for me," she said, opening her eyes now to regard me straight on and firm, like she had when I was younger. "I don't need help getting out of this house and you know it."

I held her eyes for a moment, looking for the answer she wanted.

"If you came to tell me about Larry," she said, "I don't want to hear it." A weariness passed her face. "Your father and Jeff were all I could handle. I hope you can see that and try not to hate me."

THROUGH THE SUMMER OF 1976, UNCLE LARRY AND I still shared secrets, mostly one between the two of us. I told Bonnie, just after the first day of eleventh grade, in a note written during study hall.

"You're sick," she wrote back. Not long after the rest of my group pulled away, too.

Larry was fired from the garage in October, passing cars for inspection while he was high. At least his boss didn't turn him to the cops.

"I'll just take vacation for awhile," he said. "It'll give me more time to think about making you happy."

In March, I was sent home from school with a letter that I would be required to repeat a grade due to "poor academic performance and excessive absenteeism." I needed the signature of a parent or guardian on the return slip. That's what they got when I went in on Monday with Larry's signature, Lawrence T. Fasbender, scrawled in black ink across the bottom.

"This'll be our secret," he said. "No use upsetting your mother."

"No use," I agreed. I was as tired as I'd ever be, with no energy to care one way or the other, really.

On the night of my 17th birthday, I took Larry for a drive.

"Holy shit," he rebel-yelled out the window as all four wheels momentarily left the ground. "You are in control!"

My hands gripped the wheel at three and nine. The car lifted and dropped, scraping bottom over the sudden dips and subtle rises of Peach Glen Road. Blackness streamed faster on either side of us as I pressed the accelerator. The wind helicoptered through the interior and I screamed. Not anything, just screamed as loud as I could out the window. The speedometer was at 80.

"Okay, okay! Tammy, that's enough!" Uncle Larry had an edge of panic to him. "Fuck, Tammy! Slow down!" He reached over and grabbed the wheel, but I pushed the pedal further. "You're going to fucking kill us!"

Pain shot through my leg as the heel of his boot dug into my shin, knocking my foot off the pedal. His foot searched for the brake and I turned the wheel hard right, propelling us into a field. Dust, dirt and fertilizer swept over the Malibu like a wave on the ocean. I hit the steering wheel, losing my wind violently. Larry smashed into the windshield and fell back to the seat, halfway on the floor.

"Oh my God." He groaned and I gasped for my air back.

Thirty seconds passed in eerie, utter silence. The headlights skimmed the newly-planted field of soy beans. A million particles of earth swam in front of us.

Larry pulled himself up. His forehead had opened and blood dripped off the square of his jaw onto his sweatshirt.

"Are you okay?" he asked, distracted and amazed at his bloody hands.

I didn't answer, but instead pushed the door open and stepped out. Standing in front of the car, in the headlights,

I looked at Larry. The windshield was shattered where he'd hit but hadn't broken through. My arm was throbbing. I turned away and started to run.

OVERNIGHT, NO ONE KNEW WHERE I WAS. I WALKED the eight miles to the Coast-to-Coast Motel and paid the room with a twenty Mom had given me as a birthday gift. I watched TV until the manager asked me to leave the next afternoon, or at least pay for another night.

Aunt Mary Ellen took the situation in hand, as she'd like to say in the years following, when describing that day. She'd gotten on a commuter flight from Philadelphia to Richmond to Roanoke first thing in the morning. Mom searched my room while the police took a description of me, looking for a reason to explain a suicidal car ride, or tearing off into the warm, Virginia night. She found it in a tin in my nightstand.

Mary Ellen called in favors to a good friend at an Ardmore clinic and arrangements were made. The clinic even sent down a car to pick us up, at great cost, my aunt (who paid) never forgot to remind me.

"This would never have happened if your father was alive," she said

I slumped into the back seat with a migraine, between her and a nurse, for the long ride to Pennsylvania. I almost laughed when she said it. No one but me and Larry knew the half of it.

I SAT ON MY OLD SINGLE BED IN THE DARK, WAITING. The floorboard outside Larry's room whined. He's slipping, I thought. The door opened, almost soundless, my uncle an outline, black on black, in the shadow.

"Jeanie," he said, and took three steps into the room, close enough that I could see his wired eyes, dancing with cocaine and anxiety. "Will you talk to me, baby?"

Larry moved to the bed, beside me. The mattress springs creaked when he sat down, inches away. His breathing was short and uneven, and his palm held a cool sweat that he touched to my wrist. He pressed my palm to the feverish skin on his chest and for a second we existed in the past. The cagey desperation and addiction were there with me, like they'd never been gone, like I'd never been cured of him. He lifted his other hand to my cheek and in my memory it was my neck, my breasts, between my legs.

"Jeanie, I miss you." I couldn't see his lips move. "I've been waiting so long for you to come back. I would have come to Philadelphia but your mother refused me every time I asked for you."

"She was right." I barely said it. I had no breath.

The light shifted almost imperceptibly when the digital clock changed to 1 a.m. Ten minutes had passed with silence, except for the gentle whoosh of a passing car.

"I love you, Jeanie-girl," Larry said finally. "I almost died when you left. Your Mom told me you were clean so I got clean, too. I figured I'd do whatever you were doing and we'd stay connected that way and when you came back things would be even better."

"Larry—"

He kissed my lips.

"Don't say you don't love me anymore, Tammy Jean. You didn't come down here after all this time to tell me that."

Hang-up calls I'd placed to Virginia, a thousand of them over the years, letters that turned into scraps before I had the courage to send them, had said everything over eight years. That I was drawn to his strange comfort like cocaine. That he was a drug I'd finally flushed out of my system.

"I was fifteen," is what I found.

Larry got to his knees on the floor, his head in my lap. I ran my fingers through his hair the way he used to do to me.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, and I knew I was breaking him.

I LEFT HIM ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES IN MY BEDROOM, shivering and sad. It took two hours for the cab to come, but when it did I was waiting by the front door with my coat on. A note for Mom was on the kitchen table, a box of Kleenex at one corner to keep it from blowing away.

The driver got out to take my bag and opened the rear passenger door for me. I turned to get in and looked up at the house. Mom, standing almost concealed, halfway behind a curtain, lifted her hand to her face and blew a little kiss. The end of her cigarette made an arc as she let it go.

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Never trust an animal that can run and relieve itself at the same time.