

Fall 2019

## Halfwayish: an entwined story collection

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**HALFWAYISH**

*An Entwined Story Collection*

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**Eastern Washington University**

**Cheney, Washington**

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**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree**

**Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing**

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**By**

**Deanna Duplechain**

**Fall 2019**



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## Origin

She was made by accident. They brought her to their room. They didn't have a crib, so from the dresser they used a drawer lined with a towel. Babies aren't born knowing cribs, they reasoned.

She experimented with pounding her fists in the air. Everything moved so different now. Brighter, louder, she could see herself, taste her hands, sometimes her feet.

She stared for hours at the sagging stain patterns above, finding more and more detail, trying to grasp the significance. Big brightness came through the window. Trees, squirrels, sometimes a bird, light and shadow always at play. She knew best the large faces, recognized their sounds, reached for them. The soft one fed her and cooed like the birds. The other's voice echoed deep inside her. Sometimes they swooped her up and colors and light spun around. Swirled. So much. Too much.

Sometimes the cooing one held her close; closer; complete. She wanted to travel back inside the cooing one. Maybe through her eyes.

The one who vibrated deeper held her but never as close. Always left a gap of distress that made her face pucker and wrinkle. Sometimes the voices came loud from places she couldn't see.

She watched her fists as they pounded in the air. Everything moved so different now. She wanted to reach the top edge of the drawer, lift herself up, find the large faces, touch them. But she needed them to move her. She experimented with sound. Calls to make them appear.

###

They'd been frightened by their creation. They wanted the baby stopped. They wanted it to go away. The real doctor, the one they needed, was far away in another state. They would need money. They didn't have that kind of money. They were only kids. The girl went to her mother and cried. Her mother cried with her. That kind of money they could only get from her father. The mother was afraid to ask, given everything, please, not his anger too.

Time is agony to them.

The kids heard about someone in town who could stop it cheap. Secret. The kids didn't see the need to talk about God, regrets, their future. It seemed the right thing, the humane thing, and they gathered the money. The girl took the walk down the alley with the other kid close by. He had the money in his pocket. They stood outside the door and knocked. Inside, it was dark. They bumped a couch and the woman on it groaned. Her wide wild eyes shone through strands of sweat-matted hair. A dark stain seeped from her. She's fine, the stranger said as he came forth. The kids pushed out the door, back into the alley.

Given everything, it was this fear that decided for them.

Thrust into the world, screams, a splash, the cold. A separation from everything before.

Stone-aged, desperate to grapple in the shadowed back seat of a car, they had willed forth their best invention. Now they had a room, a bed, could make love at a whim but they never did. They named the baby Elizabeth but called her Betsy and though she could not yet speak, she was asking them to change. Change everything. They felt trapped, not that there was anywhere to go. Sometimes they stood by the dresser drawer

in their tiny rented room, the walls so close, and watched their baby's incessant legs perform the survival stepping pattern inscribed on all human brainstems. They daydreamed about their own escapes no matter how much they loved the smell of that baby.

###

Time slipped by, creating a kind of amnesia.

The baby knew she had been somewhere before this drawer and before that and even before that. But despite the shortness of her life she could not reach back. Was she a new version of a bird like those out the window? Had she barely escaped one collapsing world to land in another? Had she chosen these large faces or had they chosen her? She could only see what was in front of her: the stained patterns above, the fluffy stars falling outside the window, and the insurmountable sides of the drawer. She wanted to crawl up and out like the vision she had of herself. She made her perfect sounds that meant *swoop her up, hold her close*. She made her perfect sounds swell into the night. When the cooing one did not appear, she experimented with screaming into the places she could not see. This required all the air her lungs could hold.

## Shelter

When he came through the front door, Denise jumped up to hug her father's leg, ending her worry that she and her little brother would be left alone forever. Her mother said when Denise learned to tell the difference between an hour and a minute, make sense of the clock hands, then she would understand *forever*.

"Mom went to the store for more colors," Denise said pointing to the dozen hard-boiled eggs awaiting decoration on the dining table.

She didn't mention pouting, then crying, at her mother's suggestion of dying all the eggs one color. Or how her mother threw the half-filled squeeze bottle of red food color, hitting Denise square in the forehead, before stomping out the door. She kept that part to herself.

"I'll be right back. And Daniel gets to decorate, too, not just you!" Denise's mother had yelled when she slammed the door.

Her mother always said things like that, things that couldn't be true; babies can't decorate eggs. And bunnies don't hop up the stairs holding baskets in their little paws. Denise had hunted in the back of the bedroom closet, the only possible hiding place in their tiny apartment, for the candy-filled Easter basket with the yo-yo resting atop strands of neon-green plastic grass. She even removed all the shoes. No basket. No colors. Her mother hadn't prepared for Easter.

The familiar thud of water from her father's after-work shower set everything right and Denise returned to play on the floor with her little quail figurines made of brass.



She arranged and rearranged them, always in clusters, so they might talk to each other. Just beyond arm's reach, her brother Daniel, in his crib, snored through his always snotted nose.

When the squat quails vibrated in Denise's hands, she ran to the window. Cars trembled in the parking lot below, but her mother's little blue car hadn't returned.

Denise spun to catch the carton of eggs just as they juddered over the edge of the dining table. Daniel woke with a gulp and screamed. The egg carton lid flipped open and every egg escaped her hands exploding in little splats on the floor. The crib moved in stops and starts, first towards Denise's quail covey, then away.

Her father scrambled, sudsy from the shower, slipping on the ruddy wooden floor. The turbulence tore away the towel he'd wrapped around his waist. Her father's penis tick-tocked like a pendulum as he snatched up Daniel from his crib. The two of them slip-slipped to her. The bubbles that clung to her father's body burst soap in her nose as he grabbed her tight. Her father slid - Daniel under his right arm, Denise under his left - beneath the sturdy dining table and the whole of the building swayed beneath them. The empty dye bowls and dining chairs clattered to the floor. Their belongings hailed down from the walls, shelves, and when the doors swung wide, the cabinets, grinding the shells and egg whites and yolks into the hardwood floor as they ran over the eggs, first one way and then the other. The world teetered.

Later, in the shelter, the rescue workers said how lucky they were. Most of the old wooden buildings in Anchorage, like the Chilkoot Arms where they lived, stayed standing because they had 'give'.

###

The road twisted and crumbled into meaningless sections and Denise's mother thought for a moment she'd gone completely mad. Then a utility pole slammed onto the hood of her car and she realized, almost thankfully, how real it all was. Vera tried to quiet herself, listen for some inner voice to plot the best course of action. Nothing, just the cacophony outside the Karmen Ghia. Honestly, she'd lost faith in her inner voice, or voices, she should say. So much wavering advice flowed one moment to the next, she froze on an average day - let alone on this day, as the world fell apart outside her little blue car.

She knew Denise waited for more colors. Maybe, Vera thought, if I sit here long enough, the next utility pole will crash through the tattered convertible top and I will never disappoint her again.

###

The Chilkoot Arms remained standing, but all the water pipes had twisted and split, creating waterfall walls. The power lines slithered free of their connections around the apartment building. The aftershocks continued. Denise and Daniel waited under the dining table as their father dressed quickly. Rescue workers ordered everyone to an emergency shelter set up in a nearby bank. Denise's father didn't want to leave until Vera came home from the store. Rescue workers told him they would direct Vera to the shelter when she returned. They told him to think of his children. Denise thrust two of the indestructible brass quails into her pocket. Her father loaded her down with blankets, picked through the rubble to fill the baby bag, mounted Daniel on his back, and took her hand before leaving Chilkoot Arms.

They followed the flow of the neighborhood to the bank and settled in on a fold-out cot against the concrete wall.

Men in uniforms handed out water and sandwiches. A small group had assembled in the far corner. They joined hands and sang low of going home.

“Don’t listen to them. Those Holy Rollers,” her father said each time he went to find some word of her mother.

Each time he left felt longer and longer and each time he returned Denise knew by his face not to ask about her mother. The circle of Holy Rollers multiplied. With the echoes off the concrete, the voices of twenty seemed like one hundred. Their songs grew louder and full of moans. Their whole bodies shook as they clung to one another. Some beat themselves and cried.

They prayed about leaving their troubles, the end of times, going home to their Father in Heaven tomorrow, upon his second coming, and of walking down Streets of Gold. They seemed to surrender themselves to the low ceiling above. Their upturned faces seemed hungry for the end of the world. Denise recognized the look. Sometimes when her mother stood at the kitchen sink staring out the window, her face had that same look.

The Holy Rollers frightened Daniel. To keep him from crying, Denise put her face close to his, took in loud quick breaths while opening her eyes and mouth big, as if she’d been surprised by something wonderful. She surprised herself for what seemed like forever until Daniel snored through snot. Her father held still like a stone on the cot.

“Those Holy Rollers will feel stupid tomorrow when it’s just another day,” he said.

Alert for vibrations, she wrapped her fingers tight around the brass quails in her pocket.

That night Denise dreamed the indestructible quails became eggs, whole again, and miraculously returned to the table. Dying them red alongside Daniel, who held the wire dipper perfectly, she told her parents to never mind about the Easter basket, or Christmas presents, or quarters, even if all her teeth fell out. They didn't have to pretend with her anymore, she said. In her dream, her mother and father made big happy surprise faces.

###

Power lines sparked live along the ground. Huge chunks of concrete flew to the ground and rolled like marbles, though never crushing the driver's side of the Karmen Ghia.

Sounds of danger came from everywhere at once.

Her decision not to prepare for Easter had been made months ago. Vera'd promised herself she'd be gone by then, but towards the late afternoon of each day she only stared out the kitchen window. Then the opening of the door, the soft thud of the shower, then dinner, then another day for what seemed like forever.

Vera thought, *I must live*. She opened the car door and stepped out, the lurching unsteadiness of the ground delivered her to her hands and knees. When she could not rise, she crawled, away from Denise, who huddled with Daniel and her father, first under the table and then in the bank basement. On hands and knees, she headed in the opposite direction, skirting the danger until she found her sea legs.

## Changelings

Irene wants no Republicans in her house. The kitchen radio must have wafted news into the living room about the strong chances of Bush Jr. stepping into the White House. Irene's head twists and her eyes dart about the room, moving from one owl knickknack to the next with an urgency close to panic, as she repeats the no-Republican rule to Betsy.

"It's just us, Grandma, and Warren. We're not Republicans." Betsy sighs and continues a standoff with Irene, firmly holding down the housedress Irene attempts to pull over her head.

"I've polled the owls, mostly Democrats with a few Independents. And if any Republicans show up, we'll bury them out beneath the cabbages," Warren offers up to Irene.

Back in the coherent days, Irene lectured Betsy on keeping her life free of unnecessary attachments. Men and children should never be the center of a woman's universe. Don't clutter your world, she'd said. After years of ill-fated attempts at loving and being loved by men, Betsy decided to let Irene's words sink in. To live by them. No husband, no children. Now she wishes they'd talked more about what *should* be the center of a woman's universe.

Betsy's own parents vanished before she had any memory of them. When she was old enough to understand, Irene told her the story of how their single engine plane disappeared somewhere above the Arctic Circle on their way to work the oil pipeline in Prudhoe Bay. Irene has been both mother and father to Betsy, and it won't be long before

she vanishes as well. Avoiding men, children, clutter, and Republicans doesn't seem enough of a life goal and Irene's current mental state seems unlikely to produce any further guidance.

The argument could be made that her grandmother has never even followed her own advice. Owl curios fill every nook and cranny of her house. As for children, she'd raised Betsy as her own and taught kindergarten at Matanuska Valley Elementary for over thirty years. Now Warren, her 'gentleman companion' as he calls himself, stands against the fading sunlight in the expanse of Irene's picture window, but Betsy doesn't begrudge her grandmother any comfort. Maybe Irene never said *universe*; maybe she'd said *existence*. Maybe she'd said *life*. Maybe she'd only wanted to save Betsy from hurt. Flourish. She was always big on women flourishing. I should've paid closer attention, asked more questions, taken our time together more seriously, Betsy thinks. She can't imagine the world post-Irene or what the hell she's going to do with all these owls.

Warren's resonant voice marvels on the miracles of the gargantuan cabbages and almost round-the-clock summer growing season. A burn scar runs along the right side of Warren's face and disappears down the side of his neck beneath his pearl snap shirt. When they first met, 'you should see the fire' was all he said in reply to Betsy's too-long gaze. She's not asked any particulars of his scar, though she's wanted to. Close to 10 p.m. and the sun is still setting.

As Betsy's focus slips to the rolling Matanuska Valley outside Irene's window, her grandmother takes the opportunity to slough off her housedress. Betsy gives up the fight. It's nothing Warren hasn't seen before, she's sure. Irene sits naked with shadows

falling on her failing body. She had once been *zaftig*, substantial. Now her tissue paper skin clings to her thin bones, so insubstantial, her owl tchotchkes could carry her away.

Her body paints itself from the inside with splotches of eggplant purple at IV and injection sites, places of contact with even the slightest pressure from human hands, and repeated run-ins with objects in her crowded house.

“I am my own tattoo artist,” Irene says turning her arms this way and that.

Warren smiles, nods to her, speaks of the lingering light, and how it makes going to bed in the summer almost impossible.

“I want to stay up all night. Always afraid I’ll miss something,” he says.

Irene’s urge to be naked started three days ago. Maybe the toxins in her brain are driving her mad. Maybe the morphine or the combination of drugs are setting her skin on fire. Warren keeps his eyes directed out the window and talks his stream: how he once saw a 138-pound cabbage and a 35-pound broccoli at the Alaska State Fair down the road in Palmer, how everything grown in the valley turns out a little sweeter due to the long summer days. Slowly, his words smooth the lines of Irene’s worry. Her eyes settle on the tall owl umbrella stand dressed as an English gentleman, complete with a monocle and top hat, who seems to have become her particular friend over the past few days. On occasion Irene replies to the umbrella stand owl as if it’s a kindergartner asking questions. “Yes, it hurts,” she’ll answer. “From all that terrible smoking,” or, “I guess to appreciate life.” She compliments the umbrella stand’s dancing before resting her head back on the couch cushion.

“I’m glad you’re here, Warren. It’s a pleasure to get to know you,” Betsy whispers.

Irene sits upright and says in a sing-song voice, “Yes, I’m glad you’re here, Warren. It’s a pleasure to get to know you.”

“Grandma, please....”

“Everything’s going to be all right,” Warren laughs.

He wraps his arms around Irene and fits his scarred cheek against her hollowed one. Betsy sees Irene come home to her body. The soft, cloudy eyes of her grandmother return. Her eyes widen at her own nakedness. She pulls the furry blanket towards herself. Warren gently tucks the blanket edges around Irene, leaving out her left arm so that he may rest her hand in his. He recounts their first meeting, over a year ago now, at the Palmer Community Center Senior Dance. How he’d almost given up going, thought he’d met everyone in the Valley, but there was Irene one Saturday night.

“Like Jessica Tandy in *Cocoon*. And to my surprise, she invited me home with her,” Warren says.

“You were the only other Democrat,” Irene says.

“And here I thought it was to unravel the mystery that is me,” Warren said kissing her hand.

“God, we should all live so long.” Irene rolls her eyes at him and leans over onto her satin covered pillow at the end of the couch.

“Yes, we should. Goodnight, ladies, until tomorrow.”

Everything does not seem like it will be all right. According to the home hospice nurse, as little as a day, maybe a week. Lung cancer from smoking all those years has deepened into her liver and lymph nodes. Warren presses his lips gently to Irene’s for a goodnight kiss. Cruel that their kisses are so numbered. When I get back to Port Aransas,



Betsy thinks as she waves to Warren backing down the drive, I'll find someone for goodnight kisses, put real effort into it, buy a dress, stop cutting my own hair.

"Bacon for dinner, please, sweetheart," Irene calls out to Betsy.

Dinner already happened. Broccoli cheese soup with Warren, though Irene only stared into her bowl lamenting on how she's lost all love for soup.

"You want two or three pieces?" Betsy asks.

"Four. What the hell, right?"

"What the hell *is* right."

After second dinner, Betsy slips out to the garage side of Irene's house to smoke. Betsy had quit, finally quit, but has graduated to over a pack a day since her return to Alaska last month. The cigarettes, matches, body spray, and mouthwash are kept in the top pot of the many empty plant pots worming up the hardiplank in crooked stacks. Chain smoking while the sunlight finally becomes faint enough for stars to show through, she pinpoints the Big Dipper. Her eyes memorize the starlight, tracing the sweep of the bowl over and over again, until she can see the North Star with her eyes shut.

###

When the cancer first came two years ago, the doctors spoke optimistically. Making such strides in medicine these days, one said. A brief, dark cloud to be endured, said another. A great excuse to fly to Alaska from Port Aransas, Betsy thought, and spend quality time with her grandmother. Irene would undergo her round of treatments and everything would return to normal.

When her hair began to fall out, they made a game of it, scouted for just the right circumstance, like a sneaky line-jumper at Nordstrom's while they were shopping for scarves.

"We were here first, you rascally cheat! A plague on your house!" Irene had hissed at the line-jumper, yanking out a clump of her own hair and fake trembling it skywards. The line-jumper stood aside, face warped with horror, and certainly never cut in line again for the remainder of her life.

The good times associated with pulling out her hair in clumps ended the day they walked into Irene's favorite restaurant, *Bob's Big Boy* in Anchorage.

"I am sorry. We are out of broccoli cheese soup," their waitress said.

Irene's hand inched up to the edge of her scarf and Betsy gave the nod.

"Oh, ye merciless Gods! Why must you thwart us in even our simplest desires!"

Irene pulled out a clump of hair trembling her fist towards the heavens.

Betsy and Irene waited for the waitress to be shocked, angry, laugh, throw them out, make some excuse for the kitchen, but the waitress sat down in the booth, hugged Irene, took the clump of hair into her own hand, and said, eyes brimful of tears, that she'd make more broccoli cheese soup immediately. Turned out their waitress, Vicki, owned that *Bob's Big Boy* franchise. A picture of Irene and Betsy appeared on her website eating broccoli cheese soup with the caption FREE SOUP FOR LIFE.

The doctor had reported Irene's remission near complete so the promise of a lifetime of soup seemed wonderfully generous, though they both wished they hadn't made Vicki cry.

Her new hair had grown in white and spikily thin. A lady from the American Cancer Society visited with a wig, the color matching Irene's from before. While styling the wig in a swoopy updo from some unknown time period, the earnest, soft-spoken woman shared stories themed around the sadness of total hair loss. Voilá, she'd said, before her departure, pleased with Irene's transformation into a coiffed troll doll. Irene and Betsy took turns animating the wig like a wild animal hand puppet, trapped the scrunchy clump in the nightstand drawer swearing never to let it escape, and celebrated an all clear from the doctor with broccoli cheese soup and champagne.

Betsy returned to her bungalow on the Texas coast. Irene went back to her half-day kindergarten teaching and took up volunteer clowning at the children's hospital in Palmer. Apparently, her brush with cancer inspired her to attend the Palmer Community Center Senior Dance where she snagged Warren.

Two years almost to the day of her departure, Betsy received the call from Irene that the cancer had returned and this time the doctors didn't put any sunny, walk-in-the-park spin on the diagnosis. Upon her return to Alaska, Betsy checked on the wig, still hideous as ever in the nightstand drawer, but not funny anymore.

###

Always after smoking she rinses her mouth twice, rubs pine needles between her fingers, and walks through mists of body spray to mask all reek of tobacco. Deodorized, Betsy returns to the living room where Irene has settled into her rented hospital bed. Irene doesn't want to be shut up in the bedroom. On the wall above her bed hangs a picture of Betsy at about two years old - nestled inside a giant cabbage as if she'd grown

there. A small circle of framed photos display the milestones of Betsy's life with Irene, but everywhere else - on all the walls, tables, and bookshelves - are the owls.

"Be careful, very careful about what you bring home. Not you, I don't mean you. I'm glad I snatched you home," Irene had said to Betsy when she arrived in Alaska last month. "It's these owls. Buy a couple of innocent whatnots and you end up looking like a crazy old owl lady."

"Oh, grandma, you love owls," Betsy told her, thinking about the owl slippers she'd brought for Irene, gift-wrapped inside her suitcase.

"No, I never did. I just didn't want to hurt people," Irene said.

It all started, Irene said, with a painting she'd bought from a Saturday market artist because she liked how moonlight faintly outlined the owl whose glowing yellow eyes seemed like little moons themselves. Then at Salvation Army, she purchased a half-priced owl paperweight to keep her papers from flying away. Irene confided that her enthusiastic ooohs and ahhs on opening owl presents ever after sprang from her desire not to offend previous owl gifters or hurt the feelings of the current owl gifter. Not that she disliked owls, Irene had said, but her politeness had been completely misinterpreted.

On display in the living room are owl nesting dolls, owl ashtrays, stop photography coffee table books of owls in flight, a trio of hear-no-speak-no-do-no evil owls, a montage of owls hunting mice rendered in stained glass, owl nightlights, and a bulging-eyed owl with a clock in its belly. On a large tree branch anchored into the wall, a taxidermist-stuffed owl lands dramatically, wings spread to a full five feet, still startling Betsy every time she comes inside from her smoke breaks. On the landing to the front door, close to the head of Irene's hospital bed, stands the tall umbrella stand owl dressed

as an English gentleman with his monocle and top hat. Who dreams up such things, Betsy wonders.

Very late the room goes black and Irene says she can feel the owls on the move, circling. Betsy crawls in next to Irene, keeping herself close to the edge, afraid she might bruise her grandmother, and fears she feels the fluctuations too.

“I slapped you once. I think about that,” Irene says.

“Please don’t. I’ve forgotten all about it. I was difficult, I know,” Betsy replies.

“More like an alien,” Irene says.

They titter over this, remembering Betsy’s teen years. The labor of Irene’s breath becomes pervasive.

“You know how you always threw all your spare change into your purse? How it would sink to the bottom? Well, there was a time, sort of a long time actually, when I used to take what I thought you wouldn’t notice,” Betsy admits.

“You *think* I didn’t notice. I’d reach for my purse and it would fly up, five pounds lighter. Then you’d come home with a big bag of candy. Maybe I shouldn’t have let you think you were getting away with it.” Irene works the bed control to recline a bit more. “When your conscience caught up with you, my purse got heavier. Still don’t know what to do with change. Probably hordes of it around here. You take it all for gas money. Drive the Audi down to Texas. It’s yours now.”

The darkness and furry blanket cocoon them.

Betsy dreads the sun rising along with all the indisputable facts of the day: the home hospice nurse, the respiratory therapist, Vicki’s soup delivery, awkward neighbors, agonizing friends, crying students, talk of Republicans, the weight of clothing, the

panicked thoughts and whirring eyes. Betsy will go to the store for more bacon and cigarettes. Irene will insist she drive the Audi, tell her for the fortieth time the Audi belongs to her now, but Betsy will walk, chain-smoking her denial the whole way. And even worse, maybe none of this will happen. Maybe Irene and Warren have already had their last goodnight kiss. Maybe the day that Betsy fears unendurable is already upon her. Irene presses the control to bring the bed all the way down.

A piercing sliver of sun highlights the gargantuan cabbages in the field outside the picture window. The bed shudders as if a flurry of wings have come to rest. Irene turns her patient face to her particular friend, the tall monocled owl, who seems to have run out of questions.

## **The Cleanup**

Familiar oil platforms marked the Gulf Coast horizon, but now more elaborate than back in the day, like twisted futuristic cities. Sargassum seaweed still lay in long tangles up and down the beach. The seaweed's curvy lengths enmeshed with washed-up trash: tar pieces, broken bits of plastic, spray paint cans, single loose shoes, cigarette butts, and beer cans as far as the eye could see. Years ago, when Betsy and Denise had first arrived in Port Aransas with their smart-aleck faces and grape-smooth bodies, they called it Orgassum seaweed when the tourists asked. The sincere nods of the tourists confirmed Denise and Betsy's theory that no one ever really listened to them.

Denise pulled the pink, thickly ruffled swim bottoms back over Isabell's diaper and stood her daughter up. She peeled Isabell's fierce grip from around her fingers and let her go. Her big bustling butt provided Denise the amusement she'd hoped for when she purchased the suit at the store. Isabell's first trip to a beach. Denise's first trip back in over twenty years; she'd done the painful math. Betsy had never given up on inviting her down, but so much time had passed, she feared they'd grown apart. Or more precisely that Denise had grown and Betsy had not. Denise had gone to college – granted, community college - but she had skills, a roster of home physical therapy patients, a house. She had to rent out a room to make the mortgage, but the house was hers. Betsy still rented the old broken-down bungalow and worked at the Stop N' Shop. Probably still smoked cigarettes and drank PBRs. She'd also become the Lead Liaison of Port Aransas for the Annual Texas Statewide Beach Cleanup.

“You got trashed on that beach so many times, you *should* help clean it up.” Betsy had phoned Denise in Austin last week. “Please let me meet my niece. We claimed each other as family, right?”

Denise had found herself agreeing. Betsy’s grandmother had died last year, and Denise knew that was all the family Betsy had. Denise rented a car she couldn’t afford since she didn’t trust her own to make the long trip, rented a room at the Captain’s Inn she couldn’t afford since she didn’t want to commit to staying with Betsy, and drove down for a long weekend. Betsy planned to meet them at their old spot on the beach after her shift at the Stop N’ Shop. Every female passerby made Denise sit up in expectation, half waving at complete strangers, using the shotgun approach to compensate for her fear of not knowing her friend after all these years.

The extra padding and soft sand erased Isabell’s fear of falling. Walking was a newly acquired skill. She fought to stay upright on flat surfaces, let alone the crumbly, shifting surface of the beach. A wave of worry passed over Isabell’s face on the first couple of tumbles. Right at the edge of her decision to cry or not to cry, she checked in with herself and came down on the side of not crying. By later plops, she laughed, jiggled, and clapped. Falling was fun with this booty and this sand.

Her halter top twisted up above her little balloon of a belly. She grabbed a handful of sand and jammed it into her mouth. A gag reflex followed, then her arms shot up to the sky. She shook her head violently while spitting. Apparently, this cleansed her palate for another tasting. Denise had vowed not to be a helicopter parent. She left room for Isabell to learn her own lessons about falling and what she should or shouldn’t put in her mouth. She’d only intervene at household cleaning products.



“Still hasn’t turned to sugar, huh, Izzy.”

“No. No – wawa ba.” Isabell patted her own tummy then brought her arms high to catch the ocean breeze.

Isabell’s arms caught the attention of a seagull that touched down close and a staring contest commenced. The seagull cheated, using first one beady eye and then a head twist to deploy the other. Her daughter was clearly the winner; she kept both unblinking eyes on the bird. Then the seagull looked off into the distance feigning complete indifference. Classic move. Isabell extended her right hand toward the bird, fingers splayed, and turned full face to her mother.

“Wha ha ha?” which Denise translated to ‘What do you make of this fantastic creature?’

“Seagull. That’s a seagull. He may know an easy mark when he sees one,” Denise warned her daughter and snapped shut the Cheerios container.

Denise squinted at a woman heading in their direction and steadied herself for greeting Betsy, the hug she hoped would feel natural. She wondered if they’d talk easily about their past, how they met in juvie – their long journey - their parting. The woman, clearly not Betsy, walked by without a glance towards Denise, keeping her eyes on the tame, almost flat, Gulf waves that brought in the gentle tide. Denise had, over the years, completely written her months of detention out of any stories she told others. Though it was nothing to be ashamed of, she and Betsy were the normal girls in there - just recreational drug use, maybe possession of a few packages for a little side money - not torching the family home or beating anyone with a bowling trophy. During group therapy, they’d made up some violence solely to discourage the tough girls from beating

them up. Betsy had her grandmother; Denise had her dad and brother out there somewhere. But in their captivity, they realigned their allegiance to each other, told each other every secret back as far back as they could remember. At the end of their six months, drunk with freedom and eager to live out the delinquency they'd been charged with, they'd wandered south. They hitchhiked, slept in gas station bathrooms, befriended many a stranger, and learned to steal from campground coolers along the way. Whitehorse. Toad River. Calgary. Great Falls. Casper. With a pocket-knife found at the side of the road, they cut palms and mixed their blood. Cheyenne. Pueblo. Lubbock. The ferry ride to Port Aransas.

In Denise's memory, the water shimmered with dolphins leaping to the surface to spirit them on their way. Once on the beach, they'd seen the faraway fire, a pulsating oasis of light in the distance. They'd followed the glow to bright-eyed people circled around flames, passing their joints and Boone's Farm, welcoming them to the fold. Their first ever Dino's Full Moon Bacchanalian Bash. Port Aransas was warm, on the coast, and far, far away from Alaska. That first night, Dino talked of wild mustangs and sea turtles. As they stared into the fire, he played songs of crooked genius on his beat-up guitar. His songs tingled Denise and Betsy, as they leaned into each other, knowing they'd arrived.

Near as Denise could tell, where she sat now was the exact same spot.

The mottled grey seagull, rough for wear, took one sidestep closer to her daughter on its scaly legs. Bottom-heavy though she was, Isabell gasped and rose to standing. Her knees, hidden by little rolls of baby fat, found some stability. The seagull turned its head

fully to take in her height. The two held very still. Isabell looked to her mother, unsure what this exchange required.

“You may have a friend there. I don’t really know.”

Denise had almost dodged parenting. Two abortions and a miscarriage. Then she got pregnant again at forty-one. She and Bad Rick barely had sex, so the pregnancy seemed a testament to her body’s relentless pursuit of a fetus. Isabell was practically a miracle, everyone said. Most days that seemed a fair assessment. Denise worried about the future Isabell, but she’d never willingly abandon her child and just sticking around would far outpace her own mother. The exit of Bad Rick, wanting no part of Isabell, probably helped Denise decide in favor of Isabell’s entrance into the world, for which she was grateful; observing her daughter construct herself gave Denise the most satisfying and bewildering reasons to live she could imagine.

The seagull and Isabell tangoed around the beach blanket. Isabell advanced one step, arms out like a little Frankenstein in staggering pursuit; he retreated one hop. The seagull was adept at keeping equidistant from the girl, just beyond her reach. With the seagull’s complex calculations of flight, this was child’s play. Isabell abruptly lost interest in the seagull, staring off at the waves. The seagull wasn’t finished and sidled up to her. When Isabell felt the bird’s feathers touch her leg, she fell upon him. The bird’s wings spread for escape and Isabell grabbed them in her little fists. She looked to her mother. A moment of victory spread across her face before the seagull began pecking at her cheeks, her forehead, so near her eyes! She let him go, but the bird got in a few more pecks before Denise dove in and swooped Isabell up. She grabbed the beach blanket, the cooler, the diaper bag, the pop-up umbrella, her purse and ran with the bloody, sand-

encrusted Isabell, whose screams pierced Denise's ear as their belongings fell here and there along the way to the rental car.

###

She recognized Betsy's silhouette in an instant, even with the white hospital hallway glare. Thin and slinky. The years of sun had deepened her skin and lightened her hair. Isabell was slung on Denise's hip and Betsy embraced them both. Isabell, her face puffy and dotted with tiny bandages, licked the lollipop given to her for being a good girl. In her purse, Denise had the antibiotics and anti-bacterial ointment to prevent avian pox and a whole host of other horrifying infections.

"No stitches but turns out seagulls are very dangerous. Super viruses. Dread disease. I think we should leave now before child services arrive," Denise said, not joking.

They returned to the beach, retrieved Denise's fallen items, and stowed them away in the trunk of her car. They strolled down the beach. When they swung Isabell between them, Betsy had to switch up sides. She was in physical therapy for strain on her left arm.

"Bagging beer all day hasn't helped. But really it got worse last year. I invited Bush Senior to kick off the beach cleanup. The organization's 25th anniversary - Texas - I figured it was worth a shot. And he came. Gave money, made an inspiring speech. I said thanks, like 'thanks and goodbye'. And he said, 'Oh, no, I'm here to volunteer.' He pulled on my shoulder all day walking the sand, leaning down for the trash."

"I wish I hadn't heard that story," Denise said.

"I know. Almost makes you like him, right?" Betsy said.

Denise laughed and looked sideways at this much older version of her friend. A tad thicker in places, but she'd know her anywhere.

"I say we walk over to the Gaff for pizza and beer. My treat," Betsy offered.

They migrated inland towards their old haunt, their steps falling in unison. Betsy promised to show Isabell the sea turtles. Talked of how they returned after many years at sea to find the precise spot of their own birth to lay their eggs. Isabell didn't take sideways looks. She stared straight at Betsy, smitten.

"Do you ever run into Dino?" Denise asked.

Denise intended to throw Dino's name out with nonchalance, but even after all these years, his name ricocheted inside her. Her toes rammed a buried piece of driftwood and she hopped in a little circle to ease the pain. He'd seemed like such a prize that first night: those genius songs, his shark tooth necklace, and muscled body that leapt into the darkness and returned triumphant again and again throwing massive chunks of driftwood onto the fire, sparks rising all around him. Near morning, Dino had held out his hand for Betsy. They'd disappeared into the dunes and left Denise alone on the beach: the girl not chosen. They'd survived so much in their travels but didn't survive Dino. The three of them lived in the broken-down bungalow for a time. Betsy, under his sway, followed him room to room and gave all her secrets to him. Denise felt abandoned, pushed out the door, and floated north on her own. From Betsy's invitational phone calls over the years, Denise knew she'd split from Dino long ago.

"I manage to dodge him mostly. He was in New Mexico for a time, I know. Opened a one-man surf school here in Port Aransas."

"There aren't any waves," Denise said.

“Right. He has a daughter. Thank God it wasn’t with me. They lived on a commune somewhere, but he’s back again because I see his name on the board at Stingray’s for winning belt sander races.”

“How do you race a belt sander?” asked Denise.

“I don’t know, but apparently he’s the champion. He looks rough. Wears an eyepatch,” Betsy said.

“Like he’s trying to be a pirate?” Denise asked.

“No, like he lost his eye somewhere,” Betsy said

“Oh, Dino, Dino, Dino, Dino,” Denise murmured.

“He throws his Full Moon Bacchanalian Bashes every so often. Still gets lucky with the young ones I bet. Still passes off those Townes Van Zandt songs as his own, remember?” Betsy asked.

“Oh my god. Were we stupid?” Denise asked.

“Naïve. Naïve. Now us big girls know better, right, Izzy?”

They swung Isabell up off the beach and onto the Gaff’s patio.

Not much had changed at the Gaff except that smoking had to take place outside, which is where they sat to accommodate Betsy. While the ashtray filled and the PBR cans emptied, they recounted their days together and marveled upon their survival. Izzy curled on Denise’s chest fast asleep. Drunk on words and beer, Denise wanted the moonless night to last forever. Betsy knew the night clerk at the Captain’s Inn and said she could get the room cancelled, no charge. They walked the beach by heart to the bungalow, roomier and less broken-down than she remembered, and Betsy padded a dresser drawer for Isabell’s bed.

###

They were on the beach before sunrise. Betsy had rallied volunteers for every quarter mile of the beach. Everyone had bags and tally lists to keep track of the trash. There would be prizes for the most trash, the most unusual trash, and the trash from farthest away. After the cleanup, the Gaff would provide a party spot with free pizza for all involved.

Betsy held the bag for Isabell and Denise as they traversed their quarter mile of the beach, up to the dunes and down to the water. Up to the dunes and down to the water, again and again. At the first beer can that Isabell emptied of sea water and dropped into the trash bag, Betsy offered a high five. Little did she know a high five would be required for every beer can after.

Denise looked to Betsy's palm. No trace remained of the cut made with the knife they'd found outside Cheyenne. Denise looked at her own healed palm, practically a miracle it never got infected.

By day's end, Isabell had learned that shells and charred logs were not trash and to walk around used condoms and jellyfish.

At the sight of seagulls, Isabell touched her bandages and winced. Denise encouraged Isabell to map out her damage, relate the seagull incident with monosyllables and finger pointing. Denise hugged Isabell to show how sorry she was for her hurt, as did Betsy before they returned to picking up beer cans. They sometimes looked back over the ground they'd covered, the trash picked clean from the Sargassum seaweed, and said what a good job they were doing. They said that all day.

## Chaperone

Millie pitched a cot beside her husband's hospital bed to chaperone him into death. Daily, Del told her to go on home, but she knew he wanted her there, and he knew she wouldn't dream of letting him go into the unknown alone. Except for the two nights she'd stayed at Hill Country Memorial birthing their son, she'd slept nestled into Del's side, in the same bedroom, for fifty-three years. She nicknamed Del *The Furnace*, claiming she could see wavy lines of steam rise off him in the night. His body heat permeated her at every point of contact, so deeply that her left side remained a few degrees warmer than the rest of her. Even after a week of sleeping on the cot, as she listened to the beeps signaling his failing heart, she felt his sleeping warmth all along her left side.

After Del died the stoic death she knew he would, she folded up her cot and returned alone to their long-time home in Fredricksburg. Land of Germans, peaches, and LBJ. His death cut like a machete. She lived, but for years after his death, her heart wasn't much in it.

About the same time of Del's death, wineries started sprouting up all over Fredricksburg. He'd never been one for change, so Millie never understood why he stuck around after death to witness the invasion. Doris, her closest neighbor, embraced the 'bougies', as she called them. She swung by in her truck every Wednesday to get Millie out and amongst people. They'd tour, sip, and eat little finger snacks.



“This is hot, scrubby country like much of Spain, good for grapes,” the lady at the Messina Hof Winery, serving thin-sliced cheese on seeded crackers accompanied by Pinot Blanc, explained when Millie asked, “Why in the world Fredricksburg?”

Even in Doris’s company, Del appeared to Millie. She’d feel a hot flutter along her left side, and there he’d be, asking her if she’d lost her mind spending \$12.00 on a glass of wine. Saying what a goddamned good thing it was they hadn’t wasted hard-earned money going all the way to Spain, like she’d harped on, if it looked just like the Hill Country of Texas, where they’d lived all their goddamned lives. He screwed his face up every which way and gargled, making fun of the wine bougies, just as she knew he would. Millie laughed and let Doris believe her laughter sprung from the positive effects of social interaction.

Glen expressed concern. Too much house for her alone, too isolated, he said, she should consider moving. If he was so worried, he could come live in the garage apartment, help her, be her company, she said. Glen said she couldn’t expect him to disrupt his whole life. What life, she wanted to ask. Work, that’s all she could see of her son’s life. No wife, no girlfriend. He never came to dinner, never played his guitar for her anymore.

Glen gave her a little pug so she wouldn’t be alone. Millie christened her new companion Rufus. She loved his little smushed-in face and long hanging tongue. When Del first fluttered in and met Rufus, he deemed the dog a nonviable creature, one of God’s countless, colossal boo-boos, though he insisted Millie let Rufus lick the leftover yolk off her breakfast plate. Every night Rufus warmed himself, snoring and snorting, at Millie’s left side.

One day, as she walked down the long, long driveway to check the mail as always, leaving behind the cell phone that Glen harped on her to always, always keep in her jeans pocket, Rufus went after a jackrabbit. Millie went after Rufus. Millie fell, and though she didn't know it at the time, broke her hip. It hurt like a son of a bitch, she knew that. She twisted there, cursing, on the hard earth, isolated amidst the Juniper scrubs. She pulled herself into the long shade of a Live Oak, confident Rufus would be back to keep her company. The sun moved across the sky and he didn't return. She imagined his little legs carried him the half mile over to Doris's driveway where he barked and weaved, signaling her to hop in her pickup and come rescue Millie.

That never happened. Nor did Del, as in life, always underfoot until she really needed him, flutter to her side. Millie feared the coming darkness and began dragging herself to the house. She didn't enjoy being an 'I told you so' type person, but Del knew he should have paved the driveway. They'd talked about it enough. The rough dirt scraped her hands. The gravel poked her the whole way home. When Millie finally heaved herself over the threshold of the front door, Del apologized for not getting around to the driveway in life, and, of course, she forgave him.

Glen would come to exaggerate the episode and say she'd pulled herself in a delirium for miles. From the paving estimates still clipped to the side of the refrigerator, Millie knew the driveway measured only one quarter of a mile.

Three years, almost to the day of Del's death, Millie returned to the hospital where she'd pitched her cot. The fall had shattered her joint and the doctor advised a whole new hip. Millie agreed to the surgery and came through just fine, but the hospital proved a hotbed of infection. She contracted some scary acronym of a virus, MRSA

maybe. Millie didn't remember, but in her fevered sickness, she'd hosted happy hours for Del and several friends, both dead and alive, in her hospital room, making imaginary margaritas with all manner of fruit flavorings. Glen said she seemed to be having a fine time, but she knew it worried him. She'd never made a margarita in her life.

Glen took it upon himself to find her a one-bedroom unit in the Renaissance Luxury Senior Living Community in downtown Austin to be closer to him. Her house in Fredricksburg went on the market.

"My life is there. What if Rufus returns?" Millie protested. Del will pitch a fit if I let strangers move in, she thought, but knew sharing her fears of a dead man's tantrums wouldn't strengthen her argument.

Glen remained adamant. All the damned healthcare workers, with their placid faces, argued on his side. Glen showed her the poster with Rufus's picture he'd hung all over Fredricksburg offering a big reward. The new owners of her house promised to capture Rufus and bring him immediately to her place in Austin if he returned.

On the day Millie was discharged from rehab, she reached for Glen's hand for help, but he placed the walker her doctor instructed her to use until her hip strengthened firmly in front of her. She refused words or eye contact as he drove her to the Renaissance. The automatic sliding glass doors opened for her, then dinged and dinged in protest, until she finally cleared the doorway. She felt unmoored. Del had carried her over their Fredricksburg threshold when she turned twenty. He might have been dead three years, but in their house, he still lived all around her, still helped her know who she was.

Glen pressed the eighth-floor elevator button and they rose to her new home where, for the first time in her life, she looked down on a city and shared walls with

neighbors. Del didn't seem to have followed her. She wasn't surprised; he'd railed for Texas to secede from hippie-infested Austin for as long as she could remember.

After Glen left, Millie stared down at the city streets until dinner time, then refreshed her make-up. At the entrance to the dining room Miss Jean, the cheery activity lady, spotted her and waved from across the room with an enthusiasm that should be reserved for greeting long lost pugs. Miss Jean headed her way, weaving through the tables, big beaming horse smile in place. Millie looked over the sea of gray. Scattered walkers and canes waited in attendance upon gray-skinned strangers with gray hair sitting around tables with gray tablecloths. The big fishbowl of a dining room reminded her of the absolute worst days of middle school, and Millie remembered how, on those days, she'd retreated to the back corner of the school library to eat her sandwich. She turned abruptly, almost bowling over a couple clinging to each other for dear life, and, with no walker, vaulted on her stiff leg to the elevator. She pressed the button frantically while looking over her shoulder for the approaching Miss Jean. Inside the elevator, through closing doors, she saw the bewildered face of Miss Jean. She didn't think I could move so fast, Millie thought on her way up.

That first night, Millie listened intently to the sex taking place on the other side of her thin wall. In all her 76 years, she'd never heard the lovemaking of others. George, her neighbor, let out low throaty groans, punctuating the rhythmic headboard thumps. She'd met George earlier with Glen, while the movers brought in the heavy things. George had taken her hands in his, bowed slightly to brush his lips across her fingers, and winked one of his sky-blue eyes.

“Come on. Does that ever work?” Glen had asked after George hopped on the elevator for Tai Chi class.

Apparently yes. The mystery woman moaned, bed springs bouncing with surprising ferocity. She claimed to have reached her orgasm limit multiple times but kept proving herself wrong.

“You are so much man! Oh, sweet Jesus, show some mercy!”

No doubt Viagra was involved in these escapades - that, and, Millie hoped, a good bit of theatrics. She was relieved that Del hadn't appeared at the Renaissance. She couldn't bear him knowing she listened with such interest. Some intruding doubts as to Del's bed skills threatened her memory of him. Millie felt left out. She inched up in bed and turned her ear this way and that to gain the best reception, her stomach grumbling from her missed dinner.

“Oh, God, Georgie Porgie. I am yours, all yours! Take me.”

Millie placed a hand firmly over her mouth to silence a giggle. She tried to envision the face of the ecstatic woman. Millie's imagination refused to see any of the vague, wrinkled faces of the women residents she'd met in the Renaissance lobby. She settled for seeing herself, her own face and body entangled with George. Her face, but maybe twenty years younger, how she still half-expected to see herself in the mirror, just before she had to fast forward life to catch up with her image.

She remembered the group of women who'd corralled her and Glen earlier. The women offered warm welcomes to Millie while taking every opportunity to run their hands up and down Glen's arms. He'd hugged them delicately, and though the women held on past a comfortable interval, he smiled and patted their hands. That was her sweet

boy, she thought. As a child, he'd always been gentle, prone to puckering his lips for kisses and holding his arms wide for hugs. He kissed and hugged long past the age most other boys refused such affection from their mothers. She wanted that Glen. Not the Glen who told her how happy she'd be at the Renaissance, giving her a raised toilet seat as a housewarming present before abandoning her in a sea of boxes.

George with some strained grunts and the woman with a cascade of squeals, reached their finale. In all her years with Del, it never occurred to Millie to make all that fuss. Del would have thought her crazed or injured. Wouldn't he? Or maybe she'd gotten it wrong all those years and Del had died disappointed by her silence. If that was the case, he should have said something. She couldn't read minds. Del. Del, *you should have said something, you knew more about the world than me*, she whispered into the darkness.

George's bedsprings sighed as the bodies next door positioned themselves for sleep. Their soft kisses reached her ear pressed firmly against the wall. Millie eased herself silently onto the single bed she'd bought when she feared the expanse of the queen bed without Del might swallow her whole. She wondered if George's hand cupped the woman's belly, if the weight and warmth of his arm held her in sleep. Tears fell onto her pillow as she watched unfamiliar shadows move across the ceiling.

Later, waking in the dark, startled by her new surroundings and shaken by dreams of her pug pulling himself through the Juniper brush, hurt and alone, she swept her arm out to search the empty space beside her. During daylight hours, Millie often imagined Rufus adopted by a family with children. He frolicked with them in their big backyard, his long tongue hanging sideways. But at night, she saw Rufus staggering on the verge of starvation or as a pile of bones picked over by coyotes.

###

Every time she thought of the big gray hubbub of tables in the common dining room, a panic rose in her. In private protest, she'd folded her walker against the wall and refused to go downstairs for meals. Miss Jean made daily visits to escort Millie to meals or excite her about the World Headlines discussion group, but Millie, through the half-opened door, deflected. "I like my meals alone" or "I'm unpacking, damnit," she'd say in a crotchety, leave-me-alone, old-lady voice she affected to surprising success. Though most of the boxes of her greatly downsized possessions remained unpacked, she'd assembled her computer on the table she pulled over to the window. She ordered her comfort roast beef and mashed potatoes with gravy online from the diner she saw from her window. When ads for Vietnamese, gyros, tacos, crepes from Chez Nous and Asian fusion from Koriente popped onto the margins of her computer screen, she thought, why not expand my delivery palate?

Once she braved the few blocks, after ducking past the front desk staff without her walker, to dine out at the Whole Food Café.

"Just one?" the hostess asked, and Millie, stunned, realized she'd never, in all her life, eaten by herself in a restaurant. She chickened out at the thought of sitting at the table all alone, wondering where to look, while all the other diners pitied her.

"How silly! I've forgotten my wallet," she said and returned to the Renaissance in defeat.

Klondike Solitaire and *Golden Girls* kept her company. Sometimes she watched the moving patterns of people on the streets below and wished to see herself moving amongst them. She followed along with a chair yoga video every day. She searched the

*Plenty of Fishes* dating website that popped up on her computer screen. The faces on the profiles could easily belong to the men who circled the tables in the dining room downstairs. But here she scrolled safely past them. Here, they could not see her. Here, no one had to want her at their table.

Almost nightly she eavesdropped on George. There was no doubt in her mind that George enjoyed almost as much variety with his partners as she did with her delivered meals. Each woman had a distinct voice, though George never used names, or even words as far as she could hear. Millie saw no harm in imagining herself the recipient of his affections. The idea of an actual man in her future began to form. Not George; she was a one-man woman and couldn't see herself with a many-woman man.

The outline of her future man squeezed in beside her on the single bed. This constructed man had been married once to a wife he loved deeply but lost to illness. He was a version of Del, but more agreeably talkative, not adverse to travel, and with a healthy dollop of George's intimacy skills. The man would whisk her away from the Renaissance to his home where, amidst their familiar small talk, she'd prepare meals from her new World Cuisine cookbook. At night, inside their self-contained walls, she'd experiment with moaning and saying sex words out loud.

###

That first week, she lived in her pajamas. Glen called every day, but Millie declined his visits. She didn't want her son to see her flail in these surroundings. Besides, he was at least a little to blame for her present predicament. She felt justified in withholding a bit of love. On the phone with him, she invented residents she'd met at meals, lied about winning at Bingo, and even floated a flirtation with George. Millie



heard his mostly approving tone on the phone, until it came to George. He made clear he disapproved of any men in the picture, especially George who seemed quite lecherous, he said.

Poor Glen, so rigid. Maybe she and Del, with their one and only, fifty-three-year marriage, had cursed their son. Or maybe all the divorce battles Glen fought in his practice had ruined him. He scared all women away. Never dated a woman casually, but with the agenda of marrying her. His one and only. Happily and forever. Even Millie now knew the impossibility of that.

###

“Mom, you’re busted. Miss Jean called me.”

Glen pulled open the curtains. Sunshine violated Millie’s eyes and exposed her sleeping past noon. She inventoried her guilt and knew he’d seen the piles of take-out containers on the counter, noticed the walker she’d found handy for drying her hand-washables, and all the still-unpacked boxes. Such stacked evidence wasn’t worth defending.

“Some news of Rufus?” Millie tried for a bright voice.

“No, mom, and I think it’s time you let that go. Now. Up. Come on. I’m your date for this art thing downstairs.”

As Glen paced the room, clapping his hands and chirping *Carpe Diem*, Millie thought to turn the invention of her crotchety old lady voice on him. He’d deserve whatever nastiness she could muster. Miss Jean had given him a good excuse to come barging in, using a key she didn’t even know he had. Given the circumstances she didn’t feel the ground beneath her solid enough for demanding the key from him or refusing his

company. With spleen, she complied. Readyng herself for events took longer and longer these days. By the time she came into the living room, Glen had made short work of emptying and breaking down the boxes. *Put it back, put it all back! I will be leaving here any day*, she wanted to scream. Millie regretted she'd never believed in spanking her son. She wished to revel in some distant memory of inflicting this much pain onto him. But no, she took the offered walker and rode the elevator down with Glen.

A sign perched on an easel at the entrance of the activity room announced - *A Celebration of Women: The Art of George Sotiropoulos*.

"Or maybe I can treat you to lunch at Red Lobster?" Glen turned to stand in front of the sign.

Soundscapes of pleasure echoed in her head. She imagined the shocking, salacious paintings George might render of his nightly love sessions. Though the idea of viewing carnal images alongside her son caused a prickly heat to rise into her head, she took pleasure in knowing the mortification and remorse he'd suffer for moving his mother next door to such a pervert.

"But Glen, we're already here." She veered her walker around him.

Millie narrowed her eyes at Miss Jean who, with a toothy smile and a wink, handed Glen two glasses of wine from the banquet table. The creators of the Renaissance had done their best, on a budget, to carry the theme through the activity room. A dark, entwined foliage pattern splayed across the carpet. Deep green couches and dark wood tables dotted the room and sconces provided a flattering light for those assembled. Millie's breath quickened at the sight of George at the opposite end of the activity room. Women residents with various visitors encircled him. Millie folded her walker against the

wall and held out her arm for Glen's support. He hesitated but slouched over to her when Miss Jean nudged him closer with her bony elbow. Millie's heart stopped and her eyes shut as they approached the first painting. In her mind's eye, she saw tumbles of old flesh in embarrassing contortions. With such a painting as evidence, she would divulge the details of George's nightly conquests to her son and maybe hint she was among them. Even the suggestion of infidelity to Del, would spin Glen's world upside down. He'd deeply regret, as he should, bringing her here against her will. Millie downed the horrible box wine for liquid courage.

"Huh," she heard Glen mumble.

Millie opened her eyes to a portrait entitled *Esther Lee*.

George was no master, but he certainly had a loving eye. In his rendering, *Esther Lee* stood gracefully in her own inviting eternity. He'd captured the luminous fragility of skin, like an old person's, but also like a baby's. Warmly-veined skin like malleable marble. Skin that invited touch, but the lightest hover of a touch, the breath of a touch. Skin that promised to rise to the touch. Millie fought the urge to run her hand down the naked backside of *Esther Lee*, which disappeared tastefully into the bottom edge of the frame.

Though her back was turned to the world, *Esther Lee* looked over her shoulder, out at Glen and Millie through cinnamon-colored eyes with hopeful expectancy. The heaviness of her eyelids, the folds of her skin, the lines of accumulated time pulling down on her form, only heightened the inherent sensuality George had captured in his painting.

Millie and Glen admired *Esther Lee* for some time. When she turned to her son, she saw her own surprise mirrored in his face. Millie squeezed his arm to indicate her

desire to move on. Glen bent his arm slightly to offer her more support as they visited the other five portraits, about the number of lovers she had calculated aurally. Arm in arm, they took in each woman. Millie loved them all. Each woman lived and breathed and seemed just about to share their secret desires with her. She looked at their thin, parted lips. Lips that she'd imagined were her own. Lips that, through the thin wall, called out to her each night alone in her room. She wished to answer their calls. She imagined their mouths opening wide until she could see inside.

Glen surprised Millie by insisting they congratulate the artist.

"I admire your gift," Glen said and offered his hand to George.

"Why, thank you. Millie, we've all looked for you in the dining room. How are you settling in?"

Millie felt Glen's eyes on her, eyebrows raised. She looked around the assemblage. Esther Lee and all the others crowded around George. If Glen lived this long, his chances would greatly improve, she thought.

"To be honest, I've not settled well. But I couldn't ask for a better neighbor." Millie winked her left gray eye out of sight of her son.

###

She'd finally found him. Howie. Married once, lost his wife of thirty-nine years to cancer, and owned a home in Austin in need of a woman's touch. He was open to intimacy, travel, and adventurous cuisine, within the limits of his health, which hadn't been great lately, he'd admitted. We shouldn't apologize for growing old, Millie had replied.

George had painted her profile picture too flatteringly Millie thought. Truthfully, George said. On Friday nights with take-out at Millie's place, they'd narrowed down the thirty-two responses she'd received on *Plenty of Fishes*. Millie trusted George to weed through the Casanovas, to find the sincere one. He'd helped compose the weeks and weeks of emails that led to Howie asking if he could meet Millie for dinner at a restaurant of her choosing.

Millie reached for her son's hand as they entered Whole Food Café. He puckered his lips and kissed her forehead. The hostess, though puzzled, sat them at separate tables across the café from each other as they requested. Glen, nervous about her meeting a strange man, insisted on serving as Millie's undercover chaperone.

"He's not a strange man. He's Howie," she said, admitting only to herself that Glen's presence brought her great comfort.

In all her 77 years, she'd only dated Del. And as Del had been somewhat frugal, the dates had been few. And they hadn't seemed much like dates, Millie thought, more amiable meetings that moved along the natural order of things. She and Del knew from high school they'd get married, settle down in Fredricksburg, and be together forever.

This felt different, like some great unknown, Millie thought, finding the quiver in her tummy silly and delightful. They'd agreed on dinner at 6:00 p.m.

"A glass of the Messina Hof Pinot Blanc, please," Millie told the waitress with authority.

Her heart raced. Millie looked over at Glen, already busying himself with his cases, his many papers, just as he promised he would.

She dripped the wine through her lips, remembered its sweetness in her mouth. A warmth throbbed along her left side as she took a deep swallow. She swirled her glass and envisioned Del striding amongst the Juniper scrubs, Rufus, tongue hanging long, frolicking beside him.

She took in the café, the tables beginning to fill. When her eyes met Glen's, he gave her a smile and a nod before averting his attention back to his files. She checked her watch. 6:04 p.m. Any moment now, she thought.

## **TransVan**

They'd started out well before sunrise, on the opposite side of Texas, in Port Aransas, listening to public talk radio broadcasted out of Houston. After their late morning fight, Dino had twisted the dials of the TransVan's radio with rancor until a pop station, bass maxed out, played at full volume. As they rolled over flat empty miles of brownness, Betsy noticed a nagging, repetitive thud emerging from the engine, but used the music as her shield, convincing herself the thuds came from the radio's off-kilter bass.

No jinxy thoughts, she told herself. Not when crossing Texas in the seventeen-year-old GMC TransVan she'd purchased as a surprise for Dino with all but \$87.00 of their savings. True, most of the money rolled in the Crown Royal bag had been hers from working at the Stop N' Shop, but over the course of ten years together, they'd come to use the word *theirs* whenever it came to resources. After all remnants of El Paso's suburbs disappeared, thud found a partner - bang - and the trouble graduated from possibly imaginary to most likely real. Knowing the money left in the Crown Royal bag would buy just enough gas to reach Los Angeles, the thud-bang pierced her shield of denial and caused dread to dribble into her tummy. The idea of calling her grandmother came to life, but Betsy smothered it quickly.

Betsy shot a sideways glance at Dino, their self-appointed, relentless driver since departing Port Aransas over ten hours ago. Making good, so far, on her promise never to speak to him again, the last three and a half hours of their journey had remained wordless. Even when the air conditioner switched from blowing cool air to spewing hot, burnt-smelling air, she'd simply closed the vents without comment and rolled down her

window. In silence, he'd followed suit. She took pride in the fact that she'd broken her never-speaking-to-Dino-again record at hour three, but doubts about their future and the thud-bang threatened to make words form and pour from her mouth.

“It’s possible to love something as an idea, like Los Angeles. But not really like it as your reality. I’m having serious reservations.”

Dino’s never-before-mentioned reservations, halfway through Texas, interrupted Betsy’s daydream of holding his rockstar hand while a cool Californian ocean breeze blew through the new halter-dress she might be able to afford if they were a two-income couple.

If he didn’t want to move to Los Angeles, after talking of nothing else for the past four years, he damned well should have said something before they’d driven more than halfway across Texas in a van she’d spent their life savings— though really, and she was sorry to have to say it out loud - *her* life savings on – all for nothing. Her voice sounded foreign and mean but didn’t stop. Not to mention, she’d supported his music habit for years, a habit he’d sworn would transform into a career, or at least steady money, if only he lived in Los Angeles, where they were headed at this very moment.

She scanned his face for signs of sadness, guilt, a dawning sense of responsibility, anything, but of course not. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing ever fazed him. Damn him, she thought, no drip of dread in his tummy, as he steered with his wrist, arm resting easy atop the steering wheel with his long curls swirling around his smooth, untroubled face. God, how she loved him.

Early this morning, when Betsy’s spirits still ran high, the public radio station broadcasted a show on Gender Dysphoria Syndrome, something Betsy had never heard of



before. Sandy Stone wanted to become Sam Stone. Sandy said that she'd been born into the wrong body. She felt she should live a man's body, have a penis. As she took her testosterone and got closer to becoming a man, she'd noticed an unexpected, yet distinct, shift. As a woman she'd felt the sea of life intensely, as if on a tiny raft. Every change of weather registered deep within, her little watercraft rose and fell with every ripple. As she became a man, her boat got bigger and bigger and cut through the water, like a yacht or a cruise ship. Sam Stone said he didn't feel that he was being tossed on the water anymore, more like he was moving through the water. That's the real difference, Betsy thought, more so than a penis. And that's Dino, she thought, easy in his captain's chair, hand on the rudder, flesh free from fear, moving through the water.

She turned away, seeking distraction in the scenery: distant tree, close bush, cow and calf, blast of sunlight on broken glass, tumbleweed, rusted truck in field. Tumbleweed, lone cow. She was tired. She'd been tired for a long time. Betsy's head drooped and swayed with the chugging motion of the TransVan. Her body sank into her thick-upholstered captain's chair and her clenched breath broke free.

Betsy dreamed they left the highway and pulled over for service in a town called Zenda. They encountered a mechanic - Val - according to the nametag stitched on the sparkling white coveralls, who opened the hood, squinted down into the engine, and said, *well, now aren't you lucky*, pulling out a wrench that had fallen in. Dino and Betsy laughed. Val laughed with them. A laugh that said, *oh my god, yes, we are so lucky*. Betsy wished she'd just acknowledged the problem earlier. They had escaped calamity and could continue carefree on their journey. Everything seemed hunky-dory and right as rain. No charge, the mechanic said, slapping the van's side in a playful way to ease them

on down the road. As Val shrank in the rearview mirror, so did the TransVan. Dino darted and swerved the toy-sized van through an obstacle course of gargantuan tumbleweeds, until the steering wheel came off and he handed it to Betsy. She tried navigating with the disconnected steering wheel until it dissolved into thin air. One of the giant tumbleweeds absorbed them and they were rolling...rolling...rolling. She woke with a start to U2's *With or Without You*, wiping a trail of saliva from her chin, happy to see Dino's extended arm upon the connected steering wheel.

She discerned the still present thud-bang and distracted herself with the landscape: barn, tattered billboard, normal-sized tumbleweed, fallen-down mailbox with the flag up, a sign announced *Welcome to New Mexico – The Land of Enchantment*. They'd made it out of Texas! No small feat. Betsy patted the dashboard, sending all her positive energy into the noisy engine.

Weekly, she'd combed *The Thrifty Nickel* for the camper van owned by someone down enough on their luck to sell to her budget. *1971 GMC TransVan with a spoiler, \$3,400.00, firm or best offer. Connie (805)968-1033*. Betsy drove the couple of hours north from Port Aransas to meet Connie on a spooky compound, complete with a three-legged dog, outside of Refugio. The TransVan looked just like the Scooby Doo Mystery Van if it had lived a much more desperate life. The odometer had racked up only 78,000 miles in its seventeen-year life. Betsy had heard that mileage, not so much the years, mattered in purchasing a vehicle. Partly, the low mileage was due to the original owner, Connie's father. The van remained mostly parked in a strategic spot, as his fishing outpost for four years, until he died and willed the TransVan to Connie. She, along with her 'old man,' as she referred to her boyfriend, had been living in the van for the past

thirteen years, a temporary solution turned long term. They got around on her old man's Harley mostly and left 'Pam', as they referred to the van, parked on the compound. Pam ran smooth, Connie said, because her old man was the best damn mechanic in all of Refugio. Betsy hadn't asked for any details beyond that, but Connie had been hungry to share. She'd called it quits on the old man and had found a place in town, if Refugio could be called a town. This had shocked her old man.

"He was all, but baby, baby, baby. And I was like, don't you baby me, motherfucker, you promised me a house and now my posture's ruined from living in Pam. You promised me – shit, oh, shit..." She disappeared under the pop-up table to retrieve her lit cigarette. After some rummaging and bumps to her head, Connie struggled up from under the table. Her still-lit cigarette dangled from her mouth.

Betsy had found her seller.

"I invested thirteen crap years in that man. Time to cut bait, as my father would say. Are you going to live on the beach? I always wanted to live on the beach."

"No. Laurel Canyon, in Los Angeles. I'm helping someone realize a dream," Betsy had told Connie.

Connie started crying and opened another Shiner Bock. Denise wheedled the price down to \$3,100.00. Any guilt about talking her down disappeared when, driving back to Port Aransas, one by one the treads peeled away from the tires. Dry rot, the tire guy explained. Connie had been truthful about the van hardly moving for thirteen years. Betsy learned that Pam had duals, two heavy duty tires side by side in the rear, to bear the extra weight and give stability on the road. Six brand new tires took the \$300.00 she'd saved on the purchase price.

The thud-bang, thud-bang, thud-bang added an extra percussion line to Fleetwood Mac. Cactus, red rock formations aflame in the distance, clouds like flat-bottomed boats, cactus, cactus, cactus. Road sign - *Vado 30 miles*.

She'd surprised Dino with the van, the van that would enable their dream of driving out to LA, living in the driveway of his producer friend, and making a record. When she rolled into the driveway on the new tires, she'd expected him to sweep her up, spin her around, and make wild, grateful love to her on the cigarette-scarred cushion bed. Cool, he'd said. Cool. That's it. Good thing Denise wasn't around to hear that. When she lived with them, she'd always accused Dino of taking Betsy for granted. Betsy always came to Dino's defense, but she had expected this gesture, Pam the TransVan, to be more appreciated. Especially after Dino'd gone on and on about the need to strike while he was still young. Dino possessed the spirit of youth, his pogo-stick body bursting with energy, but he'd been twenty-nine for the past three years. Betsy was twenty-eight. A grand gesture seemed necessary to move their life along. His life along. Her life along, her shifts at the Stop N' Shop weren't setting her world on fire.

Dino had met the vacationing producer four years ago after a show, over at Stingray's, who'd said Los Angeles would eat him up. "You'd be huge," Dino quoted Phil, the record producer, who'd handed him his card with a Laurel Canyon address. They'd stayed in touch with phone calls that sometimes lasted an hour, Dino said, calls that kept the iron hot and only amplified their musical kinship. His lukewarm reception to Pam dampened Betsy's spirits momentarily, but she'd pushed full steam ahead. Quit her job at the Stop N' Shop and got trusty friends into the bungalow to cover rent. On the eve

of their departure, they drank champagne but never christened Pam's cushion bed with grateful sex.

Farmhouse, dog, cow, cow, tumbleweed. Cactus, cactus, cactus, cactus, cactus, cactus. Betsy looked away from the roadside scenery when it appeared all the cacti raised their middle finger towards her. She heard a faint clunk join the fracas of the motor. Clunk-thud-bang. Clunk-thud-bang. Clunk-thud-bang. Betsy shut off Madonna in the middle of *Lucky Star* and, without the cover of radio, the engine trouble became an indisputable truth.

"We need to pull over in Vado, get this engine looked at," Betsy said, breaking an over four-hour silence.

Dino swerved to the side of the road, cut off the van, and made several unsuccessful starts at speaking to Betsy. The horns of several veering cars screamed at Dino, as he leapt from Pam, barely perched on the side of the highway. Betsy found no peace in the absence of the clunk-thud-bang but was relieved to see Dino stumble out, in one piece, and come to a stand-still amongst the flipping-off cactus. Best to let him cool off, she thought, or at least have a desert time-out. After what felt like an eternity of staring at Dino's lone figure against the prehistoric landscape, she heard a soft sob. Another and another and another sob filled the motionless air until his body convulsed and fell onto the hard ground.

Betsy crossed the cracked earth as if it might break open beneath her feet and reached for Dino. At her touch, he spilled his guts. The record producer's number had been disconnected for over a year, but Dino couldn't call it quits. He'd kept Phil's card in his wallet and invented their conversations in order to keep his world from shrinking

down to nothing, he said, because he liked himself better when his future held promise, even imaginary promise. But his motives weren't solely selfish, he'd kept the story up for his fans over at Stingray's and the Gaff, and especially for Betsy, because they too liked him better when his future held promise.

"Admit it. And it was all harmless enough until you drove up in Pam. Now we're clunking and banging our way to LA with no money, no knight in shining armor out there. I am freaking out," Dino confessed.

At Pam's pop-up table, while eating four of the ten peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Betsy had prepared for the trip, Dino and Betsy felt the slight sucking sway of the semis as they rolled past. Dino's tears, the first Betsy had seen in their ten years together, had softened all hard edges. She'd admitted her plan suffered from impulsivity, he'd admitted fabricating phone calls, and both agreed change was undeniably necessary. They doubled down on each other and the reality of Los Angeles, turned the pop-up table into a cushion bed and enjoyed make-up sex. Afterwards, they smoked, looking up at Pam's vinyl ceiling, and Betsy shared the positive part of her dream with Dino, ending before Pam shrunk and the tumbleweed ate them. They basked in the post-glow of love-making and reasoned that once they got to LA, they could find Phil, and even if they couldn't find Phil, he wasn't the only record producer in Los Angeles, and, worst case scenario, California had to have Stop N' Shop stores same as Texas.

In Vado, the convenience store/diner/bar/laundromat/video store begged for customers next to a half-trailer with a flapping flag and post office sign out front. Clunk-thud-bang. Pam shook down Vado's peopleless main street, sparsely lined with mostly shuttered-for-good shops, with Dino and Betsy losing hope that a garage could survive in

a town so clearly dead. After an abrupt turn in the road, a shimmering, almost blinding, watery vision spread across the desert like a man-made lake. As Pam clunked closer, the lake revealed itself as piles and piles of reflective junk shimmering in the glint of the early evening sun. The precious jewel at the junk's center was a rusty hangar hugged by open-hooded cars. A sun-bleached sign suspended high across a wide gateway entrance announced - *Scooter's Busted Knuckle Garage and Salvage*. A smaller, less-weathered sign reading *& Mini-Grand Prix*, hung underneath, swinging in hot wind.

Betsy and Dino clasped hands and steered Pam through the gate.

A high-pitched drone rang out from the left side of the hangar. When Betsy peered around the corner, she saw three men, one of them Scooter according to his grease-blackened coveralls, operating the tiny joysticks of highly detailed, neon cars speeding around and around an oval racetrack. Shirtless boys and shoeless girls draped themselves on the low chain-link fence that kept the salvage from encroaching on the track. Vado wasn't a ghost town after all.

Inside the hangar, a sign behind the counter, piled high with oily parts and drooping paper, read *Welcome to Scooter's - Repair and Despair Under One Roof*.

"What seems to be the problem?" a woman asked, her voice startling them from a far corner, where she read with her feet propped on a stack of tires.

The woman listened, blank-faced, as Dino unspooled their tale of woe, including their unfortunate lack of funds. The woman seemed impatient to return to *Tame My Wild Heart*, giving no indication that the desperation of their story or the charm that Dino spread thickly in the telling had any effect on her whatsoever.

“So, Port Aransas, huh? That’s a far piece.” Scooter startled them, having entered noiselessly to lean on the piled-high counter. “We honeymooned over that way. Camped right on South Padre Island beach.

“Oh, here we go,” said the woman, burying herself in her book.

“The missus here - Jess by the way, she can be a bit shy – had never been to the beach; she wanted to swim in the ocean, see dolphins, and she’d never tasted lobster before, if you can believe that. So, I got us a live Spiny one down at the marina. Wrapped it all up in foil like the guy at the marina said, poured in a little beer to keep it moist, stuck it on the campfire. Damned if that thing didn’t start thrashing and crinkling in the foil, like it was possessed. Threw itself right out of the fire.”

“Oh, man, that’s mean. He should have told you to poke something sharp into its head. Kill the brain, otherwise you’re burning it alive,” Dino offered.

“Well, we know that now, don’t we?” Jess said.

“Oh, you should have seen her face. The horror. The horror.” Scooter placed his palms along his cheeks, pulling his face down into a mock scream, then laughed with delight at himself.

Jess turned a page in her book.

“She refused to eat it. Had to eat the whole thing by myself, best fear-filled flesh I ever ate. Hey, am I right? What’s the name - Dino, you said? We might be able to work something out. I need some picking done in the salvage yard. I can’t keep up with all these orders for parts. All these repairs. It’s killing me.” Scooter spread his arms palms up and twisted at the waist seeming to indicate that pretty much everything in sight was killing him. Jess, not looking up from her book, sniggered. Scooter shot her a look and



motioned Dino into conference behind the counter, slung his arm over his shoulder, and whispered. “Give me a couple, well, let’s say a few days, of solid hustle around here and I’ll poke my head up under your hood. Get you on down the road. Work doesn’t scare you, does it?”

Betsy heard the offer, the offer that answered her prayers, wanting to whisper *thank you* heavenward or at least clap her hands in celebration, but the sniggers from Jess, the look on Dino’s face that said yes, he actually might be afraid of work, and the thought of all the open-hooded cars around the hangar, gave her pause.

“But your first job, Dino, your first job is to poke something sharp into my brain. I’m begging you.” Scooter grape-vined, twisting and curving himself in what must have been his impression of a lobster wrapped in foil burning alive over to Jess, rubbed her shoulders vigorously and kissed the top of her head. “Twenty-seven years of sunshine, right here.”

“Maybe if we’d ever gone anywhere, ever, after our honeymoon, you wouldn’t have to tell that same goddamned story every day of your life. Now take it outside,” Jess said.

Betsy tried to follow Dino and Scooter, mostly to escape Jess, but also to solidify the terms and offer herself up as a worker as well, but the screen door slammed behind them. She watched as Scooter produced a long printout list from his coveralls and walked the yard with Dino, pointing at cars, opening hoods and doors, pulling hubcaps, starters, cigarette lighters, and belts into a random pile amidst the piles. They seemed to be bonding. Betsy turned back to meet Jess’s eyes, who stared hard over the top of her book.

“Listen to me. That man can’t fix anything. From the clunking, it sounds like you have a severe suspension problem. Driving slow, you should be able to make it to Las Cruces, where there are actual mechanics, but they will want actual money. So, if I were you, I’d get some,” Jess said flatly, rolled off her one-armed, sloping chair and shuffled out the rear door.

The idea of being alone in the hangar panicked Betsy, so she trailed Jess and held the door open. No sign of Dino and Scooter in the rear yard. She watched Jess wind her slow way through the shadowy graveyard of cannibalized cars. Jess’s hunched-back silhouette appeared in the lit doorway of a battered pumpkin trailer sitting in the yard. Betsy cried out to use the phone.

“Disconnected today,” Jess answered before closing her trailer door.

They’d veered off the map; everything had a layer of despair. Everything here had come to die and if they stayed even one night, they would be incurably infected. Betsy kicked the TransVan on her way down the driveway, resenting the high, open road spirit that Pam had given and taken away all in the same day. Betsy ran full throttle down the main street of Vado, becoming acutely aware that she’d not run since high school and that she really needed to quit smoking. As soon as I get to LA, she promised herself.

A Greyhound bus, destination Houston, pulled into the parking lot of the convenience store/diner/bar/laundromat/video store, as Betsy, lungs burning, arrived. From her Crown Royal bag, she changed two dollars into quarters with the clerk, and hurried out ahead of the bus crowd to the phone booth.

“Grandma, listen. I’m in Vado, New Mexico, broken-down. It’s an emergency or I wouldn’t ask.”

“Is the wastrel there?”

“Well, not *right* here.”

A long silence followed as some of the bus passengers created a line outside the booth and gave sideways, impatient glances to Betsy.

“Oh, honey. I’ll give you the money to get wherever you think you need to go,” her grandmother finally said. “Just don’t throw good money after bad, that’s all I ask.”

Betsy promised and wrote her grandmother’s credit card information on a piece of paper she borrowed from one of the bus passengers. Her grandmother said if anyone questioned Betsy’s permission to use the card, just have them call her. They expressed their love for each other amidst Betsy’s promises of repayment as soon as everything slid into place out in Los Angeles.

Betsy tucked the paper into the Crown Royal bag, and with a foolproof solution in place, to celebrate her relief, she grabbed a six-pack of PBR’s. The clerk, apparently the only worker in the place, served food to the driver and passengers sitting down to dinner, so Betsy left one of her precious five-dollar bills on the counter, not even waiting for the twenty-six cents in change.

They’d toast and inch their way up to Las Cruces, park in front of a garage and be the first customer of the morning. They’d drive into Los Angeles by tomorrow evening, eat the last of their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the beach, and plan the future.

Betsy skipped up the driveway and followed the drone of the Mini-Grand Prix, where Scooter and Dino leaned, side-by-side, on the low chain-link fence. Their faces glowed, as untroubled as saints, in the stark floodlights. Like synchronized bobbleheads,

Scooter and Dino watched the progress of their cars, zipping neck and neck around the little racetrack. The long printout, stuck on the prongs of the fence, rippled like a flag.

Look this way, Betsy thought, look this way, if he looks this way before the cars go around one more time, I'll stay. If he looks this way, before the cars go around three more times, I'll stay, but Dino's attention never wavered, like the world had fallen away.

God, how she loved him.

## Omissions

In the first month Howie appeared on her roster of home physical therapy patients, he missed three visits. On those occasions, Denise knocked and rang the bell: no answer. Later, wide-eyed, he'd acted at a loss to know how he'd missed her. Maybe he'd slept through the doorbell or maybe he'd moved too slow and Denise had given up on him before he reached the door. Her theories differed. Maybe he'd stood in the living room ignoring her or maybe he'd driven, against doctor's orders, over to Dairy Queen at their scheduled appointment time for a dip cone, also against doctor's orders. Regardless, he needed to be where he said he was going to be. Denise didn't tolerate missed visits.

"These visits are necessary to your life. To stay independent and live safe in your home. When we miss visits, not only do I not get paid, I lose out on the gas money getting here, and you don't get better, you get worse. Any more missed visits, I will give up on you and tell your doctor why."

She made him give her a key to the front door, buy a desk calendar, write down all visits in red ink, and promise to be home. The missed visits ceased but he lacked true motivation. With no close family or friends, scenarios of loved ones forced to change his adult diapers or watch him die didn't work.

But once they found Millie on *Plenty of Fishes*, his improvement had been steady.  
*Millie the Motivator. Inspiration angel don't dissolve today.*

Denise cracked the door.

"It's me, Howie."

No answer. Must be in the dining room, his crowded kingdom of tripping hazard area rugs, skyscraper piles of newspapers, and Jenga stacks of recyclables. Along the

entry hall hung his life in pictures. Nearly every visit, Howie, now the lone docent of their memories, narrated a story about his wife, while facing one of the framed photos. Howie curated no tales under photographs of his estranged daughter, which documented her growing up where they used to live in Las Vegas. In the first she was a bundle in Maureen's arms and in the last she looked wild at her high school graduation. Pictures of Maureen and Howie, the backgrounds becoming less and less exotic, cataloged their years together, until the last one, him standing next to Maureen in her wheelchair with the daughter nowhere to be seen.

The big picture that dominated the living room, in its delicate wooden frame bought on one of their visits to Thailand, exhibited a mod, ecstatic couple, circa 1961. With the jagged California coast as backdrop, Howie and Maureen lovingly inserted cake into each other's mouths. Their eyes shone, with certainty, at the dazzling future ahead of them. Howie was quick to point out he'd fallen in love with her well before finding out she was the Picasso-hanging-in-her-bathroom kind of rich.

The bride would be unquiet in her coffin if she could see this living room now, filled with food containers and dishes, decorations from every holiday, dead plants, and dozens of half-packed boxes of her belongings. Maureen's worldly possessions had been packed for pickup and then, article by article, Howie had unpacked them over time, rescuing tennis shoes she bought to hike the steep cliffs of Cinque Terra, or the tattered hat she wore to garden, or the silk scarf that had touched her neck. He piled them on any and all available surfaces in the living room, giving the impression the boxes had exploded. Any memory of a more orderly time lay buried deep beneath a four-year layer of archeological chaos since Maureen's death. His one day a week housekeeper left the

room to its own machinations. Howie had refused further help, denying the downhill slide of house and life. Gaping into people's private lives remained Denise's favorite part of her job. Apples to apples, she felt pretty good about herself almost half the time. *Can't really ask for more than that.*

She headed towards the chug of the oxygen condenser mixed with the Turner Classic Movie channel at full volume. The always-on miniature TV sat atop an old magazine pile that threatened to landslide off the dining room table.

Denise froze at the threshold. Howie's thin torso arced unnaturally over the low back of the dining room chair, the hose of his nasal canula coiled around the TV antenna. *Howie! Are my little notes, posted literally everywhere in this house, saying PUT OXYGEN BACK ON AFTER USING THE BATHROOM, PUT OXYGEN BACK ON RIGHT AFTER MEALS, so hard to understand? Did the smiley faces make the instructions seem optional?*

CPR certification was necessary for her physical therapy license but that didn't mean she wanted to use it. *Ever. Not a dead person, please, not a dead Howie. I could backtrack to my car, let someone else find him.* That would be the housekeeper in four days. *Shit.* She crossed to Howie as if the distance between them was littered with land mines, upped the condenser to four liters, uncoiled his oxygen hose, inserted the canula prongs into his nostrils and secured the tubes behind his ears. She placed two fingers lightly on his carotid artery and searched for a pulse.

*No, no, no, no, no* as she hugged his body tight and lowered him to the floor.

Once she had him flat, she dialed 911 on her cell phone and put it on speaker.

"911. Ma'am, is that gunfire? Are you in a safe place?"

Denise muted the TV. *No, this didn't feel like a safe place, but the operator said help was on the way. His air passage clear.* She removed his oxygen. She needed to begin. She remembered the moonlighting fireman that led the class for her CPR certification.

“If you only remember one thing when the moment comes, let it be *Stayin' Alive* by the Bee Gees. Trust me.”

He'd pumped a CPR dummy in the church basement to the rhythm of the song, the whole song.

*Here goes.*

“Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a woman's man, no time to talk, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. Stayin, alive. Stayin' alive.”  
Rescue breath. *Be with me, Howie.* “Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother. You're staying alive, staying alive. Oh, oh, oh, oh. Stayin' ali-i-i-i-i-i-ve.”  
Rescue breath. Denise fumbled the words but never missed a beat.

###

“You did everything right. It only works about 5% of the time, you know that, right?”

A fireman took the seat next to her at Howie's dining room table. She wondered if he knew the Bee Gees fireman.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She leaned into him and stared at a silent gunfight from an old black and white Western. The remaining workers went about their duties. The coroner zipped up the body bag.



*So loud.* “Yes, I’m all right.” Denise answered. *Carry me away. Lift me up. Rescue me; that’s your job, right? Like mine is making people better.*

“Well, just in case.”

He set down a card for counseling and left her. Denise’s cellphone buzzed with Melissa’s name, the supervising physical therapist back at the office.

“We don’t usually do this for contractors, but we’re going give you a paid grievance day.”

Melissa, having already re-scheduled all Denise’s visits for the rest of the day, told her to go home, grieve, process.

“And, I know you know this, but make sure your note leaves no questions as to liability,” Melissa said.

*All heart, that one.*

Denise looked down at today’s square on Howie’s desk calendar, April 10<sup>th</sup>. 10:00 a.m. THERAPY/DENISE. 6:00 p.m. FIRST DATE/MILLIE, WHOLE FOOD CAFÉ.

*Oh Howie, what a lousy day to die.*

Denise knew she was not all right when she unlocked her front door hoping her mother would be home. No mother, but Ella stood sentry and wagged a welcome. Denise had rented out the spare bedroom for three years to fill the hole in the mortgage left when Bad Rick abandoned her mid-pregnancy. Denise knew she’d miss the money but looked forward to her and her daughter, Isabell, having the house to themselves. Almost as soon as the renter had moved out, a dog appeared on her doorstep. No collar, no chip, nothing. She walked the dog up and down the street and called the shelters. She didn’t want the

dog, but the dog, maybe a shepherd and rottweiler mix, followed her room to room and nestled beside her. The dog understood no words, which Denise thought odd for a dog that looked to be middle-aged.

Not *sit*, not *stay*, not *walk*, not *eat*. She wasn't deaf; she was like Denise's patients, unhearing.

She named the dog Ella, though the name meant nothing to the dog. Then two days after Ella appeared, Denise's mother showed up out of the blue, as she had every four or five years of Denise's adult life. Vera had gone through a terribly rough patch and needed a place to re-establish herself, as she put it, *as she always put it*.

"I know this mother/daughter stuff is a bit awkward with us. Maybe this visit we can focus on fun time together," her mother had said, all open-faced.

*Yes, mother/daughter relationships do become strained when the mother runs out to the store for Easter egg dye and doesn't resurface for fourteen fairly fucking crucial years.* Instead "Of course, you can stay here, Mom," Denise replied.

She resented being a halfway house for Vera but remained hopeful that pretend mother/daughter time might, one day, rehearse itself into the real thing, erasing all the years Denise had watched the door, hoping her mother would appear home from the store, bags brimming with Oreos, Pringles, toasted-cheese-sandwich makings, and chocolate milk.

Her mother's first fun time activity involved getting her profile up and running on several dating sites. Vera vowed veracity but utilized creativity: attractive, fit, 50's white female seeks successful, sensitive man (any race) to enjoy the finer things in life and attain true intimacy of spirit. Instead of *cosmetically doctored, 63-year-old, seeks man*

*with money to become husband number four.* Replies had poured in and Vera kept up a whirlwind dating schedule that exhausted Denise to think about. When Denise did meet husband number four, she planned to offer up her sincerest wishes for a long, happy marriage instead of screaming *run, run, run for your life.*

Denise wished Vera had arrived to be near Isabell. She'd wanted Vera to care for Isabell while she worked, but Vera hadn't wanted to be a mother, let alone a grandmother. Isabell was safer, and probably more loved, spending her days with Juanita down the street. Denise's guilt nagged her to go pick up her daughter early, but instead she opened a bottle of cabernet, and raised a glass to Howie.

"If I die, promise you'll toast me," Howie had said one day performing shallow squats with upper extremity support inside his walker.

"I promise I'll toast you," Denise had replied.

"Make sure you flip me over to get both sides."

Maybe she should take a shower, change clothes, wash death off. Instead, with Ella curled beside her on the couch, Denise logged on to write the only patient note needed for today. Patients had died before, but always at a distance, after going back to the hospital or moving to be nearer their children. Never like today, lip-to-lip, while trying to pump life back into their hearts.

*I walked in on Howie, feared he was dead, wanted to flee the scene, fruitlessly pounded on his chest to the beat of Stayin' Alive, felt the life of a sweet man melt away in my very hands, wished to stay cuddled with comforting fireman forever.* Put through the legal word tumbler it came out: Therapist arrived at appointed time of visit to find patient nonresponsive. Therapist noted nasal canula not employed though patient repeatedly

educated to remain on oxygen at all times (3L). Pulse undetected. As per protocol, therapist dialed 911 and proceeded with CPR until arrival of EMS personnel. Patient declared deceased at 14:32.

###

Howie had been nonresponsive once before, three months back now, when she'd first convinced Howie to stop missing visits and Vera first arrived on Denise's doorstep. She'd found him slumped forward, his nasal canula drooped uselessly around his neck. Denise had sidled up to him, replaced his oxygen, and gently patted his cheeks.

"Howie, Howie, time for therapy."

His arms had wrapped around her waist and held her tight. He'd nuzzled her waist murmuring *Maureen*. He raised his eyes to her, full of groggy love.

"Oh, it's you. My apologies."

He'd taken in the chaotic dining room, moaned at the return of his reality, and thrust his head onto folded arms to escape. While Howie cried, Denise lightly rubbed, open-palmed, along his spine like she did with Isabell.

"Howie, the exercises aren't going to be that bad, I promise you."

This stirred a chuckle that became a cough and then desperate gasps for air.

"Sit up, open your lungs. In through the nose, out through the mouth, smell the roses, blow out the candles."

He followed her slow counts in, one-two-three, out, one-two-three-four and his face gradually lost the look of death. Smell the roses, blow out the candles. Smell the roses, blow out the candles.

Her eyes fell to his laptop opened to his dating profile in progress. *Even Howie's casting his net. Am I the only one in Austin who's given up?*

The text boxes were blank, but a photo of Howie, in a white suit, looking vigorous in some sunbaked European village, had been uploaded. She guessed the picture to be over ten years old, though maybe not; sadness and sickness puts dog years on people.

“I need to put my best foot forward, don't I?”

“Yes, you do, Howie. It's a lovely picture. Sorry. I didn't mean to pry.”

“Pry, pry. Help me. These things I'm supposed to say. What is one word you would use to describe me?”

“Dangerous. Howie, your insurance doesn't pay for me to write your dating profile. I am here to get you stronger, safer. Listen to me, keep your oxygen on.”

“Love, that's what makes us stronger. Safe, well, that ship's no longer in the marina.”

She ignored this and ordered 10 sit-to-stands with minimal use of upper extremities. Denise watched him struggle in this simple act, trembling each time he rose and catching himself on the armrests to stop from tumbling back on each descent.

*His heart's not in it. Failure to thrive. I have Isabell for inspiration.*

“Howie, what about Carla? Your daughter, can we find her, reach out to her?”

He dropped into his chair, face crimson, and shot a how-dare-you glare in her direction.

“Hey, you told me to pry. Do you want my help or not?” Denise responded.

His daughter had always been a challenge, he told Denise, dropped out of college, made frequent trips to rehab which they'd funded. Finally, on advice, they'd stopped

sending checks. Not long after Maureen's death, she'd called Howie to announce he had a grandson on the way, which meant doctor visits, vitamins, and stocking endless baby supplies. Starved for connection and eager to participate in this new, presumably sober, chapter of his daughter's life, Howie sent generous bi-monthly checks. On his surprise visit to Vegas, plush teddy bear in hand, he'd found his daughter very unpregnant, drunk out of her mind, rolling naked in her yard with a man who told Howie to go fuck himself. *Thank goodness your mother's dead* was all Howie had said before taking a plane back to Austin.

Denise struck a bargain with Howie: set of exercise, favorite hobbies; set of exercise, best attributes; set of exercise, likes and dislikes; set of exercise, ideal mate. Set of exercise, best word to describe him.

She'd found a way to motivate him - the hope of a future loved one.

That evening she'd settled in to write her treatment notes while her daughter Isabell crawled back and forth over Ella. Isabell offered up her favorite toys, two squat quail figurines made of brass, for the dog to chew on. Ella raised her eyebrows patiently to Denise.

"Play nice, Izzy," Denise said.

"This is nice," Isabell replied and whispered some secret into Ella's pointed, uncomprehending ear. Her daughter now formed full sentences contradicting her and kept secrets with the dog. Denise didn't like where this aging process was going.

Instead of *I helped Howie complete his dating profile in order to give him a will to live and extort committed physical activity from him*. She typed: Patient exhibited syncope. Therapist instructed patient in deep breathing technique and re-educated patient

on need for consistent use of oxygen. Breathing returned to normal after therapist intervention, O<sub>2</sub> saturation at 92%. Patient performed prescribed strengthening and mobility exercise program under therapist supervision. Patient compliant with all instruction.

“Unbelievable,” Vera said, arriving home early and almost tripping over Isabell who rose for a hug. She skirted Isabell and the dog and headed for the wine. “Such an embarrassment. He shows up on a walker.”

“Some people prefer them to falling down,” Denise said.

“He didn’t mention a walker in his profile, did he? False advertising, Blain or Blair or whatever his name was. I carried the cooler and lawn chairs across the entire field in front of everyone. I’m surprised they weren’t playing the finale by the time we got settled. Then he says he has to go potty. Potty, like a child. I left him there, said I had a headache, which is not a lie now.”

Vera took a deep drink.

“Maybe update your deal breakers to include any and all use of assistive devices,” Denise offered.

“Good idea. This guy certainly didn’t inspire a naked painting in my brain.”

“I’m sorry to have to hear that, Mom.”

Vera stuck out her tongue, turned on the radio, picked up Isabell and danced the length of the living room.

“Hey, let’s look at men. You shouldn’t work on a Friday night anyway.”

Denise logged off work and the three of them flipped through Vera’s respondents. They spun out stories of what life would be like with Frank and his love of bowling. Or

Calvin who, in the spirit of honesty, admitted one of his ears was twice the size of the other. Or Nathaniel who, if everything went as he hoped, promised a honeymoon at the *Ark Encounter* in Kentucky. Isabell, laughing whenever Denise and Vera did, liked the picture of Lorenzo barbecuing the best.

“Pick him, Vera. Pick him,” Izzy said.

“Very well, Izzy. I’ll give him a whirl,” Vera said. “Don’t you think it’s time you got back out there? You’re so pretty, sweetie.”

Vera smoothed Denise’s hair back and gently brushed her cheek. Denise leaned into her mother’s hand.

“You need to wear clothes that show off your figure better, not these scrubs day in and day out.” Vera rinsed out her wine glass and headed off to bed. “Nighty night, hon.”

Isabell looked up at her mother wondering if the fun was over for the evening.

###

With Howie’s increased endurance, Denise had set retrieving his mail as his functional walking goal. He carried his own portable oxygen and, just in case, Denise had a lawn chair slung over her shoulder. She shadowed him as he plowed his walker down the drive. From the sounds of his breathing, the ‘just in case’ was about to happen. In his defense, he did have a very long driveway. She opened the chair at the mailbox and suggested a rest.

“Don’t plop. Sit down nice and easy. No arms.”

Howie made mental markings up the drive, viewing the distance covered with satisfaction.



“If I had a good handicapped parking spot, I could make it to any table in any restaurant. Easy.”

Twenty-seven women had responded to Howie’s profile and he’d landed on Millie. Denise had been extorting exercise out of Howie for seven weeks by composing his emails to Millie. In anticipation of their first date, he’d even taken to exercising independently between his regular therapy visits. Howie and Millie were smitten with one another and he’d convinced himself they’d fall in love over the breadbasket. Denise, afraid to lose her dangling carrot, discouraged a first date. Howie’s last date took place over forty years ago and culminated in marrying a beautiful, adventurous, warmhearted millionairess. *He has no idea how rough it is out there.* This next date could only end in disappointment, sending him into a spiraling decline. *Why risk it?* He stood and opened his own mailbox, the first time in over a year.

“Best junk mail I ever got. You know I’m ready.” Howie looked to her with soft, pleading eyes.

*Isabell should take lessons.*

“Okay, if you make it up the driveway in less than two minutes, we’ll ask her out.”

Denise thought the two-minute goal impossible, at least weeks away, but Howie shot up the driveway ahead of her.

*The promise of a loved one empowers Howie to retrieve his own mail and miraculously break all personal best walking records on his uphill driveway. Therapist reluctantly emails Millie the Motivator for a first date.* Denise typed: Patient achieved mail retrieval goal, ambulating with rolling walker, portable O2 at 2.5 liters and standby

assist with 5-minute seated rest break. Timed Walk Test/300 feet (gradual incline) @ 1:35. Patient exhibits steady improvement.

###

Denise stepped out of the shower with the intention of changing into her sweats, but retrieved her scrubs from the hamper, and found herself putting them on. She couldn't let go of this last bit of Howie yet. *Just a little more alone time and then I'll get Isabell.* Denise threw herself on her bed and Ella leapt up to nestle, the dog placing her head on Bad Rick's old pillow. With effort, Denise turned Ella's head into his head - her ex-husband, the one of which she could not speak. He'd left her and the not yet Isabell, moved to California, and didn't even know the wonder of his daughter. Denise's wedding pictures rested in a box in the attic. Undramatic. Maybe she should go find them and tear them to bits or set fire to them in the backyard. But she was afraid to see her wedding day pictures, to see her face of smug certainty, like Maureen's, a face that believed blindly in all the bright days ahead.

She heard the front door unlock.

*My mother is home.*

Denise looked at the clock. The clock said 5:43 p.m. but she saw 6:00 P.M. WHOLE FOOD CAFÉ. *Millie! Oh, Millie will soon be sitting at the restaurant thinking she's been stood up.* Denise sprang up, put on her shoes, and headed down the stairs. Ella followed, but upon hearing a man's voice from the living room, growled a warning, and shot ahead. Denise heard Vera scream, Ella's attack barks, a struggle, and objects dropping to the floor before reaching the foot of the stairs.

"Abajo! Abajo!" the man yelled. Then silence.

Racing into the living room, Denise found Vera on her hands and knees gathering tomatoes, avocados, tortillas, and a bottle of tequila off the carpeted floor, returning each item to a rumpled sack.

“Siéntate,” commanded a handsome man whom Denise recognized as Isabell’s first choice for her grandmother, the barbecuing Lorenzo. Suddenly Ella sat.

“Ella speaks Spanish! Thank God my fiancée does too,” Vera held out her left hand to show off her engagement ring. “It’s official. We brought enchilada and margarita makings to celebrate.”

“Quedate,” Lorenzo told Ella, taking Vera’s hand to help her off the floor.

Vera stood, the bag of groceries in her arms, and Denise burst into tears.

“Always so dramatic,” Vera said.

Denise hugged Lorenzo and kissed her mother, excusing herself due to a bit of an emergency. She’d celebrate with them soon, she promised. She heard Vera say, as she closed the door behind her, “What’d I tell you? She lives in those scrubs.”

It was 6:24 by the time Denise ran into the Whole Food Café with Isabell on her hip. She recognized Millie from the portrait she used as her profile picture, sitting alone, staring in the direction of the door.

“Millie? I’m Denise, a friend of Howie’s.”

“Is he all right? Did you give him a ride?” Millie asked.

“No. This is.....Howie died today. I didn’t want to let you just sit here. Alone. Wondering. Not knowing,” Denise said.

“Oh, dear...I’ve been waiting,” Millie said, bringing her napkin absently to her lips.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Will you sit with me?” Millie asked.

As Denise settled Isabell into a highchair, handing her a piece of bread from the full basket, she related the details of Howie’s demise to Millie. Denise let Millie know how much he’d enjoyed their correspondence and how the thought of meeting her brightened his last days. She left out the details of his daughter, the disarray of his home, his failing health, his missed visits, and her co-authorship of all his emails. She didn’t mention that she’d nicknamed her Millie the Motivator or that she’d postponed their first meeting, this meeting, certain it would end in disaster.

A man approached their table.

“Is this some catfish situation? I was afraid of this. Mom, you know that’s probably not even her child, right?”

“Denise, this is Glen, my son. My chaperone from across the restaurant. He refused to let me meet a strange man from the internet without him. The date’s off, Howie died today, can you believe it? Pull up a chair.”

They squeezed around the table meant for two. Millie insisted on a bottle of Messina Hof Pinot Blanc to accompany dinner. Glen apologized, filled Denise’s glass, and handed cranky Isabell her second piece of bread. When Glen offered Denise a bite of his linguini, twisting the pasta just so on his fork, careful to include a mushroom, and cupping his hand underneath the bite all the way to her mouth to guard against any dripping on her scrubs, she felt an impulse to empty a few of her dresser drawers and make room for his clothes.

*I'm sorry you missed this, Howie. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.*

**(907)744-1150**

“Guess where I am?”

“Hard to say, Daniel.”

Maybe jail or a halfway house, but she didn't say that to her brother. No need to rub his face in her low expectations. She'd debated with herself on answering at all when the 907-area code appeared. He had a phone, he had no phone, his phone was stolen. He lost his phone. His number perpetually changed due to delinquency with his bill, or warrant, creditor, and baby-mama-dodging, but the 907 stayed constant. For periods of time, a 907-number popped up on her phone every two weeks. Then sometimes two years would pass before it flashed. At the end of these calls, she often wired money Walmart-to-Walmart, the bank of the disenfranchised. Sometimes he drunk-dialed to mourn life choices or seek confirmation on the lousiness of their childhood, the abandonment of their mother, the failures of their father. Last time, Daniel high-out-of-his-mind-dialed because he longed for their father back. Missed the idea of who their father could never be, now that he was dead.

She'd stopped creating a contact for Daniel. Some random 907 number, no message, a telemarketer or a misdial she could reason. The weight of Daniel lifted up and away, but only for a moment. Soon the unanswered call ate at her heart. Her worried imagination created scenarios all ending with Daniel hurt and alone. Visions of his bar fight bruised face propped against a brick alley wall or his bony body tunneled into a dumpster for warmth played across the ceiling as she lay safe in her king-sized bed. All her fault for not answering the call. But really, is Alaska the best choice for living along

the constant edge of homelessness? Why not Hawaii? Bottom line, answer or don't answer; both kept her up nights.

Her husband sprung from the bathroom ready for his day. One shoe dropped, then the other and he mouthed, "Who is it?" while he slipped them on.

"Daniel," she mouthed back.

He waved his hand, whispered "Hello Daniel," and bounced downstairs. No sigh, no eye rolling. Not even after the money and time they'd spent to create a semi-solid place for Daniel to unravel all to shit. Sometimes her husband's goodness hurt.

"I'm at Turnagain Park, our bench by the bay. With the sun, everything's shining."

"Oh, I remember."

"I got my hands wrapped around a hot cup of coffee."

She heard a lighter fire his cigarette. She saw his rail thin body, his buzz cut, his eyes too deeply carved into his face. She blurred the edges, brushed in some of his seven-year-old, beautiful boy face. He'd often woke crying from dreams where monsters chased him. They always found his hiding places. She'd hug him then and his terrors disappeared.

"I'm clean."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I'm seeing things clear, really clear."

"That's great, Daniel."

"I won't lie. They made me go. Fucking detox or back to jail. No more hard time for me, right Big D?"

Daniel loved nicknames, never used real names. He had a gift for wordplay. She didn't want to answer his question for the same reason she no longer typed his name into her phone. Remaining neutral about the future was the easiest way. She rolled over to look out her window. Two squirrels corkscrew-chased each other up the tall Live Oak, the branches tapping on the glass as they made their daredevil leaps onto the roof. She heard their frantic thump-thumps above.

“Glen says hello.”

“How is the Glenners?”

“Oh, he's fine. Downstairs making coffee, I hope. Still getting light here in Texas.”

“Stays light all night up here.”

“Summers, yeah.”

“I'm happy here, right now. Just sitting.”

“Well, that's good.”

“More of the cliff fell off. Our bench is practically in the ocean.”

She adjusted the image in her mind, moved the bench closer to the edge. Through the phone, she heard the pounding of water, the cries of seagulls, his cigarette inhales and exhales. She imagined the park their father took them to as children, dark hunks of cliff sliced from the earth, plummeting into the churn of the bay. Chunks of mansions crumbled down as the cliff continued to give way at fissures created the day the earthquake made the ground beneath unstable. Their father drank tallboys and smoked on that Turnagain Park bench, wood-paneled beater station wagon parked behind him. She and Daniel played at the cliff's edge, awed by the surge of the water. They pirated



boards, chairs, once even a bathroom sink from the ruined houses and wowed at the way the current and the rocks splintered everything in no time. As the summer disappeared, their father sparked his lighter and held it between them like a tiny campfire. She and Daniel rubbed their hands together, pretended it warmed them. There was no need to go home. They all loved that bench.

The ends of the world pulled close for a moment, the familiar brushed against her and she curled up tight in the blankets, and watched the light grow. Please, let's just stay like this, in this moment of precarious balance, let nothing happen, she thought. Their silence stretched to calm.

“Well...”

“I'm proud of you, Daniel.”

“Tell Frowny Face her uncle's coming to meet her soon, maybe this fucking Christmas.”

“She only does that for pictures. Mostly she's happy.”

“This number's permanent now, okay. Save it, okay?” It was what he always said.

Above, the squirrels cavorted in mad circles in the attic. They always found a way in. From downstairs, Glen yelled up “Coffee,” as he met the many morning demands of Isabell.

“I love you.”

“Bye-bye, Big D.”

###

Daniel's moment of communing ended abruptly as a busload of Japanese tourists disembarked and swarmed to take pictures of the cliffs and remnants of the mansions

lodged in the rocks or barely holding to the side. With the frothy expanse of water as backdrop, the tourists expertly arranged and rearranged themselves in every possible smiling combination. Daniel stubbed out his cigarette, tossed his coffee cup, and tightened his hoodie against his trek back to town. He wondered if he'd make it to his meeting with the job counselor or wind up back with his crew at Rudy's. Both were north. He'd know when he got there.

His phone vibrated. She'd sent him a row of smiley faces. Lame, so fucking lame, Big D, he thought. He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, fingers wrapped tight around his phone, as his legs carried him into his day.

## Swag

Ginnie said, in confidence, she'd made a grave error in hiring this guy, this Teddy. Tonight, I meet Teddy here on Fremont Street and act like I'm training to be his backup, vacation-relief-type person. In truth, I'm to shadow Teddy tonight to get the lay of the land and fully replace him tomorrow. Ginnie will call him into the office in the morning and let him go, very professionally. That's the kind of people I need to spend more time around – professionals. I might have heard that advice a time or two from Dad, but advice only hits home when it's ready to be heard.

Everything just feels right, like I'm meant to be back in Las Vegas at this exact moment. Bob says I can stay at his place for as long as I like, rent free, probably because he's still in love with me. Distance, Carla, distance. And just because he drinks himself stupid every night doesn't mean you have to. Rehab would be good for someone like Bob, teach him some moderation, but you can't tell him that. And do not fall back into bed with Bob. Out of the question. Fresh start.

Vegas can creep up on you. Lower your bar.

Like this homeless guy, sitting over there, at a public table on Fremont Street, pulling a clean shirt out of his briefcase with shaky hands, putting on deodorant, spit-brushing his teeth, his whole toilette right in the middle of downtown. Shaky Hand Man. Oh, and now a cordless, electric razor. Unbelievable. Living out of his briefcase. Heartbreaking. Not even a nice briefcase.

When I fall on hard times, I don't have to flap around like that in public. Hard times come, sure. That's the natural stream of any life. My way with people really helps. Back in Vegas two days and I'm situated. I finished my stint in rehab. I tried staying in

California. That state is not for everyone. Seems like it might be, but a shitload of people leave every day, so it's not just me. I saw myself spending time on the beach, but good luck making it to the beach without a car. California's not what it's cracked up to be, Dad doesn't understand that. He's prejudiced against Vegas because I've had some bad luck here. Like bad luck isn't possible in California, come on. I could tell stories. He thinks money pulls my little puppet strings. Surprise, I have a job.

Ginnie's got me. She's proof that good luck can happen in Vegas. Her sweet office, managing all this downtown event type stuff. Her framed diploma on the wall behind her, BS in Public Relations from UNLV. Bullshit sounds about right. She laughed at my joke, hard. Not sure how she graduated when we never got out of bed in time for class back in the day, but good for her. Never imagined her with kids and living in Summerlin. Gated communities are for assholes, but she hasn't gotten stuck up. She's the same Ginnie. Called me back right away. She knows my potential. And now she's in charge of creating a new and improved experience, making downtown a destination. She said the acronym for it, but I don't remember.

Teddy's ten minutes late. Living up to his reputation.

I forgot how hot it gets here.

The public tables are new.

The kiosks are new. Lined all up and down Fremont full of stuff tourists buy: Elvis everything, oversized shot glasses, T-shirts with boobs, T-shirts with ripped abs, and T-shirts with - *What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas*. Classic. Strolling stilt-walkers, musicians, jugglers all hired by Ginnie to create a festive mood. The Viva Vision Light Show, the centerpiece, plays across the canopy that runs the length of

Fremont Street. The Fremont Street Experience. Now I'm the swag person. Go up and down the area here, show enthusiasm, give away crap from a cart. Like Mardi Gras. I know people can go ape shit for beads.

Super cool job with lots of room to move up. Fits in with the PR classes I did make it to. Everything's lining up.

I'm going to suggest to Ginnie they rip down that Girls of Glitter Gulch billboard with all those bare asses. *No If, Ands, or Butts*. When you think about it, the caption doesn't even make any sense. It's all butts, and they're all looking back over their shoulders, so we know their faces. I might have had some trouble but at least my ass isn't plastered on a Fremont Street billboard for all to see. I should tell Dad that next time we talk. Give him something to be grateful for.

"Carla? Hey. Teddy. Let's get you trained uuup!"

Real charmer. I see what Ginnie means.

The swag's stored in the Neonopolis basement. We go down the elevator past the Heart Attack Grill. People that weigh over 350 pounds eat for free. Gross.

Teddy unlocks the cage.

"I will now issue you a non-breathable, extra scratchy, cheap ass polo. Looks like you need a large?"

Unbelievable. This guy is not a people person.

"Yeah."

Nothing said about a polo. Thanks, Ginnie. Some pants-wearing warning might be helpful. Polos? Not a good look for my shape, and in all actuality, not any woman's shape, but maybe not terrible with certain kinds of pants. Otherwise the tight stretch over

the slightest muffin top is hideous. Can't see how bad it is. Stupid metal funhouse bathroom mirror cuts off below the shoulders.

Teddy's knocking.

"Hey, you about done in there?"

Up on the street, the crowd thickens.

"I position for the first show here. High visibility, lets them see I'm doing my job. Make sure the cart's stocked. Beads, fake poker chips, little clicky lights, pins, stickers, pencils, whatever. They rotate the crap. Woohoo, hand it out. After the last show, lock the cart back up. Voilà, you're trained uuup. Hey, keep an eye on things, okay? Don't worry, you'll do fine."

I'm not worried, Mr. Out of a Job Come Tomorrow guy.

Yeah, this is much better for tourists. This area downtown used to scare people. Never me. I loved my old apartment over on Bonneville. Built in the 1950's, which makes it historic for Vegas. Wood floors, seafoam ceramic tiles in the bathroom and, the best, an ironing board that folded right out of the kitchen wall. I wish I still had that apartment. It felt like home. Downtown Vegas. People never understand that it's north of the strip. No one ever understands that people live here. That a million people live in houses that stretch all around in neighborhoods. 'Did you live in a hotel? Where would you go to school?' Stupid Californians, they come over here and never leave the Bellagio. They know nothing about this place.

Surround sound pulses the air and vibrates up from the hot cement. Thumps my heart. The crowd tightens under the canopy of light. Teddy squeezes back in reeking of pot. All eyes roll up to the sky. Moving colors change the gray arched ceiling above to a

kaleidoscope. Colors dart and burst, make patterns, blend and dissolve. Like fireworks without the wait or explosions. The show runs the long block of Fremont and the strip clubs and casinos fade to the periphery. All the faces are illuminated, tranquil, mesmerized by the spectacle. Transported to a magical place. Awed by stuff, stuff we all know, not much more than a high-tech kid's cartoon. Color, movement, sound. But the focus, the closeness, the color brushing the upturned faces makes everything beautiful. Even stoned Teddy. Probably better high. What isn't, really? Across the light sky, people on ziplines scream. Fly, but don't fall. I want to do that. Some night when I have off, after a few paychecks, I'll treat Ginnie. We'll have a girl's night out. I'll show my gratitude to her. We can come down here like people having fun.

The finale. Teddy's ready, holding the beads up high. Bombarded on all sides, the people are suddenly grasping and ugly. Ape shit is right, the people smash me into the cart for fucking plastic beads and clicky lights. Teddy gets on this face like he's handing out rice to starving people. He gives out thirty, forty trinkets tops. People reach toward us with open hands, hungry for swag. But Teddy says that's it, shuts up the cart and wheels over to the side of the outdoor bar in front of Glitter Gulch. I shadow.

"I didn't think there was a limit to what we could give out."

"There isn't," he says.

Silence.

"Can I trust you?" he asks.

Aww, come on, I hate this.

"Yeah, absolutely."

“There’s a few perks to the job. That’s one. I only give out however much I feel like to whoever I feel like giving it to.”

“But it’s worthless and it’s not even yours.”

“Bonus.”

Ginnie wouldn’t like this. I’m doing her a favor taking the place of this guy.

The bartender comes over and slaps hands with Teddy several ways.

“Who’s your companion here, Teddy?”

“My trainee, Carla.”

“What’s your pleasure, lovely?”

Long Island Iced Tea, what?

“No. Nothing, thanks, I’m working.”

“She doesn’t know. Seriously, though, you’re cool, right? You wouldn’t throw me under the bus?”

“Quit asking me that.”

“Okay, training part deux. Sal here gets a big bag of beads every night. The nice ones with the big logo pendant thingy. Inside, the girls of Glitter Gulch give them as souvenirs after lap dances. They get better tips and we get complimentary beverages in our Fremont Street Experience company-issued water bottles. Am I a genius? Say yes.”

Ginnie doesn’t know the half of what’s going on down here. A Long Island Iced Tea sounds good, especially quenching on a night like this. No, it might come up tomorrow when he talks to her. I promised Ginnie the straight and narrow. Teddy’s the kind to bring that up and make me look bad. I opt for ice water and Teddy gets a gin and tonic, extra gin, extra ice, extra lime. We toast water bottles. Sal smiles and nods



believing that things will go on as they always have. I turn away from temptation, back to the street.

No. Tell me that's not Cindy Jaime. Cindy Jaime? What? Please tell me this isn't happening. Shit, she looks the same as in high school, thin with matching everything: her pedicure, her earrings, her eye shadow. Each hair in a perfect place but like she didn't even do anything to make it that way. Miss Everyone Loves Me and My Scent Precedes Me. Huge diamond on her finger, of course, some rich dude married her bony ass. Don't let her see me. Please God, melt me into a puddle and then evaporate me into thin air. Why now? In this polo shirt, in front of Glitter Gulch, standing next to Teddy. Fuck. Life is so unfair.

“Shouldn't we circulate, I mean, isn't that the job?” I ask.

“Whoa, gung ho. Sure, you can even push the cart this time.”

I set a course away from Cindy. The cart's heavier than it looks and a wobbly wheel keeps pulling it astray. I put in some muscle to keep it straight. I shouldn't get so flustered by that. Cindy's so stuck up she'd probably look me in the eye and act like she didn't know me. Probably doesn't even remember my name. Some people get to skate through life like it's one big party, or picnic, or ice rink, or fucking whatever it is for them.

“Carla? Carla? It's Cindy - ,” her voice faint behind me.

Are you kidding me? Power ahead, fast. Oh, thank you, the next show is starting, drowns her out. Teddy's oblivious. He struggles to keep up. The wheel pulls to the right and the metal cart veers hard into a couple, arm in arm. It hits them with force just above

the knees. Their faces twist and their mouths are moving but I can't hear what they're saying.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry! This wheel, I'm sorry!” I say up close and loud, but they can't hear me.

The man grabs me, shakes me and I'm pretty sure he's calling me a bitch. Teddy blocks him, takes my hand and pulls me away, speeding the cart along. He somehow steers the cart in a straight line, keeps hold of my hand and delivers us out of the fray and back to the safety of Glitter Gulch.

“Grasshopper! First night and already you found the best perk of all.”

He laughs and holds his hand up for a high five.

“What're you talking about?”

“Bashing the cart into these assholes! Restaurants, you get to teabag. Out here in the Experience, you get to cart bash.”

“I didn't do it on purpose,” I tell him.

“Oh, a kamikaze accident, I see. Well, it's highly effective anger therapy, take it from me. Maybe a tad lighter with the bash next time. Leave room for plausible deniability.”

This guy's nutty deluxe. I don't know what I am going to say to Ginnie.

Sal's refilling Teddy's water bottle. Cindy Jaime's spotted me again, making direct eye contact now. Waving. There's no escaping, is there? She's walking towards me and even from here I can smell how fresh and clean she is. This cheap polo traps the heat. I see my sweaty self fully in the reflective glass front of Glitter Gulch and my muffin

top's way worse than I imagined. I'm bubbling over. I hear myself tell Sal, *Long Island Iced Tea*, as I hand over my Fremont Street Experience company-issued water bottle.

###

Cindy Jaime's the same snitching little bitch she was in high school, no surprise there. I still don't know if it was coincidence or intentional spying that put her on Fremont Street that night, but Ginnie's covert, that I do know, so anything's possible.

Cindy spilled her guts about my purely accidental cart-bashing and our adult beverages from Glitter Gulch the next morning at her mommy/baby playdate with none other than Ginnie, who fired us, both of us. Over the phone, so it wasn't even professional. Such a disappointment, she'd said, after putting herself out there for a friend. Disappointment?

"Let's talk about my disappointment in you for having playdates with fucking Cindy Jaime, the girl who got us suspended, our enemy since high school. I question your judgement letting that woman around your children," I'd said before I hung up.

Teddy high-fived me on that last part.

I know. It all happened fast but when you know, you know.

I called Dad to tell him we were moving in together, share the happy news, maybe provide him with an opportunity for generosity. It's better than getting married really, because we choose to commit to each other every day, without all the trappings. Look at all the money I saved him, with no wedding. But nothing, withholding, as always.

"Double-down. Tell Howie we're having a baby, that he's going to be a grandpa. It's not a lie, we know we will someday." Teddy's genius idea keeps the checks coming.

When I came clean to Teddy, told him about the secret plot to take his job, he took it in stride. Don't apologize for the way of the world, we're all just doing what we've got to do, he'd said.

That's one of the things I love about him, his forgiving nature.

We tap our Fremont Street Experience company-issued water bottles together, enjoying the cool of the evening, in our yard. Our little patch of grass.

## Halfwayish

Before they'd left Austin, she'd searched online for the thinnest possible, though most complete, guidebook available. That guidebook now occupied the front-zipped pouch of her backpack. Page one referred to the Pyrenees as a substantial mountain range.

If she survived, she would contact the publisher to suggest a revision: *really, really fucking substantial mountain range*. That would help readers to better understand the truth. It would also mean more words and more words would make the book thicker. Today, already, the first day of her hike, the first day of their five-hundred-mile hike, Denise fought the urge to abandon her belongings along the trail like a top-heavy wagon-train pioneer heading West. Tonight, they will stop in Orisson.

Chanting *Orisson, Orisson, Orisson* to the slow rhythm of her tramping helped take her mind off the relentless rise of the trail. Chanting *Orisson, Orisson, Orisson* also kept thoughts of Daniel at a quiet distance. Upon hearing of her brother's death, she'd tried to convince Glen to cancel their trip

"No, no, it will be good for you, cathartic," her husband had said. "Staying home's not going to bring him back to life."

He was right, but Denise worried she gave in too easily. She worried his words merely corroborated her very selfish desire to proceed with living. She worried forging ahead with plans so shortly after her brother's death made her a not-very-good sister, but she carried worry around like an expert, and boarded the plane.

Once on the plane, she'd worried about her lack of preparedness for the hike ahead of her. This wasn't a new concern; she'd worried for weeks as the day of departure

drew nearer on the calendar. The plan had been for Glen to have bonding Saturdays with her daughter Isabell, while Denise walked fifteen or so miles each Saturday in the neighborhood, backpack stuffed with dirty laundry for practice, while breaking in her new lightweight hiking boots which featured generous vented areas for breathability, deep traction on inclines, and solid support around the ankles, but that never happened. She'd actually waved goodbye to Isabell and Glen before setting out one sunny Saturday morning, backpack and hiking boots donned, but grew so bored with the uninhabited streets of her gated community, lined with the predictable five-model loop of houses surrounded by empty yards, that she returned home in time for lunch. Her total training for the five-hundred-mile hike passing through the Pyrenees amounted to about three miles on level ground.

Now, a rest at every plateau proved necessary to prevent her heart from bursting through her ribcage like some gnashing alien. Lungs on fire, head like helium, she stopped to look back. The world below spread itself big enough to show its roundness. The featherbed of forest that stretched back to St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port invited her to bounce back via the soft treetops. Instead, once her heart calmed, she headed up. Up, up, and even more up.

Far ahead, her husband's pack, weighing in at forty-eight pounds, which well exceeded the thirty-five-pound limit recommended by the thinnest possible guidebook, taunted her with its steady ascent. Not only that, a travel-sized guitar in its case dangled off Glen's pack keeping consistent stepping time like some cocky metronome. Her pack weighed twenty-eight pounds, a full seven pounds under the recommended extended hiking weight limit, but it felt like she carried all of Texas on her back. Glen occasionally

waited ahead, smiling, with his oversized pack and swaying guitar. Denise would rub the side of her nose, with an extended middle finger, and smile back.

She played made-up games to pull her through. The chanting. The overtook foot game: one foot overtook the other, overtook the other, overtook the other and on and on. She imagined herself in a land where belief and wide-open arms allowed her to fly. She created an invisible rope tow to do the bulk of the work. She walked backwards attempting to trick her brain with the illusion of a downhill view. Her brain didn't fall for it, but at least walking backwards used different muscles. When all games failed, she pulled her hat brim down, and committed to the slow, agonizing climb.

A man hogging the full width of the trail barreled through on her left, elbowing her off the path, and interrupting her chant.

"Buen Camino," she offered the customary greeting, with as little snarky subtext as possible, considering.

The man, barely turning his face to acknowledge her, pounded up the trail. *Daniel, it's Daniel*, she thought. His thick brows and lashes, the same rise of cheekbone, his rail-thin body, his same distorted understanding of personal space, his same dislike of niceties from strangers. The man hotboxed a roll-your-own, leaving a trail of smoke in his wake, and instead of a backpack, carried a tiny red suitcase. That would be Daniel, choosing the hardest possible way to hike up a mountain. She stopped herself from calling out his name. The man continued up the mountain, disappearing past Glen, who waited at the next plateau. She let the weight of her backpack rest on a nearby tree, then allowed gravity to win.

Denise remembered a day she'd arrived early at his kindergarten room to collect him for their walk home. Peering into the window, she'd seen the teacher leading his class in Hokey Pokey. Daniel's sense of boundaries and commitment to *shaking it all about* differed greatly from his classmates'. As the game progressed, he'd flailed bigger and bigger, bashing and frightening the other kids until the teacher grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, sat him in a chair, and sentenced him to a time-out. From her place at the window, Denise saw him smiling into the corner. She didn't say anything about the Hokey Pokey incident as they walked home or mention the time-out to her father later that night. Denise fought back playground tears if she didn't hear her name among the first eight when sides for Red Rover were chosen, so his smile at being excluded mystified her.

"Hey, you, I'll bring up the rear a while," Glen said. He'd come down from his plateau and extended his hand. "Tell me a story about Daniel. Something happy."

She looked to the next guidepost marked with a scalloped seashell and an arrow pointing up. The guidebook suggested the lines on the shell might represent the many paths each person takes back to their center along The Way. Or maybe the trail marker referred simply to the actual scalloped shells, worn about the neck, by the original pilgrims to scoop up food and water for sustenance.

Nothing happy came to mind. She told Glen that storytelling while hiking up a substantial fucking mountain range wasn't supported by her lung capacity. Denise led the way at a snail's pace.

"Okay, I've got one," Glen said.

"Of course, you do," Denise said.



Glen told the story of Isabell and Daniel's first meeting. Last year, over Skype from Alaska to Texas, Daniel had shown Isabell his six-month wooden chip from Narcotics Anonymous and his scholarship letter for the construction certification program at Anchorage Community and Technical College. Bombarded by questions springing from Isabell's five-year-old curiosity, he'd tried to explain jackhammers and heroin to his niece. He promised to visit at Christmas, and Isabell promised to draw Uncle Daniel a picture. Her promise inspired interesting crayon creations filled with blissed-out blue people operating dangerous, inexplicable equipment.

They arrived at Refuge Orisson a little after three in the afternoon, the afternoon before her 47<sup>th</sup> birthday. Their place of rest, not yet halfway up the Pyrenees on the French side of the Camino de Santiago, or in English, the Way of Saint James.

They placed their packs on a set of bunk beds in the hostel to show they were taken, then climbed the staircase to the deck, which sat atop the hostel roof, built into the side of the Pyrenees. The throb in her feet slowly subsided in open sandals but the skin on her heels was blistered. Stacked stone upon stone, an ancient shepherd's house served as a tavern across the path from the deck. The expansive view below, the way they had come, displayed itself in a series of descending peaks and valleys. Clouds rolled in and out like the ocean, creating an impressionist's map of the world. Islands of land poked out from their white sea, the clouds ebbed to reveal new continents, then rolled back over, flooding land mass. The view changed every moment. They sat in silence amidst the sweeping change, nothing between them and the sun.

Her rubber legs managed to cross the path over to the tavern.

"Bonne chance." The barmaid pointed out the window to the clear skies.

The guidebook warned of Orisson's socked-in view most days of the year.

"Oui, tres bien, merci," Denise replied.

She'd said bonjour on the way into the tavern, all the guidebook French she could retain exhausted in a single, simple exchange. No more words left. Two glasses and pitcher in hand, she stopped trailside to observe the hikers still pushing on up the mountain.

"Sante! Prost! Salud! Gun bae!" the diehards called to her.

"Cheers, buen Camino." She raised her pitcher to them.

Hikers not stopping for the night in Orisson continued up the Pyrenees via Lepoeder Pass, crossing the Franco-Spanish border, then descending all the way down the Spanish side of the mountain to sleep at the next existing hostel in Roncesvalles. She strolled back to the deck, worrying that would be her tomorrow, trekking up the mountain. She poured beer for Glen and herself. They kissed and clinked glasses.

"Happy almost 47<sup>th</sup>, Denise!"

"Happy Honeymoon, my husband!"

They'd delayed their honeymoon for over two years, waiting for her daughter Isabell to turn six before daring a whole month away. They'd left her with 'Aunt' Betsy in Port Aransas. Denise worried about seagulls, riptides, and the myriad dangers her daughter faced on the Gulf Coast, while she sipped her beer, and surveyed the distance she'd conquered.

The thinnest possible guidebook referred to *The Way* as a pilgrimage, but Denise thought that too pretentious, too religious. Why not just walk? The idea to walk took hold after she'd watched a film starring Martin Sheen. In *The Way*, the prickly-heroic father,

played by Sheen, walked the Camino to honor his dead son. Movies with triumphant prickly-heroic fathers played her like a fiddle. She cried half the night and decided this would be her response to surviving into official middle age, or maybe more truthfully, well past. Living to ninety-four seemed exhausting, painful, and completely out of the question. Rolling in the honeymoon aspect to the trip justified the expense, the time away from work, and leaving Isabell.

She'd gotten the call of Daniel's death four days before their departure. He died at forty-two, not a complete surprise; she'd expected the call all her adult life. No tears fell on hearing of his death, but she'd suddenly had the impulse to pray. Having been raised atheist, this bewildered her. The idea of kneeling, folding hands, and speaking to the air seemed foreign and not a little silly. Nothing from the one summer she and Daniel had been allowed to attend Presbyterian Bible camp helped with her prayer impulse.

"It's free and they have hot lunch," Denise had said, assuming that would be more than enough reason to let them go.

But her father only permitted their participation after the youth leader promised the Presbyterian camp days consisted mostly of volleyball and crafts, no praying, and very little bible.

"Don't let the Holy Rollers lull you in with mac n' cheese," her father had warned.

The thinnest possible guidebook told her the Camino led to Santiago de Compostelo, where the remains of James, James as in Christ's inner circle James, are said to be buried. Saint James had some pretty impressive miracles on his resume: reviving a hanged boy after his father walked the Camino, striding on the ocean to toss drowning

men back into their boats, and the ability to personally usher people into heaven. The guidebook said that people have never ceased travelling The Way since 812 A.D. Spanish legend holds that the dust from the Camino, stirred by the pilgrim's feet as they trod for salvation, health, forgiveness, and peace, created the Milky Way. The shape of the Milky Way mirrors the shape of the trail. The dust made visible the swirling air and the traveler's burdens, and the kind wind carried their troubles far from Earth into a distant part of the galaxy.

###

Denise and Glen had arrived by train in St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, the trailhead town of the Camino, the day before.

"We're here. The port where our feet take off, pied, ped, get it," Denise said.

"Good one," Glen said.

They followed the crowd to the Pilgrim's Office. Volunteers sat at low tables labelled with signs that indicated their languages; most of them had English on their list. Everyone received their credentials, an accordion-like document stamped along the way to validate each pilgrim's journey and to allow stays at the inexpensive hostels. Questions and answers in every language flooded the room. The quality of attention given to the answers ratcheted up by the late afternoon shadow of the Pyrenees, a substantial mountain range, falling across the town.

In the evening, they walked St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, an ancient gated community. Except for passing through Canada, Denise had never been in a foreign country. The tiled-roofed houses fascinated her, the rocks that built the walls of the city fascinated her,

the weeds fascinated her. Weeds, flowers, vegetation of all colors literally burst out of the stone walls, sideways, rooting and thriving where life wouldn't seem possible.

They walked the ramparts like guards.

“Any signs of the barbarians, Denise?”

“All clear.”

“How about now?”

“Still all clear.”

Exploring the town, they'd turned a corner to find a small, lone dog lying motionless in the middle of the cobblestone lane. The little dog must have been run over. The indifferent patrons drinking wine, chatting at the sidewalk café, left him there in the street to be hit again. Denise ran to the dog's side. She didn't want to touch him in death, but she couldn't leave him there. As she fell to her knees, crying, to scoop up his little dead dog body, he leapt up to kiss her face. For a moment, it seemed a miracle.

“My old dog Gerard. His bones love the warm stones,” the café waiter said.

He ushered them to a sidewalk table.

“Please to give you wine for plan to save my dog.” He filled their glasses and raised the bottle.

“For the dog worrier,” he declared along the sidewalk and the patrons toasted and laughed along with Glen and Denise.

If Gerard had been a Spanish dog instead of a French dog, Denise would have had an impressive array of commands to share with him. Her own dog, Ella, showed up, years ago now, on her doorstep as a stray, and seemed not to comprehend a single word Denise spoke to her. Lorenzo, her mother's husband, discovered on meeting the dog that Spanish

was Ella's first language. He'd spent weeks patiently teaching Denise fifteen Spanish dog commands which Ella, proud to show her comprehension and obedience, eagerly enacted. At this very moment, on the other side of the world in Texas, Ella probably sat devotedly eyeing Lorenzo, awaiting a Spanish command.

The waiter's dog, Gerard, slept on Denise's feet, looking dead, but she knew he wasn't.

###

At the end of her first punishing day of the five-hundred-mile hike, on the deck of Refuge Orisson, after propping her legs up, and savoring a cold beer, Denise felt a surprising second wind. As Glen strummed his travel guitar, a strapping blonde couple, man and woman, in neon clothes, pink bandana head wraps and matching yellow gloves and walking poles arrived on the deck. They breathed in the vastness of the view like deep sea divers ready to plunge. Their glowing faces turned to Glen and Denise.

"May we join you, friends?" the woman said, German by her accent.

"Please," Denise replied.

"Hans, get us some glasses and another pitcher to share with our fellow pilgrims."

Hans nodded, set his pack and poles on a chair, then bobbed and weaved, through another clump of hikers, over to the tavern. Mila introduced herself. Denise thought Mila, robust and clad in all the colors of the rainbow, to be the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen, though she felt a bit jealous of her husky voice.

"So, my lovelies, how was your first day of the Caminooooo!" Mila yodeled down the mountain.

Hans returned and they fit introductions into a song break. Beer glasses full, they made little adjustments to allow room around the table. Glen switched to some Blitzen Trapper and they all went back to the view. The music worked as a magnet, attracting more and more hikers to their end of the deck. Glen, with a full audience, basked in his heaven, and worked through his repertoire. Here and there, travelers offered chunks of bread, cheese, salami, and pieces of fruit to the misshapen circle, just enough reaching each person to constitute dinner. As needed, someone crossed the now empty path, empty pitcher in hand, and returned to pour, so their glasses seemed bottomless.

Conversation was sparse, but Denise gathered that Hans and Mila lived in a commune in Germany. Denise stopped herself before expressing surprise at the existence of communes in Germany. Like she wished she'd stopped herself last night before marveling at finding her same toothpaste at a grocery store in France. In the moment Denise felt grateful for this slight worldview shift, an extraordinary butterfly landed on the very corner of Mila's pink-cat-eyeglasses. Its delicate orange-edged wings flapped open slowly, revealing lavender deepening into a plush indigo at its center. Denise made the tiniest possible pointing gesture and mouthed *butterfly*. Holding her head perfectly still, Mila strained her eyes to the side, and Hans leaned in. They all gazed on the butterfly making a home of Mila's glasses.

"We walk to rid Hans of his inoperable brain tumor," Mila said, tilting her head slowly to offer a better view of the butterfly to Hans.

Hans reached for Mila's hand at a sloth's pace. The butterfly's wings still flapped. Clouds still splashed around the sea of mountain peaks. Glen, as if on cue, switched to the Leonard Cohen portion of his repertoire. Denise searched her brain for the right

words but found nothing. The little band of pilgrims, unsure of most words until reaching the chorus, sang a full-voiced *hallelujah*. Mila and Hans seemed to have no expectation of words and continued to marvel at the butterfly.

“And you, why do you walk?” Mila asked.

Denise watched the butterfly crawl across the top of the pink-framed glasses, Mila’s eyes crossing to follow the progress.

“I turn 47 tomorrow.”

Hans and Mila’s hands slow-motion-moved for their beer glasses in preparation of toasting her birthday.

“Glen and I never had a honeymoon.”

Their hands continued to inch towards their pints.

“And my brother died at work, electrocuted, completely clean, after years of struggling.”

Confused emotions swirled upon their faces. Denise regretted adding this last reason and didn’t really know why she had, until their hands slowly switching directions, came to clasp her own. The butterfly’s wings still flapped. The clouds still moved around the peaks below. The pilgrims sang their final, broken *hallelujah*.

Glen transitioned to the Beatles. *Here Comes the Sun. The Long and Winding Road. Let It Be*. Everyone knew the words, the butterfly flew up into the evening sky, but Mila and Hans didn’t let go.

As the sun descended into the clouds, Mila and Denise went into the hostel bathroom below. Mila shared her laundry soap and they hand-washed their socks and underwear in the sink, then clipped them on the clothesline outside the hostel door. The



silhouette of practical underwear hanging against the last grand strands of sun setting on the Pyrenees caused them to fall into hysterical laughter. From a nearby bench, Hans and Glen shushed them for the benefit of the already sleeping pilgrims, only to have it backfire. Granny panties were universally funny.

Mila and Denise washed their faces and brushed their teeth with the paste Denise squeezed from her new tube, using the tiny sink with its dribbling water flow with synchronicity, as if they'd shared a sink their entire lives. They dried their faces, Denise with her thick purple-cloth towel and Mila with a lightweight, fast-drying one that rolled compactly for backpackers. It was the bright orange microfiber one that Denise had seen online and thought to order, but never did. Denise stretched up to the top bunk to kiss Glen goodnight, then rolled into the bottom one.

She wormed into her sleeping bag. Her muscles melted into the thin mattress. She turned towards the welcome silence of the wall, away from the Fred-Flintstone snores and late arrivals to the bunkhouse. Daniel had absolutely been clean, she knew that; the company had been required to test post-mortem for insurance reasons. The company said his fatal accident resulted from a *combination of extenuating circumstances*. The metal pins used to reconstruct his ankle, following a car wreck in his twenties, increased the voltage in his body to a level causing his death. He'd neglected to divulge the wreck or the metal pins. The company representative said Daniel had been cited as a repeat offender of their "buddy system" policy, claimed that following the rules might have saved him. He'd been working alone that day at the back side of the house, so he hadn't been found for hours. She tried to fathom his last-moment thoughts, lying in the

backyard, looking up into the sky, she hoped he knew he'd done nothing wrong. She fell into her deepest sleep in memory.

###

Choralling angels woke her. Everything seemed unfamiliar. *I might be dead*, she thought, seeing nothing but a gray, blank expanse above her. She reached into the void to discover the ceiling. At some point in the night, she'd climbed the little ladder and entwined with Glen. Precariously balanced on the tiny bunk, they saved each other from the edge. The sound of zippers zipping joined the angel music piped into the bunk room to wake the hostellers and gently cue them on their way. People floated about on tiptoe and shared their plans in whispers.

Denise gave Glen's sweet sleeping face a peck on its cheek and descended the bunk ladder to pee, discovering screaming muscles at every rung. Almost the last to rise, Denise spotted only three or four other sensible hikers still lolling in their bunks, no Mila and Hans among them sadly. On the way back from the bathroom, she stepped outside into a dank, thick mist sealed around the mountain and shrouding the clothesline. She walked blind into the fog, hands extended in front of her, discovering her cold, still sopping-wet socks and underwear alone on the line. She plopped on the nearby bench pulling her feet close for inspection of her blisters.

She smelled smoke before she saw the glow of his cigarette end brighten with an inhale. The man from the trail, his little red suitcase next to him, sat beside her on the bench lacing up his boots. Denise knew Daniel's cremated ashes rested in an urn on their dining room table in Austin, but for the moment, she supposed her brother sat near her on a bench not quite halfway up the Pyrenees, on the French side, in a world so much bigger

than either of them had ever imagined. Daniel never set foot out of Alaska, though he always promised to visit. Until this last year, he'd rarely had a phone number that lasted more than a few months. And for years before that, he'd rarely had a steady address that wasn't prison. She imagined the little red suitcase held Daniel's few possessions, the burning cigarette had been rolled by his hands, and that after trudging their paths, they'd found the same bench of rest. Denise and the stranger remained still and quiet for some minutes until he pressed out his cigarette, saving the butt to his pocket, and opened his case.

"Here," the stranger said, handing her two large square bandages.

"Thank you. I didn't break in my hiking boots," she said.

"Rookie mistake."

"Yeah, I know. I meant to walk in my neighborhood. The guidebook said - "

"Aww, fuck guidebooks. You're walking now," the stranger said, shutting his red suitcase, and heading off up the murky trail.

She squeezed the water out of her socks and undies, believing the stranger and Daniel could well have been twins separated at birth. Inside, kneeling to pull out her backpack stashed underneath her bunk for the night, she saw Mila's orange towel folded on her mattress. *Happy Birthday!* read the folded note on top. Inside, Mila wrote:

**The Pilgrim's Prayer**

*Be for us,  
The compassion on our journey,  
The guide at the crossroads,  
Our strength in fatigue,  
Our fortress in danger,  
Our place of rest on the way,  
Our shelter from the heat,  
Our light in the darkness,*

*Our consolation in discouragement,  
And the perseverance of our intention.*

She leaned forward onto her bunk, hands interwoven around the towel. The last of those packing slowed their movements and silenced even their whispers, so as not to disturb what appeared as prayer. Mila and Hans had both signed the note. *P.S. See you tonight in Roncesvalles, my sleeping Grizzlies.* Denise removed the heavy cloth towel from her pack, held it tight to her face, and placed it on the bed for whoever might need one; the thinnest possible guidebook said this was the way. She flipped the book's pages to the map, showing the long trail to Santiago de Compostela where the remains of St. James are said to be buried, before zipping the book in next to her new towel.

After a breakfast of coffee, bread and fruit in the tavern, Glen and Denise headed up into the dense mist. She heard his footsteps fall softly on the earth but could barely see his outline. She reached for Glen's hand and it was there. The shadowy forms of two or three other stragglers passed close by.

"Buen Camino, we hope for music tonight," one said.

"I hope as well," said Glen.

She let go of his hand, wanting to fall a bit behind, to feel suspended in the air made visible all around her. She wondered what games would get her over the hump of the mountain today. She couldn't chant *Orisson, Orisson, Orisson* anymore. As a chant, *Roncesvalles, Roncesvalles, Roncesvalles* didn't exactly roll off the tongue. Glancing down, she gasped to see a white billowing froth bubbling from the vented areas of her hiking boots, making her feet appear rabid. Denise bent to see her boots better.

“Look, Glen, it’s a miracle! I’m becoming a Saint, Saint Denise of the Self-Washing Feet!”

“Less laundry detergent and more rinsing tonight,” Glen said, backtracking to see her boots for a moment before continuing up the mountain.

She’d have to explain the joke to him later. Denise remembered one night in the midst of a rainstorm, she and Daniel ran barefoot in the yard. Daniel’s heel drove down on a piece of glass and Denise washed and bandaged his foot. They’d kept it a secret, so their dad wouldn’t be mad about the barefoot part, but he’d found out and made them promise never, ever to do it again. Denise never did.

*Usher him in. Usher him in. Usher him in* was what she settled on to help her reach the peak. Wanting a birthday/honeymoon kiss at the exact border, the boundary where France ended and Spain began, they crossed back and forth, back and forth looking for some kind of marker that just wasn’t there.

## **Hatchlings**

A little jab to her belly startled Betsy awake. In her bungalow's shadows, she could just make out the balled fist of Isabell pressed against her stomach. Her arm poked out from the sheet-mound she'd twisted to cover her little six-year-old body. This, only the third night of their planned month together, Betsy had yet to acclimate to Izzy's habits: her habit of hogging the covers; her habit of lashing out her limbs at night; her habit of having to eat multiple meals every day, all day, at regular intervals; her need to get to bed early and wear matching 'outfits' at all times; and her habit of devising questions. The soft, fairy snore of Isabell, the snore of her best friend's daughter entrusted to her care, and the thought of baby turtles warmed Betsy to the idea of starting her day. She slid off the bed and tiptoed to her open window. In the gulf, wispy whitecaps captured the light of the half-moon hanging in the cloudless star-packed sky.

Her phone, charging on the dresser, flashed a text from Sarah: *It's a go.*

Perfect, Betsy thought, searching, by habit, along the top of the window frame for the zip-locked bag containing her cigarettes. She probably shouldn't smoke today. Not today. Strong odors, chemicals from sunblock, even the natural oil of human hands can affect a hatchling's ability to imprint. The scarce females have only their short walk down Malaquite Beach into the surf to store all the tastes, smells, and sounds they'll need to return to their shore of origin and lay their own eggs. With so much against the baby ridleys, tobacco reek didn't seem especially courteous when coming in close contact with them, but clean, night wind from the ocean would, she reasoned, neutralize the odor, as she leaned out the window as far as possible to light her cigarette, still keeping the

sleeping mound in her peripheral vision, readied, if necessary, to toss her cigarette. She'd never be able to explain to Isabell why she smoked.

Betsy and Sarah had found the clutch of eggs, releasing as hatchlings today, exactly fifty-five days ago. They'd scouted the Padre Island National Seashore for the v-v-v-v flipper-prints of nesting sea turtles. They'd tracked the v-v-v-v's into the dunes, excavated a rare Kemp's ridley nest, and brought the ping-pong-ball-sized eggs, all one-hundred-and-six of them, to the Sea Turtle Science and Recovery Center for incubation. Betsy volunteered and Sarah served as lead park ranger for the Center.

Yesterday morning, Sarah allowed Betsy and Isabell to watch the hatchlings, aided by the temporary little sharp tooth on their snouts, called a caruncle, pierce through their shells. Then at a creeping pace, their mottled green flipper-edges sluggishly karate-chopped a bigger hole in the shell, through which slimy, long, green, lethargic heads with gaping, grasping little-old-men's mouths emerged. Several of these all-neck heads, rolling as if in search of a horizon, had poked fully through the shells, before Betsy had to report to her shift at the Stop N' Shop, Isabell in tow. Her long-time boss had given the okay for Betsy to bring her to work, where Izzy asked her why customers said the f-word so much, why they bought so many nasty packs of cigarettes that made cancer, and what they did with all the ice. *They just do; it's their choice; keep their beer cold*, Betsy had replied.

Betsy brushed her teeth and scrubbed the tobacco smell from her hands with a scentless soap before sitting alongside the sleeping Izzy. The child's translucent, poreless face showed absolutely no trace of the seagull attack she'd suffered on her very first visit to Port Aransas to meet Betsy. There must have been a dozen tiny bandages dotting

her face that night after the attack when they sat on the patio of the Gaff. Denise, with her daughter curled asleep on her chest, had explained how Izzy and the seagull appeared to have been *playing a game*, all going smoothly until she'd tried to *hug the seagull*, and, was then *pecked viciously* about the face. Just over one year of age at the time of the vicious pecking, Izzy didn't seem to have any lasting memory of the event. Betsy brushed her niece's cheek, her niece by choice, and thought how glorious it might be to have skin like that again.

“Did the almost-gone turtles finish getting born?” Isabell asked, eyes popping open.

Betsy nodded. She had tried to remove the word *extinct* from her vocabulary when speaking to Isabell. Almost-gone was easier to say. With Isabell, *extinct* came out *eggs-stink*. Almost-gone felt friendlier, less doomsdayish, and implied more time and room somehow. Many a parental stink-eye had fallen on Sarah, when, after her ranger talk on the threatened survival of sea turtles, children in the audience sniffled, some even wailed, over the uncertain future of their entire planet. Betsy didn't want Isabell to return to her mother Denise, suffering full-blown, end-of-times nightmares. Excited for the turtle-saving prospects of her day, as part of the volunteer flag-line guarding the hatchling's passage, Izzy bounced off the bed.

Betsy and Isabell arrived at the Center at 6:40 a.m., just minutes before release time. Betsy stashed her keys and purse under her driver's seat, and they scurried down the trail to the beach. Eighty-nine hatchlings, out of the one-hundred-and-six eggs incubated, writhed in a long wooden box pointed towards the incoming surf, about one-hundred feet down the beach. Most of the hatchlings had entered a state referred to as



*frenzy*, a monumental burst of oomph, encoded on their brainstem to release shortly after birth. *Frenzy* fueled their long crawl down the fine-ground sand and powered their somersaults out into the vast sea.

Handing out flags, Park Ranger Sarah said she didn't have to remind everyone how important their job was today. "If any of these females from today return to lay eggs, that will be lucky, a beyond belief kind of lucky. I mean, the odds for survival are only about one in one thousand and these are just eighty-nine hatchlings, so -"

Betsy crossed into Sarah's line of vision, shook her head and narrowed her eyes. As a friend, over a casual beer, after their bonding egg-find experience, Betsy had suggested to Sarah, that her years and years of stewarding the natural world while witnessing its degradation had understandably left her somewhat pessimistic, but it didn't play well with the public.

"What I mean to say, is *when* the females from this bale reach maturity and return in ten or fifteen years, they'll weigh over one hundred pounds. Yeah? And their shells will have grown hard and thick. Can you imagine the adventures they will have under them? All they will have seen. All they will have survived: the shrimp trawlers, oil spills, changing ocean temperatures, a sea full of plastic."

Betsy cleared her throat and thrust her flag into the sky.

"What I mean is, it will be a miracle. Okay," Sarah continued, "flags up everyone. Wave them in the air to keep birds of prey, the gulls mostly, but also people away from the hatchlings. No one crosses through. Don't close in on the hatchlings but do keep a line formed on either side to channel them into the ocean. Don't touch, no flash

photography. And I hope everyone followed the scent-free rules. Let the release begin. Open the gate!”

Two lines of bleary-eyed volunteers, silhouettes in the dawning light, clapped and whooped with their orange flags flying high. But the turtles weren't exactly off to the races; the hatchlings bottle-necked at the opening of their box, creating little piles and toppling until finally scabbling onto the sand. The new-born creatures, not well-designed for land, wielded their clown-shoe flippers, oversized in comparison to their itty-bitsy bodies, clumsily as they crawled towards the whites of the waves. Kept behind the flag-line of volunteers, clumps of observers gathered, oohing and aahing over the turtles' progress. Gulls circled overhead and the unflinching volunteers slashed their flags at the greedy, low-flying birds attempting to dive for their breakfast.

About an hour after the release, while there had been some close calls, all eighty-nine hatchlings remained in the turtle parade. With the sun rising in the sky, the first turtles in the now spread-out procession came under Betsy and Isabell's watch. Every third or fourth wave of the rising tide reached the ground where they stood, and their feet suctioned down into the sand, as each encroaching wave receded back into the sea. The closeness of the hatchlings brought a wave of self-conscious guilt to Betsy and, feigning a nose itch, she sniffed each hand to determine if any cigarette smells still lingered. All clean. She would throw the pack in the dumpster tonight, she swore, not the trash can in the kitchen, the dumpster at work, and never buy another pack.

Giant popcorn clouds scattered across the Texas-sized sky. The first hatchling met the waves and when lifted off the earth up into the water, their flippers finally made perfect sense. Paddling full force, the baby turtle heaved itself over the incoming wave

and dove down, disappearing. The onlookers held their breath collectively and then audibly exhaled and applauded when the turtle's perfect head popped up to bob at the ocean surface. The baby took a moment to survey the vastness and, without hesitation, dove again. The next and the next and the next turtle plunged into their destiny. Watching the tiny, defenseless hatchlings, their shells not even hardened yet, Betsy wished to dive in and swim alongside the turtles, a mermaid-vigilante warding off all dangers, as the hatchlings made their way in the world.

She looked over to Isabell, standing in the rising tide, buried up past her ankles in sand. Isabell tugged against the sinkhole only to have her sandal fly off into an ebbing wave and twirl out to sea. Shielding her eyes against the dazzle of the sun on the water, Isabell marked the course of her sandal. Dropping her flag to her side, she splashed out dangerously close to the turtles entering the ocean. In a single movement, she plunged forward and rescued her sandal, just as a strategic gull flew in low, close to Izzy's head, to seize a hatchling. Betsy screamed and Izzy swung her sandal in a wide, high arc, batting the gull off its trajectory, before the strength of an incoming wave toppled her. Betsy dropped her flag and ran into the waves to rescue her niece. As she stubbornly held onto her flag and sandal, the next wave met Isabell's face full force, pushing saltwater up her nose and into her open mouth. She struggled to sit up, eyes burning, gasping for breath. Before another wave could crash upon her face, Betsy reached Izzy, and yanked her to standing - just in time to witness, another of the opportunistic gulls swoop through the gap left in the defense-line by Betsy's abandoned flag, and snatch a hatchling.

Betsy set Isabell on solid ground. The gull ascended high above the beach and then flew over the close-by jetty. The whole group, volunteers and onlookers, stretched

and strained their bodies towards the sky hoping for a miracle. The wriggling turtle, barely visible, fell from the gull's beak unto the rocks of the jetty. The group, except for Isabell, deflated, as the spoiler gull dive-bombed into the jetty's rocky crevices.

"Look, the baby turtle got away. The seagull let her go," Isabell said to Sarah, who had come to retrieve Denise's downed flag and guard the gap, as everyone worked to regroup after the incident.

"No, it's impossible for a turtle to survive that fall. The gulls use the rocks as a tool –" Sarah noticed Betsy's widened eyes and frantically shaking head. "Well, it was only one. All the rest are safe and sound. As far as we know. Pretty good work, everyone."

Their fellow volunteers offered melancholy smiles to Betsy and Isabell as they ushered the last hatchling-stragglers into the sea. The onlookers snapped their final pictures of the bobbing turtle heads. Sarah thanked all the volunteers for the success of the day and reminded them to come enjoy the hotdogs, chips, and soda awaiting them at the Center. The crowd cleared the beach. Betsy watched Isabell wipe tears away with her hoodie sleeve, as she sat on the beach to put on her sandal.

"Hot dogs. Pretty good second breakfast. What do you think?" Betsy asked.

Izzy walked down the shore and Betsy followed.

"None of this was your fault. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine," Betsy offered.

Isabell walked and Betsy shadowed.

"I mean, I didn't even hold on to my flag. But you, you held onto yours like a champion. I left the hole," Betsy persisted.

“What - if - that was – the one?” Isabell asked, pushing down a sob, trying to gain control of her breath.

“What do you mean *the one*?” Betsy asked.

“The one. The one. The one-in-a-thousand that makes it back to lay eggs,” Isabell said impatiently.

“No, sweetie, it doesn’t work like that. I hope it doesn’t work like that. I mean, it doesn’t. It does not work like that,” Betsy clarified. “The one that makes it back is always out there. That’s how it works.”

Izzy turned to eye the ocean surface, wanting to believe, but hoping for proof. Betsy cuddled the girl’s shoulder, pulling her in close. A militant colony of seagulls came to land in front of them, at the edge of the waves, and pecked incessantly at the sand, snatching tiny, burrowing creatures into their beaks while cawing shrilly. Several bully gulls screamed loudly and claimed a larger area of the beach for themselves.

“I fucking hate seagulls,” Isabell said, observing the colony.

“Hate’s a strong word, Izzy,” Betsy said, kissing the top of Isabell’s head before she ran screaming into the crowd of seagulls, causing them to dart in all directions, and take off panicked into the sky. The girl followed with her own scream at the dispersing gulls.

Izzy splashed into the waves and Betsy followed.

Betsy lifted Isabell onto her back. Isabell encircled Betsy’s shoulders lightly with her arms and became weightless as the water rose around them. Betsy strode into the ocean as far out as she could and still keep their heads above water. Their bodies, past the

crash of waves, swayed slightly in the current. Their heads bobbed, eyes alert for even one almost-gone turtle to come up for air. They kept watch on the vast surface.

**Thesis Books**

*Crime and Punishment*/Dostoevsky (1866)

*To the Lighthouse*/Wolf (1927)

*Light in August*/Faulkner (1932)

*Giovanni's Room*/Baldwin (1956)

*House of Spirits*/Allende (1982)

*The Beet Queen*/Erdrich (1986)

*Cruising Paradise*/Shepard (1997)

*Tumble Home*/Hempel (1997)

*Birds of America*/Moore (1998)

*Interpreter of Maladies*/Lahiri (1999)

*The Quick and the Dead*/Williams (2000)

*Train Dreams*/Johnson (2002)

*Tenth of December*/Saunders (2013)

*Homegoing*/Gyasi (2016)

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*/Moshdegh (2018)

