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Kentuckiana, and a Dash of Cambodia: A Collection of Short Stories

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KENTUCKIANA,
AND A DASH OF CAMBODIA:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

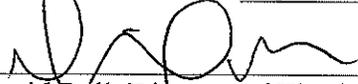
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
Brodie Gress

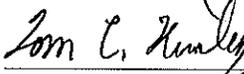
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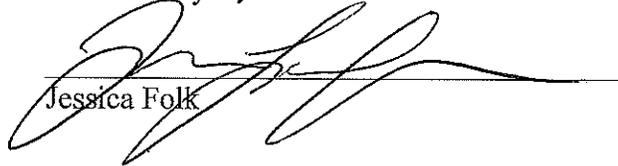
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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my committee chair, Dr. David Bell, and committee members Dr. Thomas C. Hunley and Prof. Jessica Folk, for their excellent mentorship and encouragement during my two years in Bowling Green. Dr. Bell impressed the importance of urgency upon my fiction-weaving mind, Dr. Hunley consistently demonstrated to me how to champion writers, and Prof. Folk exuded approachability, coolness, and passion for her craft all at once. Thank you all.

Thanks also to my many literature professors for sharing your expertise of and passion for prose and poetry, from as far back as *Beowulf* to as recent as *White Teeth*, and with plentiful gorgeous works in between. I've known for a while that good reading is key to good writing, but each great work I've been given to read and discuss with others, and every fingerprint they leave on my own writing, is one more reason why that maxim rings true. Thanks to professors like yourselves, their genius is more apparent than ever.

Thanks also to my graduate cohort: You've been great peers to travel along this journey with, as well as the best of friends to decompress with during its toughest moments. I can't wait to see your names on book jackets in stores everywhere, so I can tell anyone near me at the time that I knew you before you turned famous.

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Thank you to my family. Every year I get older, I realize just how hard my parents toiled for us, just how far my siblings and I have come since our 4-H childhood. I love you all.

Finally, thank you to Indiana, Cambodia, and Kentucky, my homes. Beautiful, infuriating, and rich with the kind of ore out of which stories are made.

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KENTUCKIANA,
AND A DASH OF CAMBODIA:
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Brodie Gress

August 2019

125 pages

Directed By: David Bell, Tom Hunley, and Jessica Folk

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

The following is a collection of five short stories set in regions familiar to me: “Dewberry Park,” “YouLead,” and “The Color Violet” in Indiana; “Mens Rea” in Kentucky; and “Tory Ride” in Cambodia. Gay identity plays a role in many of these stories, and other themes explored include family, region, socioeconomics, gender, mentality, and change. These stories are concerned with people on the brink, failing and surviving all the same. Some of them are intended to weigh, and some to satirize. I hope they all nick their readers.

INTRODUCTION

“Write a sentence as clean as a bone.”

James Baldwin

I could quote the most golden of lines from writers, and the answer would always be the same—easily said and hardly done. During my time here, I’ve come to learn that writing really is work: hard, intangible, irrational, and often unfair. Writing is sitting for hours in front of a screen (unless you write by hand; not so for me) and forcing words onto the page until they come naturally, if not with enthusiasm. Writing is one paragraph, one page, one chapter at a time, only to throw it away because it doesn’t serve the story. Writing is having the courage to dismember perfectly good prose just to see if the remnants can be remade even better, whether by switching the narrator, adding and cutting and splicing and merging characters, or lifting the whole story and setting it in some entirely new place. Writing is hard. It gnaws at the bones. And it involves far too much sitting; maybe I need to invest in a standing desk. Either way, my discipline as a writer has some ways to go.

During my two years at Western Kentucky University, my writing philosophy has changed, in some ways surprising and in some not. As I read these following stories, my first thought is that my endings became darker. That’s not a shocking arc for a writer, nor are dark endings hardly uncommon in literature. This pessimism might result simply from the uncertainty clouding my future, my anxiety over my net worth, or from the news climate, the economic climate, the original climate that lets us live: whatever the cause, I find myself leaning more into the bitter of bittersweet. One of the first reasons that drove me to writing was the opportunity to express parts of myself which my polite Midwestern

upbringing and the American work culture make me repress. Lucky for me, it seems the more literature I read, the more methods I discover for expressing humanity darkly. Gothic Literature this past spring especially tainted my writing, with the tragic melodrama of *Wuthering Heights*, Faulkner's unflinching look at mental turbulence in *The Sound and the Fury*, and particularly Flannery O'Connor's stories: "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work," she was quoted saying (Shearn), bless her cleaving irony. Though I've been an atheist most of my life and only ever distantly interested in Christianity, I admire O'Connor's view of Christian grace as a violent force, and her refusal to spare her characters from such violence. The grandma in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" only finds grace seconds before a bullet ends her. Hulga of "Good Country People" only begins to understand Manley's true nature after he steals her leg. Jhumpa Lahiri is another author who tends to deliver devastation subtly upon her characters, like in "A Temporary Matter." Most short stories I admire tend toward this way, and so I attempted similar punishing divinations in my own. Blaine's passion for his art obstructs his humanity, and Mitt's social orbit becomes smaller and smaller as he values his dog Regina to absurdity. Some of the other stories could reflect this better; I feel Beau gets off too easily in "The Color Violet," and I think Amity's trauma is watered down in "Tory Ride." The solution is to revise, revise, revise, though at some point revision must give way to submission.

Another change I hope these stories reflect is a better focus on plot, my Achilles heel. I feel I struggle keeping the narrative interesting, avoiding plodding plots for playful ones, and powering my stories with this beating muscle of a narrative device. It was one

contribution to the incompleteness of my original novel thesis (that and unmanaged ambitions). I would spend too much time fine-tuning character dialogue or experimenting with different narrators, without ever simply sitting down and figuring out what happens in the novel. Plotting doesn't have to be an author's forte; S.E. Hinton, the author of *The Outsiders*, said, "I have to live with my characters. I just can't conjure them up. Plus, plots are the hardest part of writing for me" (Widner). But I thought I could also simply create a cast of characters and set them loose in a room, see where their choices would take the story, and so I found out quickly that without exigencies to push them, my characters mostly just talk, think, walk, eat, balk, and feel—not always the most intriguing of actions. While I'm not writing thrillers à la *Gone Girl*, I do believe that a narrative needs to stir reading momentum somehow; readers read for catharsis, whether that's the joy of solving a mystery, the emotional release from a dramatic monologue, a confrontation reaching its zenith, to recognize their inner sanctums verbalized at last—anything along those lines. Plot tends to be a writer's best friend for that.

In both of his prose workshops I took, Dr. Bell consistently emphasized "urgency," and I found this incredibly valuable to learn yet difficult to master. Urgency is clearer in some situations than others, and I don't have much personal experience with urgent situations. From what my professors' lectures and author interviews have taught me, research is invaluable when experience is lacking, and perhaps if I researched more, I would have less trouble finding enough urgency to fuel my stories. Yet I still tend to draw from my own experiences when creating setting and characters, especially for these following short stories, and the working-class characters I gravitate toward don't obviate excitement (though perhaps I'm discounting the excitement of coal mining, road

construction, or underwater welding). If people in small Midwestern towns have any glaring peculiarities, they tend to keep those peculiarities at home for the sake of fitting in with a community. So when searching for potential stories in these settings, I search for the oddballs or pry open the door on “ordinary” people, scrounging through their closets for interesting skeletons. Local news headlines and gossip from hometown friends are excellent places to start. The Cambodia of “Tory Ride”, of course, is not the American Midwest or South, and the protagonist hails from the coast. I included the story because I want readers to realize rurality is not unique to America; countries around the world have less populated locations, and it can be surprising what rural traits transcend even culture. But I don’t mean to mitigate culture’s role; of all the stories, “Tory Ride,” set in the region I’ve spent the smallest amount of my life in, features the strongest sense of setting, likely because I have never more in my life been so attentive to setting than when I was in Cambodia. If I could just maintain such environmental detail in all my writing, perhaps all my characters would be more clear.

Three protagonists in this collection are white, gay men, while the other two are a young Laotian-American woman, and another is an entire town. In Dr. Hunley’s Reading as a Writer class, I wrote my craft essay about the role of identity politics in fiction, particularly the character-driven kind: some renowned writers would prefer it not play a role at all, and other renowned writers believe donning a less privileged character’s guise is minstrelsy. I do believe that adherents to the former sometimes underestimate the effort needed to truly empathize, and I also don’t think I’d mind being limited to writing white gay men if political correctness became law of the literary landscape, dystopic that may sound. I find life and imagination infinite in all ranges, and so I doubt I’d become

parched even with this limitation. Yet I've found myself favoring letting writers put on others' masks, with the understanding that a mask is only a mask and no more. I've read some incredible fiction about gay characters written by non-gay people, and I think the inherent chaos of authors verbally acting in a variety of roles could have continually exciting results. When I create a character, I don't intend them to be monolithic representations. Nonetheless, I also believe once an author publishes a work it's no longer only theirs; readers read the work with their own lenses, and readers who share more in common with a protagonist than the author will likely feel patronized if the author wasn't careful. So I still mostly write white gay male protagonists because I do believe that gender, race, sexuality, religion, and other such identities play large roles in people's experiences. To understand the differences requires research, reading, and listening, and even that might not be enough. Whether authors must equally be careful when writing from the perspectives of more privileged characters—well, I best stop before this introduction gets too political.

While gay men tend to center these narratives, I can't say these stories are entirely pushing the envelope on gay literature. In both "Dewberry Park" and "Mens Rea", the protagonists' gayness is incidental. Granted, a character's deviant sexuality not serving as the topic of interest adds beneficial multiplicity to gay literature. Blaine's drive toward his art and his anxiety surrounding his economic predicament drives his story, and Beau's depression, trauma from his sister's death, and obsession with his new dog drives his. The gay experience plays the largest role in "The Color Violet," when heteronormativity pushes Beau into an unfulfilling engagement with his childhood friend Willa. Even that story might seem regressive with its '90s period setting (which needs more emphasis

during revision) and mostly closeted, Brokeback protagonist. But I found Beau's sexual awakening to serve as good motivation for him later in the story, and the ending explores the remnants of his relationship with Willa, who's the more interesting between the two of them. I tried to avoid making her a stereotypical poor young mother the best I could. I wanted to explore how idealized sexuality is punishing her, too, which the coloring book was meant to symbolize. Beau struggles to understand her because he never realizes she, too, is closeted by her maternal role. Heteronormativity reflects the idea of society acting as a script foisting roles upon people based off erroneous assumptions, a theme that permeates several of these stories. I may be underestimating the roles mental health, gender, class, and other identities are playing in these stories—to be explored in other craft essays.

One of a fiction writer's most crucial decisions to be made is who or what tells the story. Two of my character-driven stories use the first-person perspective, while the other two use the third. Beau's perspective in "The Color Violet" called for more rustic language, which seemed fitting, and Blaine is telling "Mens Rea" as a matured adult reflecting on his youthful experiences, though I'm not sure it adds vital information to the story. "Dewberry Park" is told from Mitt in the third-person, which I think is helpful as Mitt is not the most sound of characters yet readers still get his thoughts. I did consider revising the story from Regina's perspective, revealing her to be manipulating him for her own gain, though that presents its own obstacles. Amity's story is third-person as well, mostly because I felt uncomfortable writing directly with a woman's voice earlier—this story is the oldest in the set. The story whose narrator I feel surest of is the town of Lindbergh in "YouLead." Unlike the others, this one is sociological in nature, exploring

how a town would react to having its local politics “disrupted”—as techies like Derrick Rosenstein say. Though obvious narrator choices could be Mayor Obadiah Winthrop or his challenger Donna McCreary, and I even imagined a local journalist as a possibility, ultimately the plural perspective was a good creative exercise that allowed me to jump between several different community members’ heads to collect different plot information, a sort of crowdsourcing mimicking the Internet. While writing “YouLead”, I read stories such as “The Lottery,” “A Rose for Emily,” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” to see how they benefitted from their communal perspective, in hopes my own would, too. “YouLead” is easily the odd member of this collection, and I wonder whether its concept might fuel a novella or novel. The execution is off: The climax is hard to believe, and I doubt I researched app development, computer servers, and town politics well enough. Yet I believe it has potential. The others, though, comfortably fit their shorter lengths.

During my time at Western, I had a bad habit of letting my literature consumption send my writing aesthetic careening, which also contributed to my novel’s lack of realization. The spring of 2018, I took a medieval and medievalist literature course, and genre conventions began fascinating me enough that I tried twisting my novel into magical realism. Last fall, I read *To the Lighthouse* and fell in love with Woolf’s omniscient narrator so much I reset my novel with a subjective narrator endowed with omniscience. By that time, I’d reset my novel so much (and plotted it with an outrageous timeline) that finishing it became unrealistic, and so decided upon short stories during the spring. This past spring I took Gothic Literature; its focus on the horrors hiding within societal norms shaped this short story collection’s aesthetic.

Whether this aesthetic takes root or not, I hope that my concern with what makes for good writing settles enough for me to do what's important—write. As people age, they change and mature and settle into some stable identity, and I think the same happens with writing. At some point, an author decides what they value most in writing—plot, character, setting, dialogue, consciousness, narration, experimentation, whatever it may be. The author heeds the least of their priorities as best they can, but ultimately a manifesto must emerge. Good stories are always easy to find, but at some point artistic choices must become doctrine, else those stories be left in pieces rather than in peace.

MENS REA

It took me several months after meeting her, to find out the homeless woman's name. Almost every day, I'd see her on the way to my favorite coffee shop; she stood out from the others with her smoky glass eye, a faded twin of the brown one on her right. She looked about a couple decades older than me, though it could be hard to tell with them. She was often with a bike, the basket filled with plastic bags, and a patchy solar blanket hanging over her shoulders. I'd catch her asleep under the nearby church's awning, and sometimes a church member would approach her with a cup of soup and blackberry tea, even as she waved her hands in polite refusal a few times. I would see her inside the coffee shop, too, sitting at the bar before the window, staring vacantly out into the courtyard before her. She was always alone.

She could sense me staring at her sometimes, I swear, and just before she'd turn to match my gaze I would wrench away, focusing back on the book of photography I was studying or the caption games I was playing on my phone. But I never could keep myself from occasionally glancing at her. She always wore that same grey hood—sometimes up, sometimes not. I couldn't understand what made her switch when she did. Some mysterious reasoning apparent only to her, I guess.

The other mystery to the homeless woman, something she did which I never saw any of the others do—but who knows, maybe her story is just one of many, and I was only paying attention to hers—was that journal she was always scribbling in. I'd glimpse lines of black ink and letters on the pages, though I could never decipher them well. *How nice*, I thought when I first saw her writing. *Someone writing in a book*. I couldn't remember the last time I'd put ink to paper beyond rent checks or dating my photographs.

I kept digital galleries like most working photographers, but I also had a thick album of my favorite photographs I'd taken, printing them out at pharmacies. After waving them dry and admiring the specificity of detail on them, the contrast of colors, the perfect three-by-three framing and line of sight, I'd take my favorite brand of silver pen and scribble in numerical dates on them, along with my name, last name followed by first. The pens were my most frivolous purchases.

In those days, I considered myself poor. Not poor like homeless, but making-ends-meet poor, between sporadic freelance assignments and a brief cashier job at a failing clothing outlet, sometimes applying for salaried jobs at local newspapers or magazines, seldom garnering interviews and never getting that final call. I'd moved to Kentucky after my return from volunteering abroad, alone and with one last thousand in savings that I hadn't spent on traveling. I didn't want to bother my parents for money, who still had my brother and sister in college, and yet I wanted nothing more than to buy a new car, an upgrade from the twenty-year-old sedan my aunt had given me—a nice car with windows that worked, an accurate odometer, pipes that didn't leak oil or require constant mental vigilance, visits to the mechanic. But I also liked coffee and cinnamon rolls at the shop, and so always blamed myself for building up rolls of fat rather than money for a new car. Or an IRA, or visits to the doctor, or other necessities targeted ads in my phone were constantly telling me I needed, things we called adulting, which I called aggravations on my art.

So is it hard to believe that the homeless woman became a mirror for my anxieties? I'd see her bizarre gummy eye and think, but for the grace of God ... One day, I passed her on the street, and she greeted me as she always did.

“Hey there, Clean Cut,” she greeted me, belying her look with a voice too sweet, like milk, affecting some kind of charisma. A pitiful charisma, one Wall Street bankers wouldn’t envy, but compelling nonetheless. “How you doing today?”

“I’m just fine; how are you?” I couldn’t help but say as my Midwestern etiquette steered me through the conversation, even while the back of my head egged me on to keep walking, dig my hands into my pockets.

“I’m fine, too. Can’t not be on a day like this,” she gestured to the sunshine around us. “Be better with a dollar, though. Have you got one?”

I was going to say no, and eventually I would learn how. I’d sculpt the most polite no I could give to homeless people like her: *No, I’m sorry, wish I could help you, but I only have my debit card on me.* A hollow wish to mask over another: *I wish you’d go away. I wish I didn’t have to see you every time I walked to the coffee shop. I wish you’d pack up your blanket, your bike, your few belongings, and simply disappear from the sidewalk. I don’t wish you were better. I wish you would skitter into some shelter like any other grotesque sight.*

But that day when she asked, I fished a buck from my wallet and handed it to her. She clasped my hand and shook it tightly, before quickly taking the dollar.

“God bless you, sir,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Blaine,” I said.

“Blaine? Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“What’s wrong with my name?”

“Clean Cut suits you better, walking around with that nice hair you got.”

I was about to say something equally snappy back, but every nickname I thought up tasted like ash in my mouth. *Brown Coat. Solar Blankie. Shaky Hands.* If we were a comedy routine, I couldn't imagine playing anything but the prop for her light mockery. To say anything about her felt like kicking a dog. When leaving, I turned over my shoulder and saw her procuring a few more dollars out of a middle-aged woman, some lawyer type working in an office nearby, and for a strange instant I felt betrayed before shaking my resentment off. That woman could probably garnish her a whole year's wages if she sold one of her cars, my thoughts ran—spat, more like. It was rich snobs like her why anyone was homeless to begin with. No one knew how to share in this country. We simply patronized them with spare change, while the only people who could actually change anything drove right on by, or flew over small southern cities like these, making patronizing observations about how beautiful the heartland seemed, with its long spans of agriculture, a wholesome yellow and green patchwork quilt.

The lawyer type gave her a twenty, without any flinch to her hands. The homeless woman clasped her hands around the lawyer's in exactly the same way she'd done with mine and said "Thank you, God bless, thank you," so many agonizing times, twisting her frame into some caricature of charity. The woman smiled, lapping it all up. I walked into the café, fuming.

**

Later that night, after an unproductive day of drinking coffee and getting distracted by social media and dating apps, I was back home hosting my friend Lester, from the same small Indiana town as me. He owned a furniture company, building custom-made luxury dining tables, console tables, night stands, wardrobes, and whatever

else for seven-figure clients ranging from Bloomberg scions to past U.S. presidents. But I never would have guessed it based on his appearance: his shirts and jeans were constantly covered in furniture grain. Even after hiring a dozen full-time carpenters, the man still sanded, packaged, and delivered his furniture whenever he could. Nowadays, he was usually flying out of Nashville to meet with interior designers in Los Angeles, New York, and other cities, and he liked to come visit me whenever he could.

After I cooked us spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, we lay half-naked in my bed together, Lester's large, creased hands over his expanding belly. He was rubbing himself up shamelessly, after we'd talked about old trips we'd taken. The gay campgrounds in West Virginia. The gay resort in Fort Lauderdale. I'd been a college student when we'd gone on these trips, and I'd found it eye opening to discover burly men dressed in leather chaps, studded vests, rainbow thongs, or nothing at all in these places, making out with each other under colorful strobe lights. I'd never seen anything like that in small town Indiana, where the gayest things around were high school contact sports and *Will and Grace*. Traveling with Lester made me feel worldly. Exposed. Nothing at all like what my current toils did.

"And there was that time in Colorado ..." Lester sputtered before his breathing halted. His hand reached my chest, started stroking me, asked me if I remembered the massages he'd gotten us and the large, warm beds we'd slept in, and I told him yes, I remembered, rolling over and kissing his chest, feigning moans and rhythm. Most times we got together, we messed around, and I didn't mind these interactions; Lester was the horniest man I'd ever encountered, and I just couldn't imagine myself telling him to cut it out, how rude of him to lack such self-control. That felt like shaming to me. So while he

worked himself up to orgasm, I looked around my home. The Box, I called it. It was a studio, cramped with an old love seat, kitchenette in the corner, a box of old things shoved in the corner, and a large bed taking up almost a quarter of the room, shirt rack, clothes dresser, an ottoman as a coffee table. The place was a hovel, but also my first home as an adult. After Lester finished, I lent him some old underwear to clean himself up. He smiled and massaged my chest.

“I have an extra room in my Louisville house,” he said.

“You’ve told me this.”

“Did I? It’s been sitting vacant for so long.”

“You should find a tenant.”

“I should. The rent would only be a few hundred. Cheaper than here.”

“That’s a good deal.”

“I could even let you stay there rent-free for a while, if you needed time to establish yourself. There’s so many gorgeous vistas in Louisville. You’d be taking photographs forever.”

I rolled over in the bed, away from Lester’s grasp. “I’m fine here, Lester. Just trying to forge a path on my own.”

Lester fell asleep shortly after, while I clutched my blanket, thinking how much easier my life would be if I just moved into someone else’s. In the morning, Lester packed his things into his car and embraced me, gave me a peck on the cheek goodbye before rolling off in his sprinter van. A while after he left, I was making breakfast when I noticed something odd.

In the middle of my room lay a light, patterned rug my parents had given me, and its center was damp. I looked up, but there was no pipe or dripping water overhead. I moved the rug away from its spot, and out of the tiniest crack in the floor came a little hiss of steam. I got to my belly and eyed the spot, saw condensed water forming around the crack. I heard a light trickling beneath the floor. Grabbing my cell phone, I took pictures and video, then sent them to my landlord. An hour later, he asked to see me in his office.

“Sinkhole,” my landlord said the moment I sat down.

“You’re shitting me.”

“That’s what the building inspector guessed. She sounded sure.”

“How long do I have?”

“She said you should leave as soon as possible.”

“I haven’t got anywhere to go.”

“No family or friends you can move in with?”

My parents, back in Indiana, the one place in the world I would rather be buried in a sinkhole than go back to. I remembered the sunsets, mostly. How they were always setting over some patch of woods or a grooving, hilly horizon. I remembered other things, too, like the crowds of boys who swarmed high school locker hallways, the Christian speakers who came to our school to preach about virtue and celibacy using funny jokes and punk rock. The moment I’d graduated college, I’d fled, coming back home only for holidays, reluctantly. The short time I’d been in Kentucky, it was only worse, but at least here I was a stranger. I didn’t like having to go home for Christmas or Easter reunions to hear extended family cooing over my cousins’ latest babies, or my

mom's complaints about the snotty Church girl who'd converted my brother to Methodism; the rare times he visited home, he spent most of them talking to us about the wonders of his spiritual awakening, all but begging us to join him. As for friends, I had few, and only one had the resources to help me. Lester's offer rang in my head like some ominous chant, and I sidelined it.

"I'll find a place, Mr. Sorenson," I told him. He told me not to worry about breaking the lease, that this sinkhole would give him and his insurance enough to worry about.

The day passed with me shopping for new apartments online. I shopped around until inevitably checking Crag's List, and even their listings were either overpriced, fifty miles away, or authored by some forty-year old man requesting only female roommates "down to hang out at clubs, bars, I have a really nice bar in my basement." I shut my laptop, figured I'd check more later, but as night blanketed the town I curled up into bed, looking at the ridiculous sauce pot already sweating with collected steam in the middle of my floor. I wondered if Sorenson had told my neighbor above me. I wondered if I would wake in the middle of the night to some sharp crack fissuring the place. I knew I wouldn't tell my parents, who'd been so reluctant to watch me move to some unknown city, trying to pioneer a career.

The next day, on my way to the park to photograph a junior league baseball game for the local paper, I bumped into her again. I saw homeless people all the time on the street, but the sight of her, the only one I recognized, stirred some spite in me, which grew as she turned around, flashing her manipulative little smile at me.

"Hey there, Clean Cut. You got—"

“I’m busy; get a job if you want money,” I spat and kept walking.

“I’m sorry, sir, I do apologize for bothering you,” she called out after me. “I hope you have a good day.”

After ten paces, I paused, cramming my hands into my pockets and gazing around at the block. Cars ran swiftly around the race track roundabout, and shadows zigzagged against walls under the hot midday sun. A construction crew was laying over the sidewalks, forcing a few homeless people out of their usual spot. I turned back to her, finishing up a conversation with a mother bearing a tray of lattes for her three children, handing her one of them. She then sat down and pulled out her journal and a stub of a pencil to write with. Writing diatribes about me in her journal, or juju to curse me with, paranoid fears blinking in my mind’s eye. So I walked to her, sheep-faced, a crumpled five in my hands. She patted her lap and laughed.

“I shouldn’t have snapped at you. Here,” I handed her the money. “Just tell me you’re not buying drugs with it.”

“Of course I buy drugs. Heavy duty cannabis. For my hands.” She winked her good eye as she held them out. They trembled, and I saw distinct scars along the wrist and knuckles.

“Factory accident a while ago.” She pulled them back. “Imagine trying to get work with hands like these.”

“That’s terrible.”

“That’s life, Clean Cut.”

I watched her try to write in her journal with her shaking hand. I could make out bizarre etchings of trees in the woods, and thunderously large letters: “THREE CANNED

PEACHES, HILLHEADS, THEY SCREWED ME OVER, THEY DID.” Her writing didn’t follow the lines at all but ran up, down, diagonally, in spirals—a mosaic to chaos, irrationality.

“Didn’t your Mama ever tell you reading over somebody’s shoulder is rude?” she laughed. I turned my attention away, apologized. As she stowed the book into her backpack, I pulled out one of my silver pens and, in further atonement, offered it to her.

“They last quite a bit, and the ink is pitch black,” I told her as she took it and balanced it on her fingertips. Back then, I imagined that must’ve been the nicest gift she’d ever gotten, and I remember feeling distinctly proud over my gift to her. It sometimes hurts to remember the stupid thoughts you had in your youth.

“That’s something,” she put the pen, too, away in her backpack. “Clean Cut, you mind me asking you where you live?”

I pointed to the building where I lived, the old flat Roaring Twenties Midge, with concrete and steel walls. Apparently it had been a high-end living complex when it first opened, complete with central heating and electricity, one of the most opulent buildings of its time. Then it changed hands over the decades, becoming student residency, then an office building, at one point a makeshift urgent care center that didn’t last long, and finally residential living again. Sorenson had spent a long time telling me its history in my interview for the apartment there, as if he were the one trying to sell it to me. The price tag had been enough to convince me at first, though later on the reasons for its low price became apparent.

“I’m moving out,” I told her. “Sinkhole.”

“No! That’s a Kentucky curse, that is. Unlucky you.” She let out a raspy bark of laugh, her throat sounding like somebody tearing aluminum in two. “Better find a new place quickly, Clean Cut, or we’ll be neighbors soon enough. Might have to grow out your nice hair then!”

I moved my hand up to touch the short bristly bangs, as if fearing they’d grown like weeds right then and there. In its bag, the camera swung on my shoulder, nudging against my hip, and I thought of an idea. Photography, I believed, was drawing attention to where the eye wouldn’t normally go, the outskirts it roamed over in its daily use, where even my own eye would rather not wander. It was remarkable, how much putting a camera before my eye changed my thinking, separating me not only from the world but from myself, morphing into some unbodied specter, observing the world around it. That was my philosophy back then, of course, that any worthy artist could shed themselves when they entered into their art and become—what? Some bizarre, unfeeling purveyor? Whatever thoughts they were, they propelled me to unzip my bag and draw out my Nikon. I could already see the photograph: A homeless woman, sitting against the wall in a solar blanket, her sad smile the only hint to a life of hardship.

“Is that a camera? You’re a photographer?” she asked.

“Yes. Would you mind if I—”

“Please don’t.”

She gave a slight laugh that sounded something like an apology to me, but her voice was flat and non-negotiable.

“Right, of course,” I said, my arms wilting down. She’d seemed so nice, suffering silently on the street. I was only trying to help her, I thought. But everyone had a right to

their privacy. I left her sitting there, walking rapidly toward the game. While there, navigating around families and bleachers, taking shots of preteens taking turns going to bat and catching the ball, I jumped every time the bleachers shook, looked at the concessions and imagined it tumbling down, falling to pieces like some freak earthquake was happening. The unsound foundations, the rubble burying itself in the earth. I could barely hold my camera steady as all this crept in the back of my head like a vine.

**

Late at night, in bed on my laptop, I was searching yet again for new residencies. Plenty were open, but they were all advertising seven and eight-hundred dollar rents per month, geared more toward college students taking out loans than professional photographers. The whole exercise began to feel futile, so I shut my laptop and shoved it to the side. A fly buzzed around me, yet another one, and for ten minutes I chased them with my fly spray, hurdling over furniture and stooping underneath my bed in every attempt to kill it, finally cornering it in my bathroom. Maybe I was better off, leaving this apartment. Grabbing my mat, I intended to do some yoga outside in the cool night in an attempt to calm my frayed nerves, but before I left the building, I saw her sleeping in the foyer.

She had arranged a makeshift home next to the landlord's office, her solar blanket across her body as she slept with her head on the backpack. She snoozed with a soft, steady rhythm. I had a sudden urge to spray her, to chase away the woman whom I had only moments ago wanted to capture in film. *Get out of the building*, I wanted to shout at her. *There's no space for you. Please just go away.* My silver pen was in the seam of her journal, lying open underneath her hand, and I couldn't help squatting down, easing her

hand off the page of her journal as I examined the pages. They were inked black, with white fissures crackling across the page in grotesque abstraction. They looked like lightning bolts. Or the ground breaking open. I looked at her again, snoozing gently. Had she remembered what I'd said? Did she expect something to happen? I began drawing connections in my head, loose bridges between distinct phenomena.

I went back to my apartment, grabbed my camera, and then walked back to her. They'd told us in school it was unethical to take shots like these, in a private area, certainly without the subject's consent. But the act of putting her in my lens, lining her within my frames, did something to soften my cocktail of fears and resentment toward her. Like the camera was a kind of funnel for me, allowing me to box her in and stow her safely away.

When the photo showed in my display, it looked perfect. Soft lurid green background against her sleeping, haggard face, her grey curls around her head, and the slightly blurred background showing Mr. Sorenson's office door, sign on the door reading "Sorenson Properties, LLC." The contest submissions, the reactions on judges' faces ... I almost smiled thinking how perfect this photo was. And when they asked, I could tell them I'd asked her later, that she said she loved the photo, told me it captured her essence. If the photo was good enough, they wouldn't question it at all, I imagined back then. How would they even find a woman without a name?

Just as I turned to head back to my apartment, my camera still in hand, I heard a rumble. A creak. The sound of rock crying out, telling me it couldn't bear its load anymore. The floor started shaking a bit, and I felt two instincts vie with each other in my body, one to run away, another to run forward, collect my belongings. As the rumbling

increased, I chose to go forward, my legs carrying me forward, until an arm grabbed mine.

“The hell you doing?” the homeless woman barked at me. “Get away from there!”

“My stuff, my—”

“C’mon!”

She tugged on me with all her might as I stretched forward, almost taking another step just as the hall cracked, a fissure in the ground opening up. I screamed and pulled my hair, and the woman took the opportunity to reel me back. At last, I listened to sense and ran back with her, all the while thinking, my apartment, my belongings, I didn’t even have renter’s insurance, let alone insurance for sinkholes.

**

“You’ll love Louisville,” Lester told me over the phone hours later, after I called and accepted his offer. “We can check out the zoo, the riverside, and they’re revitalizing downtown with some art projects and bike paths. Bring your camera everywhere.”

“Thank you,” I said with a slight snap to Lester and shut my phone off. I should have been more grateful to the man who’d offered me shelter the next day, busy as he was tonight in Baltimore handing out free wood samples to interior designers, but moving in with him felt more like defeat than grace to me. I pocketed my phone, pulled my rolled up yoga mat closer to me, and looked back at the flashing ambulance and police lights. Sorenson was there, arguing fiercely with government contractors. Among his yells, I made out “Repairing fucking sidewalks, like that’s a priority” and “I told you about this weeks ago, nothing is my fault!” The contractors kept their voices calmer but asserted themselves equally. Several of the other tenants flocked outside the building; the

apartment above me had turned out to be empty, but a few other tenants reported broken lines and cracked walls. Most of them were introducing themselves to each other, contemplating how long repairs would take, whether to leave or not. We'd hardly spoken before that night, and I didn't introduce myself, even as they wondered aloud who the unlucky tenant in Apartment 103 had been. I wasn't long for this town.

The night wore on, and people slowly trickled away from the fracas. I looked everywhere for the homeless woman, but after she'd pulled me out of the building, setting me next to a tree as I gaped in shock, she had disappeared. Eventually, only Sorenson was left.

"The clean-up team said they'd try to retrieve whatever they can," he told me. "Do you have a log of all your possessions?"

"A log? Who keeps a log of what they own?"

"Receipts? Anything?"

"If I had them, they're down in the sinkhole," I said. "Listen: I don't have anywhere to stay tonight. You have to put me up in a hotel, right?"

He scoffed and put his hands in his pockets, telling me it would cost him a small fortune just to repair the building. He told me if I had trouble finding a place to check the homeless shelter a few blocks down. I thanked him for his help, cursing him as he walked away. I roamed around the outskirts of the building for some time, wishing fervently that Lester would be back in Kentucky by now, then trying to convince myself I could get through one night without a home. I could just take a long walk, I figured, as a warm breeze coursed through the night, soothing my ragged body. Then I looked around; a trio of drunken men were angrily berating each other, until one spat in the other's face and

ran away. Elsewhere, an old person in a wheelchair was roving back and forth in a parking lot, dancing her torso to heavy metal piercing the night from her phone, until a police cruiser came by, an officer stepping out to admonish her, her admonishing him back, him afraid to use any force on an old disabled lady.

I hugged myself, cold in my T-shirt and shorts, my yoga mat strapped to my chest. I began missing my queen-sized bed, even with its sagging middle, or the warm light given off by the lamp, and my heart began to pound. I used to be so young; not even a year abroad, and especially not a college degree, had been enough to ready me for life's unrelenting assails. The older I was getting, the more I was learning that taming my time, trying to fit it within black boxes on a calendar, especially when trying to pursue a career as financially unforgiving as artistic photography, was, if not a futile endeavor, then one that didn't reward small efforts. The choice to keep breathing, keep answering the question of what to do with myself, was pounding my peace of mind to a pulp. I considered driving somewhere, until—"My car!" I cheered. I would spend the night curled up in my car. Not the most comfortable space, but a better shelter than nothing.

I roamed around the building and found my sedan parked in its usual spot, unlocked as usual. Opening the back door, I lay inside, twisting my body in awkward contortions to shut the door behind me. Putting my belongings on the car floor, I made to open the trunk to pull out the blanket back there when I remembered I needed my keys to open it, the trunk button jammed and the backseat requiring pliers to unscrew the bolts. I made myself comfortable the best I could, stretching the yoga mat over my body, thinking about how much it might cost to have some tow truck drag it to Louisville; maybe I could look online to figure out how to hotwire it.

I remembered the time I had moved here in this old car, how my mom had approached me for the fiftieth time to ask whether I was sure of my plans, *because you better have one, Mr. Mannes*, she had addressed me, *and it better be solid*. I considered calling my parents right then and there, asking them to come get me, until I remembered my mom complaining about ankle pains the last time I'd called, and my father still working two jobs, not to mention the grandchild they'd likely be babysitting. I put the thought out of mind, determined to survive.

To comfort me, I pulled out my camera, switched the screen to the last picture I'd taken. There she was, the homeless woman, my muse in stunning green light. I'd never taken a better picture in my life, I swore to myself. My conscience nagged me in the back of my head, faintly ordering me to delete the picture, that its subject had saved my life and I owed her this favor, but I brushed it away. The woman didn't understand photography; if I published the photograph, it would bring both her and I great fortune, and she would one day thank me for turning her life around. In a way, I could save her even better than she had saved me. As I turned over to sleep, I heard a rapping on the window and looked up to find the very subject of my art smiling at me. I screamed, hit my head painfully against the opposite window. It took me a few seconds before I rolled down the window; she was buckling over with laughter.

"Did I scare you, Clean Cut?" she said. "I thought you and I were friends by now. We survived a natural disaster together!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not used to sleeping in cars, let alone people knocking at this hour."

She chuckled and put her arms on the roof the car, her eyes browsing its insides like some real estate agent. I wondered if all homeless people examined car interiors this way.

“Nice car you got here,” she said. “Hope you don’t mind my saying so, but I’ve slept in it a couple times. You really ought to keep it locked. I ain’t by far the nastiest person on the streets.”

“There’s no locking it now, with my car keys back in the apartment,” I said, only a little unnerved by her admission. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

“You saved my life.”

She threw her hands up and laughed, told me it was nothing, any stranger would have done that, I was just lucky the first couple rumbles had woken her up; she was a light sleeper.

“If you really want to thank me,” she said, “would you mind letting me sleep in one of the front seats? Just for tonight? I promise I don’t bite.”

And even then I wondered if she knew how to hot wire cars, if she would try to steal it from me, if she had a gun hiding in her coat and had planned this whole thing. I’d seen fissures in her notebook; had she known, somehow, that the sinkhole would happen then and there? Was it suspicious that she had been in the right place at the right time to save me, to put me in her debt so she could come back later and rob me in my vulnerability, after everyone else had left? I sat still in the car, my hands clamming up, as she continuously grinned, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for someone to have brief second thoughts about offering shelter to a stranger in need. I unlocked the

doors, and she climbed into shotgun. She kept the seat upright, didn't ask to bend it down.

"Such a lovely car you got, Clean Cut," she said. "Smells good, too. You take care of it."

"It's all I have at this point."

"I know the feeling."

We sat for some time, the homeless woman asking me different questions about myself. I told her I'd come from Indiana. That I'd finished school a few years ago, went abroad to do service work, then came back without any plan in mind, and so I'd moved here to try to make something of myself. As I told her this, I started realizing that perhaps my parents hadn't been coddling me, when they'd asked me repeatedly whether I really wanted to come here, but had already figured better than I had that my photography career wouldn't jet off here. That I needed to either switch cities or careers. All while sharing this, I kept noting that a stranger was in my car. That I didn't even know her name. I could have asked, and to this day I wonder why I didn't then.

"Earlier, when I told you not to take a photo of me," she said. "I'm sorry if I sounded snippy. It's just, I know a thing or two about photography myself."

"Really?" I said with a disbelieving tone. In this day and age, everyone with a fancy camera and a Flickr account thought they were a photographer.

"I used to teach it up at the university."

"Wow," I said.

"Adjunct. But I liked doing it. Won a couple rewards back in my day."

"Is your work online?"

“Oh gosh no,” she said, waving her hands. “The university let me go before all that tech came to be. They were trimming budget fat, as they put it. Never mind it was one of my main incomes. Had to go full-time at the factory after that, and you know what happened there.”

As the homeless woman talked onward, slight notes of bitterness pervading her voice, my attention dimmed, unable to find her story interesting or believable. I can't tell you why I couldn't; her cloudy eye, or her shaking hands, though all that might have happened after her career ended. All in all, Rea just didn't strike me as someone who cared for the craft as much as I did, someone who truly understood the nuance of capturing a web of tree limbs in the rays of sunshine; or the intangible blur of ice skaters zipping around a rink, their human figures stretched thanks to a slow shutter speed; or a mass of small heads walking down a school hallway, the only sharp figure an officer palming his pistol by one classroom door, the political symbolism of that shot so clear, so loud and important to our modern times. These were some of my favorite photographs, the Pulitzer winners, the shots that had launched careers across the nation, floating above me in the skies to which I aspired. The homeless woman, on the other hand, seemed sunk to me, and I didn't want to fall to her level.

“Clean Cut?”

“Yeah?” I stirred back to the present.

“I was asking you what you were up to, before the sinkhole happened.”

“I was outside, doing night shots,” I lied, quickly.

“With your yoga mat?”

“I do yoga on the parking lot. Some nights.”

“You go out every night?”

“Just some.”

“Huh,” she said. “I was more of an early bird, getting up before the crack of dawn to shoot a few pictures. Plenty of time before classes started. I sure do miss it, you know. You mind if I look through your camera? Peek at the pictures? Maybe I could give you some teacherly advice. Free of charge.”

The look she gave me. That persistent grin. I couldn't imagine it was real, certainly not as real as the shot I'd taken of her in the lobby, the one of her so raw and vulnerable, the one I didn't want her to discover. Here she was, telling me she was a photographer herself; would she feel she had turned into the thing she once created?

“I'm rather tired,” I said. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“Of course. Good night, Blaine.”

I started at my name, thinking she had all but forgotten it. The minutes passed with me waiting for her to fall asleep, grasping my camera in my hands. Its hard edges were uncomfortable, though, and I laid it on the ground, the strap underneath my head. I checked the phone's time and saw it was past two in the morning. Uncomfortable as I was curled up in the back seat of my car, my eyes started drooping, remembering the cracks and fissures that had torn my apartment asunder. Wondering if there were more disasters waiting on the horizon.

“I feel like a rat sometimes,” she said. I sat back up, stirred by the unprompted answer.

“You're not a rat,” I said, automatically.

“No. But I feel like one. I see people like you walk by in your nice clothes, your suits and ties, your fancy dresses, and I think of how I must look, how long it’s been since I last took a shower, how shabby my clothes must be. I keep worrying that I stink, that I reek, and everyone can smell it, and every time they give me food or money I keep thinking that I’m just a rat they’re feeding. Out on the streets, without a home. And I try to think of what good things I could do for people, like smile, or tell them they’re beautiful, just try to be kind no matter how hard it gets.”

She drummed her fingers on the console, pulled her hair. Her smile lessened, then, and I learned then something that’s been invaluable to my career: emotions are contextual. Everyone has their own range.

“But it never feels like enough,” she continued, “like I’m a waste of space and air just running around, trying not to get stepped on by forces larger than me, and God there’s so much out there so much larger than me. I’m not even a person who feels fine walking in and out of that coffee shop, with a home, a purpose. And I just keep thinking I might as well throw myself into a river. Let myself fall into a trap like some rat.”

Around her seat, I could see her chest going in and out, her hands folded on her lap. I didn’t know what to say in response. Part of me was remembering all the times I’d thought something along those lines about her, and part of me was astounded that, the moment she’d finished talking, I realized that I felt exactly as she described. That I worried my photography wasn’t enough. That I was a waste of space and time. I heard her softly snoring at last, and I picked up my camera one more time, checked the photo of her. My guilt gnawed at me.

“Tomorrow,” I said.

**

I woke up to the light of dawn breaking over. I saw a man in a suit walking tersely along to work, keeping his shoulder bag close to his hip as he whipped his head away when my gaze met his for a brief second. I found there a look of hostile suspicion. A strange distortion seeped through me, like I'd been peering at myself in a fun house mirror, like I was out of my own body, staring back at the routines that guided it every day. The way he looked at me with such scorn made me feel like a rat.

I was so shaken that I turned to the front seat to tell the homeless woman about it, that I had gotten a taste of what she had to put up with daily, when I saw that the front seat was empty. In the corner of my eye, I saw Lester driving his large sprinter van into the parking lot as I searched my entire car, my heart elevating for the last time that fateful few days. My camera was gone, with one thing left in its place. I opened the homeless woman's journal, and began flipping through the pages. There was nothing written down. I flipped through the whole thing, confused about where her drawings were, had she torn them out, there were no ripped seams. The blankness of the pages horrified me, and I began to wonder if the woman had even existed until I flipped to the first page. There it was, her handwriting, the crisp ink from the pen I gave her, in one small epigraph on the title page:

Property of Rea

THE COLOR VIOLET

It was early in my brief engagement with Willa, when I learned that every time she told the story of the coloring book, she changed it. I first noticed about the third or fourth time she was telling it, when Willa was carrying baby Violet in her arms, pulling out a card from her purse for the cashier at Holiday Foods while I was pushing the cart in, helping the carry-out boy sort the groceries into bags, my hands remembering that Tetris game of sorting the milk, the bread, and the eggs from my own time as a carry-out boy, before I got my job at the garage. The guy picked up one of the dozen jars of strawberry baby jam from our cart.

“All strawberry?” he asked me, bemused.

“Baby won’t eat any other kind,” I said, my fingers still bone tired from clenching tools all day, twisting stubborn vehicle bolts and screws back and forth all day.

“What a pretty smile!” the cashier said, when she saw Violet giggle, after Willa tickled her lips.

“She gets it from her pa,” Willa said, looking toward me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d smiled like that. “She’s our little angel, a gift from God. And a fighter. She almost died, you know. Several times.”

“Oh my,” the cashier said, and like usual I could always read the dismay on the cashier’s face, regretting the drama Willa was about to share with them while a long line of shoppers formed after us.

“Twice. There were heart problems, almost a miscarriage. The doctor told me there was a good chance the baby wouldn’t survive, told me I might want to think about. You know,” Willa leaned in ominously, shielding us from her implication. “He set up an

appointment for me in Louisville, and I was in the waiting room when I saw a coloring book. Sick joke, I thought, who puts a coloring book in a clinic like that? But I started flipping the pages, and I found one page uncolored, the last one, a princess. So I got some crayons, colored her dress pink, her hair black, her jewelry blue, and the last color was purple: I colored a purple heart in her breast. Don't know what drove me to do it, just did. Then I checked the label and found out it was violet, not purple, and I thought, what a beautiful word. And I knew: This was a sign I had to keep my baby girl, from God Himself, I swear. And I walked out, and I called that doctor, told him I'd dig my own grave before I dug one for my baby. The doctor gave up, and you know what? Here she is, my beautiful baby princess. Strong as any baby can be. And when she was born, we named her ...”

Willa would often choke up when she got to Violet's name, not one beat sooner. After the ferocity of that story's beginning and middle, and that climactic moment in the clinic, why was it the name that made Willa choke up? It felt right, I guess, but she choked up every time, and I started to wonder what her reasoning was. She'd never asked me what I wanted to name our baby.

“Amen,” Sometimes another customer would say, and Willa would glow with pride, like she was Joan of Arc being hailed. And the cashiers would sometimes say wow, how brave of you, and there was even one who shared her own story, suggested they start a group in town. While Willa seemed to bask in their praise, I'd be standing behind her, trying my best to play loyal husband and father for her, all the while thinking how much I was pretending.

**

We were in high school when it all began. I can't remember how we first met; she was one of those friends you grow up with all through elementary, middle, high school, same grade and all. You know how you remember almost all your classmates' names even years after you graduate and your lives drift off all over the place? 'Bout half stay put while the other half move out of state for college, or the oddballs run off to New York, California, Florida to reinvent themselves? Years later you find them online, saying holy hell whatever happened to them. Willa and I were that kind of close, except we didn't leave town after graduation.

We were just friends all our childhood. We lived in the same little square of motor homes by the highway, and I remember we'd get on our bikes together, wheeling around the block, ringing our bells to agitate the dogs and squirrels. At one point Willa found a lazy skunk and she took it, put it in somebody's mailbox, put the flag up, and we hid behind some trees waiting for one of the Bauers to come out. Sure enough, half an hour later, Ms. Bauer was outside, stretching her back and wondering why the hell the mail lady had come in the evening again. She put the flag down, opened the mailbox, and boy will I never forget how she screamed and ran inside. Willa and I laughed for weeks about it, still got a chuckle out of it here and there.

Willa and I used to be carefree like that, and sometimes I look back and think why the hell couldn't we stay that way. I loved being friends with Willa. I was growing into a shy child, reluctant to leave home, rather have a book in my lap because sometimes I'd find things in books I couldn't find anywhere in our little Catholic town, even while Dad made me come outside and learn how to fix cars with him after school. Willa, though, even as she grew into one of the popular girls—cheerleader, student council, and all—she

always hung onto me. She had a way of dragging my adventurous side out: we climbed water towers, tp'ed our favorite chemistry teacher's home, went swimming in random ponds we found during walks in the woods. But we entered high school, eventually, and the freewheeling faded away as we worried about extracurriculars, college applications, and what the hell we were doing after graduation. Still, she insisted we get lunch together a couple times a week, and that's when the rumors started. Which led to the beginning of Violet.

We'd gotten together at her place, for the first time in years outside of school. We were in her room, lying side by side on the bed, looking at those glow stars that were all the rage in the nineties, when I rolled over and just put my hand on her breast. Didn't even ask, just did it without thinking. She didn't move it away, and it felt like we'd turned a corner, couldn't go back, couldn't stop, as we started kissing. I kissed harder and harder, because my body wasn't doing what it needed to do, and I wanted it to so badly.

"Beau Doener," One of the guys on my tennis team had said a few weeks prior, on the tennis courts one hot September afternoon. "Saw you and Willa having your little lunch date together. When you gonna lay that ass out?"

She started taking my shirt off, balling it up and throwing it into the corner, and she ran her hand all over my chest, her soft fingers with their pink nails. I slipped my hand under, felt the hard nipple, and I convinced myself I was twitching to life down there.

"We're just friends," I told him.

"Friends share, Beau" he went on, "and Willa wants to share her g-spot with you."

“G-spot?” I asked. Wish I hadn’t. The guys all burst into laughter, and the practice rallying ceased for a moment. The assistant coach turned away, to recompose himself. I burned with indignity.

“Knock it off,” Mickey Spieliger said. “Beau’s a gentleman, doing right by Willa.”

In bed with Willa, I started thinking about Mickey. He was one of the best singles players on our team, the one who served lightning aces and had a crazy backhand spin that threw his opponents for a loop. I thought about his legs when he served, the sweat glistening as they trailed down, the way his shirt stretched over his breast, and I squeezed Willa’s breast, grunted while she yelped in pain. I squeezed harder, thinking about how firm muscle could be, until I topped her. Grunted and jerked.

When we finished we lay there, breathing. I didn’t think sex would be this hard on the body, how easy it was to hear my breath afterward. I’d thought people were supposed to feel alive after doing the deed, that the mind would rage with epiphanies and endorphins and love. I felt like I had to pee.

“Your g-spot’s hot,” I told Willa as she was putting her shirt back on. She threw a quizzical look my way. That was the first time we had sex. It was the last time we had sex. When I told the tennis guys later, huddled on the bleachers together during a varsity match, they all let out a long, mobbish whoop, confusing some of the audience and making their parents laugh nervously. They thumped me on the back.

“Didn’t think you had it in you, Beau, you dog!”

“I got her right in the g-spot,” I said again and again.

I was proud of myself until Willa called a few weeks later to tell me she was pregnant.

**

Mickey Spieliger and I were doing doughnuts in the middle school parking lot the one Sunday we were both off from work, a month after Willa had given birth. Mickey's truck tires screeched against the pavement, black smoke billowing up behind us, both of us hanging onto the handlebars as we did five, six, seven spins in a row before he took his foot off the throttle. We sat back, and my heart slowed down.

"You smell that?" Mickey sniffed out the window. "Fresh pavement. Man, get high of that shit, lemme tell you."

"Better than hot boxing your cousin's weed, I bet."

He slapped my knee, relating that story of when we got weed the first time from a guy he knew at the auto shop, the night of prom. Willa had been pretty far along about that time and didn't feel up to a night of dancing, and so I'd promised her I wouldn't go either, leading to Mickey and us both skipping out. He called prom bougie-ass shit high society put on to "mask the raw, natural energy that was human sex" and so that night we did weed instead. Mickey and I had befriended each other when I'd gotten a job at his dad's auto shop. He turned out to be much more of a hippie than I'd assumed, and we bonded over our shared interests in national conspiracies and old Japanese RPGs we used to play.

"So you're a dad now," Mickey said.

"Yeah."

"You sure it's yours?"

“Willa tells me it is.”

“She might’ve lied, Beau. You should get a DNA test.”

“The baby’s got my smile, everyone says.”

“Tell me something, man,” Mickey said, leaning back into his seat. “What did you wanna do with your life? Like, before Willa got pregnant.”

I sat still in the car, uncomfortable with the question. I hadn’t let myself think about that for a while; during our graduation, as we picked up our diplomas, a presentation had played telling the audience what each of us were doing after high school. Most people were heading off to college somewhere, to study nursing, accounting, business, communications. Mickey’s slide had said he was taking a gap year, back when he was planning on doing City Year before he dropped out of that and stayed home to work at his dad’s garage. Mine said I was joining the workforce; like everyone’s it showed my baby picture, and I remember eyeing the young and helpless thing on the screen with dread. Willa didn’t graduate.

“What do you wanna do?” I threw back at him.

“I applied to school,” he said. “I wanna study art. Applied to IU, Purdue. I even tried some fancy art school in Chicago. Just to see if I’d get in.”

“I didn’t know you did art.”

“In my off-time. Makes me feel good. Mr. Knox said I was talented.”

“Wasn’t he the gay teacher?”

“Hey, man, he’s pretty cool,” Mickey protested. “You know. For a gay.”

We barked harsh laughs after that. I laughed especially hard, and it almost came out like a cough, like I was ravaging my vocal chords, twisting them like a puppet to make them do something they weren't made for.

“Willa’s my fiancé,” I said. “We’re getting married someday.”

“Was that Willa’s idea?”

“Ah, hell, Mickey. Just do another doughnut.”

He reignited the engine while I shifted in my seat away from him, quietly trying to keep my legs away from him, scared he’d see the bulge in my pants, that he’d kick open the door and throw me out of his truck. But he said nothing, and after a few more burnouts on the parking lot, we went home to our respective small-town apartments.

I walked in to our two-bedroom apartment, with a narrow living room and kitchen hard to maneuver around. We’d moved in there shortly after graduation, with Willa’s maroon sedan to share between us. One bedroom was reserved for Willa, the other for us two. Coloring books were scattered around the living room floor; Willa seemed obsessed with using our money on them, and I wondered if she wasn’t trying to find that original book somewhere.

“Why don’t you just go back to the clinic and see if you can get it there?” I asked her once.

“I could never go back to that horrid place,” Willa said. I didn’t think it was so horrid; I’d never told Willa, but I’d gotten myself tested there, after we did the deed. They said I had nothing, and I was convinced Willa and I were each other’s first, and I told myself I would be loyal to her.

I came down the hall and looked into Violet's room, with a crib, a rocking horse, stuffed bears and toys all over her room, and walls painted with simple green hills, tiny black birds, and a yellow sun. Our room was even sparser, a mattress on the ground and an old Goodwill dresser for our clothes. Inside Violet's room, Willa was dressing Violet for her baptism in a small, frilly dress Willa's mother had given us. Violet was a gorgeous little baby. Hard to say anything else. After Willa brought her home from the hospital, she quickly bloomed with her rosy red cheeks, her dirty blonde curls, her tiny, nibbling baby teeth. She constantly giggled and dribbled over her zoo animal bibs, and she would reach out and grab everything she could, like Willa's curls or my leathery fingers, and she'd try to put it in her mouth, like she wanted to eat the world up. She was beauty incarnate, pure innocence. When I picked her up in my arms, I could see my own mouth looking back at me, Willa's eyes darting around the room. I became scared for her, afraid I might drop her and she'd shatter into millions of glass shards. She was beautiful, like a glass dove, the best part of Willa and I being together.

"She's our life now," Willa said. I mumbled yes, said what I thought I should say in Willa's presence. But those few words, I think, began my resentment as I started thinking what else I could have done. Go to college. Study literature. Read about and travel to places beyond Shithole Indiana. Go anywhere where I could get a fresh slate. But I put that out of mind and got dressed for the baptism. We left for the church, a miniature family, under the impression it had to last.

**

The next few weeks were hell. We were constantly taking Violet to appointments, getting her shots, spending almost all our money on diapers, special baby food, toys for

Violet, things she needed to “prod her cognitive development,” as Willa said once after looking it up in a book at the library. I made minimum wage at the garage, wasn’t getting promoted yet even though my boss said he loved the work I did there. I tried working harder and harder, more and more hours, to bring home enough money for us, while Willa spent all her time taking care of Violet, fussy baby as she was. We were able to buy a couch and TV with a VCR attached to it for the living room. Willa grabbed tapes from the library, some for Violet, some for us.

We were on food stamps, of course. The WIC kind, and so we were limited to what we could use. We learned that, pretty as she was, Violet was a picky eater. We tried every type of baby food over the course of a few days, and she would tightly shut her lips and whine before all of them but one.

“Why does she like strawberries so fucking much?” I heard Willa complain as she fed Violet yet another small bottle of the jam. “She won’t eat anything else, and this is the most expensive kind at the store.”

“She’ll grow out of it,” I said.

“When?”

Not soon enough, it seemed as a week passed and the apartment started smelling sick with the jam. We tried giving her new toys, experiment on her with different foods, but she cried and cried and cried for what seemed like hours, all times of the day, and at night we could barely get out of bed to comfort her. Willa would eventually feed her the jam to calm her down, keeling to Willa’s cries the way her tapes said you shouldn’t with a clingy baby. Willa called her mother and me my dad, and they suggested reading to her, playing music, swaddling her in different blankets, making weird faces at her. They came

over and tried to help us, but they couldn't do much for Violet, either. She seemed determined to bemoan her tiny world, like she was fighting the body she was growing into. My dad just shrugged when she cried in his arms, as I figured would happen. He'd tried his best at parenting after my mom had walked out on us, going to Arizona to find herself, as her one postcard to me had explained when I was eight.

"Take her to a doctor," Willa's mom announced when she visited, "and quit your lease on this place. Willa, you all need help."

"We're fine," Willa said.

"You're not. Move back in with me, and get your GED. Beau can go back to his dad's, and he can still visit and help pay child support."

"I remember well enough what living with you was like," Willa snapped, and her mother stopped. She raised an arm, as if to slap her, but pulled it back, her face clenching from the hurt. She collected her things and left, without another word to Willa. Willa locked herself into Violet's room, not saying another word. I sat in the kitchen, eating microwaved chicken alfredo for dinner, watching the TV from the counter, not certain what to do now, until I got a text from Mickey asking to hang out this weekend. So I went to Violet's door, to knock and let her know, but I heard her voice through the door.

"Mommy wants to tell you a story," she said, fingering Violet's lips. "Mommy almost did a bad thing. A terrible thing. Almost a year ago, she visited a doctor. A nice doctor, with a sweet voice always patting her patients on the shoulders. Mommy and the doctor talked about you, Violet, when you were as small as a peanut. Mommy wanted you to go away, Violet. She didn't want to take care of you. She thought you were punishing her, for something she did with Daddy. But the doctor, the nice doctor, she told

me she would let me take some time to think about it if I wanted, that I seemed distressed to her, and I did. I took a week, and when I came back I told her I still wanted to do it. I still wanted you to go away, Violet. So the doctor made me an appointment, and two days later I was waiting in her office, in a chair with a few other young women. There was a couple old people marching back and forth outside, holding signs. The signs had pictures of drawings children had made. And what do you know; I found a princess coloring book inside the clinic, and when I sat down and flipped it open I found every page colored in but the last one. It was you, Violet, a pretty princess dancing in front of a mirror, me and daddy in the back, wearing crowns and watching you. I asked for a set of crayons from the desk, and I colored that princess in. I gave her pink and blue and green hair, red earrings, a purple dress, and a beating violet heart. And that's when I realized I was coloring you, Violet. I realized you could color me, too. We could color each other, and we'd be happier for it. And that's how you got your name."

I opened the door softly and saw Willa pick Violet up then, hugging the baby tight against her shoulder, Violet dribbling onto her blouse's strap. Willa bounced her up and down.

"Mommy's so sorry, Violet," she said over and over again, like a chant.

"Mommy's so sorry. Please forgive me. Please."

Willa saw me through the crack in the door and extended me a hand, pulled me into a small family embrace. Then my watch vibrated. 9:00 p.m. Bedtime for everyone. We put Violet down, and Willa and I went to bed in the same room. We kissed each other to sleep, light peck on the lips, then turned out the lights. After she fell asleep, I lay in bed, taken with Willa's story, the way she changed it every time she told it, reshaped it

like clay however she fancied. At last she'd explained Violet's name, yet even then I wasn't sure I believed her. Willa wasn't the same girl from childhood. Motherhood was probably changing her, weighing her down like fatherhood did me, but there was also something missing in Willa's voice now. She sounded like she was mimicking something now. It made me wonder what really happened at the clinic. There was only one other person who'd been there.

**

Willa's mother had driven her there, I remembered when Willa told me she'd gone to the clinic, the first time. I'd had few interactions with Ms. Morgan, none without Willa. But one early morning before church, I snuck out of bed, leaving Willa still asleep, and found myself following the highway back to that little square along the highway where we'd grown up, turned into the entrance and crawled along the road I used to bike so many times to Willa's house until I parked outside her childhood home, a mobile with a deflated swimming pool in front. I took some long breaths, thinking how crazy I was to come do this, why I even needed to know more about this damn coloring book Willa wouldn't shut up about. I climbed out, stepped up the tiny wooden stairs, forgetting that the top one creaked until my foot landed and found someone had fixed it at last. I knocked on the door, and Willa's mother opened up. She was dressed in leopard print pants and a simple tanktop with the PowerPuff girls on front.

"Hello, Ms. Morgan," I mumbled.

"Hello, boy who knocked up my daughter," she drummed her fingers on her white doorframe, paint chipping away on it. Ms. Morgan looked so much like her daughter, but

with grey roots, a slight limp to her walk, and a tired, sagging face, resigned to the world spitting on it over and over again, like most of us in that square had been.

We went inside and sat at the kitchen table, me tucking in my arms like a boy while she sat on the opposite end reading the last chapter in her thriller. A kettle was boiling on her stove, and when I started to say something Ms. Morgan got up and fetched it off the stove, poured it into a mug with sugar and a tea bag. World's Greatest Mom, the cup said on the side. She sipped slowly from it, and I waited for her to finish until she put it to the side.

"So what you want?" she asked. "Money? I ain't got it, and she wouldn't take it even if I did."

"We're fine," I lied to Ms. Morgan. "Willa told me about the clinic."

"Hear she tells everyone."

"She told me you drove her there, the first time. Said she wanted you to wait outside in the car. Didn't think she could go through with it while you were in there. And she came back out and told you she'd changed her mind."

"Is that what Willa said."

"That's not how you recall it?"

"Why do you care?" Mrs. Morgan set the cup aside on the counter. I saw the steam curling up out of it, into vague shapes like fists and flowers.

"She tells that story about Violet to everyone we meet. The coloring book, how it changed her mind at the clinic. Did she ever say something about a coloring book to you?"

“No, she didn’t. And why does it matter what changed her mind. She kept the baby. Now you two gotta raise it. And boy, if I hear about you walking out on her—”

“I wouldn’t dream, Ms. Morgan,” I quickly said.

“Why don’t you ask her about it?”

“That’s the thing; she keeps changing details. One day she says she colored it blue, the next it was red, and one day it was the first princess in the book, and then it was the last, and then it happened before she talked to the doctor, then after, once somehow during, and I just don’t understand why she keeps changing the story up.”

“People’s memories get mixed up all the time.”

“I was just wanting to see if you knew anything about it. Willa seems so different now.”

“Having a child will do that,” Mrs. Morgan said, looking out her small kitchenette window to the blue swimming tub in the yard. I remembered seeing her in it, once when I was in middle school riding my bike to visit Willa, just floating without a care in the tub, reading the newspaper, small table with an iced drink on it. When I got inside, Willa told me her mom was on an opioid high. I asked how she knew, and she brought out a little bag with some malformed pills in the bottom of the bag. “For headaches,” Willa told me. “She can’t afford the stuff at the pharmacy anymore.” I told Willa a social worker ought to come visit them, and Willa said her mother had fooled the last one well enough, her tone poisonous as she said it.

“I don’t remember much about that day,” Ms. Morgan said, “besides driving Willa down and her coming back, saying she’d changed her mind. I tried to tell her to go through with it, but it was hard for me to explain myself. I didn’t know how to tell my

daughter her being born threw my life off course,” Mrs. Morgan said. “What I can tell you is Willa’s a stubborn, imaginative girl. Gets it from her dad, I expect, he used to speak that way with me. She could always make up some story for why she threw the laundry in the toilet, why she cut up my bras for wall decorations, why she had a stray cat in her bedroom, shit like that. Coloring book’s probably just another story she cooked up.”

“But why?”

“You been to church with her?”

“Yeah. We go every week.”

“She’s convinced everything’s gotta have a reason.” Mrs. Morgan put her hands in her head. “I just hope she does right by that child. Better than I did her.”

“Mrs. Morgan—”

“I got a headache. I need to lay down,” she cut me off. “Promise me this. Don’t walk out on her. She’s seen enough troubles as is. I don’t care if it kills you to stay; if you leave, it’ll definitely kill her.”

As she walked into her bedroom, I sat at her kitchen table for a while longer than I should have. My heart was having trouble keeping still, like I saw two routes before me, and both led to some horrible conclusion. I drove back home, not visiting my dad’s. He would just tell me to man up over my problems, like he always did.

**

Mickey came by to pick me up after work, as he said he would when Willa needed the car to drive Violet to her latest shots appointment. When I told her I had a ride home, she thanked God, said what on earth would we do without Mickey, though she said

it all with an elevated pitch, like something was grinding behind her teeth, the same grind she had every time I brought Mickey up. I wasn't sure she actually liked him, but I didn't care. She didn't get to trap me at home all the time.

"You could get a beer or two, if you want," she said when she dropped me off at work. "I know how you boys are. But make sure you come home before dinner. You need to spend more time with Violet."

I promised her I would and met Mick at work, him grinning at me like a hyena for some reason. He was happy the whole day, whistling a tune and lubing axles and balancing the books without a single complaint. When our shift ended, we wiped our hands on our pants, cleaning the oil off, and we got into his car and drove. But instead of turning at the next light toward my apartment, he drove straight into town.

"Where we going?"

"I got something to tell you. But I need to work up to it."

"Okay, mystery man."

He drove me around, rambling through the town square, around the courthouse, the banks, making our way into the highway past the little suburban districts, past all the houses too expensive for me and Willa to buy. I figured we'd never be rich enough to buy them. We made small chat, him asking me about work, me about his latest art exploits. We finally parked in an empty lot by the closed-down skating rink off the highway, where he and I and Willa had once hung out together. "I gotta get me some girlfriends, what with you and your boyfriend," she said with a sly sneer, and I shook my head, stuffing my thoughts back down.

"So what's your big news?" I asked at last.

“I got in.”

“To IU? Purdue?”

“And Chicago.”

“Oh shit!” I shot a fist into the air and hugged Mickey, congratulating him over and over again, careful not to embrace him too close, to ignore my body. My hands wanted to grab his hair. I wanted to kiss his cheek. We let go, and I fixed myself away to the other side, almost crumpling over there.

“I’m gonna miss you, man,” I admitted. “You’re a solid friend, Mick. You were there for me when all the other ass clowns in high school weren’t.”

“There’s one more thing,” he said, suddenly hunching into himself, staring at his knees. He was sweating, his fingers fidgeting. “I haven’t accepted anywhere yet.”

“Why? Don’t be scared,” I said, rubbing his back. “Chicago’s expensive and all, but you got help. You can take loans. You gotta go, Mick, there’s nothing for you here.”

“There is something. Someone.”

“Who?”

“You.”

I thought that was an odd thing to say until he looked at me, me at him. Even then, I thought I was imagining things, that no one around here but me was like that, all the queers had ran off to college while I was stuck here alone. Then he put his hand on mine, his fingers shyly intertwining, and I could see his heart was seizing up, and I knew what terrors were racing through his head, knew why his hand was trembling, because I’d always feared the same things growing up. I took my other hand and cupped his face, and he sobbed as he realized his intuition was right. We kissed.

When I was a kid, it took years for me to realize I was nearsighted. I thought the world was just naturally blurry, a confusing mishmash of shapes and colors that everyone else could somehow navigate better than me. My dad and I were driving toward school one day when he pointed out a sign to me, started laughing. “Idiots can’t spell shit around here,” he’d said, and I asked him what it had said. He cocked his head at me, said he thought I could read, and I told him I could, but not the blurry stuff on the road, and he said his first curse word in front of me then, and I started crying until he told me I’d done nothing wrong. He took me to the eye doctor the next day, sighing about how much the copay would cost, though I didn’t know about stuff like that back then. The eye doctor did his tests and confirmed that I needed glasses, and that day I got my first pair. I remember driving home, stunned at how crisp the world actually was. Every letter legible, every corner sharp and piercing, the leaves and the street lines apparent to me. When we got back, I ran around the yard, obsessed with the lines on the trees, the caterpillars crawling along leafy stems, the soft colorful fluff on birds. That’s what kissing Mickey felt like. That’s when I learned the sense of touch wasn’t nearly so blind.

When we stopped at last, we both laughed, elated with our mutual epiphany. He leaned his head into mine, rubbing our foreheads together.

“Leave her,” he breathed into my face.

“I can’t.”

“You can still be a dad. But you don’t love her, Beau.”

We leaned over to kiss each other again, but a maroon sedan that looked familiar flashed by on the highway. I jumped and shoved Mickey away from me, like he was a bomb, until it roared past us. We sat still, breathing, and I clutched my chest like a heart

attack had happened. Mickey bent over his wheel, like his back was giving out and he was spilling into a mess on the floor. It was there we knew we had other instincts hammered into us, that wouldn't fall away overnight. He put his gear back into drive, drove me home. We didn't touch again, but he said he'd call when I got home.

When I climbed into bed with Willa, I realized how empty kissing her would feel from now on. I could see that clearly now.

**

The last day of Willa and I's engagement, I woke up later than I should have for work. I could hear Willa comforting Violet in the other room and collapsed onto the couch, wishing I knew some magic trick that would shut babies up for a while. We couldn't figure out how to cure her colicky nature. Willa wanted to use her credit card again, sink us further into debt we'd already mounted, and we fought over it again this morning.

"I want to take her to another doctor," she yelled.

"The last one said not to worry, she'd grow out of it," I yelled from the kitchen table.

"She's our daughter. We can't half-ass this. We'll sell some things. The living room couch."

"I'm not sitting on the floor to watch TV. She's doing what babies do."

"I want a second opinion."

"Fine, sink us even further into debt," I'd said. When I got up, getting all dressed, I slammed the door behind me.

At work, I mindlessly repaired vans and trucks and cars that were brought in. Checked the fluids, realigned wipers, changed oils, did the works until Mick's dad pulled me aside to growl at me, told me a customer had come back complaining I hadn't aired their tires enough, that I'd done it under standard, that I was off my game. I told him I wasn't feeling well, and he told me to head home early. That was more hours I wouldn't get paid, but the gas fumes and the noise of wheels turning and screwdrivers drilling made my head spin.

So I left for home, coming back home and collapsing onto our couch, while the TV played the local news. Willa came in later; Violet had finally calmed down, and her face looked equally drained as she climbed onto the couch with me, not that angry I wasn't at work. I just wanted to watch TV, but I felt her hands touch mine, rubbing up and down my arm. She shuffled closer to me, her hands sliding all over my chest, and I closed my eyes. Feeling Mickey kiss me.

"Does my g-spot look hot?" she teased.

"I was such an idiot."

"I know a lot's happened, and we're stressed," she said, "but everything will be okay. I know it. I knew it the day I colored in that book. It came to me, like a prophecy."

"I'm gonna find out whether this so-called magic book actually exists," I said, seizing up when her hand found her way down my pants.

"Let's have another, Beau."

"Another what?"

"Violet, she needs a brother, a sister."

“You mean another mouth to steal half her food?” I leaped up, throwing her off me, shocked. She came up with me, grabbed my shirt with fists.

“We’ll get more help, you’ll get promoted, it’ll be fine,” she said. “Please, we need to build this family—”

“I’m a fucking auto shop monkey,” I threw her hands off me. “Willa, I make shit for money. We’re on food stamps. We can’t have another. I want to leave.”

When it finally slipped out, I acknowledged it, even as Willa fell back, clutching at the wall with her hand. Violet began wailing again. The kitchen light flickered. The floor in the corner had a wet spot on it, and I could see flies dancing around the sink. Everything about this place disgusted me.

“You can’t go. You have a daughter,” she said.

“I don’t love you, Willa. I’m tired. I want to leave this place. This state.”

“You can’t leave me with a baby, you fucking punk.”

She started banging her fists on my chest, calling me an asshole, a nobody, a fag, she wasn’t stupid, she knew what Mickey and I did, that I was a no-good faggot going to hell, and that made me grab her arms and throw her into the couch, wanting to dash her brains out, my best friend from school. She ran to the cabinet, pulled out plates, flung them at me. I ducked under one, got the door open and slammed it shut as I ran out. Another one cracked behind me. I heard Violet wailing harder than ever.

I got into our car and drove around for a while, ignoring my phone as it blew up with messages and voicemail from her. I played one, listened to her grieving, begging me to come back, she didn’t know what to do, Violet was wailing and wouldn’t stop. I drove to the gas station, bought a pack of cigarettes for the first time, thinking it was times like

these why people started smoking. When I went outside and puffed one, the acrid smoke made me cough and choke, and I threw it in the trash. I watched the nearby pharmacy, a man walking out with a plastic bag in his hands. I could make out a square shape flexing the bag's skin, and squint that I did I couldn't make out what it said. I imagined a coloring book inside it. And so I drove back, thinking the engagement must go on.

When I walked into our apartment, the plates broken and smashed in the kitchen. The cutlery we just bought were strewn about the ground, the coffee table was overturned, the water running in the sink. There was a stain of blood along the faucet. I heard a wail come from Violet's room, something like a banshee, and I walked in, ready to calm Willa down again, ready to cry, apologize over what I'd done, that I'd never leave her or Violet. Walking in, I found Willa was curled at the foot of Violet's crib, sobbing and heaving. I came over and grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her, tried to pull her onto her feet, but she whipped away from me, smacked me with her hand, and resumed curled up. Her phone was out. I saw her phone on the ground, heard a 911 operator talking over the line, and I thought she'd called the cops on me. That they would throw me in jail for failing as a father, for being gay.

"Willa, I'm here. Here to stay. I love you, I do," I said.

"Violet, I, no, Mommy loves you," she moaned. Over and over again. She was incoherent. So I stood up, checked inside Violet's crib. The room went cold.

"I just wanted her to sleep," Willa went on. She kept hiccupping, sneezing, stuttering, and I thought she might have a seizure, she looked ready to melt down. "I needed quiet, just a little, she wouldn't sleep, she wouldn't nap, oh I swear to God I'll never, I'll never sleep again, I just picked her up, trying to calm her, and she just kept

wailing, and I tried singing, tried hugging, tried bouncing her, burping her, and there was no strawberry jam anywhere, oh God, oh God, Beau, she didn't stop, Beau, and I just got fed up, blamed you, thought you were gone, Beau, thought I was all alone, I didn't mean it, I just, I was just shaking her, just so angry, I didn't mean it, and I, and, and, oh God tell me she's alright. Tell me she's fine."

At some point, she quit babbling and let out a long moan. Minutes long. Bloodcurdling. Like her soul was seeping out, leaving behind a husk. I picked up her phone, explained to the operator what happened, and later the paramedics would arrive to tell us what I already knew when I looked again into the crib. Violet lay still, her pretty brown eyes still and cold. I couldn't help thinking: Our baby girl finally quit crying.

**

About a year later, I saw Willa again. I was still working at the garage, paying off the medical bills from that call, and I was seeing a guy now, some carpenter from Tell City who'd hug and hold me at night when I woke up screaming some nights. Most calls to me came from Mickey; we kept in touch after he went up for art school, me telling him about my boyfriend, him about his wild affairs with the men of Chicago, both of us happy for the other. But then one day I got a call from Willa, asking me to come see her, and I figured it was the least I could do. But then she asked me to bring something, and I told her that it wasn't a good idea, she needed to move on from all that, but she insisted. I felt like some crazy fool, but she still had a way of persuading me, even after all this time, Skunk-in-the-Mailbox Willa.

When we met at the prison, sitting across from each other at one of the tables, I saw a lot of women talking with their boyfriends and girlfriends. There was one prim and

glam woman being visited by her mother; they both looked disdainful to be there, as they muttered what I figured were curses about the inmates and each other. A few of the other women had kids who hugged their mommas, and the mommas hugged them so fiercely, tears springing to their eyes, like they were trying to squeeze a childhood into hours.

Willa stared at the table, her fingers twitching in her hands. I saw a scar on her forehead.

“What happened?” I said, pointing it out.

“The others heard what I was in for. It was just once. To punish me.”

“They shouldn’t do that.”

“I needed it.”

We sat there, two exes whose love was built on two lives spent together, inside jokes, bad sex, and a child. I tried talking with her. Telling her about my job, the latest car we’d fixed up, the guy I was seeing now, that I was thinking about the Navy now, met some vets a while ago, how cool they seemed with me and my boyfriend. I tried asking about her, wording my questions carefully, afraid I’d set her off. She gave me mostly one-word answers.

“What’s prison like?”

“It’s almost bad as strawberry jam.”

I stopped after that. We folded our arms for a while, and I thought about all the different ways this could have gone. If we hadn’t been hellbent on being a family. If I’d been more committed to church, God, Willa. If we’d gone to college instead. If I’d spent more time with Violet. If I hadn’t been trying to prove I was a man. If we’d used a condom. If.

In court during her trial, I'd given my testimony, trying my best to portray Willa as a wonderful mother, so much more devoted than me, but the prosecution had the 911 log, and they played her guilt-laden rambling for the jury to hear. I saw Willa at the defense table, her mother behind her glaring at me, and during the recess she cornered and slapped me hard on the cheek. I took it without question; looking at Willa, I could see her fire had clearly gone out, blankly accepting her conviction from the jury. I was afraid I'd be next, but no one accused me of anything. Neither Willa nor her mother ever pressed charges.

"Did you bring it?" Willa asked me. She looked thin and beaten down, in her orange jumpsuit. I frowned as she tapped her foot on my own, a kind of pleading. "Give it to me."

I pulled two things out of my bag. A set of crayons, like she'd asked, and the coloring book. I'd called the clinic, and they still had it, sitting on their waiting table, after all this time. They were closing shop—after all the protests, bricks through windows, and an anthrax scare, employees were quitting left and right, so they didn't care if some stranger picked up some coloring book. When I first picked it up, I'd looked through and found several pages of princesses twirling dresses and gowns, feeding birds and rabbits, singing, dancing with princes in castles. In one of the last pages, one of them was holding a tiny baby version of themselves aloft in their arms. None of them were colored in. When I slid it over to Willa, she flipped through its pages, glancing at each one like they were a scrapbook of her life.

"This is it," she confirmed.

"Why did you lie about the coloring?"

“I could have sworn I colored in it.”

I didn't think anyone would forget whether they'd colored a page in or not, during such a crucial moment, but I didn't question her. Willa pulled out the crayons. She mindlessly colored the page with the baby on it, but she ignored the line drawing altogether. She colored what looked like rainbow flowers, blooming in clear circles all around the page, until their vibrancy began to draw the eye more than the black outline of people. I started wondering if she really wanted to see me at all, or if she'd just figured I was her best chance at getting the book and crayons.

“They told me your sentence got shortened twice already,” I told Willa. “You could be out of here in a year, Willa. Go to college, get a job. Live your life. You don't have to tell anyone about this.”

“My mom told me she had Violet cremated,” she said. “Buried her ashes in the garden. Mom thought that'd be better than a vase. She couldn't afford one of the cemetery plots. Even the smallest ones.”

“She didn't let you go?”

“I didn't ask.”

She was tearing the crayon's wrapping off with her nail as she grinded the crayons to dust trying to solidify the blank space. I thought she might tear the paper in the book. The crayons wore down quicker than I'd ever seen anyone do.

“Beau, I know you never loved me,” Willa said. “Not that way. But did you ever love Violet?”

What was the real answer? Yes, I loved her. I gave up leaving Indiana to be with her and you, Willa, even though I hated my job, even though I despised the town, even

though I'd never even been attracted to you, that I'd been thinking about Mickey's legs the one time we fucked. No, I didn't love Violet, she just seemed like some glorified ragdoll to me that I thought you were using to trap me. Was it somewhere in between? One and the other, with every passing day? Something else entirely? Willa was asking me if I loved our daughter, and I didn't even know what the word love meant. People bent and twisted it around, like a tree not allowed to grow naturally but rather yanked and prodded and forced into being.

“Yes,” I said. “No. I tried. Every day.”

Occasionally Willa put the crayon down, swapping for another one, coloring and coloring and coloring until at last she finished: a rainbow meadow, a fantasia of prismatic colors, psychedelic and nonsensical but somehow stirring. I could still make out the mother and baby outline, but the two visions competed with each other for my eyes as I found myself squinting, focusing between one and the other. Then Willa propped the book upright and tore the picture out of the book. She ripped it to shreds. The pieces decorated the table, like large confetti.

“The whole time we had her, even when I was holding her in my arms, bouncing her up and down, trying so hard to love her, in the back of my head,” she said, “was always the same thought. That if this coloring book hadn't been there ... I hated myself so much, every time I looked at Violet and thought that, and so I tried harder and harder to love her. And I think, that day, when I realized you weren't doing the same, you were ready to leave, I thought I was trapped, thought the world was so unfair that you got to leave while I had to stay, and I snapped from the guilt. Like I couldn't handle that war inside me. And I keep thinking, I could have given her to my family, put her up for

adoption, she was still so young. So why do I go back to the coloring book? Why am I a monster?”

Her face fell into her hands, and I pulled one away into a tight grasp with my own, relieved at her admission. It was like I was seeing her, for the first time in a long time, after that façade I’d spent our whole engagement trying to dig underneath.

“I go back to the coloring book, too,” I said. “And I think.”

“What?”

“I wish you hadn’t like coloring so much.”

“I wish you’d never touched my breast.”

“Guess we’re both monsters.”

“Guess I’ll see you in hell.”

She and I sat there for a minute before we chuckled, then laughed, the raucous, hollow kind that turns heads. My cheeks hurt while we did; I hadn’t laughed much in such a long time, since Willa and I were teens, really. As we did so, we agreed that we were doomed for hell, that Violet was going to pull the lever on us, that a just God would let her design our eternal damnations as we spoke: Halls of wailing. Endless diaper changes. And strawberry jam. Strawberry jam, as far as the tongue could taste. The sense I trusted most.

DEWBERRY PARK

From the moment he saw her wet black snout and doleful almond eyes, the way her tongue kindly licked his fingers when he poked a few through the fence, the way she wobbled forward on her one hind leg with a humble poise, Mitt knew he was going to adopt the white Saluki-Labrador mix. She needed him. She couldn't survive in this stale, cold prison of a shelter, surrounded by yapping dogs loud enough to make children cry and adults shudder. He checked the sign on her cage: Her name was Regina. "I'm an old girl, about ten years old, and my favorite treats are bacon and cheddar bits," her jovial profile read. "I may only have three legs, but I can still get around pretty quick, and I love swimming! I sometimes need to take breaks during long walks, but I wag my tongue and smile whenever I feel the breeze in my ears! Take me home and I'll make you smile every day!" The sign ended with a photocopied pawprint, Regina's name cutting across it. She needed a home. Mitt would give her one.

"Is that Regina?" Mitt heard his current roommate, his friend from college Lila say over his shoulder. "Oh, they just got her a few weeks ago, after she got out of the hospital. It was horrible; Susan told me they found her quivering in a ditch on the interstate, lacerations all over her ribs. Apparently she flinched every time Greg or Jeremy approached her. Poor thing. I think she likes you."

"We're kindred souls," Mitt declared.

After Mitt had gotten laid off from his job, Lila would come home for weeks from the vet's office to find him still in his pajamas, absorbed in some show on his cell phone, a bowl of stale chips or pretzels on the coffee table or a flat soda on the night stand.

Finally, earlier that day, she ordered a lunch of Chinese for them and threatened to shove the lo mien down his throat, and once they'd finished she'd taken him to the shelter.

“It'll cheer you up to see the dogs and cats,” Lila had told him on the way. “I can have the worst day possible. I can lose my keys, get surprise bills in the mail, George can cancel on me again for his stupid video game club—almost anything in the world can happen, and a lick on the cheek from my favorite dachshund or pug still cheers me up.”

Mitt had silently tolerated her faith in animals. His parents had let his sister keep a couple cats growing up, and she had always fawned over them while he regarded their nightly yowling with chilly appraisal. Dogs, on the other hand, he had always seen as slobbery idiots doing whatever their human owners told them to do for little doggy bones and treats, degrading themselves by rolling onto their backs or wearing those ridiculous costumes he'd seen people stuff them into. Mitt had always seen pets as little more than distractions, overgrown furry toys for sentimental people. But Regina had shown him otherwise; she was a survivor. Like how he saw himself.

“It's about closing time,” Regina prodded Mitt, kneeling down with him by Regina's cage, bringing him out of his head. “Ready to go?”

“I have to adopt her,” Mitt said.

Mitt had been crouching there for twenty minutes while children and young couples had browsed through all the other cats, dogs, hamsters, gerbils, skirting around Mitt and Regina as if recognizing their moment too intimate to be interrupted.

“The Rochesters don't allow pets,” Lila said, referring to the family who owned their house. “And the attic floor isn't big enough for a dog. C'mon, let's go. You can come back and visit her.”

“Go on,” Mitt said. “I’ll take the bus home. I need more time with her.”

Lila told him to quit it, he was being ridiculous, but Mitt would not stand up, even as she stood over him, clenching the fence with her hand like she was ready to rip it off and beat him with it, and still Mitt wouldn’t stand up. She groaned. That next Monday she was accompanying him to the shelter, vouching for his character in front of the shelter workers as he signed up for a trial week with Regina. That afternoon, Mitt was leading Regina into their apartment, hushing Regina as she whimpered, hopped, and sniffed around the small garret with the sloping roof and living room with one sofa and broken coffee table propped by books.

“She’s so well mannered,” Lila remarked.

“She’s wonderful,” Mitt said, scrunching the fur of her neck.

“Are you sure you can take care of her?”

Mitt knew why Lila would ask that. He knew she was thinking of the days she walked in and found him slumped over, flipping mindlessly through videos on his phone. She’d told him time and again to visit a counselor or a psychiatrist, get treated for his depression, but his insurance didn’t cover any options, and some days he found cleaning the apartment, digging through the crevices of the couch for loose change, or wallowing within his blanket and pillows such a comfort, such a safe place from the world outside, full of terrifying possibility. He could get in a car wreck. Get laid off from another job. Walk into a lake, drunk, and drown.

“I don’t mean to criticize, Mitt,” Lila explained. “It’s just, you’re in between jobs right now, and caring for a dog isn’t cheap.”

“I can do it,” Mitt said.

“You sure? I can buy her food for a little while, but at some point you gotta—”

“I’ll get a job,” Mitt snapped. Lila was taken aback.

“Just make sure she’s fed and gets her shots,” Lila muttered before leaving the room. “And take her to Dewberry Park. Best park around for dogs.”

As Lila retired to her room, Mitt scratched Regina under her chin until he grabbed her leash and collar, let her ride in the front seat of his old sedan as he drove her to Dewberry Park. He’d gone jogging there a few times, but normally he wordlessly ran past hundreds of strangers, most of them with their dogs or exercising in pairs or groups. That day, he found that people noticed Regina. Several women cooed and fawned over her sleek white and grey body, told Mitt what a great person he was, adopting a three-legged dog. A few of the women flirted with him, which he laughed over. When a muscular guy with a rottweiler did the same, Mitt lit up with mirth he could barely contain. They exchanged numbers, Mitt learned his name was Terrence, and after parting ways Mitt gave Regina a bacon-wrapped bone he’d been saving for the end of the walk, and she devoured it with ease. At the end of their walk, he let her off the leash for a bit, and she jumped into a ditch, licking dandelions and chasing after frogs alike. She walked to the edge of the lake, watched some fishers casting lines in the center of the large lake, and she pawed her feet in the lakebed among the cattails. Mitt grew anxious, remembering his own past with swimming. He ran down and snatched her by the collar, put her leash back on, soothed her as she whined. He started whispering his secrets to her, found the more he talked to her, the calmer they both became. On the way home, he convinced himself Regina had had a wonderful time, which wasn’t hard when she constantly had her tongue drooping out of her mouth, a dopey grin to Mitt.

Like magic, Regina worked on Mitt; he called a few places, garnered an interview, and within another month was a phone line worker for an insurance company, with better pay, hours, and benefits. Mitt began accumulating vacation days. And every day Mitt came straight home from work to sneak Regina out for a walk, feed the Saluki-Labrador bacon and cheddar bits he bought by the pound from PetCo.

“I have to admit she’s done wonders for you,” Lila said after his first week at his job and a second date with Terrence with the rottweiler.

“She’s my lucky charm,” he said.

But they couldn’t hide her forever; one evening while Lila was playing with Regina, bouncing a tennis ball against the wall, Mitt heard a knock on the door and opened it to find Mrs. Rochester holding a baggy of dog poop in her hand. Mitt had forgotten to take a baggy with him on their previous walk, and Regina had squatted right on the corner of the Rochester’s backyard, where Mrs. Rochester tended a small row of roses. He had also forgotten to come back for it and wanted to knock himself on the head.

“Are you keeping a dog in here?” she demanded, and with the worst timing Regina skipped into the room, chasing after a tennis ball she’d nosed into the room, her back leg balancing her ably. Regina noticed Mrs. Rochester and walked up to her, sniffing and licking Mrs. Rochester’s knee. For a minute, the angry furrow on Mrs. Rochester’s face relented as she looked at Regina’s missing leg, but she quickly stifled it.

“My son’s allergic; there’s a reason we don’t allow pets here,” she said.

“I swear, Mrs. Rochester, I won’t let Regina out of my sight,” Mitt said, “I’ll put down a deposit—”

“Get rid of the dog or leave,” Mrs. Rochester announced. “Final verdict.”

She slammed the door, and when she finished walking back downstairs Mitt muttered after her, almost calling her a slur, while Lila grabbed Regina by her collar.

“We’ll find her a new home,” Lila said, rubbing Mitt’s shoulder. “She can stay with my folks for now. I’m sorry, Mitt; Regina’s such a good dog, doesn’t deserve this one bit.”

“I’m not leaving her.”

“Mitt, c’mon. We’ll get kicked out.”

“No need. I’m moving out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I can’t afford this place on my own.”

“It’s for Regina,” he turned and rubbed Lila’s shoulder. “I’ll pay the rent for the rest of the lease.”

“So you’re just gonna leave me here?”

“I just said it’s for—”

“Regina’s a dog! We’ve been friends since college!”

They didn’t speak for the next week, as Mitt packed his things into various boxes, hired a small box truck to transport his mattress and Regina’s kennel. Though she had always loved animals, Lila refused to play with Regina during that time, ignored her pitying moans, left her food and water bowl go empty. Mitt had never seen her treat any animal in such a way, and he began to wonder how hurt Lila was. He heard her on the phone later, negotiating an exit with Mrs. Rochester and making arrangements with her boyfriend. He thought he caught her calling him, “dog-crazy, wish I’d never taken him to the stupid shelter.”

In the last hour, as he packed his final things into a truck, she came up to him as he was eating pizza over an extra cardboard box. She sat down and handed him a small slip of paper bearing her boyfriend's address.

"In case you need anything," she said.

Regina hopped over and rested her head on Lila's knees, as if she knew she wouldn't be seeing Lila much anymore. At last, Lila broke into a snuffle as she scratched Regina's ear.

"It's not your fault, honey," she said. "I'm sorry Mommy ignored you. Mommy loves you."

"You can still visit her," Mitt said.

Lila cast one final grimace at Mitt. "You need to grow up. You get one dog and then you wreck our lease over her?"

"She saved me," Mitt said. "I was pitiful. You remember."

Lila pursed her lips, looked at Mitt askance. Mitt knew she thought he was going crazy, but Lila didn't know him. She judged him. She didn't understand how much Regina needed him, the connection they had together. The two college friends gave each other a polite embrace and shared one more goodbye. Then Mitt took off in the rented box truck toward his new apartment, with Regina in the passenger seat, her head out the window as her ears and tongue flopped in the tailwind on the nice summer day. Mitt grinned at the sight. The months passed.

"Binky doesn't like her," Mitt said while walking around the apartment complex with Terrence, holding hands with him. Terrence had been talking about his work at the police station, how his rottweiler Binky had once been a drug sniffing dog before he'd

gotten too old and been shot on the job once. Mitt had found that endearing, but the more they walked, the more Mitt noticed that Binky growled every time Regina approached him, spooking her so much she almost lost her stance. Binky had no right to judge her. He was being prejudicial.

“Binky’s always like that,” Terrence said. “See his rib? That’s where he got shot, when he sniffed out the meth on his last case. Druggie tried to kill Binky to save his own ass, and I put a bullet in his leg. What kind of sick fucker tries to kill a dog?”

“Her missing leg doesn’t scare him, you think?”

“Gosh no! Binky loves cripples, er, disabled people, whatever the term is. He was best friends with Wheelie back at the office, took joy rides on his lap all the time.”

Terrence kept telling stories about his time at the police academy while Mitt smiled and laughed at appropriate moments, all the while keeping a wary eye on Binky. As their dates continued, Mitt noticed Binky never quit growling at Regina, like she were some pestilence he wanted to chase away, and Mitt found it repulsive. Regina didn’t need that kind of hatred in her life. One night, Terrence took Mitt out for a nice meal at the Greek restaurant. They sat at a nice table waiting for the pita bread to come out, napkins over their laps. It was their first date in a while without the dogs. Terrence was dressed up in his nicest white shirt and tie.

“You know, I really like you,” Terrence put his hand over Mitt’s on the tableside, putting an envelope in Mitt’s hands. “So, I got us tickets to Myrtle Beach. Next weekend, the whole weekend. Don’t worry, I found a sitter for the dogs. What do you say?”

“I think we should quit seeing each other.”

The pita bread came out, and the waiter wished them a wonderfully good meal. Mitt helped himself to a few pieces while Terrence sat in his chair, gaping at him.

“Thank you for dinner,” Mitt said. “But I need to get going. Regina’s sitter doesn’t know how to put her to bed.”

“Why?”

“You know, the reviews on Yelp seemed decent enough, but I don’t think she’s actually—”

“No, us! I thought we were good.”

“Oh,” Mitt said. “Well, I didn’t.”

As Terrence began spouting off—telling Mitt all the things that were actually wrong with him which Terrence had apparently been stuffing away all this time—Mitt recalled asking him earlier this afternoon whether Binky wouldn’t be happier at his parents’ home, the poor dog was just getting so old and seemed so jumpy around Regina. Terrence had called it nonsense; him and Binky were lifers. That’s when Mitt knew.

After, they parted ways, Mitt saw a string of other guys, none of whom lasted much longer than a week. They all adored Regina but grew tired of Mitt insisting they spend their dates walking her or used her as an excuse to not go to movies or spend the night at some other person’s house or a campgrounds somewhere. Mitt wouldn’t hire a sitter of any kind anymore, and he couldn’t seem to leave her alone for more than a few hours. He’d spend his lunch hours during work rushing home to take her out in the new spacious backyard of his apartment complex, double the rent of his old place, but he didn’t mind. Dogs were welcomed here; there were even baggies stored around the

courtyard. Mitt bonded with a few other dogwalkers living in the complex, but he couldn't help tugging Regina a little whenever she played with other dogs.

“Does she run off a lot?” other owners would ask him. “Surely she can't get far.”

“No. She's perfect,” Mitt would say, and as they saw him tightly gripping the leash, they'd laugh nervously, assuming Mitt was new to dogs. They'd tell him to relax, that he had doggy daddy jitters, and he would nod his head in vague ascension to shut them up. Regina needed him. These clowns didn't understand.

Lila called occasionally, and she visited a couple times at Mitt's invitation; he thought Regina missed her, no matter that he still felt stung from her words when they parted. Their times together were short; Lila used her boyfriend to get away quickly, and Mitt let her go. When she left, he would scratch Regina behind the ears, telling her what a good dog she was, rewarding her with bone treats she would gnaw on for several minutes.

Mitt and Regina returned to Dewberry Park several times, and there was a bench by a bridge where Mitt always liked to sit down, Regina lying at his feet. She knew not to run off now, even when her ears perked up as she scanned the lake's surface, watched boaters fishing in the center with a hawk's vigilance. Mitt had a feeling she yearned to swim, liked to feel the water on her legs. Maybe her missing one didn't feel so missing when she was in there, paddling around like other dogs.

“Regina, Regina, Regina,” Mitt said. “I know you wanna leap into the water. But I can't protect you when you're in there, you know? Did I ever tell you the last time I went for a swim? It was the summer after sixth grade. I was out by my parents' lake, paddling around on the shore near the dock. I was getting ready to go to my last swim

practice; my sister was supposed to take me. She could swim like a champ, you know, had no fears about it whatsoever. But it starts getting late, dusk climbing over the woods and all, and I remember thinking what's taking her so long, why isn't she here? I worried that my sister had forgotten me, stranded me, especially when her cat came out, the white one she still had after the other one died. She'd escaped out of the house like she did. The cat watched me from the shore, and I climbed out of the water, towed off, and it curled itself around my leg before it ran off into the woods. The sight of that cat running off felt like something dreadful, something ominous, Regina. So I guess I wasn't that surprised when my dad pulled up in the truck instead of my sister, with his cap crumpled in his hands. He sat me inside the kitchen to tell me that my mother had learned at the hospital that my sister had gone to a party the night before, that they'd had too much to drink, that they'd gone out to some river and she'd tried swimming across it. Some anonymous source called the cops, and a team had found her body. He told me that whole story and I just sat at the table, looking out the window. I saw my sister's cat running off into the woods. I still can't remember the cat's name, Regina. I can hear my sister cooing his name all the time in the house, but I can't remember what the name was. I don't know why."

Mitt felt a tug on the leash and pulled Regina back from sneaking toward the lake. She whined at him, and Mitt hugged his arms around her neck, soothing her, telling her he was sorry if he hurt her. He thought of Terrence's beach getaway. Perhaps the two of them could use a vacation like that, and at work the next day he filed for some personal days.

As he got on his laptop and booked a flight for Myrtle Beach, he read the rules about baggage, seating, and carry-on items, coming at last to the airline's policies on animals. Only certified service dogs allowed, it said. He tried searching for friendlier airlines and found the rare few too expensive for him. Mitt threw his hands up in the air and growled, thinking what a joke these airlines were. Renting a car and driving would be slightly more expensive, and take much longer, and Regina deserved all the vacation she could get. She'd seemed fatigued a lot recently; the vet had told him she was simply getting old, and Mitt fretted about her never getting to see the beach, experience the ocean like he had a long time ago when his father had taken him and his sister. The pictures of those vast bodies of water still put a chill in him, but he would go there for Regina. So Mitt shopped online for animal safety vests, false certificates, and other forgeries. Weeks later, at the airport, Mitt got through security quickly enough.

"Are you handicapped?" the TSA worker asked him after Regina stepped through the metal detector.

"I get anxiety on flights," he said. "She calms me down."

Everyone nodded as they noted Regina's blue-and-yellow vest, sporting a yellow hexagon surrounding the silhouette of a golden retriever with the word SERVICE in bold, white letters across it. One guard even cooed after Regina yipped at him, dropping to her chest as if to play with him. Mitt tugged Regina along, hurrying her along past kiosks and restaurants toward their gate. They took their seats among the thick crowd, Mitt pulling out a book to read from while waiting. Across from him and Regina, a mother with thick black curls in a tank top and flip flops was bouncing her young daughter on her knee, one suitcase and a purse beside them. The girl reached a hand out to Regina, who licked each

of her fingers, making the girl laugh. Mitt smiled. Regina was a good soul. Then a ticket worker came over and asked the mother to come to the desk with them, and after she wheeled her suitcase and carried her daughter over, Mitt occasionally peeked from his tablet to watch them. The worker at the desk spoke in soft tones while tilting her head down, in absolute concern, as the mother began grabbing her hair, looking around the airport as if for an escape. She began bickering, pulling out papers and poking at them, speaking in quiet, imperfect English. The desk worker noticed Mitt, who quickly turned back to his book, but he was summoned shortly after. Her nametag bore the name Shawna.

“Hi there! What a gorgeous dog,” Shawna said right off the bat, addressing Mitt’s pet first, as Mitt had noticed the custom was. “How old is she?”

“About eleven human years.”

“So sweet,” she said, finishing with pleasantries. “Sir, I apologize. There was a mistake in the booking system. Absolutely our bad. We neglected to book a mother’s child on the plane, and all the seats have already been filled. We see that you booked a seat for your pet ...”

“She’s a service dog,” Mitt explained. “I need her.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry, we’d have her incredibly nice and cozy in the luggage compartment. We have special kennels, handlers, the works.”

“I need her with me in the cabin. I get anxiety on flights.”

Shawna smiled, leaned forward over the desk. Regina growled slightly in response, sensing Mitt’s recoil. “Sir, I hate to ask. But could you provide a doctor’s note explaining your condition?”

“I wasn’t informed I needed to bring a doctor’s note.”

“Then I’m afraid we have to concede the seat,” she frowned, shaking her head in mock sorrow; the faux empathy made Mitt want to bash her phone over her skull, how ludicrous her display was. “Don’t worry, there’s many other options. We could book you a later flight, or we could stow her safely—very safely—in the luggage compartment. We would pay you back for the extra seat, and heck I’ll even put a bunch of miles on your card, for your next flight. Would you like a minute to think it over?”

Mitt stood stiffly before the desk. He’d paid for two seats. He and Regina would only have this weekend before flying back. He didn’t know how much time she had left. He didn’t want to lose a single hour because the airline had screwed up their seating. He checked the TV in the corner, saw a news story about an online boycott for a department store that had been caught on camera racially profiling some patrons. Mitt casually drew his phone, unlocking the screen and pulling up the video.

“Shawna, is that your name? Isn’t it wonderful that we all have camcorders in our pockets now?” Mitt said, showing her his phone was ready to record. “Maybe I should record some video right now. And maybe I could send it to the local news later as proof that your airline neglected to inform me that I needed to bring a doctor’s note to prove my condition. That you threw a mentally handicapped person and his service dog off your flight to cover up your own mishandling. I’m sure that would be a juicy, viral headline to go around on the Internet. I’m sure the CEO, board of chairs, whoever, would love that kind of attention. I’m sure they’d be looking for someone to take the fall once it went viral.”

Her smile froze stiffly on her face, to Mitt's pleasure. "Sir, I'm trying to keep a family together."

"Book them another flight. It's not my fault your computer screwed up."

She blinked several times before she picked up her glossy red phone and made a couple calls, explaining the situation and nodding her head several times as sweat collected on her brow. When she put it down, she informed Mitt that of course he would be allowed to keep both his seats and take Regina with him, and she profusely apologized for the way she had treated him, that she had never meant to question his condition, and he told her he accepted her apology, calling her a bitch under his breath on his way back to the seat. As Mitt returned to his seat, he took little note as the desk worker had to summon the mother and her daughter again, explain that they would have to wait until later that night for another plane, and he thought he heard the mother begging for the earlier flight, something about a court date for the father's deportation. As they left the gate, Mitt tuned the conversation out as he scratched Regina behind the ears.

Mitt and Regina had a wonderful time in Florida. They went for morning runs together, Mitt holding her leash as Regina galloped across the beach, and when he grew tired they lay on the towel under an umbrella, Regina occasionally wriggling but never leaving Mitt's side. The ocean was beautiful but also terrifying. He let her skip and hop in the tideline, but he kept her leash firmly in his grip, refusing to let her swim in the ocean. He was doing everything he could to keep her safe, from everything nature could throw their way.

But nature nonetheless found a way. A few months after they returned, Regina began slowing down. She took a long time to wake in the morning, some mornings

refusing to get out of bed, even when Mitt waved her leash in front of her face, telling her they would go to Dewberry Park. Quick as he could, he took her to the vet for a checkup.

“Cancer in the liver,” the vet told him, following it with minutes of medical jargon Mitt barely registered as he held Regina’s leash in his hand, until the vet finished explaining. “She has about three months left. You wanna hear some options?”

“I need some time alone, if you don’t mind.”

The vet patted Mitt on the shoulder, and she walked back to help an assistant immunize a lesbian couple’s fussing cat. Mitt and Regina sat together in the solemn office, Mitt slumped against the chair, Regina curled at his feet. He saw a young boy with a puppy licking its cheek, a typical Labrador, Mitt could see. He could see the boy running around with that puppy, then getting friends later, going to baseball games or what not, the Lab turning into some kind of social link for the boy to reach others. That hadn’t been Mitt and Regina. She had become Mitt’s closest companion, a kind of glass he could empty all his bad thoughts into, expel them and Regina would absorb them into her, cleansing Mitt’s worst fears. He could confess anything to her, and she would never talk back to him, never judge him for his flaws and failures. And in return he took care of her, fed her, exercised her. All of that, for what? He remembered the slip of paper, then, and searched his sock drawer to find it with Lila’s address on it.

At her apartment, they sat together on her couch, Lila wiping her eyes after seeing Regina limping around now, still burning to play fetch and lick people’s faces but now with more struggle than before. Mitt looked around, saw photos of Lila with her boyfriend and various animals, including birds, cats, dogs, mice, rabbits, hamsters. They

fostered animals sometimes, Lila said, when the shelter didn't have space for them. Mitt felt like Lila was cheating on Regina, but he kept his opinion to himself.

“We had to put down an animal today,” Lila said. “A Doberman. Poor thing. Nobody wanted him, his facial scar scared people away, and he was getting old and sick. We all loved that Doberman, knew he had a sweet heart, but we couldn't spend the money on another surgery for him. Broke my heart.”

Regina put her head on Lila's lap, and she rubbed it tenderly.

“I think you should bring her to us, Mitt.”

“I'm sorry?”

“It'll be less painful for her that way,” she said. Mitt imagined her choosing her words carefully at this point, fiddling with and measuring them. “You need to let her go, Mitt. I think you have trouble with that sometimes.”

“I think I'm good enough at letting people go. Unlike you, I just like a chance to grieve instead of tossing them away.”

“I didn't mean it like that, Mitt. I mean, this is a chance for you not to toss her away. To let her go peacefully.”

Mitt buried his face in his lap, crumpled his arms over his head while Lila rubbed his back. Regina cooed and came over to lay her head next to his. He kept imagining water, water bubbling up, swirling all around him. He remembered seeing an ad on television, one of those PSAs, except this one featured a teenage girl lying in bed until water came streaming through the windows, wrecking the furniture and sloshing her things everywhere, while she banged on the door that had somehow locked. The water flooded more and more until she was left suspended, clutching her neck as she drowned

violently. Mitt couldn't remember what the PSA had been for—drugs or something—but he clutched his neck, acknowledging that consistent fear of something invading his space, threatening to surround him and rob him of all oxygen, nothing to ward it off.

“Okay,” he muttered to Lila. She hugged him then, told him they could make an appointment tomorrow.

Back home, Regina lay in her small corner bed, making no noise, her ears flopped across her paws as she stared at Mitt. He knew this day was going to come eventually, but it was too soon. They needed more time. She needed him. He could see the scars on her ribs and knew she'd lived a life of neglect and mistreatment. He called in to work, asked for a personal day, and found he couldn't sleep that night. As the morning sun rose into his window, he grabbed Regina's leash and shook her from her sleep.

“C'mon, girl,” he said, and Regina shook off her gloom as she fit her head through the collar.

They drove to Dewberry Park one more time, so early that the only other person there was some lone fisher in the center of the lake. Mitt and Regina had stopped going after a while, when it seemed to have blown up on pet owners' radars, but this last time was worth it when Mitt pulled into the lot and let his Saluki-Labrador out, who leapt out to sniff dandelion beds and elm trees surrounding the footpaths. Mitt remembered when he'd first taken Regina to the park, how happy she'd seemed to be there. He remembered playing fetch with her there, roaming the forest trails, and here and there Mitt squatting down just to grab her, hug her, rub her, touch her, feel her warmth spreading through him like a secret rejuvenation, healing every ugly thought inflicted inside him. He didn't know how he was going to live without her.

Regina's ears perked at some splash of water. She began barking and took off, her leash slipping out of Mitt's hand. He jumped from the bench and saw her launch herself into a lake, paddling towards the center.

"Regina!" Mitt shouted, and ran after her, pounding his shoes hot on the concrete, until he ran to the edge of a boat ramp, where he could see what Regina was swimming toward. The boat in the center had overturned, and in the middle was an older man flailing, his yells for help barely audible. Mitt took off his shoes, his pants, his shirt, and he waded into the water before it was deep enough for him to doggy paddle then swim. He'd never been a good swimmer, and the lake was large enough to scare him, cause his heart to freeze while considering swimming its length. His feet quit touching the bottom quickly, but he swam on toward Regina. The sight of her struggling in the water drove him on. He got close enough and found Regina madly waving her legs, trying to stay above water, and he quickly put an arm under her, helping her stay afloat. He could see the older man waving his limbs madly as well, struggling in the water. The man's boat was overturned, a bait box and rod floating away from them, and his orange vest wrapped around his head was flat on the surface, a hole in its breast.

"Oh, thank God!" he sputtered. "Help!"

"Just hold on," Mitt said.

"No!" the man flailed. "No, come back!"

The man would stay afloat for another few minutes, and Mitt would come back for him, but Regina needed to get to shore first. Mitt struggled as she squirmed under his arm, water threatening to slip down his windpipe, but continued swimming even as he heard half-gargled screams until he and Regina reached shore. Mitt collapsed to his knees

while Regina ran up the footpath and shook her coat before coming back to Mitt, biting his shirt and helping him out of the water. She licked his wet face as he balled up a shirt to pad Regina dry, wrapped his jeans around her fur, and hugged her to warm her up. Regina whimpered and shivered in between Mitt's legs, her wet black nose probing his face for attention, and Mitt suddenly recalled when he'd first gotten her at the shelter, the way the press of her nose had felt like a balm on his troubled soul, and he embraced her, burying his face in her belly. Then Mitt looked toward the lake again. The man was gone.

He checked Dewberry Park, saw nobody else around. He figured there'd be a search for the old man later, but Mitt wouldn't be there. He would be home, with Regina, making her comfortable in her last days. She didn't deserve to drown. She had inspired him to brave water, to save her. All that mattered was Regina, his best friend, his furry companion, who never judged him, who helped him stay afloat. She needed him, she needed him, she needed him.

TORY RIDE

A few hours before she would commit an act she never thought herself capable of doing, Amity leaned back into her poolside wicker lounge chair, lazy and indolent, sipping on an Italian soda she'd ordered from the hotel concierge as she listened to Opal read from a laptop, rattling off tasks for each of the eight Kampong Thom volunteers to do the next few weeks. Every volunteer had to bring around ten Cambodian girls from their local school. Marcia would handle the logistics, printing out schedules and fliers and any materials needed for the presentations. Ellie, the sole health volunteer in the province, would talk to nonprofits, but they still needed one to present on sexual health to the students. Amity and Zeke would team up for the writing and arts activities.

As she barely noted the instructions Opal was imparting onto them, Amity drowsed in the swampy air, the hot sunlight scathing her skin. It was all a scam, wasn't it, she thought, her cynicism scathing her mind. A bunch of American Peace Corps volunteers would teach these girls about things like the importance of sexual health! how important it was for women to work! how to recognize and stop domestic violence! but all those high school girls would go back to their domineering mothers telling them how to be a "proper" Cambodian girl, how to clean up around the house and cook food for the family, how to smile when your drunk husband belts you in the eye one night for nagging him to come home earlier. In the year she'd spent living with her host family, Amity still didn't get along with the mother, a woman always teasing her for playing her Springsteen knockoff acoustic guitar alone in her room every day. But then one night while strumming a morose "Born in the U.S.A." rendition, Amity heard the mother and father arguing in their room, followed by a solid smack, a long silence, then water running in

the bathroom. The next day, the father was telling jokes and making the whole family laugh like he always did, while the mother laughed politely with them, her foundation lightly obscuring the foul play on her face. The sound of running water still rang to Amity as clear as the wind brushing palm tree leaves around her now, or the sharp zing of a knife slicing jack fruit in the hotel's kitchen.

Water splashed her foot, and Amity saw Zeke treading water in the pool, stifling wolfish cackles. Of the ten volunteers in Kampong Thom, Zeke was the sole male, and Amity's closest American neighbor, seven kilometers away from her site. He hadn't slept with any of the women volunteers yet, unlike his fellow male volunteers in the other provinces, and Amity appreciated him for that. She let their friendship grow, though she couldn't help reading into his gestures, watching for signs of anything more trying to grow. Zeke splashed her again, at which she shook her head, rose, and jumped into the pool after him, her shirt and shorts still on. Tempted by the two's antics in the pool, the other volunteers shed their clothes for the bikinis underneath, and even Opal conceded, folding her laptop up to join them. The women soaked their skin in pool water, letting loose after weeks spent at site wrapping their ankles inside sampots, collared shirts buttoned all the way up at all times.

After they climbed out and dried off, the volunteers shared their goodbyes as they climbed onto their bikes to ride back home or to the highway to pick up a ride home. Two other volunteers jumped on a tory going north, leaving only Zeke and Amity left in the city, trying to board a vehicle going south to their neighboring villages. They walked to the highway, towing their extra clothes, sunscreen, and a few snacks from the provincial capital market for their ride home.

“I’m so sick of this heat,” Zeke moaned. He scratched his forehead, kicked at the dirt beneath his feet as he and Amity stood at the corner of Highway Six and *Phlaur Tuk*, two cracked streets intersecting at the edge of town. Kampong Thom City’s tall buildings reigned over the landscape, their looming shadows ceasing a few feet before reaching Zeke and Amity. The shadows crept closer as the sun set in the sky. Passing them by on the highway were semis with broken lights; busses ferrying Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and European tourists; and mopeds driven by fathers, the mothers in the passenger seat carrying their babies, and three other kids squeezed behind them. Street vendors hawked their pineapple bits, their strawberry-flavored soda, and roasted crickets at the two *barang*s dressed in loose pants and tank tops, lathered in sunscreen and shoed in sandals caked with dirt and mud.

Zeke and Amity and three Cambodian men waited for a tory to stop by and pick up passengers. Any tory. Large vans carrying more than a dozen people (almost two dozen if no one was hauling any pigs, caged chickens, hauls of bananas or coconuts), tories were the fastest option for anyone looking to dash through Cambodia. The tories adhered to no clear schedule; they drove as fast as they could on the highways, skating around potholes and semis.

“Quit pacing, Zeke,” Amity spoke after sipping through a straw from her plastic bag of coffee and condensed milk. “They won’t stop if they think we’re busy.”

“No, they won’t stop because they think we’re rich tourists waiting for a bus. Just because we’re white.”

“*You’re* white,” Amity reminded him, glancing at her skin, once a dark cream paled by American life but now a rich brown after many months biking outside through

the flat fields back and forth between her school and home. “People at my site still think I’m from China.”

“Hey! We’re not rich! We’re just as poor as you!” Zeke cupped his hands around his mouth like a bullhorn, his useless words echoing to nobody’s ears. The three men beside them muttered to each other, laughing at the boy’s antics and scanning the girl up and down, to Amity’s displeasure. Zeke sat down next to Amity on the curb. She dwelled on his words, the lie inherent in them.

“We’re still Americans,” she muttered after him.

“A hundred fifty bucks a month isn’t much after food, school supplies, and five wedding gifts,” he argued with her, sitting down on the ground next to her.

“Five?”

“My host cousin, my co-teacher, my uncle’s second one, the lady who sells me t-shirts ten percent off,” Zeke counted off weddings. “Who am I missing? Maybe it was four. What’d you spend your money on?”

“My friend teaching in Seoul came to visit,” she said, hanging her head. She’d spent half her monthly salary in Siem Reap visiting Angkor Wat and eating out. Her friend benefited from the exchange rate and endlessly remarked how *cheap* Cambodia was compared to South Korea. After she’d departed, Amity had let loose the long sigh she kept trapped the entire weekend with her non-Peace Corps friend. How relative wealth could be.

“D’you see Opal went to Hong Kong with her mom last month?”

“But she just finished her basketball court last week! How does she have the time? Fuck.”

“Five-star volunteers,” Zeke complained. “I’m so sick of seeing them blow up Facebook with pictures. ‘Look at the bathrooms my community built! Look at the school court my Let Girls Learn grant approved! #PCLife!’ Hash tag blow me.”

“Oh my God,” Amity affected Opal’s celestial voice, like a CEO opening for a charity event. “I’m just *so* grateful to be here in Cambodia. My host family and school have taught me *so much* about what *happiness* there is in taking bucket showers and wiping my ass with my bare hand.”

“And because of that, I *so deserve* to vacation in Hong Kong with my lawyer mommy.”

The two burst into so much laughter they didn’t even try hailing the clean, white tory that rushed past them. The two had agreed on a beaten up tory, one boasting a crooked fender, holes in the ceiling, seat cushions ripped up, no AC, squealing puppy in a burlap sack, or a monkey riding the back tire. Those were the cheapest tories, only 12,000 riel, three dollars, two cheaper than the standard fare. That would be four extra meals in their villages if they bought only pork and rice from then on.

“We can haggle the driver down to two,” Zeke said. “I’ve gotten so good, I whine and kick up a fuss.”

“Maybe we should just grab a bus. The sun’s getting low,” Amity pointed out. Cambodia’s highways had no streetlights, no street markings, and half the vehicles on the road didn’t have functioning headlights, all reasons for Peace Corps Unbreakable Rule #3: Don’t travel at night. A couple motorists pulled over next to them, offering two-dollar rides each toward their villages, but Zeke and Amity waved them off. Peace Corps Unbreakable Rule #1: Don’t ride motos.

“Stupid Peace Corps rules,” she muttered as they sped away.

“Here comes one,” Zeke said, waving down a rusty red tory, its side door already sliding open to expose a lanky teen. The windshield was cracked, the backseat empty, the middle seat holding a clearly pregnant woman and her mother. The driver screeched to a stop next to them. The teen leaped out of the car to usher travelers inside.

“*Ttuol ban!*” he yelled. The three men climbed on, handing the teenager a fistful of bills. The skinny man whispered something to the teenager, and he nodded, moving aside for the men to climb into the back then gestured for Zeke and Amity. Zeke made to climb on, but Amity spoke first.

“Three dollars each,” she said. The teenager shook his head.

“Dree fitty, ‘dree fitty!” he said.

“Nope,” Amity pushed three dollars into the boy’s hand and tried to climb on, but he stepped in front of her, gesturing for more money.

“Amity, come on,” Zeke said, belying his earlier statement about his negotiation skills. “This is our last chance.”

Amity checked the tory parked in front of them. The three men sat in the back, their kroma scarves wrapped around their heads, capped with baseball hats. The driver was drinking viscous water. Amity bit her lips.

“Zeke, let’s get another—” she didn’t finish speaking before Zeke pressed an extra dollar into the teenager’s hand and climbed into the seat next to the pregnant woman. Amity closed her eyes and followed. The tory took off, Amity and Zeke crammed together into one and a half seats, the pregnant woman asleep in her chair, her mother curled up next to her. A smell of chicken shit came from the front of the car. The

sun sank lower into the horizon, dusk creeping over the rice fields and palm trees, the occasional house stilted high above the land, for when the rainy season brought floods.

The tory rattled as it sped at a breakneck pace over the wide dirt road cutting through Cambodia's rice fields that constituted a national highway. A Chinese construction crew was paving the stretch between Zeke and Amity's villages and Phnom Penh, but the stretch they were on remained mostly unpaved, like the farm roads stenciling the flat countryside. The two volunteers had biked it from their villages a few times. Their sweat fell behind them on the hot days, the sun searing their skin, vehicles kicking up dust clouds caking them into clay-like figures as they begged for rain from the occasional cloud, peddled their large mountain bikes haggardly toward the next city, always too many kilometers away.

The tory driver wavered in the lane a little, jerking back every time he neared the center of the road or the ditch on the other side. The young man—a boy, really, Amity realized—sat in the passenger seat, peeling an orange with a knife far too big for the task, its handle taped up. Zeke munched on a Clif bar he'd brought in his backpack, a gift sent to him from home. He offered one to Amity, who shook her head, feeling sick. The tory ran over the occasional pothole, jostling the car enough that Zeke's head smacked into the ceiling. The pregnant woman's mother kicked the driver's seat, yelling at him in Khmer, and the driver grumbled but slowed down, taking another swig from his water bottle. The three men sat quietly in back, murmuring to each other occasionally. They eyed Amity and her long black mane.

“What have you got for this week?” Zeke asked her.

“Enlist students for the camp. And I think my co-teacher’s giving a test this week,” Amity said. “I’m also still trying to figure out a good project to do.”

“Renovate your library, that’s what I’m doing.”

“The last volunteer did that,” Amity muttered. “It’s got a Dewey Decimal System and everything.”

Amity resented the volunteer who’d come to her village before her, a quiet homebody who’d rarely left his host family’s house and so had bonded quickly with the mother, the father, and two brothers, both whom barely spoke to Amity herself. Maybe they were mad she hadn’t been a boy they could relate to, or a girl they were allowed to flirt with. God forbid they try to be friends with her, Amity thought and huffed.

“I can’t believe we have another year,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” Zeke asked.

“It’s just all ... so much,” she flung her back into her seat. She was always hot, always sick of eating rice and soup and fish, always tired of teaching. She hadn’t had sex in months, not since that stupid blonde German in Kampot she’d hooked up with during a trip to Phnom Penh, the expat teaching a reiki class to touristy hippies. He hadn’t returned any of her texts or calls afterward. She hadn’t called her mother—her real mother—in a while. “How often do you think about quitting?”

“Hard to say,” Zeke said. They had signed up for a two-year commitment, but Peace Corps would let them terminate early if they decided. None of the staff would ask any questions, just pack their bags and send them home. A volunteer Amity had befriended during training quit six months ago after suffering too much depression and anxiety at site. Before leaving, she’d told Amity about the cold tone the assistant director

had adopted over the phone, how she'd struggled to pack all of her things into two suitcases, the hot embarrassed tears that ran down her face when she thought of having to tell her family back home the change of plans. The image was all that was holding Amity back at the moment.

“I think it's been like every day for me,” Amity confessed.

“Maybe you're having that halfway slump they talked about.”

“Fuck that. I've been in a slump for months now,” she sank into her seat, angry at Zeke for trying to rationalize her anger. Cambodia was easier on the men. Shaking her head, she pulled out a notebook and her weathered edition of *English for Cambodia*, an old British textbook designed to teach Cambodian students English. It was fifteen years old and in need of an update. She flipped to the chapter she'd be teaching tomorrow and looked at the vocabulary words. *To recognize ...* Amity read the definition and knew her students wouldn't understand it at all. She could always have it translated, but she wanted to keep her students thinking in English. Tapping her notebook, rocking her foot on the bed of the tory, Amity couldn't think of a simple definition for the word. The tory skidded over a pothole, jostling everyone in their seats. Feeling her stomach grow ill, Amity stowed her materials away and stared out the window.

The sun had nearly disappeared under the horizon. The road was getting hard to make out, the tory's headlights obscured by an indolent cloud of dust. The pregnant woman woke up, patted her baby's belly. Zeke tried to speak to her in Khmer, and she kept asking, “Come again? I don't understand?” and he gave up. He told Amity he studied every day and still didn't know Khmer well enough to hold a decent conversation; she didn't know why she knew it any better than him. She knew some

Malay from her mother but didn't think the languages were much alike. Perhaps Southeast Asia's ambience had activated a lingering script in her DNA.

The driver turned on the TV, and a Khmer music video blared out from the screen. A woman crooned a soft tune and gently danced, her wrists elegant and fluid as she twisted in her golden sarong, her whitener heavily applied on her face. On the screen, a moving cursor colored the white subtitles to red as she sang each word, and melodious Khmer spilled out into the van. Normally Khmer sounded screechy to Zeke and Amity, but the woman sang more deeply, her pitch more resonant and pleasant to their ears. The pregnant woman watched the music video, the singer reflected in her deep black irises. Amity took a Clif bar from Zeke and offered it to the woman. The young mother-to-be carefully unwrapped it, sniffed the oats and almonds. She took small bites, her dark brown lips flecking with granola. She ate the whole thing.

The men in the backseat goofed around, punching each other's shoulders. Finally, a skinny one leaned forward, tapped Amity's shoulder, and she turned her head back. His breath reeked of canned Angkor beer.

"He your husband, no?" the skinny man asked in Khmer, his two bulkier friends rapt with attention. She was about to tell the man no, they were just friends, but she noticed how their eyes consumed her face, traced her black silk hair, like at the market.

"Yes, he my husband," she said back. "We come from America. We going back home now."

"He look like sick river fish. You should ditch him, come with me," the man said. The other two burst out laughing at their friend's bold words. Amity's groaning stomach sickened.

“What are they saying?” Zeke said, laughing politely with the men. “I thought I heard pineapples. Or world peace, I get those two mixed up.”

“It’s nothing,” Amity twirled around, pulling her hair into a ponytail. She’d been meaning to cut it for a while. Her mane was reaching down near her waist, and she feared it would catch bed bugs, or leers as it did now. The men’s laughter ceased, and the skinny one poked her again. She ignored it before whipping around and fixing them with a glare.

“Everybody shut up tomorrow,” Zeke said in calm Khmer.

“Zeke, stop talking,” Amity said.

“I’m just trying to help,” he said. “You’re getting fired up.”

“He’s touching me, it’s pissing me off!” she snapped at him. “I knew we shouldn’t have gotten on this tory.”

“Amity, we can’t get off now, it’s dark. We won’t get another one.”

“Call your mom, doesn’t your host family have a car?”

“It’s in Phnom Penh. I’ll stop the men, don’t worry about it—Amity!”

Amity ignored Zeke, tired of men telling her what to do. She leaned forward and addressed the driver in her simple, crisp Khmer. “We want off. These men bother me.”

The teen turned, his mouth half-full of oranges, and he set his knife on the middle seat. The driver ignored her. Amity stood up from her seat, shook when the tory careened around a pothole, and grabbed the passenger seat for stability. Fixing herself up, she ignored the backseat men howling at the sight of a slight, Cambodian-looking American trying to grab the driver’s attention.

“Driver. We want stop,” she nudged his shoulder. The teen told her to sit back down as the driver opened his water bottle. A vile odor attacked Amity’s nose, and she recoiled into her seat.

“Zeke! The driver’s drunk!”

As she finished speaking, the driver drifted toward the center of the road as an oncoming pair of headlights approached them. Zeke screamed curses, and the pregnant woman’s mother kicked the driver’s seat again, cursed at him in Khmer. The driver swerved right, nearly veering into a canal as a semi honked, rushing past them, the blast of air slamming the tory. Amity and Zeke clung the sides of their seat as the driver curved the vehicle back onto the road. The pregnant woman and her mother were wide awake, clutching each other. The men in the back howled with glee. The soft Khmer music kept playing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Zeke chanted.

“Why won’t they stop?” Amity said.

“I don’t know.”

Amity formulated plans for escape. She could feign nausea. Or even vomit for real, she thought as she rubbed her ailing stomach, but then she eyed the passenger in front breathing into a paper bag and composed herself. She and Zeke could scream, bother them enough to make them stop. Zeke could try overpowering the driver, but that might get them killed if they did it at the wrong time on the road. Zeke didn’t have the gumption for that, anyways.

“It’s okay,” Zeke said, his breath escalating. “We’ve probably ridden with drunk drivers before without even knowing. They say it happens all the time here.”

The tory's engine sputtered, slowing the vehicle down as its treads grinded against the ribs and ridges of the highway. The driver slammed the pedal, and it burst back to life, throwing all the passengers backward into their seats.

"Driver, too spoon, too spoon," Zeke said to the driver.

"Zeke, your Khmer sucks," Amity growled. Her friend said nothing, his lips pursed into a grimace. He liked to bottle his rage, like how Cambodians often did. But Amity was a firecracker, letting her fury simmer and pop into action. A voice whispered into her ear.

"We pay tory lot money," the skinny man behind her said. "We rush fast to karaoke bar. You come, no?"

During training their instructors had warned her and Zeke's cohort of volunteers about karaoke bars. Groups of Cambodian men would rent a room with couches for the night, a karaoke machine playing in the room. Waitresses brought in trays of drinks, six-packs of beer, their finest bottles of Cheval, or even offer themselves as company, whatever would rack up the bill, separate men from their money. Amity had loved karaoke back in America.

"Zeke, I want off this fucking tory," she said. The skinny man grazed his fingers on her shoulder before leaning back and chuckling with his friends. They looked around, and Amity noticed the pregnant woman's head bent down.

"Talk to her," Zeke said.

"We can't drag her into this," Amity shot back.

"Talk to her mother then. They probably want to get off, too."

The tory swerved again, going down the center. A gang of mopeds separated, honking their horns viciously at the driver, who raised his water bottle of vodka at them in response before realigning his driving. One of Amity's students at her school had died in an accident a few months ago. He'd been biking home from Amity's afterschool class, only a half hour away from his home when a semi had driven into him. Her co-teacher had found him on the road, couldn't hold back tears as she informed Amity. "He looked just like roadkill," she'd said in perfect English. Amity never heard such haunted wailing as when the boy's mother broke into the schoolgrounds, screaming for her son to come back home a day after his burial, clutching the boy's bike helmet, unworn during his accident. Peace Corps Rule #2: Never ride your bike without a helmet.

Figuring Peace Corps wouldn't approve of them knowingly riding with a drunk driver either, Amity turned to the mother and daughter.

"Can you tell him stop?" she pleaded to them.

"My daughter eight months pregnant, she need get home soon," the mother leaned over her daughter to say, then she hummed the way older Cambodian women did, starting low and working their way to a piercing pitch. "Where you live?"

"Truol Rhat."

"That only ten more minutes."

She knew the mother was lying. They'd just passed the lone large hill dotting Kampong Thom province. They were still almost an hour away from Amity's village. The mother turned from Amity, ending the conversation as she pretended to search her purse. But her daughter kept her gaze on Amity. They locked eyes, and Amity felt a chill. Amity's hair was wavier, and their lips differed, too, hers thin while Amity's were fuller,

like two hills meeting at the philtrum, but the two shared the same almond eyes, heart-shaped faces, long black hair. They almost looked like sisters. Amity recalled home in California, her middle sister going through a divorce, her oldest one stricken with brain disease. Her mother working her way up the bank chain of command, where she'd started out as a receptionist. Her stepfather reading the news in his recliner, checking over tax accounts later. Her parents' looks of anxiety during Amity's last semester of college, her announcement she was going abroad to teach English in Cambodia. Her mother had called her once during her finals week, sobbing about land mines still left in the country, dengue and malaria running rampant in the countryside, a possible civil war, droughts, famines—how could Amity possibly stay safe? Amity assured her mother she wasn't doing anything dangerous, and Peace Corps would send them home if they ever were.

Amity peered into the pregnant woman's eyes. They couldn't be that different in age, though it was hard to tell with Cambodians, their skin aging so slowly. She could've been in her thirties, or twenty-three like Amity. She wondered how the girl had gotten pregnant. Where her husband was. If she'd married at all, if there'd been a fiancé, a boyfriend, or a man lurking in the backseat of a tory one day. How did the girl feel about the baby now, had she dropped out of school, did she sell food or shirts at the market, work at a factory in Thailand, was that where she was coming from, or a doctor? Amity's questions stacked upon each other into a tower of unknowns, and the woman seemed like a portent of what could've been Amity in another life. Had her mother never left Laos, or never risen up in America beyond racking shirts at a clothing outlet. Lost for words, she reached for the woman's hand, caressing it with her own, holding their gaze. The pregnant girl licked her lips. Then screamed.

The girl grabbed her stomach and curled up like she was about to throw up. Her mother dropped her purse onto the ground, yelling *kon srey, kon srey!*? Streams of Khmer jabbered into the tory, overpowering the quiet Khmer tune. The mother barked at the boy up front, reaching across to smack him on his cheek. The teen untwisted himself, trying to deflect her blows, but the mother pummeled him with fists and he cowered back. The pregnant woman screamed more as her contractions continued, and the men in the back yelled, Amity making out “This crazy girl birthing!” The driver was nodding off until the mother picked up her bag and beat his head with it, telling him to stop immediately or she’d find out where he lived and have the police take away his vehicle. The driver lurched to life and took his foot off the pedal, drifted to the side of the road. Zeke and Amity sat stone still in their seats, observing the chaos ricochet about the tory.

The tory skipped over a few bumps, slowed down, and skidded to a stop. The passenger jumped out, threw the door open and shoved Amity and Zeke out of the van as he grabbed one arm of the pregnant woman, her mother holding her other arm. The men sat in the back, still as stones, none of them eager to help. The driver fell asleep. Cars and trucks rushed past their parked ride, and the dust spun in circles around them, coating their faces and clothes. Inside the tory, the Khmer ballad sang on.

The passenger ran behind the tory, pulled out a rice mat and laid it flat beside the tory, traffic streaming around the parked vehicle. Sobbing, the pregnant woman lay down, her mother muttering to her, saying breathe, breathe, breathe. The passenger tried fanning her face. Zeke and Amity clutched each other, unsure how to help. Amity wished she were a health educator. The mother lifted the daughter’s sarong, yelled push! and the daughter squeezed out yells through gritted teeth. Amity remembered her mother telling

her about the time Amity had been born, how her mother had broken her water while shopping for hydrangeas at a Wal-Mart. The girl hadn't broken her water yet. When would that happen? Should she get a towel? What towel?

The daughter's breathing slowed. Her hands loosened their vice-like grips, and her limbs sagged as she looked up into the night sky, its stars twinkling out constellations unfamiliar to Amity. It had been a false labor. The mother wiped the sweat off her brow, chided her daughter for making a scene, and pulled out her phone to call someone. Amity was about to let out a long breath when she noticed one of the backseat men, the skinny one, stagger out the door. His fists curled up, his sinewy arms tensing, he started yelling at the pregnant woman, claiming she'd spoiled their night of fun. His friends climbed up to the door after him but failed to calm him down. "Stupid lying bitch!" Amity heard him say.

He lunged for the woman, still lying on the ground, but her mother stepped forward, catching the man's arm and pushing him back with maternal strength. Zeke rushed forward to help, was elbowed in the face yet still grabbed the man around his waist and pulled back. Amity noticed the teen opening his door, petrified enough to forget his knife on his seat, its taped handle centering Amity's awry gaze. Driven and enraged, she snatched it, ran forward, and stabbed the man, so deeply she let it go and left the knife stayed stuck in his hip. Thick rivulets of blood ran from his wound. The man howled, grabbing the knife's handle and sinking to the ground. His friends jumped out, huddled around him, grabbing their hair and letting loose with Khmer curses as everyone else stepped back. Amity caught her lookalike staring at her, eyes bulging so wide the white around her brown pupils became clear. The pregnant woman climbed to her feet

with surprising agility for someone who had just endured a false labor, and her mother rushed her back into the van. The boy shoved his father to the side, jumped into his seat, and rammed the gear shaft forward. The tory ignited to life, blasting down the road, dodging another incoming tory. While the two men were yelling after it, Zeke grabbed Amity's hand and pulled her away as they ran from the skinny man bleeding on the dirt.

The night wore on as the two sprinted. The sounds of crickets and birds foreign to Zeke and Amity engulfed them. They didn't stop running, their hearts ricocheting behind their bones. Zeke almost tripped into a ditch before Amity grabbed his shirt and pulled him back onto the road. They finally slowed down a mile later, both bending over and gasping. Amity threw up.

“Are you okay?” Zeke asked.

Amity nodded. She was okay for as long as the adrenaline lasted. But as the long night passed, her rush faded as their night calmed down, the air cooling under an icy moon. The two slowed to a miserable plod alongside the road, their hair frazzled and combed in dust. Amity waved her fingers through her hair, wondering if she could feel bedbugs crawling through the strands. Their feet blistered, grew sore. Both of them had forgotten their backpacks during the debacle. Semis dashed by, followed by drafts blasting the two further back from their journey. Amity and Zeke alternated looking back, watchful for the three men to appear on the horizon, hurtling after them. She'd seen the blood coming out of their ringleader's hip. It was like she'd stabbed herself, too, and a wound now gaped somewhere she couldn't salve with her hand or a bandage. The blood left a trail circling back to her, flowing around her into a long script she couldn't comprehend yet. She kept seeing the woman's young eyes, too, and Amity wondered if

woman feared her now. Amity was almost afraid of herself. She clutched her back, missing her things. As her nerves quieted down, she tried recalling everything that happened. The Khmer ballad cut across her conscious.

“How much longer?” Amity asked Zeke.

“I don’t know.”

A moto pulled up, its portly young Cambodian driver grinning at them. “Going where?” he said in choppy English.

“*Truol Rhat.*”

“One dollar, only one dollar, you and you,” he pointed at them each.

The two didn’t even need to share a look. Both squeezed onto the seat, and Amity paid the fare. As the Cambodian wind whipped behind them, Amity realized how she called everything here Cambodian. The Cambodian sun. The Cambodian dust. Her Cambodian knife attack, like her brain was compartmentalizing every single thing she did here into a folder she would tuck away once she left. Zeke clenched the sides of the moto seat, and Amity hugged Zeke around his waist. The single light illuminating the bridge in Zeke’s town appeared on the horizon. Zeke told him to stop the moto there, his Khmer perfect for once.

“What do we tell Peace Corps?” he asked her as they approached the town.

“Nothing,” she said. “We don’t tell them, we don’t tell Opal or Marcia or any of the others, we don’t tell our host families, our families back home, we tell nobody.”

Zeke took his hand from the seat and pressed it onto hers, the one that had stabbed the man.

“Are you okay?” Zeke asked her.

“I’ll be fine, Zeke,” she said, uncertain that she was.

“It’ll all be okay,” he told himself.

“It’ll be *so okay*,” Amity joked to him.

“Oh, this was just the *finest day of my life*, let me tell you, I’m *so grateful* for how *life-changing* it was!”

They let themselves laugh the day’s insanity away, and the Cambodian driver joined them. He pulled over to the intersection underneath the light, and Zeke climbed off. He waved her goodbye, told her he’d probably be scrounging around the market begging for a new backpack somewhere tomorrow, thank God he hadn’t taken his laptop this trip. He walked off, and Amity thought about how she would be scrounging, too. She shook her right hand out and let the motorist take her back to her home for the next year. She remembered those fearful eyes once more, saw them as clear as the lone light shining from her favorite eatery’s window, the rear light of the motorist driving away. She remembered those eyes so vividly she used them in her class the next day. Her hair was barely combed, still bedraggled from a lack of sleep.

“To recognize,” she said in English as she finished chalking those eyes on the board for her students, “means to see what you already know.” She finished drawing and turned around to survey her sophomore class, half boys and half girls, wondering what violence they’d already seen in sixteen or seventeen years, played out on the streets, at the markets, in the comforts of their homes, what roles they would perpetrate as they grew up. Amity felt the smooth white chalk nestled within her fist. She could see the eyes of that young pregnant woman in all of her students, that same quick thinking, expert acting, and compassion for strangers that had saved lives on that tory. If a pregnant teen

could endure such trials, Amity decided, then she, too, could stay on for the long ride ahead of her.

YOULEAD

We have to vote on a speech for the post office opening this evening, our spouses messaged us at the tennis match.

Jesus, I forgot, we wrote them back. The sun was hot, and our neckbones cracked as we looked back and forth between our phones and the match. Which one should we pick?

I thought the one about the child mailing his granma was nice.

just not mcrearys.

Hers wasnt that bad. Winthrops suckd, like reading an ad

Both so bitter. Can u vote 4 us

no

y?

it keeps track

how does it od htat ??

**do*

idk its an app just do it urself.

k

We typed in our votes, and then the other parents cheered. We looked up, saw a tennis ball bouncing against the opponent's side of the fence. We missed our kids scoring on an overhead shot after a lob. We clapped listlessly, thinking how tired we were, we still had to pick up groceries on the way home, the van was making that noise again, and now this silly proposal bugging us, maybe we shouldn't even bother. Our phones kept ringing with notifications, the little orange light blinking, vibrating twice in our pockets.

Thank you for voting! the note read. Every day the app sent us a daily aphorism: *Take part in true democracy! Let your voice be heard! You are each and all in charge with YouLead!*

Our mayor is an app. Well, that's not quite true: we're the mayor. All of us, each of us, from our bedrooms to our baseball fields, everyone here with a zip code and the ability to string words together into coherent proposals and send them via the app. Last week we voted on which street to repave, a few days before that on how large a portion of property taxes to allocate to schools, the fire department, the police, waste management, wherever. Yesterday we christened a graveyard: The Holy Trinity Graveyard of Lindbergh. A close second was the Couch Potato Dead.

One of these days, we're all going to make some really stupid law, the civics teacher among us complained in the app's forum. *We'll make it illegal to own cats or ban cigarette taxes. Or something awful, like start a lottery.*

Ms. Firoux, I know your a smart lady, my son loves you in class, a car dealer wrote back, *but havent you ever gotten a lottery card at a gas station?*

She sent us a link to a short story most of us had forgotten we'd read in high school. Some of us read it for the first time. Most of us quit after the first paragraph.

As we message each other, ads interrupt our threads. Sometimes it's a low-quality ad featuring our local chocolate maker, widowed tailor, or upholstery maker overzealously yelling into the camera. Other times it's a sleek promotion from Apple, Kroger, Staples, some regional, national, international conglomerate with an office in town that slew any local competitors a while ago.

If you want fewer ads without buying a subscription, vote on an increase in the app's management funding next year! The app proposed in a community message through the app. The team insisted they wrote these personally, but one of the government documents released hinted at some freelance writer they'd contracted after Ms. Gill left. *We programmers and other staff think of YouLead as a public good, and we'd love it if you did, too!*

Clicking the word *love* made a bunch of grinning and winking hearts fly upward across our screens. Only a few of us thought it was sweet.

Sucking your California cocks is bad enough tax-free, an anonymous account wrote back, unaccompanied by graphics of blowjobs. A few of us copied the message to spread in our private digital circles before it was censored. Another wrote that the homophobia was unnecessary; our town had a bad enough reputation. Either way, the account was deleted for infringing YouLead community policy. They'd told us anonymity wouldn't be an issue, but here the no-names were nonetheless.

**

It all started about a year ago, before our next mayoral election. On our TVs, we saw the mudslinging start up between Republican challenger McCreary, a former psychiatrist who'd retired early to work as a state representative, and Democrat incumbent Winthrop, the second son of Lindbergh's furniture industry magnate. The grainy black and white footage, red rubber stamps, "I'm So-and-So and I approve this message" began flooding the airwaves as they called each other Washington insider, corporate lackey, and—the worst of them all—politician. We set about cleaning our kitchens, getting haircuts and shaves at the barber's, and running 5Ks at the gym, but

everywhere we went we watched the two combatants on our flat screen TVs, flinging so much mud at each other they might as well have been pig wrestling. But one day we saw something different.

It began as Winthrop's ad. Before some of us could even change the channel, it cut to McCreary's ad, and a few of us perked our heads in confusion. Then Winthrop's came back, and the two played side-by-side. We could see just how similar they looked in that moment, hitting the same three accusations, the same bold print, the same beats of a political ad. The both started shrinking into little boxes on the screen, followed by clips from past campaign ads, all of them syncopated, all of them shouting the same language: dirty money, career politician, not for the people of Lindbergh. The ads started tiling over each other and then altogether over the screen, the noise of accusations and self-adulations piling on until the screen faded to white, text appearing in its place.

"Tired yet?" the text read. A sleek, nondescript phone rotated onto the screen, a towering black obelisk consuming most of the screens. "Tired of the mudslinging, the backtracking, the broken promises? The old system has failed. Welcome to the new system. Welcome to ..."

After one long slow revolution, the black, unbranded phone settled center place. Its dark screen turned on, showing a sans serif logo: YouLead, in a solemn black font, eschewing any suggestive color. When the ad finished, most of us kept running on our treadmills, cooking dinner, able to manage our surprise within our routines, but some of us gaped. Pointed.

"What the hell was that?" we asked each other. "Is that the new iPhone?"

Over time, we saw the ad everywhere, mutating into different forms: on Facebook and Instagram, a 5-second GIF played, edited for vertical viewing. On Twitter, it grew and expanded as we scrolled down, irritating several of us trying to get to the latest sports stats or our favorite celebrity's latest stupid tweets. On dating apps, it had us swipe right for *True democracy, and swipe the politicians out*. Wherever they appeared, the ad featured crisp camerawork, sleek graphics, and hardly a bump in streaming, fueled by some bandwidth giant somewhere. Some of us began to notice a date and time listed, for a forum at the local library.

When that time came a few dozen of us were jampacked into the back of the library, a few bookshelves moved out of the way to make more room. We filled up almost all the seats in the rows, muttering to each other. Everyone thought the app would be an entertaining train wreck waiting to happen.

“D’you see in the paper, McCreary called it the devil’s plaything, swore it would unleash our ‘base impulses.’ She must think we’re all savages for not going to church twice a day like she does, the uppity—”

“Tell you what, though, I do think it’s a crazy idea. I needed my kid’s help just to figure out Facebook, how the hell is this gonna fly.”

“The young people would be the only ones who’d eat it up, and they’re not even here.”

“Probably thought they could watch this on the YouTube. Nobody wants to leave their house anymore.”

“Tell you what, tech is the *cause* of a lot of our problems, not the solution.”

“What would make more sense if they had an app that let us know what crazy shit Winthrop tries to pull so we could fix him up next time we see him. If he doesn’t hide away in his daddy’s big house, that is.”

“Well, I don’t know what you mean, Pam. He sure fixed the water tower just fine, didn’t he?”

The laughter died down as a group of strangers strode in and sat down at the table in front, with a security guard nearby and local journalists jostling in the front row. We could tell the out-of-towners by their half haircuts, groomed beards, the guy in the center’s new suit, and the Indian woman on the right. The only Indian family for miles around was a doctor and his family in nearby Spursville.

“We’re here to put power, *real* power, back in the hands of the people,” A public relations person named Derrick Rosenstein stated after a long introduction. His hair was sculpted like a porcupine’s back. “The app’s working title was Sapiientiam Turba: The wisdom of—”

“The crowd, yes,” one of us, a librarian, finished. “Some of us folks know a little Latin, however surprising may that be to you.”

“Of course not.” Derrick’s gleaming grin barely budged. “I was explaining for those who didn’t. The way the app works, if it’s lucky enough to be elected by Lindberghers, is that all of you would be in charge. You would log in and review ongoing executive decisions as well as have the option of legislating new ones. Each of the app participants would review each proposal, commenting on them in public threads, and voting on decisions within the time frame. It’s true democracy, the core of what we’re

proposing here: everyone has a chance to be heard, rather than just voting on one of two people to run things for a few years.”

“So everyone’s in charge? Crazy,” a liquor store owner among us who lived next door said.

“It’s been done before, actually,” Rosenstein answered. “The Greeks did it.”

“We’re not a city-state,” the librarian grimly replied. “We’re a small town in Indiana. We have state and national laws to observe.”

“The app has Indiana and the U.S.’s constitutions embedded within its code, and we have a lawyer in Indianapolis on call to ensure local proposals don’t contradict them. This is some sophisticated AI we’re using here; you’re in luck.”

“Your generation thinks you can solve everything with an app,” the husband of a retired office supply owner interrupted. “Can’t find a cheap taxi? There’s an app for that. Want random sex with a floozy? There’s an app. Order groceries, invest in the market, count your steps, app, app, app. You say you’re basing this off the Greeks, so I assume you’re familiar with Plato. Well let me quote something he said once: Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something.”

The trophy husband—most of us couldn’t remember his name—spoke with a long and rhythmic tone, and many of us nodded in agreement with his quote, though none of us could gander what it meant. Except apparently for the Indian engineer.

“Nothing whatsoever exists without me or beyond me,” she said. “The atoms of the universe may be counted, but not so my manifestations; for eternally I create innumerable worlds.”

That shut the trophy husband up quickly. He sat back down with a sheepish look on his face, possibly knowing he'd entered a bout of quote-offs with less firepower. The engineer, in turn, returned to her twiddling hands on the table, distracting herself with the stacked chairs behind us. One of us wondered if she'd ever seen a library like this. Another wondered why she didn't have that red dot on her forehead, and yet another prayed that none of us were thinking of stupid Indian stereotypes we learned from Hollywood.

"I'm sure Ms. Gill could go all night quoting from Western and Eastern philosophy she's studied," Derrick finally interrupted them. "And I'm sure that—what's your name, sir?—yes, I'm sure you too could go all night. But we're here to answer questions about our nominee. Part of our policy is being open and frank about how YouLead works."

"You gonna record me in the bathroom with that thing?"

"No, sir, we want to hear your thoughts, not your urine."

"What about secretaries, historians, positions like that?"

"Those positions will remain filled by people, until their nomination and duties are incorporated into the app with time."

"How do you know this won't turn into some 4Chan thread?" a young-ish local lawyer asked.

"Because there won't be any anonymity. To use the app, you have to identify yourself through your residential zip code. Not only will we be monitoring the discussions for civility, but people will know how to find you if you act the fool."

“I don’t want to do all that mayor work, that’s why we pick an idiot like Winthrop to do it for us,” one restaurateur said, to a murmur of chuckles in the room. In the corner of the gym, for once standing outside the center of attention, Winthrop bristled next to his aide. We noticed and read his presence like some bellwether for YouLead’s impact here in Lindbergh.

“We have different opinions on government, but I’m sure Winthrop has done an excellent job running Lindbergh smooth as water,” Rosenstein said, and most of us stifled some cackles. “In this case, you won’t have to do all the work. YouLead will. When a decision has to be made, the question will be put out to you all, and people will make proposals. Once enough proposals are made, you all vote on the best courses of action, and that’s what will happen. Like we said, wisdom of the crowd. The least you can do is up- or downvote, while the more active among you can write up proposals, persuading the others with your best rhetoric. There’s even video and audio options, for those of you concerned with your writing skills.”

“My question,” asked Patricia Huebbel, the editor-in-chief of the Lindbergh Lodestone, “is who’s funding you all?”

“A venture capitalist,” Rosenstein said. “There’s enough funding for one five-year term, so no taxes, no need to use any city funds. If you all like the way it’s going, you’ll vote for yourself how to best fund the app.”

“But who is this capitalist?”

“They’ve requested anonymity for now.”

“I thought you wanted to be transparent.”

“What I can tell you is they’re a kind philanthropist who recognizes that democracy needs fixing in this country,” Rosenstein answered smoothly. “The only people you need to worry about are the team in this room. And we are here to ensure your opinion of YouLead rests entirely on its concept, not on any problems with execution. We bought servers, we have the best bandwidth, so even if your connection isn’t fast, the app will zip right along.”

“But why are you even interested in Lindbergh?” a young woman asked.

Derrick’s cheek dimpled. Some of us thought he was concealing a smirk. Others thought he looked like a handsome young boy with quite a head on his shoulders, all this talk of apps and politics, my goodness he must have graduated Notre Dame. A few of us thought he talked gay, not that there was anything wrong with that. Just noticing.

“In the past couple decades, it’s true that new tech has disrupted several industries. Transportation, shopping, entertainment,” he said. “We want to see if we can disrupt politics, too. Lindbergh seemed ripe for change.”

Winthrop was staring daggers at Rosenstein and his crew, and they were the first to leave once the forum finished. A few days later, one of his janitors spread the news that he’d seen Winthrop and his administration’s sole lawyer combing through all the law books in the office to find requirements that the mayor be of a certain age, prove residency, demonstrate commitment to Lindbergh as a town. When they found a few, Winthrop’s lawyer emailed the electoral committee to say YouLead couldn’t qualify as a candidate. The electoral committee answered that Rosenstein had emailed them already, explaining that YouLead was running not as a candidate itself but as a vessel for the citizens of Lindbergh to be a candidate, many of whom would fit the criteria. The

committee had found Rosenstein's lack of political baggage in Lindbergh and his email's funny reference to Lindbergh's 1998 water tower and sewage line calamity very persuasive. The out-of-town team had done their research. The rest of us, however, were still making up our minds.

"We're ground zero for some government takeover by Silicon Valley," the paranoid mechanic among us theorized at the local bar a week later. A few of us were gathered around as the bartender uncapped bottles of Miller or poured drafts from the Schnickelfritz taps. "They're seeing how it does here for the higherups in Silicon Valley, tweaking it and such, and if it works they're gonna try it again at the state level. Then the fed."

"But why here?" we wondered. "It's Lindbergh, for God's sake, we're a county seat of twelve thousand. Why not test drive it in San Francisco?"

"Maybe they want to see if it can work in the Midwest first. Works here, it'll work anywhere."

A lot of us assented with nodding heads and clinking glasses. We were much smarter than they took us granted for, we believed. They thought we were a bunch of rubes willing to take them at their word, but we were onto their game.

"What exactly is so *bad* about the idea, though?" began the bartender, a younger woman who also photographed for Huebbel's paper as a side gig. "I've worked here for three years, and almost every day you all are coming in here bitching about the stupid tax law Winthrop tried to push onto Lindbergh or the crackpot bullshit McCreary said in her latest ad. You're always going on about how the government sucks, how if you were in

charge here's A and B and C of what you would do. Well, here's y'all's chance. Why not give it a try?"

One of us began laughing, saying oh girl, did you take a class in politics at the community college, how precious, but he quieted down when he noticed the thoughtful looks on our faces. No, we didn't trust the app. We could smell its coastal packaging a mile off. But it was true that we hated, hated, *hated* our politicians.

"The best thing about all this so far," one of us finished their beer with a great big gulp, "has been how pissed Winthrop looked at the forum. And I can't imagine McCreary's much happier."

"The two finally have something in common," another of us said. "An enemy."

Sure enough, an ad came out with Winthrop and McCreary, standing side by side, feigning sincerity the best they could. Both of them related their origins as politicians, listing off student council elections in high school, college activism, Winthrop's internship in D.C. and McCreary's service on medical boards. Both of them stated that, though they had differing views, they believed in the power of human leadership. They even held hands, their fingers drumming nervously over the other's.

"We are answerable to you," Winthrop said.

"We lead only by listening to you," McCreary said.

"Put your faith in people, not products," Winthrop smiled even wider, his carefully mussed hair and plaid button-down shirt glistening in the sunlight.

"The best solutions are made when we're in the same room," McCreary chimed in, her hand drifting away from Winthrop's hand.

"Yes."

“Right.”

Winthrop squeezed McCreary’s hand and tightened his smile, while McCreary burst out with a huge laugh and looked at Winthrop with eyes unnaturally wide, affecting some star-crossed lover look. They weren’t the best actors, some of us agreed in waiting rooms, lunch halls, at junior varsity football concession stands. In response to their ad, YouLead went beta.

It was a complete political simulacrum. A few of us downloaded it out of curiosity, see its bells and whistles, and did those bells whistle. The app was as smooth as any other, collecting information from our other profiles to assemble a fresh, clean one in less than a minute. It explained its privacy policies (most of us skipped over that), how to write messages, record videos, snap selfies, pick a GIF, tape audio clips for it to transcribe. It allowed kinetic learners to impatiently tap through its tutorial and patiently tutored those of us who read instruction manuals to a T. Then it showed all of us how to swipe to the government section, the casual chat room, the civics education videos, each with a clean white icon to represent it. The app set up periodic fake government scenarios, ranging from “Let’s create and elect an official superhero mascot for Lindbergh” to “The children’s hospital is underfunded; let’s find a financially responsible solution.” Each one appeared with blocky pastel animations to make us laugh with their goofy Citizen Kale, a piece of animate one creative person suggested making the children’s hospital into a kind of superhero mascot, to help draw nonprofits’ attention and donations, which easily won the following vote, and within days a new feature on the app appeared, allowing us to suggest proposals fixing multiple problems. *The key that frees two birds will win the day*, it said, apparently updating the traditional violent phrase. We

chatted about it to our friends and family, remarking what a cool idea our hospital proposal had been, neither Winthrop nor McCreary would ever have thought of that, whoever said one person should be the expert on government? All “experts” had ever done was make money off their expertise. Meanwhile, we felt good using the app, like each of us had contributed to solving this problem. We glowed with an inner utopian pride as we found ourselves liking each other, trusting each other. YouLead began feeling less like somebody else’s idea and more like ours.

One savvy user among us checked the app’s credit section and discovered Ms. Gill had designed the animations and written the app’s friendly text. When the rest of us learned, the more cosmopolitan of us adored that an Indian woman was apt in her English. That would show these hicks a thing or two about immigrants. But while she and the app advertised itself well enough, a few of the coders did less so in public. An introverted daughter of a popular basketball coach among us overheard one of them whisper to the other one day at the library, unaware someone was listening in.

“Coffee’s, like, two bucks here,” one of them said.

“I signed a lease for a two-bedroom apartment, fully furnished, private bathroom, utilities, washer and dryer,” the other jabbered back. “Seven hundred a month. Seven. Hundred.”

“That would get you half a broom closet back in the Bay. These people have no idea how lucky they are.”

“Still ... a year here and I might want to trade it for that broom closet. It’s like AmeriCorps here.”

“Don’t know why they insisted we move here, could do it all from Indy well enough. But you can’t say no to a six-figure salary paying off those MIT loans.”

We swore and complained when somebody related this exchange at the ‘Fritz. Many of us getting our starts in town were struggling with mortgages, insurance costs, and child care, and here were two man-children frothing over the comparatively low cost of living. The suspicious among us asked the eavesdropper who the coders meant by “they,” and she said they never clarified. A couple of us researched Rosenstein’s background: a LinkedIn profile stating a Wharton School degree and some time spent at a D.C. lobbying firm, and a carefully curated Facebook and Instagram—both essentially the same—with photos of him at beaches and concerts and bars with at least two friends in each photo, a few family Christmas photos thrown in. No Twitter, and not a hint of any political affiliation. He was the perfect job candidate.

We researched Ms. Gill in turn and found scarcely anything beyond a picture somebody’s ink portrait of her and a Facebook post from a couple older women—aunts, we presumed—asking her when she’d come back home, she was the last sister who needed marrying.

Despite our misgivings with the team, we kept using the app, as election day crawled closer, until it was only a month away. The app had gotten so popular, it was only a matter of time before the rest of the country started hearing about it.

“Is your small town approaching its next mayoral election? Well, now,” ABC News anchor Juno Roswell nudged her co-anchor Mila Pierre back in the newsroom, “there’s an app for that.”

“That’s right, Juno,” Mila replied. “In a small central Indiana town, alongside the democratic incumbent and a republican challenger, an app is running for the mayor. ABC’s Dean Roswelli has the story.”

“I’m in Lindbergh, Indiana, a town of about twelve thousand, famous for its river mill, furniture plants, and a high school football rivalry between its Stallions and Bucks. But recently, the town has been hitting national headlines for something entirely different,” we saw the newscaster’s report continue on our TV sets. “This coming November, incumbent Obadiah Winthrop will face challenges not only from local Republican senator Donna McCreary, but also”—dramatic pause—“an app.”

The news report proceeded to show YouLead’s ad, featured shots of some of us around town on our cell phones at the Wal-Mart, along the street, at school, making us look like zombies, our heads tilted down so much we were growing bone spurs in the backs of our skulls. Some of us scoffed at the report’s portrayal.

“I thought it was strange, sure,” one of us was interviewed at the courthouse. “But my husband and I got it together, started using it, and, wow. It’s great to see all your friends on there, and it’s so good at teaching us how to balance budgets, what makes for a good speech, what different public works are and why they’re important. Like, we’re all much more invested in the community now. It feels like we’ve cut out a middleman.”

The report explained how the app worked well enough, screwing up some minor details like its stage of progress and showing outdated icons in its footage, though only a few of us reflected on the fact that we knew the app that well by now. They talked to Rosenstein, who gave them his usual pitch for the app, calling it a revolution in politics,

that it could “very well be a sign of huge changes to come to the way we govern in America.”

“How far do you see it going?” the reporter asked.

“As far as the people take it,” Rosenstein chimed.

They cut off the interview there, featuring a few printed quotes from Winthrop and McCreary with heavy concerns about the app’s utilization and the team behind it, written as politely as the two could muster. After their quotes, the story ran more testimony of some of our own thoughts on the app, most of it glowing, making it sound like the best thing since sliced bread, though when gossip spread around town we learned several people had shared complaints and concerns with the reporter, like the candidates’ candor about sustainability, programming, and censorship, but if so they’d been edited out. Other channels ran similar reports, and all in all they sounded like more advertising for the app.

“Corporate corruption,” one of us accused. “Bet their philanthropist’s in cahoots with the news media.”

“This is just what they wanted,” one of us told another in the cafeteria during school lunch. “A national profile. The app hasn’t even launched yet officially, for crying out loud.”

Nonetheless, we kept using the app. The latest proposal had us proposing our first ever PRIDE festival, and we were heartened to see most of us agreed, minus a small, strong opposition from the local Catholic church. When people in our community saw the support, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, all kinds of members began coming out to their family. The proposal itself changed its design to a rainbow theme.

Winthrop and McCreary felt it was time to strike back again, ready to play dirty. They ran one of their usual mudslinging ads, painting Rosenstein and the team as out-of-towners who had no idea how Lindbergh worked, and most of us were nodding along in agreement, still resistant to an outside force coming in and making itself at home in our neighborhood. That ad might've turned the tide, had they just cut the last ten seconds.

“And let's not forget their mysterious user experience designer, Ms. Gill,” the ad ran, and her profile was entirely in black and white except for a red dot on her head that wasn't even accurate. Some of us didn't even notice, while the rest of us groaned and covered our eyes. “What does she know about our Christian background, our German heritage? Why does she think she can speak our language? Text Rosenstein and his team NO to invasion.”

The morning the ad went viral, some people reported that McCreary and Winthrop had been seen high-fiving each other, thinking they had beaten the California team at their own game. Then they, like the rest of us, learned why the ad had gone viral. One of us was at the diner with them, and saw, live, their faces melt into horror.

“Lindbergh politicians run a racist ad against first-generation Indian designer,” one of the more neutral headlines read.

“You will *not believe* how tone deaf this local ad gets,” a vogue teen website ran.

“We need to get real about the dark side of America's insular heartland,” a brash liberal site featured in bold font.

“WHAT A BUNCH OF RACIST BACKWATER PIGSSS!!!!” One comment read on the bottom.

“Some ‘Christians’!!! Would they say same of Jesus, man of Mid-eastern descent!” another read.

“I would die and burn in hell before moving here, and if Lindberghers were smart they’d pack up and emigrate on out of there,” almost every commentator said in some shape or form.

A few local companies with national clients had to put out PR releases to counteract the ad’s damage. The local paper reported that Winthrop had an emergency meeting with his furniture company’s board of directors. The YouLead team, in usual passive-aggressive rebuttal, poured salt on the wound by creating a small video celebrating those of us from the local Latin community’s Day of the Dead festival, interviewing us immigrants who appreciated that the team had hired fluent speakers to help create a Spanish translation of the app, one that captured even the local Spanglish slang our Latin community had developed as our community grew. We complained that the current mayor had cut our festival’s already-small budget last year and refused to meet with us to explain why, “ese cabron.”

“And now we’re a national laughingstock,” we all moaned over coffee breaks, during staff meetings, at local ball games, through YouLead. Our friends and family who’d moved away wrote to us, asking us what on earth was going on in quiet, unassuming Lindbergh. We wrote back, *idk*.

“I can’t believe everyone working on that ad was that stupid,” we complained, until the newspaper reported that the two had outsourced the ad to some cheap advertising firm from, ironically enough, India. Apparently when they got it back, the

campaign teams had both convinced themselves it would work. They had two weeks before the election. And that's when Winthrop and McCreary grew desperate.

Somehow, the location of YouLead's servers got leaked on the app. We weren't sure how it got leaked—some of us said some teen savant hacker had found it out, while others maintained that the local news team had found it out and released it online rather than publish it, to maintain deniability. The team immediately set out damage control, but we shared and reposted and copied and pasted, until any dope could learn where the servers were: right in Lindbergh's own city hall, right under our noses. The team had rented out a hefty amount of servers to power the technology. Some of us were suspicious why they had cheapened out on their servers, but two of us weren't suspicious enough. We later heard that they tried to hire other people to commit the task they wanted done, but not even their own team was foolhardy enough to go through such a thing.

A security guard had found them, he told us later, woefully unprepared to pull off their covert operation. The guard had been patrolling the building and heard metal banging and plastic ripping, the ruckus echoing through the corners. Bits and shards of electrogalvanized steel (the engineer who'd helped with the building's planning noted) flew into the hallway and crashed against the wall before settling into a pile. Turning the corner, the guard found two people completely wrapped in black cotton pants, shirts, and hats: a man and a woman, several brass keys dangling from the man's waist. A shard of the server's shell had cut the woman's cheek, and another had slashed the man's forehead, but neither paid their injuries any heed, armed with bats and like purge veterans smashing and denting the servers. The two yelled and screamed, as if all the time they spent bottling their true feelings were now erupting out of them. Electricity fizzled across

the servers. The guard yelled hey, and they looked ready to run until he pointed his flashlight and gun at them, commanding them to freeze and drop their bats. They started sobbing, telling the guard they would pay him off, but he, to our applause, commanded a little more self-respect. He approached and unmasked them, astonished to discover who they were. Winthrop fixed his tie and swept dust out of his hair, while McCreary realigned her necklace—now missing a few pearls—and rearranged her skirt underneath her black garments. In moments the two were once again cardboard cutouts of human beings, smiling and jostling each other for better pose with the wreckage of the servers behind them.

“I’m Obadiah Winthrop—”

“I’m Donna McCreary—”

“Vote for me.”

They denied it all, of course, saying the guard was a liar, hinting at his former alcoholism, which we found repugnant, as the guard had worked so hard to stay sober. We all expected them to be prosecuted within the week, but nothing happened. And we noticed the app was working even smoother than before. These servers, in fact, had been for Lindbergh government’s own websites, which now showed nothing but error messages. It dawned on the journalist among us, Patricia Huebbel, that YouLead likely slipped the false location. The team pretended to have brought servers into city hall, and we wondered whether they hadn’t hoped someone would come and bust the servers up. Huebbel considered her next move.

A week before the election, McCreary removed herself from the race, stating she wished to continue representing Lindbergh at the State Senate, knowing she would run

unopposed in the forthcoming election, already preparing stories explaining her stressful conditions and hinting at coercion from Winthrop regarding the servers. One of us walking by spotted Winthrop through his house's window, pummeling the boxing bag he had installed in there with his bare fists. We weren't exactly sorry he was hurting himself.

“He should be happy,” we said. “People will finally forget about the water tower.”

Election day came, and YouLead won in a landslide.

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So here we are. All of us, mayor-ing through an app. The Associated Press ran a report on the election, and the article was ran nationally. We felt shy and encumbered as so many eyes watched us, wondering what would happen next. *True democracy*, the app had promised, but surely, the pessimists abroad said, civilians would grow frustrated with trying to understand the intricacies of government. Surely they would make a mistake with canceling funding for the police and fire departments, reinforce majority groups' oppression of minorities, or isolate people further within their phones, keeping them from engaging with each other *IRL*. Rosenstein left Lindbergh and headed back to California, likely to report to its anonymous funder on where to take YouLead next. We gossiped to each other over the threads of YouLead's forum. We weren't sure if the team members had followed them; we still saw Ms. Gill around, who had apparently begun dating the Latino among us who organized the annual festival, now more funded than ever before. She eventually became one of us, liked to joke that her invasion had been successful after all. The world was getting smaller.

At some point, an anonymous local wrote an Op Ed in the newspaper, which circulated throughout Lindbergh and even gained some life outside it. The local had

talked about their personal experience with YouLead, citing as a case study the community health insurance pool that everyone wanted to legislate but no one could figure out how to execute. The idea went through dozens and dozens of compromises, with people arguing about whether the tax should be a percentage or based off brackets, which health incidents should be covered under this pot, and whether it should include pharmaceuticals. Some people got heated over it as they shared their personal experiences, feeling their neighbors denying them. The idea remained under draft.

You see, once the genie comes out of the bottle, it stays, the writer concluded. There's no rolling technology back. It's embraced, warts and all. Will YouLead increase the people's power, or will it just divide us even more? That question can't be answered within the moment. All we can do here in small-town America is help lead the way.

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