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ONLY ONE SET OF BONES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Norma Calway-Fagen
May 2018

What a wonderfully challenging two years this has been. Thanks to all involved with the MFA Program for helping me understand that good writing is more than pretty words and for providing me with the tools to work harder and get better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writers write in a context: Thanks to my husband for his patience and support and my children for their encouragement and belief. I could not have done this without the opportunity, challenges, and help provided by the Creative Writing program at Murray State. A special recognition to Ann Neelon, Nita King, Carrie Jerrell, and Betsy Puckett. Finally, thank you to my mentors and committee members, Allen Wier, Tommy Hays, and Julia Watts, for their careful reading of my work. More than thanks to my chair, Lynn Pruett, who insisted that I confront conflict.

This thesis is dedicated to PS and all the women and children seen at the Rape and Sexual Abuse Center.

A story is not like a road...it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from the windows. (Munro)

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INTRODUCTION

Art Mediates Life

Writers do not write in a vacuum nor do they bring a blank slate to be filled in by imagination alone. All writers bring cultural, social, and emotional factors to their writing—sometimes consciously and sometimes hidden from awareness. These factors provide a framework from which the writer observes and interprets the world. In an essay on fiction, Tim O’Brien states “the writer of fiction... serves as a medium between two worlds—the world of reality and the extraordinary world of the imagination” (O’Brien 178). In discussing Henry James, Leon Edel (1985) noted that the author’s insight into his character’s psychology came from introspection and the material of his life. James himself said, “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (public.wsu.edu).

A writer brings all aspects of her being to writing and hopes that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Knowing a writer’s life and the links between her life and her writing can help a reader more fully understand the work. I also believe that a writer’s understanding of these connections—which not only fuel imagination but also create blind spots—is critical to his or her expansion of observational field and growth as a writer. A genre seminar with Dr. Adair and his discussion of Queer Spectrality and the traditional view of history is illustrative. Traditional views of history construct a linear

narrative from a highly selective set of events. This selection can serve to marginalize or even silence voices that if allowed to speak would give a more complete understanding of historical events. As writers need to understand what voices we marginalize or censor—including the voices within ourselves. A writer must engage in periodic introspection and simultaneously maintain a connection to and a certain distance from personal discoveries. Intellect or ego must filter emotion or id. Writing can be thought of as the Rorschach of literature in that the writer often unconsciously projects her values, beliefs, or ideals onto stories and character.

Henry James writes that he “delights in a palpable imaginable visitable past,” referring to information still accessible to memory or close enough in time to allow for correction (qtd. in Edel 338). My memories become more fragmented, and at age seventy, I am compelled by a finite sense of time and the fragility of recollection coupled with the need to understand and hopefully expand my voice. Perhaps the axiom “We should write about things we know” could be amended to include “We should know what we know.” That additional awareness would “discourage clichéd rumination on abstract topics” (LaPlante 58) but also reveal to the writer his or her blind spots. I think of the MFA program at Murray State as a tough-love therapist. I imagine this therapist saying, “OK, we know how you got here, but so what? The past doesn’t help unless you’re willing to look at how it impacts the choices you make right now as a writer. Yeah, and that includes the places you avoid. Then you have to do some things differently. It’s as simple and as hard as that.” Three years of writing therapy, and I’m still doing the work.

Family/Life Influences

We were not a family of readers as young children. There were no books in the home, except for a couple from my father's childhood: *The Hardy Boys* and *Runaway Rhymes*. There were no library visits or story hours. My father grew up with books and had two years of college, but my mother came from a family that wore burlap bags to keep their feet warm, and she never got beyond the seventh grade. When I was eleven, my parents did buy a Collier's Encyclopedia set, which we used for school reports. Surprised by these recollections, I confirmed them with my older brother. How did we grow up then— six siblings—to be eager readers?

My mother, who appreciated words and their proper usage, influenced my love for words. I was not a child or young teenager who used slang or contractions, and others sometimes teased me for the formality of my conversational language. We may have had few storybooks and novels in our house, but we had a large, worn Webster's dictionary. Recording words and definitions was a favorite pastime. Years later, after my mother's death, I would discover her own notebooks stored in a cabinet and full of definitions with the words used correctly in sentences. Mystery partially solved. This is one way a woman who grew up with the words "ain't" and "hissself," and married her first husband at thirteen, came to sound like a college graduate. We experienced the disparate sounds of the spoken word—bilingual in a way and making language even more exciting. My San Francisco grandmother called us "dahlings" and referred to bottles as "ba-tolls," while my granny said "y'all" and called underwear "step-ins." Woven through all of this is the fact that we moved nearly every year to a new part of the country or world: imagine

Colorado versus Japan or Marin County, California, versus Lewisburg, Tennessee. We were exposed to different social norms, different accents, even different languages.

I had a sensual, tactile connection to words, using a quill pen dipped in my own personal bottle of thick black ink—thank you Sister Albertine—to learn cursive. Lines and lines of fat O's and M's and small p's, later connected to make words. Words attached to writing. We had few books, but we were a family who wrote letters. Pages of missives to my father overseas, to friends we had left behind in our latest move, and to relatives whom we rarely saw because they were there and we were someplace else. Again, words attached to writing, but in this instance attention was paid to persuasion—believe in my world as I describe and inhabit it. A type of persuasion important to writers of stories.

We had no books, but we had stories and characters everywhere. I grew up with an oral culture, not surprising in a family with Irish and Appalachian antecedents. We heard stories about the ship's captain, my great grandfather, who deserted his post in Hawaii and was never heard from again, except for a mysterious letter—his wife, poor woman, just over from Ireland and with mouths to feed. Or the uncle several times removed who was a bushwacker during the Civil War. Or my mother's brother, who ran liquor up and down the mountains of East Tennessee.

We also heard gossip—not malicious, but the she-did-this-and-he-did-that type that implied causation and sequencing with a sense of drama and the constant question of motivation. Then the nights of listening to recordings of Puccini's *La Bohème* and Verdi's *Aida*—lush and sensual. Even though I did not speak Italian, I learned to listen to the nuances of voice, inflection, and emotion that told the full story. This became part of

me, what we call “active listening” in psychology, and helped me both as a therapist and a writer.

Psychology was the perfect cover for my interest in people’s stories. Very few professions give you permission to be nosy. Working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, the nascent writer in me guided my therapeutic choices as much as the psychologist. Treatment of abuse victims was in its infancy in 1984. I realized fairly quickly, that these women needed not only to tell their stories but also needed eventually to impose some sort of order over traumatic events—to bring shape to the chaos and gain some sense of mastery. This works much like a writer’s process where we have a first draft just to get the story from mind to paper and then we craft subsequent re-workings that impose order and nuance. In my own writing, the first draft often has pages and pages of description about setting and character that often delay and overshadow the conflict. I think of this draft as “a getting to know you” phase like the initial appointments in a therapy relationship. Subsequent drafts clear away unnecessary description and bring characters and conflict into focus. The last draft or two looks at language. As both a therapist and a writer of fiction, I learned to keep a certain distance—this is the client’s story or this is the story I’m writing but not *my* story. This is where imagination takes over. As Welty writes in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, “in writing, as in life, the connections of all sorts of relationships and kinds lie in wait of discovery, and give out their signals to the Geiger counter of the charged imagination, once it is drawn into the right field” (99). Another essential for both the client and the writer is a universal need to be heard. For the women in therapy groups, they needed each other and me to

actively listen. Writers, I believe, also need an audience. I don't write for myself alone, but with the hope that someday people will want to read what I have written.

Currently, the bookcases in my house—there are seven—contain authors as varied as Ngaio Marsh, Alice Munro, Chekov, Gardner, and Edith Wharton. Some are paperback, others hardcover. Regardless, rather than discard any, I add another shelf. I thank my brother for this. When I was ten, he started bringing books into the house and sharing them with me. Better yet, one summer we worked together on a houseboat docked in Sausalito. We spent our lunch break reading Steinbeck, Hemingway, or Salinger. Imagine reading John Steinbeck “on the dock of the bay” with your favorite person. Just a short walk away is where Steinbeck stopped in a parking place to look at San Francisco and later wrote in *Travels with Charley* “the necklace bridge over the entrance from the sea that led to her. Over the green higher hills to the south the evening fog rolled like herds of sheep coming to cote in the golden city. I've never seen her more lovely” (198). It doesn't get any better than that.

Craft

Craft refers to the techniques used to convey to the reader not only the events of a story but the emotional truth. Fortunately, for a developing writer like me, these elements or techniques can be described and taught. There are several craft elements that I have worked hard to master during the MFA program. I have made progress. I'm a better writer, but more importantly, I have an idea of what I don't know and where I need to continue to improve. I don't see this as too different from more accomplished writers. Good writers are like good athletes, always looking to get better.

The writer's ability to effectively use point of view determines the development of conflict, character, and theme. It is the "place from which a writer listens in and watches. Choosing one place over another determines what can and can't be seen, what minds can and can't be entered..." (Kidder and Todd 19). A writer must answer these questions: Whose story is this? Who's going to tell it? Does it matter? There are several answers to the first two questions and only one, a definite *yes*, to the last. The relation of the narrator to the story determines the method of telling the story. A well-executed point of view leads to a strong voice.

In *Studies in the Short Story*, David Madden notes that this element of fiction "seems to give writers and readers more trouble than any other aspect of fiction" (Preface to Sixth Edition iii-iv). Until recently, I did not fully understand the importance of point of view, that a writer actively chooses a narrator and the choice makes a difference in the telling. My choice of narrator was partially intuitive; for many of my stories and characters, my preferred mode of third person is effective. Comfort level, rather than ego or intellect, also dictated my choice. With first person, I feel too close to a story, even with fiction that includes few elements from my own experiences. It was as though I was a therapist who could not separate her story from that of the client. In fact, my training as a therapist—it's their story, not mine—likely impacted my ease with third person.

Both Alice LaPlante and Michael Kardos give short shrift to second-person point of view, stating that it is seldom used. However, when used effectively, second person brings immediacy to a story, similar to first person, and opens the door for the reader to directly enter the external and internal world of the character. Some readers might resist

the open door, may not want to be the “you” making bad decisions, hurting self or other. It helps to have a sympathetic character.

The story “Miss Lora” by Junot Diaz is told from the second-person point of view. The narrator addresses the protagonist as “you,” speaking as an older man to his younger self. He opens the story: “Years later, you would wonder if it hadn’t been for your brother would you have done it” (Diaz147). This allows the narrator to be in the story but also offers some distance so the narrator can comment on his younger self. Later, we learn, “This is the first time any girl ever wanted you” (Diaz 150). The distance between the older self and younger self and yet the intimacy of “you” helps readers put themselves in the story. The reader identifies with/is the character and understands the character’s struggle with a divided self, while at the same time feels empathy for the character and as an extension for self. Like the character, we all do things that are morally objectionable.

You were messed up and alone like a motherfucker. You were also convinced—like totally utterly convinced—that the world was going to blow itself to pieces. Almost every night you had dreams that made the one the president had in “Dreamscape” look like pussy play...She didn’t want to hear about mutual assured destruction, ...The late Great Planet Earth...Gamma World, any of it. (Diaz 151)

You ain’t your brother, who would have run right over and put his rabo in Miss Lora. Even though you know, you’re scared you’re wrong. (Diaz 155)

In a 2012 *New Yorker* interview, Diaz said

I really needed distance from this story. Every time I wrote in the first person it was just too close. Tried third person, but that flopped as well. Second person ended up being the only way to get through. I guess I wanted my narrator to be ‘in’ the story, but also to be able to comment on his younger self a little. That was the plan, at least. Second person, I’ve always noticed, has the distinction of being both intimate and repellent at the same time.

Diaz’s use of point of view invites the reader to identify so closely with the character that they “play the role of the main character” (Kardos 53). The reader directly experiences the character’s vulnerability and attempts to come to terms with a divided self.

One of my stories “Least Worse Person” is told from second-person point of view, which allowed me to introduce a different attitude or voice—one that is sassier or hipper. Percy Lubbock says that subject dictates method. Since my story’s subject concerns millennials’ views of love, I decided a method that produced “attitude” would better convey my characters and their dilemma. Second-person point of view brought me closer to the story and character, yet it allowed distance from the “I” of first person, freeing me to write in the desired voice. “Hell, she barely had time for you between her part-time job and full-time dedication to her art. Which was why, you liked to tell yourself, you found yourself between the legs of that redhead. Vivianne, meanwhile, had found her own blond version of your redhead, a looker and an artist like she was” (Calway-Fagen 47).

I also had a protective stance toward my protagonist. Similar to Diaz’s stories, I wanted to invite or persuade the reader to experience the events of the story as Brian, my

main character, does, to see him as a basically decent person, and to form a sympathetic identification with the character.

As the following feedback from a very patient mentor, Lynn Pruett, suggests, conflict does not come naturally to me: “The normal expectation for a story is that the main character is pushed to make a decision, a life-changing decision, so the next scene will have to be some resolution of does she or doesn’t she? In this draft, there doesn’t seem to be any reason to say no” (email message to author, January 17, 2017). One of the first stories I wrote for the MFA program stretched on for ten pages before any possibility of real conflict entered the narrative. In my defense, the first pages of the story that described a changing neighborhood and death of a spouse seeded conflict, and my choice of detail and description were well rendered. However, as I was to hear, in a tactful but pointed manner, pretty words do not make a story. In technical terms, I had mastered the exposition stage of a story and even in some stories produced a reasonable resolution. But how the character arrived at resolution, what barriers she countered along the way, was not at all clear. While, there are exceptions to the exposition, rising action, climax, resolution model, all stories have conflict. But what is conflict in a story, especially when the author is interested in conveying subtle, internal struggles. Simply put, conflict involves the juxtaposition of two opposing forces, or as Madden notes, a protagonist who struggles for something and an antagonist who struggles against something (3). The story is driven by efforts to resolve the struggle between these two forces. Even internal conflict needs to have some external expression, otherwise the character is just “navel gazing.”

Through all my younger years of reading Steinbeck, I never encountered his short story, "The Chrysanthemums." If I had, maybe my understanding of effective conflict would have come sooner. The conflict in this story is subtle but of sufficient significance to have a major impact on the protagonist. In addition, the story's conflict rings true to life beyond the written page. There are no overly dramatic scenes or confrontations, and yet the plot exhibits conflict from the beginning. One way Steinbeck achieves this is through setting. He opens with a broader view of the Salinas Valley and then narrows down to the small Allen farm on a December day where the "high gray fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and the rest of the world" (704). Elisa, the protagonist, is also isolated, closed off; she is confined to house and flower garden. Through description, the author conveys the protagonist's wish for something more. However, the descriptions are short. They offer one to two well-chosen details to seed the idea of a smothering lifestyle that is at odds with Elisa's nature: "Her face was eager and mature, and handsome, even her work with the scissors was over-eager, over powerful" (705). Steinbeck then introduces the tinker, "a big man," who operates in the world beyond the farm.

The man on the wagon seat called out, "That's a bad dog in a fight when he gets started."

Elisa laughed. "I see he is. How soon does he generally get started?"

The man caught up her laughter and echoed it heartily.
"Sometimes not for weeks and weeks." (707)

In three sentences Steinbeck ratchets up the tension and conflict. There is both a flirtation and hint of menace to the exchange. Internal and external conflict are present in the first three to four pages. All the elements of the story, including setting, function together to develop conflict.

Influences

Thinking over the last three years, I realize I am a writer in transition, working to overcome a grant-writing background—where language is static and nothing is said without a qualifier—along with my own difficulty with conflict. My writing has authority, but my style is evolving. I want to establish a clear set of guidelines, not hard and fast rules but indicators, for my writing. These indicators will guide my first draft, bringing some efficiency to that part of the process, but will have their strongest influence during revision.

Rereading the works of Flannery O'Connor and Junot Diaz was a jolt—especially their use of language and detail. I wanted to do more of what they were doing, to find my way out of the quagmire of detail and sometimes “trite phrases” (better known as “TP’s” re Allen Wier) that bogged down the movement of my stories. After my initial infatuation, I realized their voices weren’t my voice, but certain aspects of their style could add economy and, at the same time, life to my writing. Diaz’s stories are voice driven—compelling, alive. He uses familiar and unfamiliar language—ranging from Spanglish, to hip-hop, to professorial—to explicate the contradictions inherent in his characters, often all in one story. For example, in “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” he writes, “Those carbonas they were like no jamas, never” (Diaz 5) to “They look like

philosophy professors, like budget Foucault's," (Diaz 15) and finally "deep down where my boys don't know me, I'm an optimist" (Diaz 15). Through the manipulation of word choice, syntax, and tone the reader comes to understand that Yunion is a person divided and reluctant to reveal his vulnerability.

Flannery O'Connor is a master of description, particularly of people. In the story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," she uses my all-time favorite phrase to describe a "young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage" (9). In the story "The River," O'Connor describes the boy as "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" (31).

These are writers that I reread frequently and use as models to experiment in my own writing. For example, in "Not all Things That Go Up Must Come Down" instead of describing Riley as pregnant, I write, "She had felt something funny, down there—a settling in, like a boat mooring to a dock" (Calway-Fagen 21). Or in "Vamos Rafa," Irene is not a repressed woman with intimacy issues, but from the "down-there generation" (Calway-Fagen 7). There has to be a guideline or touchstone for the choice of language. As in the authors I have cited, language must be congruent with the character and story. For example, Hollis, a middle-aged woman would not think or speak in the same manner that Riley, a teenager would. I am reminded of my childhood spent listening to Verdi and Puccini but also of my teenage years to the present time, loving James Brown, Sam Cooke, and Wilson Pickett. I want both styles in my writing.

I've strived to infuse more life and variety into my stories. I was as tired of writing about middle-aged women as I suspect my mentors were of reading about them in my stories. I turned to authors such as Clare Vay Watkins, Tim O'Brien, and as

mentioned in my discussion on point of view, Junot Diaz. To be clear, except for O'Brien, these are not among my absolute favorite writers. However, I thought they were writers who could best model for me, at this stage of my development, alternate forms of telling a story that would illustrate my concerns with memory and antecedents. As Watkins said in an interview, "At some point I got over my anxiety about being a copycat, which I used to have intensely. But now I think, I could do a lot worse than copying Mary Gaitskill..." (New Yorker.com)

Watkins's story "Ghosts, Cowboys" starts, "The day my mother checked out, Razor Blade Baby moved in" (1). I easily could have included Watkins in the language section. "At the end, I can't stop thinking about beginnings... The 1860s were boom times in the Western Utah Territory" (Watkins 1). "Or begin the story here: In 1881 Himmel Green, an architect came to Reno from San Francisco" (Watkins 2). "Or here. Begin here: When a group of ten young people—most of them teenagers, one of them my father—arrived at a ranch in January 1968" (Watkins 9). In this story the author integrates the founding of Reno with the true life story of her father's friendship with Charles Manson. The structure of the story, moving from one time period to another and covering over 150 years, reflects the emotional weight of the story, including its significance to the author. It raises questions about history and the past as they influence the present. The device of "when does this story start" gives the story both scope and compression and questions causation and truth, similar to O'Brien's work.

My story "Not Everything That Goes Up Comes Down" combines the traditional story framework with elements similar to those of Watkins/O'Brien, including shifts in time and voice. By doing this, I was able to add events to the story that gave depth to the

characters yet pared down prose. It also raised the issue of the past's impact on the present but in a compressed manner that keeps the story in the Wilson Pickett end of my music continuum. As I become more capable, I intend to experiment further with structure including the modular construction. I am also interested in seeing how the forms that Sarah Eisenberg, a visiting writer to the MFA program, presented for nonfiction (a syllabus, memo) translate to fiction. I'm not sure how all this correlates to voice except that better choice of language and detail and eye toward compression should remain consistent regardless of story structure.

I want to briefly mention that reading *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson and *Olive Kitteridge*, by Elizabeth Strout—both of which are linked short story collections—gave me the courage to try something similar. Four of my stories in the thesis are linked—they are beginnings that need strengthening—and I plan on adding to the collection.

I can't end this discussion without including Kardos, LaPlante, and all the craft writers that emphasize revision, which I finally embraced. I don't mean simple editing. I mean the roll-up-your-sleeves, play-in-the-dirt kind of revision. Foolishly, I thought a good writer wouldn't have to do this. But it is with revision that the concepts covered in the craft books began to make real sense to me. My struggle with revision forced me to confront the following questions: Do I really want to work this hard at this stage of my life? Am I as a writer, willing to confront my vulnerabilities, conflicts, and internal divisions. I know, without that, my characters will be passive shadows of themselves. Stories are not like film, where nuance can be shown visually and aided by music. Instead, nuance must come through in the words.

Susan Sontag notes in her essay, “Directions: Write, Read, Rewrite. Repeat Steps 2 and 3 as Needed,” “to write is to practice, with particular intensity and attentiveness, the art of reading” (nytimes.com). You write to reread and revise and reread again as many times as it takes. Facing an empty page can be “a plunge into an icy lake,” whereas, with revision your working with something. Revision allows me to inhabit Munro’s house—described in the acknowledgement page quote—and before settling in, move the furniture around or discard some items in order to best showcase character and theme.

Vamos Rafa

Irene Sullivan stood in her shop behind the counter, arms across her chest, eyes narrowed in irritation as Mr. Costello dawdled over his selections. She was slender with frizzy grey hair and a snub nose. A not overly attractive woman, everyone agreed, except for her figure, which men still noticed. She liked Mr. Costello even if he was a bit fussy—poor dear man—but her feet were killing her and she wanted nothing more than to go home.

“I’ll get the crackers this time, Mrs. Sullivan, and the *Irish Times*, I think,” his voice still thick with the soft sounds of County Mayo. He reached for his wallet. “It’s good what you’ve done here, for the community I mean—a reminder of home. But nothing lasts forever, I suppose.”

Handing him his change, she said, “Only death, Mr. Costello. We can depend on that.”

A man nearly collided with Mr. Costello as he left the shop. Christ, she thought, now what.

“Are you still open?” he called from the doorway.

She motioned him in. “Might as well come in the rest of the way now. I have a few minutes,” she said glancing at her watch. If the man heard the reluctance in her voice, he gave no sign. He was tall with silver-white hair that curled around his collar, and—in her mind—gave him a foreign, not-quite-trustworthy look. Deep furrows in his

face and lines around his mouth suggested depletion, furthering her impression. Still, he was a good-looking man.

She was surprised when he greeted her by name in an accent that was unmistakably New York. Since her husband, James, had died, no-one called her Irene.

She stared at his face for a moment. His eyes were very blue. “I’m sorry, I…”

He told her there was no reason for her to remember him as he had moved away years ago. “I’m Martin Alito, my sister was Renee. We lived in the same building as you, 4th floor. A smile came to his eyes.

Then she remembered. The boy from upstairs, the troublemaker—one of the many boys her mother had warned her against.

“Now, I’m back staying with my sister. Not the same old neighborhood though. I hardly recognize it.”

She looked out the shop’s plate glass window at the street. He was right. She couldn’t make sense of the ways things worked anymore. These days you were much more likely to encounter a Cesar than a Conlan, dark skin rather than white. Halloran’s Bar across the street, where she and James used to have a drink on Friday nights was now a bodega advertising plantains rather than Jameson. “Things change,” James had said. But then didn’t live long enough to see the extent of the change. What would he say now? She noticed a woman of some size struggling to get herself and her grocery bags through the door. Her brightly colored dress revealed ample cleavage and clung to her plump backside—not a particularly Irish trait. At least they were Catholic, Mrs. Sullivan thought. The neighborhood had become a place that told her, in one way or the other, that she didn’t belong. She felt displaced, like a refugee from another country.

“Altogether a different world,” she said. She was glad that James had not lived to see it.

Mr. Alito looked around the shop at the sparse shelves and the signs for reduced merchandise. “Looks like you’re getting ready to close down?”

“I’m ready for a change.” She scrunched the sleeves of her sweater up as if to signal her readiness. In reality, fear gripped her chest when she thought of all the days to come with no place to go. But that wasn’t this man’s business. She arranged her face into a smile, “Is there something in particular you are looking for?”

“A present for my sister.” He scanned the shelves. “How about that bowl there on the second shelf?”

Mrs. Sullivan pointed toward a shallow bowl delicately cut in the shape of a leaf. He had chosen one of her best pieces. At least he had some sense. “You have good taste,” she said, handing the bowl to him. He turned it over in his hands, examining it from all angles. “This is beautiful. I’ll take it.”

He paused before opening the door of the shop and looked at her. “Would you like to grab a bite to eat?”

It was Mrs. Sullivan’s nature to be blunt when flustered, “No,” she said. Then, realizing how this sounded, she added, “Thanks, but too much to do here.” She gestured toward a back room. “Packing things up.”

He nodded. “Maybe another time, then.”

She locked the door behind him, turned the open sign to closed, and leaned her head against the door.

When she returned to her apartment, the sky had muted to gray. This was a difficult time of day for Mrs. Sullivan, that in-between space, when one thing was finished and it wasn't yet time for the next. She turned on the entrance hall light, took off her shoes and placed them side by side near the door. She stared at the apartment opposite hers and thought of the people who had once lived there—her memories a jumble of faces—all gone now, moved like Mr. Alito or dead like her husband. When she thought of them, it was as they had been, young, with hopeful eyes. She glanced at a silver framed photo showing a man whose smile had nothing behind it—his expression nearly identical to her mother's when she was trying to be pleasant. “Well, James, who would have thought? Here I am and there you are.”

From the kitchen, she heard the hum of the refrigerator but otherwise there was silence. She snatched open its door, suddenly aggravated by the nerve of Mr. Alito—he hadn't even asked if she was married. Figures. “Maybe some other time.” Those were his parting words. Not likely, she thought and was surprised at her disappointment. Poking around the shelves, she settled on a roast beef sandwich and glass of milk. She sat down at the little table, napkin in lap and ate, slowly, as she had been taught as a child. No need to hurry. Eating, washing up—all of it could keep you going if you did it right. She rinsed and re-rinsed her dishes, wiped the table clean, tidied the counter, waiting like a child about to go for recess until a decent time had elapsed. Then she turned on the computer, typed in “Rafael Nadal fan” and waited for the page to open.

It was her friend who first introduced her to tennis. Mrs. Ortiz had joined the cult of Federer. Perched on a stool where she could keep an eye on both the bodega cash register and her customers, she extolled the grace of his movement and the variety of

shot-making. “Say your prayers for your novio, Rafa, he will need them, maybe a novena to beat Roger again.” But to Mrs. Sullivan, it was Nadal with his intensity and powerful ground strokes who was the better player. If Federer was Nureyev then Rafa’s physicality was like an Alvin Ailey dancer. Any lingering thoughts of the dinner invitation or the emptiness of her apartment receded as the page opened to a photomontage of Rafa vacationing off the coast of Spain. He was tan and smiling at his girlfriend. Even taller in person, she had heard. It felt good seeing him like that—unencumbered, clearly in love. She tweeted, “Good to see you having fun, you deserve the rest.” Had she ever felt that way? She tried to remember.

Several days passed. Normally, she opened the shop early, but, now that she was closing, she had been waiting to mid-mornings. Empty shelves assaulted her. Packed boxes were stacked everywhere, their contents written in black marker on the side of each. As if the last thirty years of her life could be categorized, labeled, and neatly put away. It seemed like weeks since Mr. Alito had bought the bowl, and she’d had very few customers since. She wondered if his sister had liked the present. She felt responsible. That’s stupid, she told herself, he’s the one who picked out. Two days later, Mr. Alito showed up at her shop with two cups of coffee in hand. Mrs. Sullivan watched as he came through the door, juggling both cups. Even though she wanted to ask about the bowl, it irritated her that he thought he could just drop by as if she didn’t have a hundred things to do. In a flush of outrage, she held her hand up in a stop-where-you-are gesture.

“Sorry, Mr. Alito, can’t talk now,” she said.

Without losing a step, he came forward, placed the coffee on the counter, nodded and said, “Well then, I’ll just leave this here with you. Sorry for the disturbance.” With a wry smile and promising to return another day, he turned around and walked out. Mrs. Sullivan found his acquiescence as irksome, maybe more so than the original interruption, just as James’s agreeableness had bothered her.

But a routine of sorts began. He would bring by coffee, stay for a few minutes, if she weren’t busy, and then leave. Their conversation, halting at first, soon settled into a steady but mostly inconsequential flow. She did learn that his wife had died five years ago, and he had one son who lived out west.

*

On the night of their first real date, Mrs. Sullivan took a shower, got dressed, and sat down at her dressing table to see what she could do with her hair. After a few tugs of the comb, she gave up, her eyes, dark and large, had always been her best feature anyway. A touch of blush and lipstick to give color. As good as it would get, she thought. One last glance, a smoothing of a stray strand of hair, and she was ready. The restaurant was Dominican, small and dimly lit but not unpleasant. It was very clean, Mrs. Sullivan noted, but not the kind of place she would have chosen. The waitress had the sealed-off look of someone who spends a lot of time on the subway, but when Mr. Alito greeted her in Spanish, she warmed up. He ordered dinner for both of them. “Hope you don’t mind, but I’ve eaten here before.” She did mind. But at the same time, she felt taken care of. It threw her off balance, and she didn’t like that.

They sat across from each other at a table for two. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, his eyes intent on hers.

She leaned back in her seat. “Sounds like you’re pretty much alone? Your son so far away.”

“I hate it. Guess, I wasn’t meant to fly solo.” He studied her expression. “How about you?”

“I do OK. James has been dead for ten years, more time to adjust. But the business closing—that’s been hard.” He put his hand on hers. It was large and warm. She looked away from him. She hardly knew this man, and she could not tell him more than that. There had been a moment for she and James—when they’d first opened the shop. Both excited to take a risk. And they’d done OK; financially it paid off. But the excitement of those first few months could not be sustained, and soon they had fallen back into equanimity, comforted by the familiar.

*

She and Mr. Alito started having dinner together, reminiscing about the past and who was still alive and who had moved where. Once or twice they went to a movie instead, and after, he would walk her home, past the shops, people still crowding the streets, and wait at the door until she was safely in the building. He held her hand and put his arm around her in the movie. That hadn’t happened since she and James’s first dated. It felt good to be touched by another human being. She decided she would call Mrs. Ortiz and tell her about it. Not the feeling good part, though. One Sunday, he went to mass with her. She knelt in her pew, head down, eyes closed, trying to pray when all she was aware of was the man next to her, so close that his thigh touched hers. She looked around the church to see if anyone noticed. Mrs. Sullivan was from the down-there generation—not that she herself had ever been down there; they had never explored what was there to

make things more interesting. Then that door had finally closed some years before James's death—not that he minded. She was aware that life had more to it than the comfort of familiarity. As a teenager, she had envied the girls with bouffant hairdos, tight skirts, and gum-snapping—all things forbidden to her. This man beside her was like them. He would want more than a steady life. He would want to dance. She'd never learned how and wasn't sure she wanted to. To have hope now—she had buffered herself against expectation for too long.

*

When he came into the shop, he was wearing tan slacks, a blue polo shirt, and sunglasses. The blue shirt brought out the color in his eyes, and she wondered, not for the first time, why he was interested in her.

“I just came by to see if you want to take a walk,” he said.

“I don't know what to say. I've got paperwork to finish.” She pointed at the stack of receipts in front of her. “I suppose it won't hurt to take a break.” Her momentary irritation passed, and she looked at her watch. “I'll need to back by six, but that gives plenty of time. Give me a minute to get things put away.”

They walked up 207 Street. Their conversation, such as it was, centered on the neighborhood. It was a beautiful afternoon, still warm, with the sun just beginning to shade into the trees that lined the crowded street. She looked about her. People were everywhere, some going in and out of the stores, others returning from work, walking fast, not looking one way or the other. Here and there, a group of teens, some on skateboards, monopolized the walkway. Normally this would bother her, but today she smiled glad that this aspect of Inwood had not changed, life lived out on the streets and

away from the confines of an apartment. They rounded the corner, turned onto Broadway, and entered Ishiam Park. A large Ginkgo tree dressed with fan-shaped leaves flanked the entranceway. Just beyond the gate, a group of young men and women tossed a red Frisbee. A dog tried to intercept it as it sailed from one person to the next.

They walked along the path shaded by a canopy of old elms. Mrs. Sullivan had run along here many times as a young child. At one time, carriages had traveled this same path on their way to the hilltop and the Ishiam mansion. The carriages and the mansion were both gone, but Mrs. Sullivan thought the view of the Hudson framed by groves of maple and locust trees must be as beautiful as it had been in the mansion's heyday. This was something that had not changed. She watched as Mr. Alito stomped on some leaves, and like a child, seemed to enjoy the crackle underneath.

"Looks like you've done that before," she said.

He turned to her with a quick smile. "Plenty of times. This was one of my favorite places as a kid. How about you?"

"I played here some, but I liked the beach better. Sandcastles, collecting shells, that kind of thing. I never had a sister or brother, so when I was little it was just me."

He pointed to a stone bench that bordered the path. "Let's sit down for a while."

"I was lucky that way—having brothers I mean. I was the youngest, so I got picked on, but I always knew my brothers were there for me. Two have passed, and the oldest, Anthony, has dementia, so in a way, he's gone too. It's hard when I visit him. There he is but he's not. I miss him."

"I imagine that would be hard," she said. "I guess I was spared all that. Maybe I was lucky in that way."

“Maybe, but as hard as it is I wouldn’t have had it any other way. You know, nothing ventured nothing gained.” Neither of them spoke for a while.

Then in a quiet voice. “The worst part, what I feel most guilty about, is I’m glad it’s not me—just like with my wife and the cancer. I was devastated, sure, but there was a small part of me happy to be alive and healthy and not lying there suffering. I think she knew that.” He sat there without moving. The lines in his face lengthened and drooped.

Irene saw the sadness in his face and felt afraid. What did he expect her to say? She wasn’t good at feelings. Besides, bad things happened to everyone. People die. You move on. This man wanted more, would want her to be someone she wasn’t. Suddenly she missed her husband.

It was late afternoon now, and an autumnal chill was in the air. He stared out at the people in the park. “My cousin and I have talked about sharing her apartment. Me moving from New Jersey. She’s lonely, I’m lonely.” He looked at her. “Or I was lonely.” He took her hand in his. “These last few weeks are the first time in a long time that I have felt a little like my old self.”

She pulled her hand away and sat back. “Mr. Alito...Martin, I, I don’t know what to say,” she stammered. For the first time in weeks, panic clutched at her heart and squeezed the breath out of her. She longed for the safety of her apartment. “I like you, I really do, but I’m not like you.” She started to turn away. “You want things I don’t know how to give.” She knew from experience that this scar would fade over time.

Back at her apartment, Mrs. Sullivan went into the bathroom, splashed cold water onto her face, and ran a comb through her hair. Looking into the mirror, she pulled back her shoulders and faced her reflection. “What a fool,” she whispered. She went into the

kitchen, turned on the light, and searched the refrigerator for something to eat. She took out some leftover soup, heated it in the microwave, and sat down at her table, careful to place the hot bowl on a place mat. Napkin in lap, she began to eat the soup, one bite and then another until she had eaten it all. She cleaned up, went over to the computer, sat down, and turned it on.

The match was just beginning. There was Rafa pacing back and forth on the baseline. It was the last game of the first set. Mrs. Ortiz's favorite was serving. She watched as Rafa hit a stinging forehand return cross-court to Federer's backhand—a winner. Rafa clenched his fist, pumped his arm and yelled “vamos” to spur himself on. The match went four sets and then five. Finally, it was the last game of the last set and Rafa was serving for the final point. He served to the far corner of the ad side of the court. Federer sprinted for the ball, got his racket on it, and hit a return down the center of the court. Rafa was there in anticipation, raised his arm, made a looping swing, and smashed a winner down the line to win the match. The crowd erupted, and Mrs. Sullivan jumped up from her chair, joining the 14,000 spectators at the match shouting “Vamos Rafa.”

Redemption

Jes is the only person in all of Kitrell County known to have found and lost Jesus all before her eighth birthday. The finding happened on a Sunday, quick-like, but the losing took longer. She was at the Church of God Prophecy looking through a Bible picture book. There He was coming through the clouds, either ascending or descending, Jes couldn't tell which, but he sure was pretty, with long golden hair and a beautiful white light coming out of the firmament. Light so palpable it seemed to leap off the page, illuminating not only the recesses of the church but the town beyond.

This was Kittrell County, West Virginia. The town, Tygart Junction, ran perpendicular to the mountain, an arrangement dictated by the thin layers of coal that had once bound the earth together. A train had circled the mountain along the ridge, hauling coal daily and passengers three times a week. The dark rails of the train track stood in contrast to the orange, yellow, and deep purple that covered the immediate hillside. Further up the mountain, you could see where the pine and poplar trees had been clear-cut to make way for the bulldozers that, together with powerful explosives, had laid waste to the mountaintops. Rocks and rubble had come to replace trees, and the floor of the once forest was barren of the ginseng and yellow seal that the old-timers had gathered to treat the ailing. Gone were the sounds of the sky-blue cerulean warbler calling to its mate. Gone too was the hawk as it swooped down to catch its prey.

Earlier that morning, her mother had pinned Jes between her legs—“hold still you little heifer”—and tugged her hair this way and that as she braided two uneven plaits. When she was finished, Mrs. Beasley, a neighbor woman, called from the open front door, “Well now, don’t you look nice, missy?”

Jes’s mother pushed her into a threadbare sweater, leaving the sleeves to hang well below Jes’s hands. Mrs. Beasley stepped into the room, careful to avoid the clutter scattered about the floor, saying “Let me help you with those” as she made a show of folding up first one sleeve and then the other.

“Jesus,” Jes’s mother muttered. She was dressed in a long T-shirt that just covered her bare bottom. “What time is it anyway?” She stared at the old woman’s neatly combed hair and ironed dress. “Bitch,” she said to herself, but out loud said, “I’ll expect her back right after church.”

“Maybe just a little later. Church will last a good while, and then we might stop by my place and get us a bite before I bring her home, that is if you don’t mind?”

“I expect that’d be OK,” Jes’s mother answered and disappeared into a back room.

Jes reached for Mrs. Beasley’s wrinkled hand. She was a small-boned little girl of six.

The old lady gave the room one last look. “Lordy,” she said to herself, taking Jes’s hand.

On the way back from church, Jes asked Granny (that’s what she called Mrs. Beasley), “What’s Jesus doing up there all day long?”

“Lord have mercy child, how come you to ask such a question?”

“I saw His picture. It was in that big book. He was dressed in white, His hair long and real pretty, and I got to wonderin’ what He did up there in the clouds.”

“Well...” Mrs. Beasley searched for the right words. “He’s up there with all the celestial beings.”

“Never heard of them?”

“You heard of the archangel Michael, ain’t you?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jes said.

“Jesus sits up there with the angels and all the people who done good here on earth and have since passed on.”

“But what about people who don’t always do right?”

“Honey, you’re too little to do anything so bad it would upset the Lord.”

“But what would He do?” Jes said.

Ordinarily Mrs. Beasley was a hardscrabble woman whose tenderness was all but dried, but whatever softness she had left was reserved for this child who had been abandoned by all but her and the Lord.

“Well Jes, Jesus don’t truck with no badness, but He’s also a loving God, just like the preacher said, and I believe He could find it in His heart to forgive.”

*

Mrs. Beasley’s house was a mile from the church, set up on a hill. A porch extended across the front of the house, and the old lady spent most nights reading her Bible in a worn rocking chair. They trudged up the steep stairs, opened the front door, and entered directly into a long, narrow room. A sofa, with two crocheted doilies on the arms, sat against one wall. Above the sofa hung a painted panel of Jesus and the twelve

apostles reclining around a table. Nearby, on a side-table were two photographs, one of a lank-haired boy and the other of a man whose hair was equally forlorn. Jes reckoned they were father and son but didn't remember ever seeing them. She looked at Mrs. Beasley.

"Are they your kin?"

"That one on the right is my boy, Nathan. Don't see him much since he moved to the city. The other is my husband. He died before you were ever even born."

"Don't you ever get lonely?"

"Honey, I got Jesus with me. He's walking with you too if you let him."

She went into the kitchen and began to fry some bologna for sandwiches. She poured two glasses of sweet milk, assembled the sandwiches, and placed both on the little dining table opposite the sofa. "Take your sweater off, Jes, and hang it on the back of the chair." Bowing her head, she began, "O Lord, we thank you for this food."

*

After lunch, it was time to go back. Jes felt the promise of the afternoon sun dim as she started up the steep road of the holler toward home a step or two slower than the old woman.

"We're back," Mrs. Beasley said, standing in the doorway with Jes. In the dim light of the room, she saw a man sitting on the sofa. Next to him was Jes's mother, dressed in the same T-shirt she'd had on that morning. A glass pipe lay on the floor between them. Jes's mother seemed not to hear the old woman.

"Maybe we came back earlier than you expected." Taking Jes's hand, Mrs. Beasley backed up a few steps toward the door.

"You'd best leave her here."

Mrs. Beasley took a second: looked at Jes, looked at the mother, looked at the man sitting next to her. “I’ll be by next Sunday,” she said, giving Jes’s hand a squeeze. “You know where I am if you need me before then. She turned around and shut the door behind her.

“Come here, Jes,” her mother said. “I want you to meet my friend.”

The man tried to sit up straighter as he said, “Pleased to meet you, little lady.” He had a long hatchet face, reddish brown hair, and hooded eyes. Jes just stood there still as a statue.

“Where’s your manners, Jes? You speak when you’re—”

“That’s all right, Tina. Maybe when she’s rested up we can get acquainted.”

Jes walked to the alcove where she slept. She closed the curtain that served as a door. She took off her sweater, folded it neatly, and placed it in the wooden crate that held her clothes. She moved slowly in the waning light, sat down on her bed, reached up under her shirt, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. She was careful as she unfolded it, first one side and then the other, and then smoothed each crease until the paper lay flat. She had torn the picture out at church and felt comforted now by the sight of the figure coming through the clouds. She didn’t know anyone that pretty, except maybe her mom a while ago. But whereas Jesus was all golden and light like a summer day, her mother was the space between autumn and the first real snowfall. Folding the paper back up, she placed it under her pillow and turned to find her mother staring at her from the doorway.

“What you got there, Jes?”

“Nothing, just a picture I found.” She shifted her eyes toward her bed. Her mother came closer, brushed her lips against Jes’s cheek, and whispered in a voice Jes had

almost forgotten, “I’m trying, baby girl. I’m trying the only way I know how. Don’t mess it up.”

*

Some days later, Jes woke up to a quiet, dimly lit house. She put on her shorts and went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and got out an egg and slice of bread. Turning the knob on the stove, she lit a match and the burner ignited under the frying pan she had placed there. She cracked open the egg, popped it in the pan and waited for it to sizzle and harden slightly. The house was silent as she ate her food and drank from an open can of Mountain Dew that had been left on the counter. When she was finished, she went into the living room and sat down on a chair. She knew her mother and the man would not wake until afternoon. Their arguing had wakened Jes several times throughout the night, even though she had hunkered down under the covers and her pillow and blanket.

She got up and wandered to her alcove, trying to think what to do next. She took out a torn book she had found but was too restless to settle in and look at it. She lay down on the floor and gazed up at the ceiling, but today the shapes looked like what they were, cracks in need of repair. Then she knew what she wanted to do. She gathered a blanket and a few other items and headed outside. Some distance from the house, she spread the blanket and stood up a small frame that held a picture of her mother as a child. She placed a cracked saucer in front of the picture and one in front of herself. Looking at the picture she said, “Maddie, let’s have something to eat,” and began spooning dirt into an old cook pot, all the while carrying on a conversation. Jes liked that Maddie was a listener rather than a talker, and she often told her things she told no one else.

After an hour or so, Maddie said it was time for her to go and they said good-bye to each other. Jes got up and walked through the sparse grass toward the dark strip of creek that bordered the back of their house. She picked her way through the rock and rubble, remnants of the blasting that had laid waste to the mountain several years ago.

Jes clutched the thick new growth that clung to the bank and made her way to the edge to put her feet into the water. The warmth of the sun on her back contrasted with the coolness of the creek. She pulled her feet from the water and lay back, resting on the soft earth beneath her. Two bright orange butterflies circled overhead. She imagined they were celestial beings looking out for her, just like Jesus. Muffled footsteps interrupted her thoughts. A long-legged man moved through the shadows cast by sunlight filtered through the branches of the trees. He had a scraggly white beard and bushy brows that sprouted every which way. He was surprisingly sure-footed and quick, and Jes thought he looked like a wily old mountain goat. Making sure to stay well behind, she followed him to a cabin stuck back off the road. Behind the cabin were hutches so filled with rabbits small and large they had no room to move.

Above the unsuspecting bunnies, on a wire strung for that purpose, hung the amputated still-bloody feet of those recently chosen for slaughter. Jes waited for the old man to go inside and then approached the hutch at an oblique angle. She stared at the rabbits and they stared back, dark eyes glistening as if they had been crying. Jes looked around for something to try and force the door open, but there was nothing in the yard sturdy enough. The hutch was padlocked, and there was no way out for those trapped within.

Jes walked in the front door of her house and saw the hatchet-faced man sitting on a chair, opaque eyes staring into space. At first, she was too startled by the sight of him to notice that her mother lay on the sofa, but when she did, Jes knew that her mother was off somewhere else again and it would be several hours or maybe even the next day before she came back. Jes supposed there was no way around it and forced herself to mumble a hello. She was never sure whether to draw attention to herself or not and had perfected the ability to go unnoticed. The man seemed not to hear, and Jes sidled past him and into the kitchen. She spread two pieces of bread with strawberry jam. The house was silent as she ate her bread, and Jes could feel her heart begin to slow to a normal rate. She filled a glass with water from the faucet and sat down at the table. A thud sounded from the front room. Jes jumped up and headed back to her alcove. She lay down on her bed, not really tired but unsure what else to do. She had taped the picture of Jesus down low on the wall that her bed was set against. That way she could lay on her side in bed and look without anyone knowing, which is what she did then. The celestial light grew brighter, and Jesus seemed to move through the clouds, His arms outstretched as if beckoning to her. She thought about what the preacher had said about Jesus loving little children. And Mrs. Beasley told her if she asked Jesus would help her. “Jesus,” she said, “you don’t know me but I heard a lot about you being nice and such.” Jes paused and took a deep breath to gather her courage. As she started to speak, the curtain that covered her doorway rustled. She heard him tiptoe across the small room and sit on her bed. “Who you talkin’ to in here?” he said.

His voice had a ragged sound to it that Jes had never heard before. He shook Jes’s shoulder, but she kept her back to him and stared at the picture. The man reached over

and began to rub her back going lower each time until his hand was underneath her panties. It felt like his hand was a long way away but right there, like she was there but also somewhere else. Jes felt the bed give as he got up. She heard the sound of his zipper and grabbed for the picture as he turned her toward him and pulled her up to a sitting position. She clutched the crumpled Jesus in her hand. How could He help her anyway, all golden and pretty? What did He know of little girls and ugliness such as this. He couldn't help her, nor could that nice preacher man with the big smile, not even Mrs. Beasley as good a lady as she is. She would have to fend for herself and worry about the rest later.

He moved closer, grabbed her by the neck, forcing her face down, and said, "Just like a lollipop."

With that, Jes opened her mouth wide and bit down.

Not Everything That Goes Up Comes Down

Riley rocks back in her seat, snatching the number-two pencil from between her teeth. She has a nervous habit of chewing them until they are covered with tiny indentations like a half-eaten corn on the cob. She feels something funny, down there—a settling in, like a boat mooring to a dock. Of course, if she is being honest, this particular boat likely started docking a while ago in the back seat of a weekend visitor’s car. His name was John, and Riley knows she will never see him again, chose him because of this. Her mother, who thinks she knows everything, used to brag, “Didn’t even need a test. I knew immediately.” Who the fuck cares, Riley thinks, except now here she is, like her mother. Of all the things to inherit.

She stares out the window at a sky half hidden by a haze of clouds and then at the blank paper in front of her. The hot stale air of the room closes in, smothering her. She feels disoriented, not sure where she was or why.

“Ms. Crockett, can I talk to you?” Riley asks, raising her hand.

Now you have to know this about Riley. She has a mass of blonde, tightly coiled curls that spring from her head and fall below her shoulders, giving her the look of an angel. People, including teachers, always assume the best about her, and Riley has come to count on this. Too smart doesn’t get you very far in her world—neither does dumb. You have to play it right. She keeps her interest in books and the stories she has written a secret. It helps that she is pretty, real pretty. That can get you places. But she has made the one big mistake she never should have made.

“Come on up here, Riley.”

She hates to lie to Ms. Crockett, her favorite teacher. It’s not really a lie she tells herself. “I’m sick, woozy like.” Riley puts her hand to her forehead. “I need to see the nurse.”

While lying on the cot in the nurse’s office, she sinks into the kind of funk that only a fifteen year old can experience. Parent advice magazines with bold headlines like “Understanding Your Teen” have a word for this: angst. But they are thinking of an overreaction to zits, or hair that is too curly or not curly enough—not this. This thing, like an alien from outer space, has landed and taken control of her body. This is invasion of the body snatchers.

*

All this happens before her two children—one of whom in spite of Montessori and cloth diapers—will grow up to vote for Trump. It happens even before Riley publishes her first novel, but not before she knows she wants to be a writer. Some might say that experiences like this led to her writing. Or she could answer some future question, the inevitable question, about influences on her writing with this particular story, one among many. But she won’t.

*

Riley traces her difficulties back to the time she went to summer camp. But if she were being honest with herself, or maybe, to be fair, it’s just a failure of memory, her troubles go back further. If you want to circle a date on the calendar, then make it the first time Riley, at age two, got up in the big picture window that faced the front yard, took her clothes off, and started moving to music only she heard. She wasn’t an exhibitionist

exactly, it was more the freedom, the feeling of being unencumbered. Tommy Danes, a pumpkin-faced little boy from next door, was the one to alert her mother, who yanked Riley out of the window. “What am I going to do with you?” She was shouting. Her dad swore she had a wild hair like his uncle that ran off with a Catholic. “That will need to be clipped,” he said. But Riley’s wildness went deeper than that. It filled her imagination with brilliant colors. Words were shapes that morphed continuously. Even her favorite tree had a story to tell. Don’t misunderstand; Riley’s parents were good people. It was just a poor fit. A child who saw infinite variety and parents who thought the world was completed in six days.

*

We could start with Riley’s remembrances:

Camp memory #1: She’s ten years old. She sits cross-legged on the grass surrounded by other girls her age wearing T-shirts that read, “Kids praise Jesus.” It is late morning, the sun not quite directly overhead but still warm enough to cause sweat to bead on Riley’s forehead. A camp counselor—a young man they call Mr. Don—stands on a wooden platform, holding a Bible. Seconds later he drops it, the boom startling the campers as it hits the floor. “That’s how suddenly it will happen,” he shouts. “You have to be ready.” He has them stand up and raise their arms to the sky. “Reach for Jesus,” he says. As if they are going to be beamed up.

Camp memory #2: Same camp, a different day. She’s still ten years old. The same counselor. It is dusk and stars are just coming into view. The campers are gathered again on the grass but this time standing. The June breeze is equivocal. It blows the counselor’s voice, first one way and then another as if someone were turning the volume button up,

down, and then up again. But Riley and the other campers get the point. They venture out into the increasing darkness to search their hearts for Jesus. Kids scatter across the grounds. Some kneel with hands clasped in prayer. Others sit with heads bowed. Riley moves among them until someone tells her to go away. “I’m accepting Jesus into my heart,” she says. If things had gone as her mother intended, Riley would be doing the same thing.

*

Go back a little further:

It’s June 7th, 1984. Surrounded by family and friends, the boy who is to become Riley’s father is blowing out ten candles on a birthday cake decorated with GI Joe action figures. Some two hundred miles away, child protective services takes the future mother of Riley into custody. The preliminary file reads: Caucasian female, eight or nine years old, found abandoned with obvious signs of neglect and physical abuse. Possible sexual abuse victim—TBD. Unable to locate parent(s) or family.

Later, the file reveals that Riley’s mother, now called Marnie, is adopted by a Pentecostal family, that although fundamentalist in their religious practices, is exceptionally loving. Most interesting to this story is that Marnie now nine or ten—her exact age was never established—will end up living a mile away from Riley’s father. We’ll call him by his nickname, Boots.

If we were privy to the years between Marnie’s adoption and the birth of Riley, we would see that she eased her grief by reinventing her past and bringing that imagining into her future. In this way, she constructed an origin story and a self that allowed only perfection. Anything that did not fit, she didn’t see.

*

But that was then and this is now.

Her mother is making dinner. Something with chicken and mushroom slices. She is one of those round-faced, permanently smiling women who you might think doesn't have a lick of sense. You would be wrong.

She takes off her apron and perches on a stool next to the kitchen island.

“Come sit down and tell me about your day.”

Riley tells her that Wade got sent to the office for sleeping in class and how Mr. Vilander went on and on today. For no reason Riley can see, her mother eats this shit up. What she won't tell her is that Wade was stoned when he fell asleep, that Brian caught his girlfriend having sex with someone else, or that she, Riley, might be pregnant.

*

Change that to, is pregnant. Not a doubt, according to the pink line, the blue line and a strip done just to be extra sure. Riley is stuck in a pew, pinned between her mother and father, nervously chewing on her fingernails. Reverend Newsome drones on about God's plan. But Riley is thinking, not listening. She figures she is no more than three to five weeks pregnant. The website said that her “baby” is somewhere between a collection of cells and a two-layered embryo. Not exactly a baby and definitely not hers. But she knows, in the coming weeks and months, these cells will continue to split and take on a form that can be called human. She thinks about that night in the backseat of the car; there were others too. She thinks about dancing in the window at two, her friends at summer camp opening their hearts to Jesus, the black and white of her mother's world.

Her world is filled with fuchsia, chartreuse, and sapphire which colors her stories differently. Years later, she will come to fully understand this. But even now she knows it is worth fighting for. She closes her eyes, imagining that her body is hers alone again.

A voice speaks from the congregation. It is Mrs. Etheridge, a big woman shaped like a pear. Sitting next to Mrs. Etheridge is her husband, George, who everyone knows, spends most of his free time in a strip club on the mainland. And there he is, head bent in prayer, as his poor pear-shaped wife asks the congregation to pray for her dying sister. Someone else requests prayers for the safety of their daughter, a helicopter pilot in Afghanistan. But Riley doesn't pray for Mrs. Etheridge's sister or for that girl pilot. Instead, she repeats over and over in her head, "Make this go away, please, make this go away."

*

Ms. Crockett agrees to talk to Riley's parents. Riley's mother, smile frozen in place, sits with her legs crossed at the ankle, her purse shielding her chest. Her father jiggles his right leg up and down as he waits for someone to speak. Riley enjoys their discomfort. Years ago, Ms. Crockett had been their teacher. Neither had been good students—her dad because he wasn't very bright and her mother because she refused to think beyond what was on the surface.

"Riley came to me yesterday with a problem." Ms. Crockett looks over at Riley and takes a deep breath.

"Why would Riley come to you?" She stares at the teacher. "And not us?"

Riley's mother, grin still in place but stretched, turns and looks at Riley. "Riley baby, I can't imagine that there is anything you can't tell your mom. Did you fail a test, honey? Cheat? You can tell me."

Riley looks away. She knows that this will go nowhere but down. Her mother won't listen. Then she'll get loud. Too loud and that would be it. She looked at her mother. "Please don't ask me."

"Let me finish, Marnie." Ms. Crockett says in a soft voice.

When she gets to the pregnant part, Riley's mother, face twisted with anger, says, "That's a lie. Riley would never do anything like that." She looks at Riley. "Why do you want to cause trouble like this?"

"It's different now. Kids do things. Don't even consider them sex as such—"

"Stop right there, Ms. Crockett. You may be a good teacher but you aren't a mother. Don't you tell me about my daughter."

*

She is thirty-two when she next does a pregnancy test. She does it again and then one more time. Just like before. She is pregnant. She can do this, wants to do it. Not like before. She's never told her friends, not even her husband, but it is never far from her mind. A certain melancholy. But also clarity. She may not have told friends, but she quit running from herself. New book, new baby. She pictures the cells splitting, a baby forming. Her baby.

*

The rain is heavy as they walk in silence the few blocks to their house. At home, her mother removes her wet coat, reaches for Riley's, and hangs them in the bathroom.

“Sit down, Riley,” her mother says and then nods toward her father as if to say, *You sit too*. The two of them sit, one on each side, closing in on her.

“You’ll go to our friends out west. You liked them,” her mother says, “Remember? You got to ride that horse.”

“I don’t even know them.”

Ignoring Riley’s comment, her mother goes on. “We’ll figure out something to tell folks.”

She is talking to herself. Making a plan for what is to happen, and trying it on by speaking out loud. An overwhelming feeling—like suffocating—grows in Riley. She presses her fingernails into the palms of her clenched fist. There is so much she wants to say it chokes her. She’s not sure what she wants. How to explain this to her mother who allows no feelings contrary to her own. She waits her mother out. Finally, she says, “Just listen to me, please.”

Her mother gestures with her hand. “Go ahead, speak. I’m listening.” She sits, her mouth a straight line, her hands clasped tightly.

“Maybe I don’t want this baby...” Riley starts.

“Of course we don’t want this baby.” Her mother laughs. “No question about that.” She edges forward in her seat. “You can put that worry out of your mind.”

“What I mean is...” “She lowers her eyes, takes a deep breath, and looks her mother in the eyes. “Maybe I don’t want to carry this inside me.”

They stare at each other for a while. Her mother says in a hard voice, “You’ll do exactly what I say. Finish the school year and then you’ll go to stay with the Snyders.

You'll have this baby, and then leave it and everything connected to it out west. Finished. Never happened.”

*

She sits on the edge of her bed, kicks off her shoes, and looks around her—the ruffled canopy over her bed, the lace-edged bedspread, her first shoes bronzed for posterity. These things have never been her. She cries, her chest heaving with the weight of her tears. She cries for the self she was. She cries out of fear, the not knowing who she might become. She cries until she feels emptied. She thinks, it will never be the same again—this room, this house, it will all feel different. She puts her hands on the bed and slowly pushes up like an old woman might. The wooden floor feels solid beneath her feet. It seems like days since she sat in the schoolroom with Ms. Crockett and her parents. She goes into her bathroom, wipes her eyes with a piece of toilet paper, and then rinses her face in cool water. Back in her room, she picks up her cell, scrolls through contacts, and presses Ms. Crockett's name. She looks out the window. The rain has stopped and the sun is pressing through the clouds.

Only One Set of Bones

ISLAND WEEKLY

SATURDAY MARCH 30, 2000

OWNER AND EDITOR: GINA BALLARD

Hurricane Cindy Raises the Dead and Controversy

Gina Ballard

Days after Hurricane Cindy battered the island, former island science teacher, Hollis Crockett went for a walk. Her destination was the Triangle, a part of the island, that is barely above sea level. It is deserted now, but it wasn't always like that. As one old timer remembers, "My grandfather owned a hardware store there. There was a regular community with a school and church."

A hurricane in the 1940s forced the townspeople to retreat to the main part of the island. Time and the ocean washed away, or buried the abandoned remnants of their lives, until the storm. Hollis spotted caskets, empty graves, and bones. "I was looking for artifacts. I've seen bits of bone or a button from a burial shirt but never anything like this. Skeleton's, several skulls, and lots of bones."

The Triangle has been ravaged by centuries of storms. Islanders, even Ms. Crockett's own in-laws, say it is erosion from these storms that uncovered the island's past, including the graveyard. Ms. Crockett and local environmentalist, Brian Pruitt disagree. They are convinced, along with others from the state and federal governments that climate change is the major culprit. Whatever the cause, the fact is the island is losing 19 feet of land a year.

You can see the empty graves and outlines of caskets on the beach. The tiny skeleton of a child lies exposed to the elements. Headstones date to the 1800s at the graveyard, which was once inland, but is now buffeted by waves. State archeologists, contacted by Ms. Crockett, will do the excavation with Ms. Crockett as their guide.

The hurricane uncovered some of the island's history. Hollis Crockett believes another one could leave just memories.

The archeologists arrived three days after the article was published. It was an unusually warm April day, with a cloudless sky—a good omen. As Hollis waited, she heard the water-taxi's engine sputter to a stop and the passengers unload. Showtime, she thought. A heavysset woman, hair swept back in an imperious bun, seemed to be their leader. She introduced herself as Dr. Shelton, and the man beside her, a slightly built African-American, as Dr. Coleman. Their handshakes were brief, impersonal, and they would spend most of the trip talking to one another. A second man named Owen—

ordinary looking except for his ponytail and feathered earring—turned out not to be an archeologist but a graduate assistant. She couldn't quite place his age—they all looked so young to her—but she noticed a stillness about him she liked. She liked the earring.

By noon, they arrived at the beach, unbroken except for bits of debris here and there. Off to the right sat a gnarled stump on which an osprey perched and in front of them was a wide and ebbing sea. Though it was spring, the air had the sweet, musty smell of decay. “They’re over the ridge,” Hollis said, pointing to the place where she first spotted the bones. As calmly as she could, though she felt some trepidation, she led them to the site. Dr. Shelton knelt next to a long rectangular impression, the remnants of an empty grave. Nearby was a smaller rectangle, the outline of a child’s casket emerging from the muck. “OK guys,” she said, all business. “Let’s see how many of the remains we can actually save.”

*

Some would say this all started with the hurricane of 1943. But maybe, as Hollis believed, it started before the storm, before the Triangle was abandoned—even before the Pocomoke Indians—back when the first dinosaur died, and was buried in the mud. The earth folded, and folded again, and the pressure and heat turned mud to stone and the animals into oil and gas. Later came factories, people and more people, and Henry Ford saw an opportunity.

*

Years later, Hollis could still picture the beach and see Dr. Shelton, agile despite her girth, kneeling in the sand. Though she was no-nonsense in her speech, she had a certain reverence as she approached each grave. The identification of the remains would

take a long time; they were in such bad shape she told them. “Headstones will help, but there’s not many of those left. It’s important to dig out even the smallest bones.” While Owen bailed water out of the larger grave shaft, the two scientists worked with trowels to clear away the dark muck from a child’s coffin. When Hollis asked, “Can I help?” Dr. Shelton nodded, handed her a beaker, and Hollis started bailing water at the other end of the shaft from Owen. Before long, they developed a shared rhythm to their movements, and as the water level in the shaft decreased, the dank odor of decay became more prominent.

At first, Hollis felt awkwardness, like she was the outsider, but after a short while, they seemed to take her presence for granted. And Hollis was glad to be there, sharing the preservation of memory.

Hollis would remember—because it was so unusual for that time of the year—the warm days and big blue skies. No one else walked the beach or came from town to help. Except for the sound of their trowels or occasional conversation, there was silence. One day Owen showed her how to clean the bones with a bamboo stick. It was careful work, requiring close attention and for an hour or so they worked quietly side-by-side. Sweat ran down Hollis’s back and pooled in the hollow of her neck. After a while, she leaned back on her heels and watched Owen as he worked. His movements were smooth and precise. In spite of his long hair, she thought he looked very male. They talked some, although, he had a reserve that was typical of people from certain parts of South Dakota. A year ago he decided to start graduate school and got this job to help pay for it. “That’s how I wound up here.” While he worked, Hollis told him about finding the bones, the eerie feeling of the past intruding on her life—her husband’s family had been buried

there, was she even now holding one of their bones—but most of all about her love of the disappearing land. When she was finished, Owen nodded at her. “Well, we kind of wondered about that, thought you were just lonely. Why else would someone work so hard for free?” He smiled at her. “I guess that explains it sort of. Do you ever think about leaving?”

“Only every other day,” she laughs. “But I love it. Love hate I guess.”

*

“How was it today?” A voice blurted through the receiver.

“Who is this?” Hollis asked as she placed her keys and backpack on the counter.

“Funny Hollis. You know damn well who this is. How’d it go?”

“Hot and a lot of work.”

“I’ll bet it was hot.” Min, her sister-in-law, said. “Sally told me that young man was kind of cute, even if he did wear an earring.”

“Don’t be silly, Min,” Hollis said, trying to hold her temper. “Sally Prentice is a busybody and a gossip and thinks anything vaguely male is good looking. Just look at that husband of hers.” It was Min who was the busybody, Hollis thought, always poking around, trying to tell Hollis, when Frank was alive, how he liked things or how it was done on the Island. And things only got worse after the argument, which even today still made Hollis mad. All of us like to believe that in certain situations we would behave rationally. That’s what Hollis thought when she and Brian, a former student of hers and now an environmentalist, invited a group to speak to the islanders about climate change. They wanted none of it, and Min was one of the more vocal ones, at one point shouting at Hollis, “You’re not even from here. What do you care?” It felt like a war, with Hollis,

Brian, and science on one side, and Min, the townspeople, and religion on the other. Facts against faith—not the first time. At one point, exasperated, Hollis said to Min, “I knew you weren’t the brightest bulb, but this is crazy.” It just came out. The only certainty to emerge from that meeting was that Hollis was not one of them. Too liberal. But she knew there was more than their different views that ate at Min. There was the other thing. An affair. Frank had been a good man— not very imaginative, but decent. Min had been right about that. But some things are just too private to tell your sister-in-law, especially about her own brother. Hollis had been—well—she’d been a moaner, even a screamer at times. And it scared Frank. Made him anxious he said. He made rules like no sex with the windows open or when they were visiting someone. He said the walls were too thin. And Hollis tried to be less vocal, but that took her someplace she did not want to go. To be fair, he loved her even after she’d lost desire for him—Hollis suspected maybe even more. Somehow Min found out—not about the moaning—but about Hollis’s solution. And Min who was incapable of keeping a secret—kept that one, savoring the power it gave her. That all seemed so long ago.

*

It took weeks working together to collect, catalogue, and prepare the artifacts and remains for shipping to the state museum. Over those weeks, Hollis and Owen continued to work together. It was tiring, especially with the heat and mosquitoes, but Hollis later remembered Owen never slowed down. And in all that time together, he never complained. She didn’t think he was being stoic; it just didn’t seem to bother him. But the thing she remembered most was that he didn’t miss much. She would feel his dark eyes staring at her as if he could divine her thoughts. He didn’t pry, he waited. And she

found herself talking. It began as just facts like the newspaper article. But as Hollis went on she also told him about people on the island, their simple-minded denial of what was really happening to the island—erosion not climate change because only God can control the weather, her arguments with her sister-in-law, Min. “And where the hell are they now? This is part their fault.” She was outraged yes, but also sad.

“You OK?” he asked.

“I keep thinking about something I read. Something about animals leaving a lot of footprints but only one set of bones. I’ve always liked that, our significance and insignificance. Why can’t they see that?”

Some days after work, they would wade out into the water. Hollis smiled with pleasure, grateful for the coolness of the sea, while Owen walked near her, looking for shells. He would call to her, “Look at this,” and hold out a shell of one kind or another for her to see. Once it was a conch shell, the color of a peach. Hollis rotated the shell, rubbing her fingers along the smoothness of its aperture. “Beautiful. Imagine what it’s survived—hurricanes, grinding sand.”

“And they have special powers. The sound they make can keep evil spirits away.”

“If only it were that easy,” Hollis said, handing the shell back to him.

*

That night Hollis had trouble falling asleep, and when she did, she had a dream. She walked along the beach picking her way among the open graves and skeletons scattered here and there. It was early morning, gray with a half promise of light. The dark waves rushed toward her, menacing her ankles. She saw a small round object floating in the shallow water and stooped to pick it up. It was a button from a child’s burial gown.

There was something about how she bent over, the way her hips moved, stiff and calcified. She realized—the way one does in dreams—that her hips looked like that skull in the Georgia O’Keeffe painting. She woke up with a start. Light streamed through her bedroom window. She lay there a few minutes, long enough to will the fear away. Pulling the cover up over her head to shut out the light, she fell back into an early-morning sleep.

*

She opened the door to Owen and in the moment before she said hello, she remembered her dream. The feeling of fear more than the dream itself. It’s been a long time since she’d had a real visitor to her home. Min had been there, of course, but these days she met her friends at the coffee shop by the dock. She lived alone because she preferred it—time to herself enabled her to make space for others. But now, she saw her house through Owen’s eyes. Shelves overflowed with things: books, arrowheads, feathers she had found and liked, an antique inkwell, even a small bird’s nest. The mantle was just as crowded. Old apothecary bottles shared space with her favorite black-and-white photograph of a lone egret, stark but elegant. What baffled her was how she could forget the simplest thing yet remember finding each and every item and the exact reason she had kept it. Owen walked over to a shelf. “This is cool.” He ran his fingers over a sculpture Hollis had made by stacking together pieces of frosted glass. She wanted to say, “Be careful,” or “Don’t touch” as though he were a child or one of her students.

Instead she said, “It’s made from sea glass,” and picked the sculpture up before he did. “They get rounded and smoothed by the waves and the sand.” She took the pieces apart to show him. “Some are frosted like this one. But it’s hard to find now that everything is plastic.”

She poured him a glass of wine and got one for herself. They sat across from each other, he on the couch and she in her favorite chair. Hollis had never been considered pretty, but her face had a fierce intelligence that the discerning found appealing. She was surprised at how ordinary he looked in his khaki pants and collared shirt, even with the earring. Their conversation started slowly then moved at a steady pace, from her teaching to his dislike of spicy food—“not normal for a Latino,” he said, then her interest in science and history, to their shared love of music. She told him about trying to make it as a performer. The band she’d played with. “I had a good voice,” she said, “but not good enough. I’d always loved science, even as a kid, so I decided to get my degree.” They discovered that at different times they had both lived on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. But he had actually grown-up in South Dakota. He didn’t share his inner feelings like so many did now, but Hollis liked that and him a lot. By then, they had moved from their separate seats to the floor, knees almost touching, as they continued to talk. He asked her if she had ever been married, and she told him about Frank, not everything—but she talked about how she’d never really been accepted here, thought about leaving after Frank died, in short, all the ambivalence of the last years. And then she asked, “How about you? Were you ever married?”

“For a couple of years,” he said. “Grew up right across the street from her. That was part of the problem, I think, there wasn’t enough left to discover about one another. But we’re still friends.”

Towards the end of the evening, he surprised Hollis with a quick kiss on the lips. It wasn’t much more than a peck but something happened. The light in the bedroom was off and he turned it on saying “I want to see you.” Hollis watched as he looked at her, ran

his hands over her body, “you’re so lovely,” he said. His face changed. He looked anything but ordinary now. And Hollis began to moan.

*

The next day, someone knocked. And knocked again. Hollis half hoped Owen was back, but opened the door to Min. Hollis momentarily had the idea that she was there to say she was sorry. Forget the past. But Min looked like someone who had forgotten to take her medication.

“You going to ask me in or stand there staring?” Min asked. “I haven’t heard a word from you in nearly a week.”

“You can come in, Min, but only if you promise to be nice.” She led Min to the kitchen, poured them both a cup of coffee, and watched as Min took her time adding sugar and milk to hers.

“OK, Min, you didn’t drop by just to say hello.”

“That’s mean, Hollis,” Min said in her most aggrieved voice. “You didn’t return my calls, and I got worried. That’s all. Just checking to make sure everything’s OK.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

Min stirred her coffee. “Well, I heard you been out there every day working. You and that young man. He’s here nights too.”

“His name is Owen, and he’s not as young as he looks. You can tell that to everyone else who’s minding my business.”

“No need to get bitchy. What would Frank think? You with a younger man?”

“Come on, Min. Frank’s been dead for years.”

“A lot you care or even cared when he was alive.” Her voice was vicious. “I should have told him what kind of woman you were. And still are. No-good, plain and simple.”

So there it was, Hollis thought. Finally, it’s out. How many years had Min waited for this moment?

“I like him, Min. Not that it’s your business.”

“Just watch yourself, Hollis. People talk. It’s Frank’s name, our family.

Hollis gave Min a big smile. “Thanks for the warning. As long as I’ve got you to defend me I’m not worried.”

*

Looking back ten years later, Hollis remembers that time of her life as a point on a continuum of clarification. A newness but also a return or reclamation of parts of herself she had forfeited. She woke that day, a decade earlier, to a spring rain—cool but not cold—that splatters against the window of the Main Street coffee shop where she sits with Brian. She can see herself as she was then. Middle-aged, angry, but with a muffled passion. Main Street has the same few family names on storefronts, the same two churches, both Methodist—one on each end of the street—and the school where she had taught located in-between. This sameness is what allows people to close their eyes to what is happening. She is telling Brian about the excavation, the bones, and wondering if any were those of people she knew—maybe even Frank’s family—the children’s coffins, and Owen. They are tied together in her mind. The feeling of doing something important with someone she really likes. They’ve had several dinners together, even gone to the mainland for a movie. Fun. She tells him about that first kiss but not about the times after,

the nights in bed, the hunger. At the same time, he's a little too mellow—like he backs into life—she wasn't sure what it was.

“You know me, I can be a little much at times.”

“Maybe he likes that.”

“I was the bad guy with Frank. Once was enough.” Then she goes on to tell him that Dr. Shelton has offered her a job—temporary but with a good possibility of something more. It would mean a move, of course.

“What did you say?” Brian asks.

“I didn't know what to say. I told Owen, and he's all for it. Says I can live with him.”

Brian doesn't look at her or speak; instead, he busies himself with his coffee. She tries to explain her feelings. How sometimes, even now, a wild hair grabs hold of her. An urge to be outrageous, to have two to many drinks, to be held by a man. But then, the island, it's her home, her job—collecting memories—and she loves it. And to give up her solitude. She tries to smile, but she is crying. She wants to ask Brian what he would do, as if he were the ex-teacher and she the student.

Brian's puts his hand over hers. “It's not always either or, Hollis.”

*

Hollis woke to a bright sun that spilled across her favorite chair, illuminating a shelf of artifacts that she had spent many years collecting. She decided the Triangle, not here at her house, would be the best place for her to think. An hour later, as she took off her shoes and rolled up her pants legs, she knew that she had been right. This was her real home. The warmth of the surf lapped against her ankles as she walked. She bent down

and scuttled her fingers through the sand, not really searching for anything tangible. She thought about Jim, how uncomplicated he was. She knew that she might come to see this as a flaw. She also knew—as someone her age can know—that he would go on to be with other women. That’s how it should be. But there was the time before that. Did she need to leave here to have that? She looked out at the ebbing tide. Glancing back at the empty graves, she thought about the large fragment of headstone she had found. It said 1787. Hollis walked a little farther, stopped, and bent down. She had spotted a piece of sea glass, the first in a long time. She moved it back and forth in the water to remove the sand. It was deep blue but frosted over. “Beautiful,” she said, rotating it in her hand. She bent down again and pushed the glass into the sand, to allow the tide to find it, and the waves and sand to do what they have always done.

The Least Worse Person

You read the article because she asked. At least that's what you tell yourself after. But face it: the truth is you couldn't man-up enough to say no. It's not the end of the world. After all, you two are in a downswing. Distant. You in front of the computer. Her somewhere you aren't. Weeks had gone by without either of you asking anything more personal than how was your day.

It doesn't matter that the night before last, for the first time in forever, you had sex. Good toe-curling sex that left you panting for your next breath. Two near strangers, excitement fed by a sense of anonymity.

So you said yes. Even though you knew you weren't going to like it. It was her voice. The challenging tone. That was all you needed to hear. The essay is downloaded to her iPhone, probably from the *New Yorker* or the *New York Times*. Somewhere totally unrelated to the way most of the world lives its life. It says something about how people need to do away with the romantic notion of love. That it causes them to marry the wrong people. Not on purpose. But because the wrong person is familiar. Or at least the feelings the wrong person create are familiar. Feelings from childhood, what you grew up with. They feel safe because you know them.

She watches for your reaction. You look around the dining room. The report you are working on is scattered across the glass-top table. What a crock, you think. You remember the silence of your parents whenever they were in a room together. Or late at

night when your mother took long walks after an argument. You were terrified that she wasn't coming back. Until one day she didn't. Now you're being told you want to feel like that same scared little boy peering out the door counting the minutes. You stare at Olivia.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Don't get mad before you even finish the article."

So you read on. The good news is that if you played it right, didn't get caught up in romance, you could end up with the least worse person and have a chance for a good marriage. So that's it, you think. The best you can hope for is to marry the person who is least wrong for you.

"Is that what I am to you?" You hate the hurt in your voice. So you get mad. "We don't live in New fucking York. We're not cynics. This isn't cool Olivia."

"Come on, Brian. Don't get on your soapbox. I just wondered what you thought."

What you think at the moment is that last night, for the first time in forever, you had sex. She even let you enter her from behind. That takes trust, doesn't it? But when you remind her of that, she laughs.

"That's sex, not love. Good sex, for sure, and not something I would do with just anybody. But still not love." She looks directly at you. "This isn't a comment about us. I just thought it was an interesting way to look at relationships."

"Don't bullshit me," you say, glaring. You try to control yourself but you can't stop the fear spreading through your chest. She tells you she is going to bed. The conversation, as she puts it, is going anywhere.

You leave your house the next morning. Neighbors are still asleep. A glimmer of light pokes through the dark. At work, you finish the report. The one you got sidetracked from the night before. Later, you sit in your car outside your office, sip a cup of coffee, and think, what a lousy night. The argument. No sleep. You feel and look like crap. So had Olivia, you were relieved to see, before you left home. But the freeze was on. Barely a hello exchanged. A deep freeze. As you pull out of the driveway at work, you wonder where the hell she gets off being mad at you. You swear you won't let it bother you. But it does. Love does that to you.

Ms. Crockett, a skinny woman with graying hair waits in her front yard. No introductions necessary. She was your sixth-grade science teacher. Of course, she agreed to participate in your study. Not surprising really. Truth is, things came pretty easy to you back then. Grades. Team captain. Dates every weekend. Sometimes you wondered if it was because of your mother. That part hadn't been easy. Anything but. You quickly quell that thought.

After all, Mrs. Crockett told you the day you had asked, "Maybe you'll cite me as an early influence. Marine biologist inspired by grade school teacher. Something like that." You just smiled. She has a stake in your success—her star pupil, sure, but it is also her land that first showed the effects of the sea's encroachment.

She tells you to follow her around back where her yard and land, a couple of acres, fronts the Bay. The land is squishy under your feet. It doesn't even look like a yard anymore. More like a Florida marsh.

"Look at this." She pushes the toe of her canvas shoe into the ground. Water pools. "It stays wet all the time now. Doesn't dry out."

You find another spot, press down, and watch water seep up from the earth. You do a slow 180. See the clumps of cordgrass. The leaves matted together by salt from sea spray and the increasingly frequent gale-force winds. You look out beyond the grass to the bay. Battered fishing boats dot the horizon. Crouching down, you stare at hundreds of holes filled with water.

“Fiddler crabs.” Mrs. Crockett nods.

As a child, your mother would say, “Look, Brian,” and point to the fiddler crabs scurrying along the beach. Their color changed with the ebb and flow of the tides, she told you. Dark during the day, light at night. You ran up and down the beach laughing as you chased the crabs. She laughed with you. And told you about an oyster midden that lies just off shore. Made it seem like something ancient, mysterious. You felt lucky to live in such a magical place. It was this, the magic of the sea and the laughter in your mother’s voice that led you to marine biology.

Now with the ocean surge, the midden is several miles farther out, the island of your childhood is disappearing, and your mother is gone. And then there’s last night. You’d thought you were finished with loneliness.

You take some measurements and look over at Mrs. Crockett. She knows from your expression. Had known before she’d even called you. Her brown eyes moisten, “It’s bad isn’t it, Brian? Goddammit.” She stares out at the water while you tell her the bay has advanced another ten feet. Grain by grain, her yard and the island are being consumed by the rising sea.

You have lunch with Vivianne, your ex-girlfriend. She looks good. Dark hair cut

short on one side, shoulder length on the other. Contrasted by intense blue eyes. The hair suits her. For a minute, you let your mind go somewhere it shouldn't.

She's a conceptual artist. A "liver of life" as her website says. You talk about a collaborative project. About the environment, the warming of the oceans. What's happening here and elsewhere. No one paying attention. Your talk moves on to mutual friends who have left the island. One is landlocked somewhere in Kentucky as far from the water and rising seas as she can get. The other started a bakery in Seattle. She does bake cakes for gays. You pretend to be interested, but your mind is elsewhere.

You met Olivia just after you and Vivianne broke up. You two were practically married, except for a few undisclosed occasions when you were, let's be real, less than faithful. More honest, Vivianne didn't really care. Hell, she barely had time for you between her part-time job and full-time dedication to her art. Which was why, you liked to tell yourself, you found yourself between the legs of that redhead. Vivianne, meanwhile, had found her own blond version of your redhead, a looker and an artist like she was.

One morning you heard Vivianne crying. You found her in the kitchen, shuffling from refrigerator to stove, making her breakfast. Her nose red, she was still snuffling when you entered the room.

Uh oh, you thought. Must be serious. You put your arms around her and pulled her to you.

"What's wrong, babe?"

She put her head on your shoulder and cried some more. And that is how you ended up hugging her when she told you she didn't love you. No, that's not exactly it.

She told you she loved you but she wasn't in love with you. You failed to see the distinction.

“Not in the way I feel about Lenna. I'm so sorry, Brian. I never meant to hurt you.”

You told yourself it didn't matter. The woman's gay, right? Nothing against you. You knew something was off. No wonder you made it with other women.

But all that was a long time ago. Now you are friends. Almost best friends, so you decide to tell her about last night. It was like a hit and run you say. First, she slammed you with the article. Least worse person—can you believe that shit? And then acted like there was something wrong with you. “What a bitch,” you say. Maybe, you tell your ex, if you'd just read it. Not said anything.

Vivianne never liked Olivia. A Virgo. Wrong from the beginning as she'd told you.

“Virgo's are linear, Bri, and you're the least linear scientist I know. It won't work.”

There'd been no point in reminding her that you and she had been astrologically compatible, and look where that got you.

“What do you think?” A mistake—you know it as soon as you ask. The way she stares at you. Waiting, as if reluctant to let loose. But once she starts. Well no need for all the details.

“Brian...” A big pause—you're in for it now. “You're such a fucking romantic.”

You know where she's going but can't stop yourself. “And what's wrong with that?”

“Well, for one thing, you only see what you want to see. Total denial. Makes it hard to tell you things. Look at us.”

Now she’s to it. What she wanted to say from the beginning. You ask what the hell that has to do with Olivia. Whose side is she on anyway?

“Okay, Brian. You’re right. I’m sorry. I just hate to see you hurt.”

*

Later, you realize Vivianne was right about one thing—the part about Olivia being a Virgo. But that was about it you decide. Hell, what about the night you met Olivia. Nothing linear about that. You’d been through the after break-up, frantic hook-ups. Flipped through enough pictures on Tinder and collected enough phone numbers to keep ahead of the itch and reassure yourself that you still had it. So when Kevin first mentioned the club, you’d told him no way. But Kevin being Kevin, not to mention your best friend since grade school—you end up going. Five hours later, you’re slightly drunk and mad at yourself for having said yes. Then you see her. It’s not her looks, although she’s pretty enough. But not the prettiest. Slender without being thin. Dark hair pulled back from her face. All good but not what caused you to stare. It was the way she carried herself. Self-possessed but not in an *I’m hot shit* way. Natural. You felt a powerful wave of desire as she walked your way. “I want to kiss you,” she said.

Falling asleep that night, you were happier than you’d been in some time. Olivia, you thought. Now that’s a name to hold onto. Of course, as it turned out, there were differences. She liked non-fiction. You read everything and anything. She didn’t like bugs or dirt. You wanted to hike the Appalachian trail. She wasn’t much for music. You’re a lapsed Methodist. She’s Jewish. Had grown up in New York City, Columbia

Law School. The whole northeast big-city scene. But it had worked. Love conquers all, right?

That night you and Olivia are carefully careless—choosing your words but trying not to seem like you are. At least you're talking. Sort of.

She tells you about a case she is working on, and you acted interested. You tell her about Mrs. Crockett and the swamp. What that means for the island but also for the two of you. You've talked about moving. Probably should have moved when you could have. Now real estate prices are down. Besides, who are you fooling? You love it here—love that there are few cars and one traffic light. Love that Kevin your best friend from first grade still lives here. You tell her about lunch with Vivianne. Yes, she does look great, you say. Seems happy with Lenna. What you don't tell her is what Vivianne said, the stuff about you being a romantic. Eventually you get around to the previous night's argument.

“Why did you get so mad?” she asks.

You try to explain, but you're not really sure yourself. “You're saying us, our relationship, isn't love—”

“That's not what I said. I just asked you to read an article. That's all. But, Brian, what if sometimes what is important to me is different than what is important to you? I can't be worried about your feelings all the time. I have to be able to tell you what I think, or it won't work.”

That's not the only thing that might not work, you want to say. But instead you tell her she's trying to make everything your fault.

“Everything isn’t about fault, Brian. I just wonder why you want me to use your words. Why the hell you can’t accept what I say, the way I say it? I feel like you’re pressuring me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems like you want me to prove that I care about you. But nothing ever seems enough.”

“That’s bullshit. You showed me the article, remember. How’s that putting pressure on you. It might be different if things were better between us. So excuse me if I wonder what you’re trying to tell me? What’s your point?”

“Don’t be stupid, Brian. There was no point,” she tells you. But her words have nothing to do with love. *Not once have you said you love me*, you want to shout. Marrying someone because they are not as bad as someone else—or a little better than someone—that’s not why you married her. So what if you’re a romantic?

The thaw has frozen over and you’re back to where you were. Another bedtime without even a good-night. Part of you wants to bury your face between Olivia’s soft breasts. But that’s not happening. Not when she clutches a pillow tight to her body, as clear as a keep-off sign. You think back to the beginning. Was it possible this had never come up?

You make it through the next couple of days. Push paper around on your desk. Try to look productive but not really fooling anyone. You reschedule a couple of meetings with the excuse that you need a day or two more to finalize your results. Instead, you drop in on colleagues, one cubicle at a time. You skip Mr. Hays. He’s too

old to understand, and John Mackle, who's just an asshole. You've practiced your approach. Just checking in you start—wait a few minutes—give them a chance to talk. Pretend you're listening. Then, and this is where you know you have to be careful, keep it casual. Not like you care or anything.

“Hey, just read this article,” you show her the title, “and wondering what you think?”

“*New Yorker*, right?” Katherine asks. You nod yes. “Should have known,” she says. “Romance is out, Brian. We're not cool anymore. Not this decade anyway.”

“Yeah, that's just what my wife said.” A lie maybe. But necessary.

You feel vindicated, armed and ready for Olivia. Until you meet Kevin for a run that afternoon. He sees right through the lie. “Dude, get over it. Grow a pair.”

Later, you tell Olivia what Katherine said. She laughs. “That's the one who wears her hair like *Alice in Wonderland*, raved about *The Notebook* right?” Not exactly the response you want. Maybe that's why you go on to tell her Kevin's comment.

She looks at you like you are a ground-crawling life form. “Dude? Who the hell says dude at thirty-one? Come on, Bri, or should I say bro? You can do better than that.” The clarity of her coldness surprises you. “And you're not the person I met three years ago.”

*

Next day you drive past your old house and stop. It looks pretty much the same—painted white with a front porch that runs the length of the house. The red maple, a little taller now, still grows by your old bedroom window. And the creek, you and Kevin waded in, skirts the back of the property. But anger prickles when you notice your

mother's irises gone. Even the rare bearded variety had been pulled up, replaced by what looks like low-maintenance bushes. You see your mother, straw hat on head, barefoot and seated between the irises, dividing and transplanting bulbs. She's been dead for years now. Kissed you good-bye one morning and was gone by the afternoon. Anger grips you. What had started as an argument had come to be everything else. Your mother's death, the island disappearing, and now this thing with Olivia.

You make it to Mrs. Crockett's, barely. Distracted, you drive by her house. Mrs. Crockett waves as you go by.

"Forget where you're going?" She laughs when you get out of your car.

You feel terrible. You want to care about Mrs. Crockett, the island, your study. But the anger won't leave you.

"Are you Okay?"

"I don't want to talk about it." You say, and then tell yourself that Mrs. Crockett deserves better than that.

"Sorry, just a rough day. I'm fine, really." Except you're not. You know it and she knows it.

She moves closer, grips your arm. "You going to tell me what's wrong?"

You shake your head and look out to the bay. The boats are coming in trailed by screeching seagulls anxious to share in the day's catch. It must be later than you think. You turn your face to hers, meet her eyes.

"Everything's shit, if you really want to know. The island's dying, no-one cares but us, and..." You take a deep breath. When you feel like you can go on without anger,

you say, “And my wife doesn’t love me.”

Mrs. Crockett sighs and pulls her sweater around her. The wind has picked up, threatening to bring rain with it. After several seconds she says, “Is that what she told you? Those words?”

You look at her. You’ve never noticed how small she was. Not a pretty woman, putty-like nose and thin lips. But her deep brown eyes are comforting.

She’s the one you tell. About the article and the argument—that when you thought it might get better it hadn’t. About how sad you are. About the fear too. You can’t shake it. You failed your mother. And she died. But most of all the marrow-deep feeling of anger. Your mother didn’t die, not down there in all the rage. She left you when you most needed her. Now this. You take a long time to get it all out. But it helps. Mrs. Crockett talks about her life. Things you never knew. Her marriage. How love, real love is work. It’s hard, takes courage. But also needs the belief in possibilities to grow. She taps you on the chest over your heart. “Listen to this,” she says. “It’s a good one. It’s up to you to know how much you want to handle.” Mrs. Crockett opens her arms, pulls you into them. You lay your head against her chest. It is bony, not much there, but it is good. It is her words, her soft voice and the way she holds you. You feel safe.

*

You get home early, surprised to see Olivia there on the couch waiting.

“I’m glad your home, Brian. I’ve been sitting here wondering what we’re fighting about.” she says, patting the couch. “Let’s talk.”

Her face is mottled from crying. Part of you wants to go to her, but you need more time. You think about the past few days, the article, and the time before that, when things

had gotten bad. What did either of you know about love? You think about your mother, the two of you running up and down the beach, laughing. You think about Mrs. Crockett, what she said about love and listening to yourself and being listened to. The hard part is just beginning, and you're not sure where it will lead. Sighing, you shake your head. "Not now, Olivia. I need more time. We'll talk tomorrow." You touch her shoulder to show you're not mad.

Kabuki

She's standing at the bathroom mirror inspecting her face for wrinkles when the call comes. It's her father's sometime dinner companion, Arlene, who tells her he is in the hospital.

"It's bad," she says, and Hollis hears the constriction of fear in her voice. "We were at Denny's. He started talking funny, slurring words."

The first available flight puts Hollis out of Richmond, Virginia. "A frickin' hour or more away, not counting the ferry ride," she says, as she hands Mrs. Thomas, her neighbor, the key to her house. "This is when I wish I lived somewhere else."

"You're just upset. Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of the plants, bring in the mail."

Hollis gives her a quick kiss on the cheek. "You have my cell."

Hollis drives up 33-E. The October air is crisp. The sun has broken through the clouds, and the loblolly pine with their slender chartreuse needles line the road. But Hollis is too distracted to much notice. Whatever happened to her father, a stroke Arlene said, might be permanent. Her last visit had not ended well. Her father was peeved about something. Maybe that she hadn't gone to church with him that morning. She could never be sure what set him off. As a child, and now at fifty-five, that unpredictability was frightening. He sat at the breakfast table, reading the headline to her with an irritating

grin. "Hillary loses big in New Hampshire." He stabbed at the newspaper with his index finger and looked at her.

Hollis didn't look up. "We agreed to not talk politics."

His face mottled red. "How you can tolerate that woman? She's a liar. A crook. It should be Hillary for prison, not President."

"You got that off a bumper sticker. Arlene's, I bet." That only made him angrier and he shouted.

"Doesn't make it any less right, goddammit. "He had worked himself up, and spittle foamed at the corner of his mouth. "You people. You don't have a clue."

"I'm your daughter, remember?"

*

Her father was from that generation of Catholics whose grandparents came directly from Ireland to Boston and then found their way to San Francisco, bound together by a fierce clannishness and an ancestral distrust of anyone not Catholic. He was one of those spoiled children who threw tantrums when thwarted, a habit he carried into adulthood. Thinking about this now as she drives, Hollis feels, not for the first time, his childhood might account for her father's rigidity but does not explain why he married her mother, a Nazarene from the mountains of East Tennessee. Her mother had been beautiful with thick auburn hair. His parents didn't approve, and her mother, not one to forget a slight, tucked this away in a dark place where it took on a life of its own. She had been dead for years, angry to the end that her husband would survive her. Her parents were like two mismatched socks, wearable in an emergency but not a pair.

Hollis was forty-nine when her mother died of lung cancer. She'd had an incident of bleeding the night before her death and was in the hospital. Hollis stood with her father outside the room as the doctor told them there was nothing more to be done. "Dad," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "Let's take Mom home where she wants to be." They settled her in a makeshift bedroom downstairs, and her father sat on the edge of a club chair next to the bed. His shoulders slumped like the old man he had just become, and his mouth trembled as if he were about to cry. He seemed to forget that Hollis was there.

*

After her mother's death, Hollis visited her father more often. He hated living alone and coped by making daily visits to the grocery store, where he spent more time visiting with the employees, mostly female, than shopping. He accrued a following of middle-aged women. Once he pointed to a younger woman and said, "She thinks I'm still handsome."

"You still have it, Dad," Hollis said with a fake smile. His vanity didn't just materialize with the beautiful silver-grey that replaced his once black hair. He'd always preened, unable to pass a mirror or a window without taking out his comb. At the same time, he often got despondent and talked about her mother in a way that did not match how he had treated her. He had rewritten the script of their lives, fashioning it into a narrative Hollis did not recognize. Hollis thought about her own marriage. Again, two people so different, but instead of passion or anger there had been a certain politeness. Hollis knew that her reticence was part of the problem. The habit of being unseen was too strong. Years after her mother had died, Hollis's father mentioned her often. "Now, your mother—she could cook." And then he would recall a special meal she had prepared.

Hollis thought how much better it would have been if he had said these things when she was alive.

*

The doctor, an older woman bent at the waist, one hand resting on a cane, explains that the stroke was extensive. She points to a model of the brain, ticking off each area that was affected, as if giving a lecture. Hollis catches the words *right temporal* and *frontal lobes* and *partial recovery* and interrupts.

“Partial recovery?” she asks. “How could this have happened? He’s healthier than I am.”

“He is eighty-six. A lot of people don’t even live that long.”

Hollis wonders what being eighty-six has to do with it. As if there is some age when people no longer fear death. “I don’t think my dad would find that comforting.”

“Why don’t I just take you to see him, and we can talk more in the morning.”

In the dim light of the hospital room, the flesh of her father’s face slackens into deep folds, as if a string has been loosened. He has a crooked smile, but as Hollis draws closer, she realizes that his face droops on one side. A thin line of drool dribbles from the crease of his mouth, something he would hate, especially with all the young nurses coming in and out of his room. Hollis takes a tissue from the bedside table and dabs at his chin. What the stroke has done to his once handsome face would be very hard for him.

“Hey, Daddy,” she says. She hasn’t called him that in years. He is attached to an oxygen tube, and an IV hangs from a machine monitoring his vitals. He turns vacant eyes toward her. There is no welcome, no warmth, and no recognition in his look. His eyes

move from her face to the doctor and back to her face again. Finally, in a feeble voice, he says, “You have the wrong room,” and turns away from her.

She backs away from his bedside and motions for the doctor. Once in the hall outside his door she asks, “What’s wrong with him? He doesn’t even know me.”

“It’s not unusual, given the part of the brain affected. He’s still confused right now. Could last a day or two more. Let’s see how he looks tomorrow.”

*

Hollis has come to the opinion that the amount of love you have for a single person is not infinite, but she also believes there is an unbreakable connection among family, a combination of shared blood and history. So, although she hasn’t found her father likeable, she has come to acknowledge there is an on-going bond between them. It is not something she talks about or even thinks about much, but just an idea that she keeps tucked away wherever a person’s self is contained. She has not quite reached a limit with her father, who is the one person still alive who has known her, at least the surface of her, even before she had known herself. And now he doesn’t seem to recognize her. She wonders how long you can remain connected to a person who has gone somewhere and left you behind. Of course, he had never really known the real Hollis, not since she was a child.

When Hollis’s dad was stationed in Japan in the 1950s, he took her to the Ginza district of Tokyo to see Kabuki theater and eat beef curry. They sat in the theater, some of the few non-Asians in the audience. Even though Hollis couldn’t understand the words, the brightly colored costumes and the dramatic make-up kept her attention. One character was dressed in a rich red kimono with a wig formed into elaborate extensions that jugged

out stiffly and curled around in swirls about the head. His face was painted with thick white make-up; his eyebrows and mouth were outlined in red and black. When he turned around, there was a second angry face. But what caught the six-year-old eye of Hollis was the butterfly shape in coral red that covered his face. Later, over big bowls of beef curry and rice, Hollis's father explained to her that in the Kabuki tradition all the actors, even the female characters, were played by men.

Her father was five years older than her mother. Seen across the distance of decades, her father held for young Hollis a certain glamour. A photograph shows him with a mustache and dark hair curling over his forehead, looking like a movie star. Hollis sits across from him, eyes not on the camera but staring directly at her father. Yet running through this memory is a contradiction. Her father was like a figure ground reversal where one line can have two shapes or like the Kabuki character that wears a two-sided mask. One side comforted her late at night when she has a bad dream. The other cursed at her mother and worse, or trapped her in a room, counting off on his raised fingers the facts as he saw them—that was the only reality allowed—while telling her that her feelings didn't matter. It was this that caused trouble as Hollis got older.

*

Her father improved over the next few days, but still failed to recognize Hollis. "Who are you?" he asked.

Arlene answered, "That's Hollis, Jim. Your daughter."

"She looks a lot like Hollis. But Hollis is shorter, has darker hair. I ought to know my own daughter." He searches Hollis's face again, and then turns back away as if she is a stranger.

Hollis brings in pictures of the two of them together, one taken on her last visit. She sits on the bed beside him. “Look, Dad, I brought some pictures.” She shows him the recent one where he stands with his arms around her. Her father studies the picture, studies Hollis, and then shakes his head. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but you’re not my daughter.”

*

A neurologist is called in for testing. Hollis goes down to the hospital cafeteria and has a lunch of soup and part of a sandwich. She watches as doctors take their trays to a reserved section, secluding them from the families and people they treat. Even at a distance, they carry with them the smells of the hospital, the reminder of frailty, death.

The next morning Hollis meets with the neurologist. “Don’t see this often,” the neurologist says, shaking his head and entering a note on a computer.

“See what?” Hollis asks.

“It looks like your father may have Capgras syndrome.”

“Capgras? What does that mean? Is it serious.”

“It’s not serious, if you mean can he die from it. But it will affect how he relates to you. He thinks you’re trying to impersonate his daughter.”

Her unconscious mind takes little notice of the words amygdala, fusiform gyrus, and neural pathways—not unfamiliar as Hollis had taught high school science. But she does not miss the meaning. Her father recognizes her as familiar but there is no feeling attached to the recognition. To him she is an imposter. Just a nice woman who looks like his daughter and has been helping to take care of him.

“But why would I do that if I’m not his daughter?”

“He thinks that, as he puts it, his daughter hired you to care for him. It confuses him that you won’t just admit this.” She is overcome with the feeling that she hasn’t been who her father wanted her to be for many years.

*

Hollis takes him home a few days later. Arlene is there waiting, a slip of a woman, all nervous energy.

“Bless your heart,” she says as she helps Hollis settle her dad in the bed. It was a favorite expression of hers that often preceded an implied criticism. But not this time. Perhaps even Arlene knew when something was too much.

*

Waiting for her father, or Jim, as she now calls him, to wake up, Hollis stands by the picture window in the front room of his house. The small yard, grass patchy in places, looks forlorn. In a planter next to the walkway, a straggly brown stem pokes up through the earth, and mounds of dry leaves collect along the fence. Mrs. Reilly across the way has planted more bulbs, and the irises are beginning to bloom. They are arranged in varying shades of purple, some dark almost an eggplant color and others delicate lavender bordered by a white frill, like a medieval dandy’s collar. Next door, the Japanese maple displays the lacy leaves of Spring. The apartment has a slight musty odor from yellowed newspapers stacked against the wall. Hollis is reminded of home and the brackish air of the sea at low tide. She misses the solitude of her house, the time to gather the bits and pieces of her feelings into a coherent whole. In the kitchen, the counter is strewn with spilled coffee grounds, and the sink looks as if it hasn’t been cleaned in weeks. Her father was usually so meticulous.

“Who’s there?” her father calls out. His voice scratchy with sleep, reminds Hollis of a truculent child waking from a too-short nap.

She draws closer so he can see her. “Oh, Helen,” he says using the name Hollis has given herself, “I must have fallen asleep. How long have I been out?”

“You were asleep when I got here.”

Their conversations are awkward at first, and Hollis wonders how she can keep up the Helen charade. It helps that he likes to talk about his past, before he was married, seldom mentioning her mother. This hurts too, as Hollis is struck with how easily her father has replaced memories of her mother with his earlier years. She wonders if she, too, has been replaced.

In the weeks that follow, their relationship takes on an ease. Hollis sometimes forgets that there was a prior life in which she was daughter to his father. Their talk becomes more comfortable, and Hollis is surprised when she finds herself thinking that she may have lost her father but perhaps is discovering the man. But things are never that simple. “How come Hollis hasn’t visited me?” he asks one afternoon. Their last argument flashes into her mind, and in that moment, Hollis realizes she is about to do something she hadn’t done in years—talk to her father about something important to her. “She wasn’t sure she would be welcome.”

He looks at her as if she were speaking Greek. “That’s nonsense.” His eyes narrow into a hard stare. “Whatever gave her that idea?”

She can tell that an argument is about to start. She puts a hand on his arm to placate him but then stops. “Come on, Jim.” The anger flames inside her. “All she ever

heard was *Do this, don't make waves, believe exactly as I believe*. Hell to pay if she didn't and hell sometimes when she tried.”

He pushes himself up in the bed. “What do you know anyway?”

Her brown eyes look directly into his. “What I know is she's the one who helped you care for your dying wife, visited you often after her mother was gone—but that was never good enough. You should have had a clone, not a daughter.” She gets up and leaves the room. She's spent her life wanting, in a way she had not fully understood, that night at the Ginza, when she and her father sat in the restaurant, him explaining Kabuki theater while they ate beef curry and rice. In the past, she would have felt like something was wrong with her—in some way she was responsible. Instead, she feels something entirely different. She hears the laughter of children and decides to go outside. Mrs. O'Reilly's iris have gone to ground replaced by the elegant, paper-like blooms of the anemone. The leaves of the Japanese maple next door have gone from apple green to a vivid splash of crimson. The air is still with a faint chill. Glorious, Hollis thinks. She stands there smiling, and then turns around and goes back into her father's house.

*

As he gets stronger, they walk a half block or so in the neighborhood, stopping now and then so he can rest or say hello to someone. Although it is late spring and the warmth of summer already in the air, her father wears his heavy knit sweater and a cap. Old age has finally claimed him. Once while they are walking, he stops, turns toward Hollis and says, “It's remarkable how much you look like my daughter.”

Hollis waits for a pang of loss to pass before she answers. “Maybe that's one of the reasons we get along so well.”

*

She comes to enjoy his stories, which in the past she tolerated; they filled the time without her having to reveal anything about herself. She never really knew her cousins or grandparents. Hearing about his childhood, she feels a connection that she hasn't felt before.

By now, Hollis is living at her father's house. He has gotten stronger but will never be as robust as he once was. His steps are short and shuffling, and he struggles at times to get up from his chair. Sometimes she sits and watches as he falls asleep. On this night, his hair is matted and stuck up like a little boy's. He's taken his teeth out, and his sunken mouth is smaller than an infant's. She reaches out and takes her father's hand. It lays in hers, frail and trusting. She traces her finger up and down his arm surprised, at how small and cold it feels. "Do you need an extra blanket?" she asks.

He murmurs no and stares at her. For a minute, Hollis thinks she sees recognition, but it is so quick she can't be sure. He squeezes her hand. "I don't know what I would have done without you," he says. "But I can't expect you to do this forever."

Hollis doesn't know what to say. The truth is, he would likely never manage entirely on his own again. Driving is out of the question. But all that can wait. "Hey, I've liked getting to know you," she says, kissing him on the forehead.

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