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## A Prologue and Three Stories

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**A PROLOGUE AND THREE STORIES**

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

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by BILLIE PRITCHETT  
AUGUST 2019

To Helen

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## PROLOGUE

A confession: I hate most books written on the craft of fiction, not because I think they're unhelpful, but because they're overwhelming. Michael Kardos's *The Art and Craft of Fiction* is overwhelming. The second chapter is on the selection of details for stories. The fourth chapter is on what he selectively labels the elements of fiction—character, plot, setting, point of view, voice, and theme. But the fifth chapter is about the elements of a scene—dialogue, narration, description, exposition, and interiority. Isn't dialogue one of the elements of fiction, not only an element of scene? Aren't description and narration elements of fiction? I weary at how this book carves fiction at its joints. Over the past two years, I've discovered other, better books and essays on fiction craft, all of which have guided my writing journey. Among them are Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, Wright Morris's *The Territory Ahead*, and Mark Schorer's "Technique as Discovery." Thanks to these works, I now think of *the triggering subject*, *raw material*, *technique*, and *the generated subject* as terms better reflecting the elements of fiction, and perhaps I would add a fifth term, *discovery*. When I write, I discover what my stories mean, and if each story is told properly, whatever raw material originally informed the story gets transformed in the process, refined by the technique that best fits the story, and in the end hopefully everyone enjoys it and is satisfied.

I want every short story I write to satisfy the reader like a meal. I want a short story collection to be made up of hardy dishes, nothing light. Two smorgasbords I return

to again and again are Ray Bradbury's *Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales* and Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*. It's rare when every story from a writer is this good. I pray that the reader will like every story in this collection.

This first story, "Samson," is one I drafted about five years ago, and it began with a writing prompt I've since misplaced. The prompt advised using the words *ring*, *spider*, and *a knock at the door*. The story came to be about a teenage girl named Kimberly who regularly babysits for a six-year-old boy when one night, after she puts the boy to bed, there's a knock at the door. A man stands on the porch. He wants to get inside to get something.

You'll notice from the prompt that the ring and the spider are calling out to be symbolic. But when I began the story, I didn't know what to do with them. They were shoehorned in in the early drafts. I planned it this way. The babysitter Kimberly wears a promise ring from her boyfriend. Kimberly's mother is religious, and she plans to have Kimberly married off to the boyfriend someday. That was fine for the moment, but the ring got me thinking about the other circumstances of the story. How does Kimberly know this family she sits for? They were religious, too, I decided. The house's paterfamilias is a preacher and makes his boy consume only religious media. The cartoon he watches the night of the attempted break-in is about the Biblical hero Samson. There came the title. As for the spider, he shows up in the kitchen and scares the little boy before the man ever comes to the door.

What prompted the telling of this story was a literal prompt, but if I'd limited the story to the prompt, it would have been an injustice to my imagination and to the story's discovery. Richard Hugo would call the constellation of words *ring*, *spider*, *a knock at*

*the door* “the triggering subject.” According to Hugo, a work really has two subjects, the triggering subject and “the generated subject.” The triggering subject “starts the [work] or ‘causes’ [it] to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the [work] comes to say or mean, ... is generated or discovered in the [work] during the writing.” As a poet discoursing on poetry, Hugo writes of how a poet may put down the title “Autumn Rain,” write “two or three good lines,” and then

things start to break down. He cannot find anything more to say about Autumn Rain... The mistake he is making, of course, is that he feels obligated to go on talking about Autumn Rain, because that, he feels, is the subject. You don’t know what the subject is [*sic*], and the moment you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain start talking about something else. In fact, it’s a good idea to talk about something else before you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain. (*The Triggering Town* 4)

If I limited my story to a ring, a spider, and a knock at the door, I wouldn’t be able to uncover what the story was about. But before I tell you what I think the story is about and share what happens in this most recent draft, let me just say that the ring in the story is gone. I didn’t need it—or I only needed it to get me to the story’s subject, the heart of the matter.

Though a couple of words and a phrase triggered the story “Samson,” the raw material of reading and life informed it. I grew up on R.L. Stine books, young adult horror. One of the earliest books I read for enjoyment was Stine’s *The Babysitter*. A teenaged girl named Jenny babysits a little boy, and one night she receives phone calls from someone threatening to kill her. A knock at the door, a threatening phone call, tuh-

MAY-tuh, tuh-MAH-toe: a babysitter. I'd forgotten about the book until a month ago, but my subconscious hadn't. That became part of the raw material for my story. Also part of the raw material were scares from my own home life. (If I were the talkative sort, I'd explain this, but I think it's best to leave it.) Before writing "Samson," I'd tried to write about these kinds of personal experiences, but the prose was too chaotic.

Writing from personal experience, letting the raw experience be the story, doesn't make for much of a story, usually, so I don't do it. Wright Morris says personal experience is an outright hindrance. It was for him, he says. "Before coming of age," he writes,

the formative years when the reservoir of raw material was filling—I had led, or rather been led by, half a dozen separate lives. Each life had its own scene, its own milieu; it frequently appeared to have its own beginning and ending, the only connecting tissue being the narrow thread of my *self*. I had been *there*, but that, indeed, explained nothing. In an effort to come to terms with the experience, I processed it in fragments, collecting pieces of the puzzle. In time, a certain overall pattern *appeared* to be there. But this appearance was essentially a process—an imaginative act of apprehension—rather than a research into the artifacts of my life. (*The Territory Ahead* 15)

In writing and rewriting and rewriting "Samson," I had to overcome the rawness of my own life experience and refine the story beyond that "imaginative act of apprehension" that Wright disparages and instead "create coherence, conjure up my synthesis," which came for me, as it came for Wright, "disturbingly late" (15). As I said, I've been working

at this story for five years. Now, draft after draft after draft, no scene in the story resembles an event that occurred in my own life, but it's all the better for it.

The irony is that by shifting my gaze from my navel toward the unfolding story, the story became even more about me than if I'd written scenes from personal experience. As Hugo would put it, my allegiance was "to the words" (*The Triggering Town* 11). "Samson" revealed what truths it wanted me to tell, in the way the story had to be told. I am talking here of technique.

Morris avers that technique and raw material are essential in constructing a story, but the technique is what really counts. He explains: "By raw material I mean that comparatively crude ore that has not been processed by the imagination... By technique I mean the way that the artist smelts this material down for human consumption" (*The Territory Ahead* 4). What makes the story a story and not one thing after another is technique. Traditionally, the elements of fiction are thought of as character, conflict, setting, point of view, dialogue, etc., but, in actuality, these are means to which the writer accomplishes his ends, and this end is what Hugo calls the "generated subject" of a work (*The Triggering Town* 4), what is traditionally called "theme." My story "Samson" is about a girl's perceived failure to save someone. The story uses the babysitter Kimberly's point of view to look back on the night when she discovered that the child that she cared for was harmed. (Note: spoilers ahead.) She babysat, a man came to her door to retrieve a videotape, she drove him away, she found the tape, she wanted to see what was on it. On the tape, the boy she babysat for was being sexually abused by his parents. Kimberly hid the tape, did nothing, and hasn't been the same since, some eighteen years after. Her mind continues to return to that night. She would still like to do something.

Part of the technique that made the story possible was a certain point of view and selective tense changes. The story is told from Kimberly's point of view in present tense as she reflects on the events of the babysitting night. The rest of the story is in past tense, with occasional breaks into the present to allow Kimberly to provide commentary. There is one tense change at the end of the story I hope that the reader will forgive me for, where the recent past becomes the present. Just as the tense change at the end of Katherine Anne Porter's story "Flowering Judas" traps her protagonist in the past (108), my story's tense, where the past becomes the present, is there to indicate to the reader that Kimberly may yet avenge the harmed boy. Or perhaps it means that she's now trapped in this recent past, which actually feels a little more dangerous than the past she had occupied herself with for so long. The ambiguity is left unresolved. If I have succeeded in storytelling, the reader will allow me this shift and this ambiguity. In any case, I hope that I haven't let the reader down and sincerely hope that my protagonist Kimberly will do what she needs to survive.

In this essay, I've written so much about the triggering subject and raw material that perhaps the reader will allow me to focus on technique and the generated subject from here on out, or as much as I can, anyway, in writing about my stories. Assume, of course, that all the worries and failings that come with wrestling with the triggering subject and the raw material are still there and, so as not to shade into more autobiography (I don't like to talk about myself), take it for granted that the raw material that gets refined in my stories arises from my own fears. That said, I will, nonetheless, share some details about the triggering subject regarding the next story of mine, "Blue Nile."

“Blue Nile” began similarly to “Samson,” with an odd phrase I heard three or four years ago. I was living in South Korea, teaching ESL as my day job and at night working behind the scenes or center stage on various play productions for amateur theater. I’d written a couple plays that were performed. One day at the bar (I no longer drink), a guy I’d done plays with asked me if I’d write a treatment for something based on an idea he had. He asked me, “Could you tell a story about a man who can lose things?” I asked him what that meant. He said he didn’t know. The phrase had just struck him one day. I told him I’d think about it. A man who can lose things: it seemed a little stupid, to be honest, but I never let the idea go. Less than a year later, the man who could lose things showed up in “Blue Nile.” He isn’t the main character. Like the ghost in *Hamlet*, he serves a functional role, the impetus for the story.

“Blue Nile” is about a young woman Aneisse, possibly an alcoholic, who lives in her family home where she still has all her mother’s things, and she still wears her mother’s clothes, most importantly her mother’s wedding ring, a Blue Nile (the ring’s brand). All her mother’s belongings are still a part of her life, though she lost her mother to leukemia eighteen years ago. Incidentally, I’ll mention there’s that magic number again, eighteen. It was eighteen years ago that Kimberly in “Samson” experienced her own horrific discovery. Also appearing here again is the attachment to some golden past, before the Bad Thing happened. Flannery O’Connor is my favorite short story writer, but her stories verge on telling the same story over and over. See any of her stories in *The Complete Stories*, where pride comes before the fall, as it does in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Good Country People,” “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” “Greenleaf”—and this is just off the top of my head. I guess if there’s familiar territory I

tread, it's that suffering is real, it's there to be reckoned with, and the only way out is through: the suffering must be faced. The truth is, though, Aneisse in "Blue Nile" doesn't take the direct route. She wants somebody who'll help her get rid of her mother's clothes, jewelry, the other stuff, which for her is a proxy of making peace with her mother's death. One night, when she's drunk at the bar, she meets a man who says he can help her lose things. This leads her to confront the grief that she wasn't willing to face.

I tried to tell this story many ways over the last few years, and over the past few months searched for a long time for the right technique. As Mark Schorer writes, "Technique alone objectifies the materials of art; hence technique alone elevates those materials" ("Technique as Discovery" 272). Technique, the way a story makes use of character, point of view, dialogue, narration, etc., is about finding the correct inroad to the story. It's "manipulation," Schorer writes, but without manipulation, "there *is* no 'it,' no 'subject' in art" (273). Pruning, pruning, and pruning helped me to see what "Blue Nile" was about. On the last draft, I cut away large portions, dangerously, intuitively, not knowing what the story was telling me it wanted it to be, but eventually eight-thousand words shrank to four-thousand, and then I had to reconstruct from there. At the story's heart is the need to help and receive help. Aneisse's mother has passed away and her grandmother is sick. Aneisse is still stuck in a teenager's trauma. It shows in her behavior and in her attachment. She thinks that getting rid of her mother's things might solve the problem, if only she could get rid of them. The man at the bar who says he can lose things helps her realize that she can dispose of her mother's things herself, but there's still work for Aneisse to do to be psychologically whole. Also, Aneisse has to learn to

step up in her other roles in life, especially as a granddaughter and as a teacher, so that she can help others along, even if she still needs help.

This need to provide and receive help is the story's generated subject, its theme, which is miles apart from the subject that triggered the story, that phrase "the man who can lose things," and my personal experience. Richard Hugo likens the difference between the triggering subject I mentioned earlier and the generated subject or theme as the difference between a town you're familiar with and a town you find and fall in love with. Regarding the town you're familiar with, you feel obligated to get the facts straight about who's there, what the place is like, who did what, etc. Creatively, in writing about this town or this world, it's like tying your hands behind your back. Hugo encourages writers to go into towns you're unfamiliar with, fall in love there, where you make new stories and tell the kinds of stories you want. In stepping into "Blue Nile," I fell in love with Aneisse and her world, and whatever personal experience informed the story did not obligate me to what Hugo calls such "trivial concerns as loyalty to truth" (Hugo 12). I know that not all of Aneisse's problems are solved. But if I did my work, the story has a resolution. She got help to get rid of her mother's things. Now she'll continue onward with helping others, I think.

The last story in this collection, "Good News," is one I've written and rewritten over the past nine or ten months. As with "Samson," there's the threat of violence in it, and as with "Samson" and "Blue Nile," there's the world of struggle, but there might actually be good news in "Good News." This story has been the most troubling for me, and mostly not fun to write, until the most recent draft when I found the right voice that allowed me to tell the story.

What motivated the story was that I was haunted for a time by the thought that the world might be a hopeless place. I imagined all the ways the world might have turned out better and saw our world as horrible. Though I've promised not to talk too much about the raw material of the stories, I will share, regarding "Good News," that one night about a year ago, I woke from a nightmare, crying. The bad dream went like this: a woman gave birth to a baby by firelight in a home that wasn't hers. As soon as the baby appeared in the light of the fire, he cried out and then he stopped crying, stopped moving. His heart had stopped beating. He was dead. To me, the baby represented the messiah, born to die but dead long before his mission. In the darkness of my bedroom, after waking from the nightmare, I wondered if that isn't what our world is like. How could that kind of world have love or hope? I got out of bed and wrote about it. And since, I've been writing about it and rewriting it, and re-envisioning it, and now the baby lives.

"Good News" is a kind of frame narrative, and has to be by design, by technique. The original drafts owed a lot to the King James rendering of the nativity in Gospel of Matthew, the narration in the Gospel of Luke, but the somber authority in which those texts were composed could not be the voice that told my story. The story had to justify itself, and it had to do so through the narration. At first, I toyed with metafiction. The narrator was droll, ironic, disenchanted by life in the same way Hemingway's protagonist is disenchanted before his death in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," in fact even more so. The trouble I faced was how we could receive the story of the mother of a would-be messiah in contemporary times?

I came to figure out that the real subject of the story has little to do with the baby except that my main character Miriam loves him so much. The story also has nothing to

do with the messiah, either, albeit that's the MacGuffin that keeps the reader reading. The story is about learning to love better.

The penultimate draft owed most to two of John Barth's stories *Lost in the Funhouse*, "Night-Sea Journey" and "Title." In "Title," the voice self-consciously narrates the story. Here is the opening: "Beginning: in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionless, abstraction, pro, dis. And it will get worse. Can we possibly continue?" My narrator likewise began "Good News" self-consciously, commenting on the falseness of proclaiming good news in the title, and highlighting other so-called instances of good news related to the characters' lives. Thereafter, the narrator mostly rested, interrupting only to move the story along, until near the end when he provided more commentary. Like "Night-Sea Journey," "Good News" still does involve a similarly existential night journey, and also like Barth's story, my story ends on what I take to be a very unironic affirmation of love.

What has changed about the story is that I wanted a leaner narration, one in which the reader could get into this world and get immersed and then I could pull the reader out again by the end, like zooming a lens in and then out. I recalled the way Hemingway did just that in "The Capital of the World," and I echo that frame technique in this story. "The Capital of the World" begins, "Madrid is full of boys named Paco..." (29). My story begins with reference to a lot of women in first-century Nazareth being named Miriam. Hemingway pulls out of the story upon the protagonist's death. I pull out of the story upon the successful birth of Miriam's child.

In brief, here's what happens in the story. A first-century Nazarene woman named Miriam has an affair with a Roman soldier, she gets pregnant, the baby could be the soldier's or Miriam's husband, but the infidelity means she could be punished by death, but she gets away with it, until one day Herod's men are slaying the children of Jews he takes to be political radicals, and Miriam's child is threatened. So she goes on a night journey, fleeing with her husband and other family members, and then her water breaks and she's forced to give birth in a stranger's home. I won't say anymore. I'll let you read the rest.

The story, as I said, is ultimately about learning how to love yourself and those around you, even when the world seems miserable. I believe we all ought to love ourselves and one another better if we can. This is schmaltzy but true. I think this is a fine sentiment to end my collection on. Putting the stories "Samson," "Blue Nile," and "Good News" together, this is as close to a capstone as I could write, ending on love and a note of hope.

One final word, to let you know my collection's title isn't flip: I call this folio *A Prologue and Three Stories* in honor of JD Salinger's *Nine Stories*, which to me is the perfect title. At some point, the stories have to speak for themselves. The title tells plainly what the book is. If I have done my job, each piece is its own dish and can be consumed as a three- or four-course meal, or one could be the meal, the others set aside; the order could be reversed, making your palate dance differently— All of this is aspirational, but I hope in the end you will be satiated.

Billie Pritchett

JULY 2019

## SAMSON

Love can conquer any evil, but you have to be willing to lose everything for it. That's not something I'm willing to do.

I used to babysit a six-year-old named Timothy. Something bad happened to him. Recently, I saw him, all grown up, walking the aisles of a chain hardware store with his parents. I looked for signs that he carried past trauma. I saw nothing.

His trauma has become mine.

Almost twenty years ago, the world revealed itself to me as a terrifying place. Had I not discovered that some people were as bad as monsters, I might have been one of those women who grew comfortable in her own skin, adapted to the new millennium, moved to a progressive state, taken a wife, adopted a child. But my heart beats for a lost innocence.

I was fifteen when I babysat for the Thompson family. I'd come over in the evening and play with Timothy. Then we'd watch one of his religious cartoons, and I'd put him to bed at eight thirty. After that, I usually stayed up reading one of the young adult horror novels I'd smuggled into the house in my backpack. One Friday evening in April nineteen ninety-six, it all turned bad.

My mother dropped me off at the Thompson house, in this town's rich neighborhood, Canterbury. "Do right by Mister Thompson," Mom said. "That man is going to be head pastor of our church someday." I didn't have my driver's permit yet, so

I was dependent on my mother and others to drive me. Often as cost for my being transported by authority figures, I'd be subjected to their advice and worldview. As a teenager, I got used to it.

At the door, Mister Thompson shook my hand. "Hey, Kimberly."

"Hey, Derek." He always let me call him by his first name.

He told me to come inside, quick. "It's cold. Why aren't you wearing a sweater?"

He seemed like the most wholesome thirty-five-year-old in the world. The associate pastor at First Baptist Church, he was a man who smiled a lot, and who was unafraid to talk to a young person like an adult. That night, the night I discovered the crime, he wore a black blazer, white shirt, black bowtie, black slacks, and his face had a five o'clock shadow.

In retrospect, I think his face is ugly. Like several church men his age, he looked a little off, as if his face were made of wax and had melted near a lightbulb. Also in retrospect, I never really liked him as much as I told myself I did. I assumed a man like him might be someone I'd marry someday, not willing to admit to myself at the time that I preferred women to men, which my newly religious mother seemed to know before me.

I tried to play cute with Derek, tucking my hands in my back pockets and batting my mascaraed eyelashes, attempting small talk. "So, what's on the docket tonight?"

"I'm taking my wife to Sparrow's."

"The steakhouse? I heard that's good."

"We'll see. It's certainly going to be expensive." He laughed. "Oh well. It's all about keeping up appearances, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said, agreeing to what I didn't understand.

His eyes flitted toward my hair. "I like your bow."

I touched the red bow in my hair and tucked a blond lock behind my ear.

"You look like a Christmas present," he said.

To hide my blushing, I moved to the sofa and slung my backpack onto the floor. Then I put the TV guide in my lap and flipped through it as though there were an interesting program I wanted to find.

"You really do look like a Christmas present," he said.

"Where's Misses Thompson?" I asked.

"In the bathroom, getting ready. You know women." He sat beside me.

"Timothy?"

"He's playing in his room. He'll come out when he's ready."

Maybe I should have known Mister Thompson's behavior was inappropriate then, but, I'm ashamed to admit, I was proud to be recognized. In high school, girls learned to dress and coo to receive the attention of the boys. Boys were the reason I wore makeup. Imagine how I felt, then, at fifteen, receiving the attention of a man.

Misses Thompson came into the living room.

Derek stood and gestured toward me. "Honey, look. Kimberly's here."

"Oh good," Misses Thompson said sleepily. She looked considerably worse than he did. Though she and Derek were around the same age, she had smoker's wrinkles on both sides of her lips, like my mother, and through her blue sequined dress and tights, you could see a belly that had been there since Timothy's birth. "You look pretty tonight," she said to me.

"Thanks. That's what Mister Thompson said."

She looked at Derek.

He laughed. “Mm-hmm. Well, Kimber, good to chat. We’d better be off if we want to make our reservations.”

“Please,” Misses Thompson said. She said to me, “I keep telling him, let people wait for us.” She popped the Spanx beneath her blue dress and winked and grinned, lipstick showing on her front tooth. “Husbands,” she said.

I forced a smile.

A small eager voice called out my name. Timothy ran into the room and jumped on the sofa and hugged me.

I held the boy, who was so tiny for his age. “Hey, Tim-Tim. Say, who’s that on your shirt?”

“Samson.”

“Samson, huh?”

“Yeah. He gives me strength.” Timothy lifted both his arms to show his muscles.

Derek chuckled. “There you go. All right, Kimber. For real this time. Have a wonderful night.”

“Daddy?” Timothy said.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.” The boy ran to his father.

Derek knelt to hug his son. “I love you, too. More than anything. You know that, right?” Derek looked at me over his shoulder as he kissed Timothy’s cheek. “Hug your mother.”

Timothy raised his arms, but instead of hugging him, Misses Thompson bent and pecked him on his cheek, leaving a lipstick ring.

\*

To this day, I blame myself. I should have been strong enough for us both.

\*

After the Thompsons left, Timothy wanted to forego playing and get to his new video. I started the one the Thompsons had left in the VHS player. It was about Samson, who Timothy seemed to be entertaining a real fascination for. The video was part of this Christian time-traveler series, which Timothy's parents long ago foisted on him, where a group of young modern-day Christians go back to witness events in the Bible firsthand, only they can never interfere. They asked questions to their guide and events unfolded as fated.

Not identifying as a Christian myself, despite the fact that my mother made me attend First Baptist with her—hoping I'd take the Gospel message into my heart—I felt it was too late to imbibe an old superstition. I never went to church, anyway, until that previous year, when my mother, who had raised me herself as a single parent, started dating a man who was a member and who insisted we attend. I tried to like the situation and to make peace with the fact that my mother volunteered me for the babysitting role for the Thompson boy, which now seems so transparently her effort to get in the good graces of the future pastor. But fortunately, I loved Timothy.

From the end table, where the phone rested, I got a wet wipe from its package and wiped the lipstick ring off Timothy's cheek, the same one that Misses Thompson had left. Then Timothy and I sat there and watched the cartoon.

It seemed too mature for a child. Most of the story involved Samson visiting a prostitute's den and staying several nights with the woman Delilah. She appeared onscreen with her mid-rift showing, and when she swayed her short-skirted hips, Samson couldn't resist jumping up and hugging her before the screen faded to black.

Timothy didn't understand the themes, thank God. He looked bored, his elbow propped on the armrest, his eyes closing as if he might fall asleep any minute.

Apparently to stay awake, he threw his back against the sofa and lifted his shirt to play with his belly button. When he lost interest in that, he said, "I'm going to get some milk," and headed to the kitchen.

Less than a minute passed before something hit the hardwood floors. Timothy cried out.

I ran into the kitchen. The boy was on the floor, tears running down his bright pink cheeks.

A sudden rush of adrenaline overcame me as I picked him up, hugging him as he wrapped his legs around me. In that moment, I would have done anything to protect him. "Shh, shh, shh," I whispered, like a rush of water into his ears. I cradled his shampooed head and sat him down on the island in the middle of the kitchen.

After he calmed down, I asked him what happened.

"My butt hurts," he said.

"Did you fall?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Maybe your bottom's bruised. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No," he said, drawing out the word.

There was a wrapped, yellow box of Whitman's Samplers on the floor. "Where did that chocolate come from?"

Timothy pointed at the kitchen cabinets above the sink.

"So you were up on the counter trying to get the chocolates. Is that it? You know you're not supposed to have candy this late. Mom and Dad's orders."

"I know." Timothy bowed his head. "But that's not all."

"What then?"

"Spider. In the cabinet."

I turned and opened the cabinet.

Timothy screamed and covered his eyes.

On the cabinet's second shelf, the spider crawled around on the corner of a box of oatmeal. I laughed. "That's nothing, Tim-Tim."

He squealed, hands still over his face. "I don't like spiders."

"But that's a daddy longlegs." I let the spider roam around lazily on my fingers. "These are good spiders."

Timothy looked up, not screaming this time. "There's good spiders?"

"Yeah." I turned around to face him. "A daddy longlegs doesn't hurt people. He catches bugs and stuff." I put the spider on the hardwood floor near the sliding patio door.

"What's he doing here?"

"Protecting you. Don't worry about him. Here, big guy." I helped Timothy down from the island. "If you're afraid, it's okay. You can stand back. I'll unlock the patio door and let him out."

"No." Timothy grabbed my hand. "He can stay if he's good."

“Good idea.” We let the spider alone.

I hugged the boy and led him back into the living room and unpaused the video.

\*

To this day, I blame myself. Who was I to interfere with a child’s fear of spiders? What if I’m complicit in the boy’s trauma? I know that I’m complicit. I’m still complicit. I wish I could return to the past and take him from the home and keep him safe.

It would have been impossible. He was six years old. I was fifteen.

Why must I make his story mine?

I interrogate myself, over and over, as I wished my mother had interrogated me.

I wish someone else cared.

Even as an adult, Timothy needs a defender.

\*

The Christian time-travelers lurked outside the marketplace, watching Samson make his brothel visits to Delilah. Twice, Delilah asked him the secret of his power and twice he lied. Both times she tested him, shouting “Samson, wake up, the Philistines are here.” The last night Samson stayed with her, she told him if he loved her, he would tell her what made him strong. Again, she tested him, and when he woke, his head was shaved, and Philistine soldiers really were there in the room. They arrested him and took him away. To my adolescent mind, the story defied logic. If Samson knew the woman would betray him, how could he think her trust meant anything? If she really loved him, how could she fail him like that?

My father betrayed my mother by leaving her to raise a child alone. Then there were the Thompsons—and then there’s me.

Am I, in telling this story, betraying Timothy?

“I’m sleepy,” Timothy said.

“Already?” It was seven thirty.

“Can I go to sleep early?”

Timothy didn’t know how the story ended, but I did. After the Philistines took Samson into custody, they submitted him to slave labor in the temple. But when his hair grew out, he regained his strength and toppled the temple, killing himself and the bad guys. I thought Timothy might be interested in this show of strength from his hero. “You sure you don’t want to stay awake and finish the video?”

“It’s okay. I’ve had enough Samson for tonight.”

I grinned and walked him into his room.

The Thompsons made the boy keep his space tidy, nothing on the carpet except a large translucent bin with mostly religious action figures inside.

Timothy threw himself onto the bed, making the brass rails rattle. I tucked the covers around him. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite.” I flicked the brass ball on the bed post to hear it clang and got up, and I was almost out of the room when Timothy asked me what I meant about the bed bugs. It was something my mother said to me when I was little. It never occurred to me how frightening the expression might sound. “I didn’t say anything,” I said.

He coughed bronchially and rubbed his head in the darkness, seeming to have forgotten. Then he raised an index finger in the air. “One more thing. Are we going to get married?”

I laughed. “Get married?”

“Yeah, I want to marry you. We can live in this house like Mom and Dad and all love each other.”

“That’s sweet.” I returned to him and sat beside his bed. “You know, if I were to marry any man your age, I’d marry you. But I don’t think I’m ready to get married.”

Timothy unclipped the red bow from my hair. My bangs fell into my face.

“Do you want to hold onto that?”

He nodded.

“Good night.”

“I love you,” he said.

I paused—then said, “I love you, too,” and kissed him on the forehead. “Sleep well.”

\*

I have no business, all these years afterward, playing therapist in my mind regarding a boy whose trauma occurred about twenty years ago. Perhaps my attention is turned to him because it’s me who’s never properly grown up. My life is a mess.

At that age, I thought I was almost an adult, but I was only a child. I knew nothing. Horror to me was abstract—worse, fictional.

\*

I turned off the TV and got R.L. Stine’s *The Babysitter* from my backpack, hoping to read the second half before the Thompsons arrived. Derek and his wife wouldn’t have liked seeing me with a horror novel in their house, but I knew to tuck it away whenever a car pulled up. The book was about a sixteen-year-old girl named Jenny

who received phone calls from someone who threatened to kill her. I imagined myself in Jenny's shoes, my fear heightened by the possibility that the Thompsons could arrive any moment. But that night, I didn't hear any car, only a hard knock at the door.

*Knock.*

I waited.

*Knock, knock.*

No one besides the Thompsons should have been coming to the house at a quarter till eight, and even then, they wouldn't knock at their own door.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

I didn't want to go the door, but I didn't want Timothy to wake up either. I went to the window. Through the blinds, only the back of the porch was visible.

*Knock, knock, knock, knock.*

Whoever this was wasn't going away.

I opened the door. On the other side stood a man, probably in his early thirties. He had wavy blond-brown hair and wore a long coat. When he grinned, I saw his tooth was chipped. "Hey," he said. The yellow porchlight cast his face in a pallid hue.

He hadn't driven here, I guessed. There was no car in the carport, and farther out toward the street, no car was parked at the curb. There was nothing but the silent, empty road and the manicured lawns of the other houses and a fog like smoke hovering above the lawns on the cold night.

"Are you the babysitter?" he asked. "Is Derek here?"

I didn't want to reveal anything. "Sorry, I didn't get your name."

He extended his hand. “Philip Moore, Maggie’s brother. Derek’s brother-in-law.” When I didn’t put out my hand, he dropped his into his coat pocket. “Do you mind if I come in?” His head bobbed from side to side as he tried to look past my shoulders.

My breath caught in my throat. I had to force out my words. “I’d rather you not. I know you say you’re Mister Thompson’s brother-in-law, but it’s not my place to let someone in.”

“I understand. But you see, my sister Maggie asked me to pick something up.”

“Oh. Well, maybe if you wait here, you can tell me what it is, and I could bring it to you.” I thought this sounded reasonable—beyond reasonable, because it didn’t seem like I should give him anything.

“I need to get it myself,” he said, leaning his palm against the door frame. “This is a sensitive matter between me and my sister. What I need to grab is very important.”

The cold night air felt trapped inside my lungs. The thing to do was to act adult. Adults, I knew, adopt a professional, dismissive tone when they want to end a conversation. “I’m sorry, sir, but I’m letting in a draft. Good night. Maybe you can pick up what you need tomorrow.”

Just as I began to close the door, he stuck his foot in the jamb. “Hold on.”

My heart jumped. My shoulders stiffened.

“Nobody’s home, right? No one needs to know I’m here. Let me get into the office and get the tape, and then I’ll leave. Or whatever. If you want to get it for me, I’ll wait. Fine.”

This was a scenario straight out of R.L. Stine’s *The Babysitter*. When the young heroine Jenny received threatening phone calls at the house where she babysat, she

panicked at first but then forced herself to gain a level head. I thought of what Jenny might do in this situation. “This has gone too far,” I said. “If you don’t remove your foot from the door, I’ll call the police.”

“Don’t. Here.” He withdrew his foot. I immediately closed the door, bolt and chain. “Don’t call the police,” he said through the door. “I’m not violent. Bring me the videotape from the office, please.”

*Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.*

“I’m calling,” I said.

The knocking stopped.

I walked back toward the sofa and considered calling the police, then thought it might be better to contact Derek. He was the only adult I knew of then who had a cellphone. I had his number memorized. I grabbed the phone from the sofa’s end table and dialed.

Behind me there was a loud shushing sound. At the other end of the house, the patio curtain billowed. The man came out from behind the sliding door.

Pinpricks shot through my body. I screamed, “Get out,” screamed for my life, looking to do anything that would take me and Timothy out of danger. I ran to the kitchen island where the knives were and withdrew the two largest knives and stabbed at the air. “Get out of here. I’ll call the police.”

The man put his back to the wall and spoke in an exaggerated whisper, saying “Fine, I’m leaving, look,” then exited through the patio door.

I ran to the patio and locked the door and threw open the curtain. The man had run away. The knives fell from my hands and clanged to the floor.

Then I remembered Timothy and ran to his room. He was still lying in bed, but awake now, crying. He must have heard everything.

At his bedside, I dropped to the floor, crying with him.

“The spider,” he said, his eyes closed.

“What?” I said.

He didn’t answer. He only cried more, turning away from me, pushing his face into the pillow. The red bow he’d taken from my hair was balled up in his fist.

I tried to pull him away from the pillow, but he resisted. I stopped trying and rubbed my eyes. Mascara streaked the back of my hand. “You’re okay,” I said. “You’re going to be okay.”

I left Timothy’s room and closed the door and sat down against the door to guard it with my body. I needed the knives. I got them from the kitchen. I needed a phone, one with a long cord. The room next to Timothy’s was Derek’s office, where a cordless phone sat cradled next to the computer. I slumped against Timothy’s door with the phone.

How would it look, I wondered, if the police arrived, siren blaring, at a home in a nice, rich neighborhood like this? What would people think? I followed through on my initial plan to call Derek.

I told him everything, about the man who said he was his brother-in-law, who said he needed to get a videotape, who came in through the back door. “I was going to call the police,” I said.

Derek sounded concerned but calm. “Don’t call them. I will. Stay with Timothy.”

It was reassuring to me that Derek would be the one to get the authorities involved. I didn’t want the responsibility.

I carried the phone back to the office. A framed photo of Derek with his wife and Timothy poked out from the other side of the computer. Derek and his wife each held up one of the boy's arms and laughed toward the camera. Timothy was wearing a white shirt with a crucified Jesus print on the front.

Behind the photo, there was a videotape in a cardboard case. I picked it up.

I went back to Timothy. He'd already returned to sleep.

It still seems odd to me how children can endure untold horrors and let them pass—only they never really pass, I don't think.

In the living room, I sat on the sofa, trying to calm my nerves, as I held the videotape between my knees. This must have been what the man had come for, I thought. It must have been important for some reason. I shouldn't have wanted to view it, but I was curious.

I removed the VHS from its sleeve and put it in the player and sat back down on the sofa. On the screen, a jagged line like a lightning bolt popped horizontally across and faded, and then I was staring at a bare back, pale and contoured along the spine, taking up the whole frame. People spoke but their voices sounded like they were talking into empty soup cans. They were difficult to understand. After a while, I could decipher sentences. The bare human back filled with air and writhed. Shoulder blades twitched. "Use your strength. All your strength. Yes. That's it."

"I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this."

Crying, words through tears. "I love you, Mommy. Mommy, I love you."

The bare back moved to the side, and the camera lowered to frame a naked boy, on his knees on the floor, wearing a black lamb mask with a big hole cut out at the

mouth. The boy cried through the hole. Then the camera moved back to reveal, next to the boy, a thin, nude man wearing an arachnid mask, two large pincers in front and two large eyes, smaller rows of eyes above those. The two large, black eyes reflected the camera's light and a woman's wide naked figure, maskless: Maggie, Misses Thompson.

"I can't," she said. "I won't. I don't want to film this anymore. No, don't take it off."

My hair hung down into my face. I wanted to cover my eyes. The world was an upside-down place.

The man lifted his mask.

"It was the spider, Daddy, right? It's not you."

Derek's face was red and sweaty from the latex. "You said you'd do this."

"But I don't want to. It's not right. To put on film." The camera shifted from side to side. A translucent toy box appeared beside the boy in the lamb mask. "I don't want anyone to see it."

"No one's going to see it."

The boy cried more. "Mommy doesn't want to do it, Daddy. Stop."

"Hand me the goddamn thing."

The camera faced the carpet and cut to black. It ran black and it ran black. I fast-forwarded. Black. Farther. Black.

\*

The white car marked Shade County Police Dept. pulled up at the curb just as the Thompsons parked their SUV in front of the garage. Two police officers and the two Thompsons got out at the same time, everyone exchanging words briefly in the carport

before they all walked up to the porch where I stood with my arms crossed, shivering in the cold night. I tried to plan what I was going to say, thinking of the VHS tape in my backpack, when I noticed that the older officer was shoulder to shoulder with Derek and saying to him, “This is nuts, isn’t it?”

Inside, I informed the older and younger officer what had happened, but I didn’t mention that the videotape was involved. My courage failed me. As I spoke, it was as though my willpower was depleted, and everything external to me was operating according to hidden forces, fate. I felt numb and nervous, both nerve-dead and energized by the caged knowledge I carried in my skull.

“That sounds like my brother-in-law,” Derek said after my recounting. He was sitting next to me on one side of the sofa and Misses Thompson was seated on the other side. The two officers stood, the older one asking the questions and the other taking notes on a small pad. Derek looked across me at his wife. “Did you tell Philip to visit, by chance?”

Misses Thompson looked from one officer to the other.

“Honey, did you tell him to come by or not? The police need to know.”

“Yes,” she said abruptly. “I did, but I didn’t expect him to drop by tonight.”

“While we were out of the house, you mean.” Derek tapped his fingers on the knee of his dress pants.

I glanced back and forth between the Thompsons. They were bad liars.

“Well,” the older officer said, taking a deep breath, “this all sounds like a big misunderstanding.”

Misses Thompson nodded.

“If you want,” the younger officer said, “you could press charges against him for breaking and entering.”

“Not necessary,” Derek said.

The younger officer turned to me. “Did he say why he was trying to get in the house?”

“Frank,” the older officer said.

“I’m trying to understand why he’d come in through the back door.”

Misses Thompson burst into tears. She covered her face and bent down into her hands, as if faking prayer. Derek took his handkerchief from the front of his suit and pushed it into her hands. She sniveled into the cloth.

I stood and walked toward Timothy’s room.

“What are you doing?” Derek said.

“I’m going to check on Timothy.”

Before I stepped into the small hallway, Derek stopped me with a clammy palm on my elbow. “I’ll do it.”

The younger officer asked Misses Thompson if she was all right.

“I’m just so worried about my boy,” she said.

Behind me, Derek moved from his son’s room to the office, where he stayed for a while before coming out and closing the door.

“I think we’ve got all we need here,” the older officer said. “Mister and Misses Thompson, I’m sorry you had to go through this. And sorry to your babysitter.” He tipped his hat at me and to Derek, who stood next to me, hugging my shoulders. “We’ll see you at church,” the officer said.

My shoulders pulled inward as Derek held me, and I slipped away, toward the departing officers. The older officer had already walked out.

But the younger officer turned to me at the door. “The brother-in-law: he didn’t tell you, at all, why he was trying to get in this house?” His brows were lowered, a mien of suspicion. This was my last chance to reveal the truth.

“No,” I said.

\*

Life isn’t a story. Reality has no art, no shape.

In the Stine books, the heroine—it’s almost always a female hero—overcomes evil, and the world is turned right-side up. But I was still in the upside-down place. How could I, a normal teenage girl, return from what I’d seen?

When I went home that night, I felt less like Jenny from *The Babysitter* novel and more like the Christian time-travelers in Timothy’s videos who were cursed with watching their heroes die.

I thought my mother would understand. I came in the house shivering, not from the cold but from nervousness, and woke my mother, ushering her into the living room, her hand in mine.

She sat on the sofa and lit a Pall Mall and asked what this was about. I sat down beside her. As she took several pulls off her cigarette, her lips pruned around the band-aid-colored filter, I noticed the pink shade of lipstick smeared past the corners of her mouth. She must have gone to sleep in her makeup. On the coffee table in front of us, there was a tumbler with some brown alcohol left in the bottom and a half-filled bottle of

Jameson next to the black tray she asked in. I assumed my mother was having problems again with her boyfriend Don.

He wouldn't know about her private drinking or how much she suffered when she worried he would never marry her. My mother so desperately wanted some semblance of a normal life.

“What's this you get me out of bed for?”

I took the VHS tape from its sleeve and slid it into the VCR and returned to the sofa.

As we watched, my mother took long drags on her cigarette, but when the boy appeared onscreen, she stubbed out the cigarette and reached for the Jameson bottle and poured herself a tall drink and gulped from her glass. Then her hands covered her face and she peered at the TV through her dry fingers. Finally, the screen went black.

My body was practically convulsing. “Do you see the evil that goes on in that home, what kind of people they are? Right now, Timothy is trapped in that house. This can't be the first time this was done to him.”

My mother shook her head.

“The world is cruel and there are people like this—” I spoke at my mother with a religious zeal.

After a quiet moment, she rested her head against her palm. “Why did you show me that?” she asked.

“This is one of our pastors.”

My mother got up and walked back and forth in front of the blank television. I still recall the waltzlike movement of her feet, her nightgown swaying near her ankles. She tossed her hands toward me. “We don’t know what this means.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s a game they play.”

“Mom.”

“We don’t know. No telling these days. The world is going to hell in a handbasket. Who am I to judge what someone does behind closed doors?” Her manic voice echoed off the wood-paneled walls.

“Mom, Derek is a very scary man. And he and his wife are harming their son. They think they can get away it.”

“How can anyone say what harm is? What about what’s harmful to me? My own daughter is a lesbian.”

The powerlines hummed outside.

“Don’t act like I don’t know. You don’t have a boyfriend. You only hang out with girls. It’s—” My mother broke down on the floor crying. “Everything was going so well. Don got me into church. You’ve been going with us. Do you want to ruin my relationship?”

I understood how my mother felt, how much it must have hurt to have her world shaken up, and what she was willing to do for love. She’d sacrifice everything for the new man she loved. But what about my world? What about her love for me? What about Timothy?

From the carpet, my mother raised up on her knees, her long hair draping to the floor. When her hair parted, her lipstick lips showed a conciliatory smile. She put out her arms. "Come hold your mother."

I stood. "No."

\*

The following year, when I was sixteen, I went to court and got emancipated from my mother. In the eyes of my midsized town, I was another child who'd gone bad. I stopped going to church, my grades slipped, I got tattoos and shaved my head and hung out with rough girls who smoked and drank too much at bars they'd snuck into on fake IDs. I took menial jobs in restaurant dish rooms and was hungry a lot, struggling to pay rent. Eventually, I got a higher-paying job at a chain hardware store, a big brick-and-mortar building, working with people who are mostly as lost as me. Fortunately, I met my girlfriend there, who is sane and responsible, unlike me. We live together.

The events of Friday, April twelfth, nineteen ninety-six have stayed with me as the town's mainstream has flowed onward. My mother got married and she and her husband moved into a home down the street from the Thompsons in Canterbury. They have a little daughter, who I'm sure they love more than me. I regret that I'll never be allowed to meet her. My mother's new family still attends First Baptist, where Derek Thompson preaches as head pastor, taking over after the older man retired.

Eighteen years have passed. I continue to play out that Friday evening in my head. Since then, I hadn't seen Timothy, until this one day, recently, when he was at the hardware store in the lumber aisle. He wore a blue dress shirt, a red tie, khaki pants. He

was thin and broad like his father, a man now, but in his face, he looked like the scrawny boy I once knew. Without thinking, I waved.

A man in his forties, wearing a black suit, came into the aisle from the other side. It was Derek. He saw me waving.

I cut away down the next aisle to the back and went through the swinging doors to the employee space, passing my girlfriend, who sat on a bench in front of her locker. In the bathroom, I leaned over the sink, my arms quivering, as I examined my face in the mirror, which looks better than it did a year ago, my blond hair grown out so I can part it again, no more dyes, no more nose or lip piercing.

For some reason, I worried most what Timothy must have seen when he caught a glimpse of me, assuming he recognized me at all. He didn't seem to. But Derek had. His eyes had crinkled into a smile.

"What's wrong?" my girlfriend said behind me.

"He's here."

"Derek?"

I nodded. "And Timothy."

"Stay back here if you need to."

I gripped the sink and closed my eyes. "No. I'll be all right."

In lieu of my mother, Derek drove me home that Friday night, and it took every bit of energy I had not to be forthright with him, tell him I knew, scream in his face. Instead, I sat for a long time with a lump in my throat.

Derek stared out the windshield. "You must be so confused. Don't worry. You did the right thing."

“I don’t think so,” I said quietly.

“Of course you did. You were protecting Timothy. That’s what’s important.”

“Why did you call the police when you didn’t have to?”

“That was for you. To make you feel comfortable. Besides, I knew the officer.”

“It could have been bad,” I said.

He laid his arm over the top of the steering wheel. “I might have made the call for myself, too. To see what would happen.”

I glanced at him. He didn’t take his eyes off the road.

“Sometimes I wonder how bad a sinner I am. But I figure if I’m so bad, God would expose my transgressions. Tonight, something very sensitive went missing that could destroy my whole life. Destroy my family. A videotape. You wouldn’t happen to know what happened to it, would you?”

Reflexively, I looked down at my backpack in the floorboard.

“Eh, that’s all right. If my life—or my wife’s or my son’s—were going to be torn apart, it would have already happened. Why did I leave the videotape on my desk? Maybe I wanted someone to see it.” He slowed down at the stop sign. Our eyes met.

If I’d known then the ending of *The Babysitter*, where Mister Hagen drives the babysitter Jenny Jeffers to a rock quarry to murder her, I might have been more reluctant to ask next what I did. “This videotape,” I said. “If it’s bad, something criminal, and someone showed it to the police, would you turn yourself in?”

Derek chuckled and leaned his arm over my headrest. “Regardless of this—what?—this desire to face a reckoning, this feeling I have deep within my chest—don’t you know I’d do anything to protect my family? Wouldn’t you?”

I nodded.

“I’d bring pain down on anyone who tried to tear my family apart. In fact, I’d probably kill them.” His face was close enough I could smell wine and chewed-up meat on his breath. “Do we have an understanding?”

I nodded again.

He removed his arm from behind my head and placed his hands back on the wheel. We moved past the stop sign.

“The spider,” I said. My voice sounded brittle.

He reached into his pocket and then held out something red and crumpled. I took it. It was the bow that had been in my hair. “We’re here.”

\*

I stood in the row facing the Thompsons as Derek pointed to the shelf at some lumber.

Timothy nodded and took two boards down and laid them on his shoulder. “Be right back, Dad.”

My God, this was only three days ago.

When Timothy walked away, I wondered how much he had quietly suffered, if he still suffers, if the abuse ever stopped. I’ll never know.

Have I been complicit in what his parents have done to him?

No. No.

Yes. And I’ve turned his story into my horror story.

Derek puts one hand on his hip and rubs his lower back with the other hand. He grimaces at the ceiling, his black eyes turned up to the fluorescent lights and shining, glassy.

His wife—she looks the same as eighteen years ago—comes from around the corner and puts her arm on his shoulder and they hold hands and rub each other. They're a tangle of arms. "Is it your back?" she asks.

I lean my palms against the brick wall and turn my head to face them. They look at me. My blond locks hang down and tickle my temple. Nothing is fated. I can stop them. The videotape is stowed in my closet and I haven't looked at it since or shown it to anyone, but maybe I will, since I've carried it with me through every move, every failed job, every life transition, each time my mind circling back around to that night, and the horror, which I've concealed from myself, then exposed, over and over again. Now, however, it seems this moment, from a few days ago, is what is most frozen in memory, this encounter with the Thompsons where I work. Somewhere out of view, a plank of wood falls to the floor. I love Timothy. What would I do to save him? Seeing Derek and his wife in the distance, their mouths open, teeth showing, I know in my heart I could, like Samson, push hard against this wall and collapse the place, destroying them.

## BLUE NILE

Aneisse is too afraid to ask someone for help. When she was fourteen, her mother was diagnosed with leukemia. Two years later, her father left her mother for a younger, healthier woman and then her mother passed away, leaving Aneisse's grandmother Flick to take up the parental mantle, which she has for eighteen years, only now Flick is sick. Aneisse knows she can't get rid of all the pain that comes with loss, but she has been able to alleviate some pain by ridding herself of tangible things. When her father ran off, Aneisse threw out his clothes, books, tools, the bowls and cups and plates and silverware he used. But at this point in her life, she can't stand the thought of losing her mother's belongings. It would be like losing her mother all over again. Aneisse wishes someone would get rid of her burdens for her.

At the campus bar, a female bartender—Aneisse's nontraditional student from English composition—tells Aneisse about a divorce followed by a messy custody battle that almost cost her her child. Aneisse listens but doesn't think she can help. She nods and looks down at the bar top as she twists the wedding band of her diamond ring, which catches the light from the dim, sunken bulbs overhead, casting a blue beacon on the mirror behind the bar.

The bartender leans in. "Are you okay, Professor Allen?"

"Sorry. I've been distracted all year." Aneisse lifts her empty beer can. "Could you get me another?"

The bartender tosses the spent can into the trash and puts another Pabst Blue Ribbon on the bar. "I must be annoying you."

"No. I really am sorry. I was listening."

"It's all right. There are more people coming in. It's getting busy, anyway."

As soon as the bartender walks away, Aneisse swigs from her tall can. She really does feel bad. It's difficult for her to relate on a personal level sometimes. Grief has locked her in a bubble of self-absorption. Plus, in the role of professor, counseling students about their personal problems seems to her like a form of professional malpractice. How can she help anyone?

She scrapes her ring against the bar's slick varnish and breathes out chilly air. It's cold on this side of the room at the end of the row, next to the round window looking out onto the deep blue night. It's as though she's in a submarine. She rests her ring's diamond against the window and scratches.

"Ow." A man has materialized to her right, holding his ears. He wears a long, beige overcoat that drapes down the legs of his barstool. He looks like the seventies TV detective Columbo, not only for his coat but his hair (wild, woolly, brown) and his eyes (droopy, though no glass eye like the actor who played Columbo, Peter Falk). "I'd like it if you stopped that." He points to Aneisse's left hand.

"Where did you come from?"

His eyes scan her black and maroon dress. There's nothing to see. Her V-neck covers her clavicle and her skirt reaches her ankles. All that is bare are her thin arms and the tops of her feet.

"What are you looking at?"

“Nothing. Do you need a Red Bull?”

She draws back her shoulders. “Why? Don’t I look all right?”

“Frankly, you don’t.” He shakes his head. “You look like you’re maybe too drunk.”

Yes, she is drunk, and her head feels light, her legs heavy. She might even slip off the barstool. But to have her drinking called out like this— “I’ll have what you’re having,” she says.

He leans back. “Sprite with lemon?” In the dark lights, the carbonated bubbles drift up to the bed of ice at the top of his plastic glass.

“I was just leaving,” Aneisse says, then calls out to the bartender. “Tab.”

The bartender looks around. “One moment.” She walks into the kitchen behind the bar.

Aneisse opens her purse in her lap and pretends to search for her wallet, which is on top. She sees it fine.

“Where did you get that dress?” the man asks.

“Excuse me?” She glances up at him.

“I was noticing,” he says. “It looks—I don’t know, vintage. My daughter had one like that. She’s older than you.”

“It was my mother’s.” Her eyes return to her purse.

“And that ring. What a diamond.”

“I’m married,” Aneisse says—only she’s not. The ring also was her mother’s.

The man props his elbow on the bar and lets his other arm dangle from the back of the barstool. “You look like somebody I can help.”

“Found it.” She pulls the wallet from her purse and smiles. “Time to go. Busy day tomorrow.” She has to teach in the afternoon, and in the morning, she’s supposed to visit her grandma Flick and take her to her doctor’s appointment. Maybe she’ll tell Flick about this man who tried to hit on her at the bar—if that’s what this is, hitting on her. Maybe she won’t mention she was at a bar. Flick will enjoy hearing that the man looked like Columbo, the long, beige overcoat—

“I can help you lose things,” the man says.

Aneisse doesn’t slow down to process his awkward sentence, though he has thrown her off. Normally if a man leers at her at this bar, she says something mean to make him go away. But this time, she settles on, “Nice chatting with you.” She rests her arms on the bar top and waits for the bartender to return. “Any minute,” she says aloud. “Waiting on my tab,” she says to the man.

The man points to the door behind the bar. As if on cue, the bartender comes out talking to herself, hands on her hips. “Sorry, Professor Allen. I looked in the back, and over here—” She turns her back to Aneisse to study the row of debit cards and green slips on the small countertop. In the mirror, her face scrunches and her head tilts. Her purple plastic earrings shake and bangs flop. She shakes her head and turns back around, smacking her hand on the bar. The smack shakes the little holder of thin black straws and black napkins. “I can’t find your bill.”

The man in the long, beige overcoat sips from his Sprite. Then he says, “She had six PBRs. The tallboys.” He reaches into his coat pocket and grabs a bright gold money clip. He unfans the wad of cash and peels off a couple ten-dollar bills and lays them down

delicately. “Keep the change.” The bartender takes his money and puts it in the register, which dings musically when she opens the till.

Aneisse’s barstool is stuck and won’t turn when she does. She twists her whole body toward the man. “How did you know what I had to drink?”

The man shrugs.

“Have you been here the whole night?”

He shrugs again.

“Making a bar tab disappear. That’s some trick.”

“No trick. I have this ability to lose things.” The man leans over and puts a small white card next to her empty beer can.

“What’s this?” She picks up the card, one word printed on it, Clarence, in Garamond font. Aneisse encourages her students to use this font to make their resumes look prettier. Clarence is her mother’s maiden name. She flips the card over. “No job title, phone number, email?”

The man tucks his chin. “My first card. Anyway, about losing things—” His eyes dart up like a shy dog’s. “Don’t you think you could use some help?”

Aneisse falls off her stool but lands on her feet. Her head feels full of helium. She stumbles a little on the hardwood floor. The man holds her forearm to steady her. “I’m fine,” she says. He lets go. She’s close to his face. He’s close to her age, she realizes, only a little older, late thirties maybe. How could he have a daughter older than she is? There aren’t any wrinkles around his brown eyes, though he carries himself like an older man. She grips her purse tight against her shoulder. “Thanks for the offer,” she says, “but

I don't have anything to lose." He nods. As she walks away, she watches him watch her until she's out of view.

Outside, in the unseasonably cold April night, she rubs her shoulders, wishing she had a shawl. She also wishes she'd called a cab.

Luckily, there's one parked near the curb. The driver rolls down the window. "Do you need a ride?"

She walks to the street and gets in. "Good thing you're here."

"Good thing *you're* here," the cab driver says. "I lost my last fare."

Aneisse grips the door handle. "What's that mean?"

"I pulled up for a guy who'd called. He got in the backseat. But when I turned around to ask where he was going, he was gone."

\*

The next morning, Aneisse's brown poodle, KB, wakes her, licking her face. Aneisse raises up in bed. There's this sickness in her stomach. The hangover hurts. She's wearing the same clothes she had on last night, and the same shoes. She goes to her dresser and pulls on an oversized sweater, then walks KB to the back door, letting her out to pee. She starts a pot of coffee, uses the bathroom herself, and returns to the kitchen to unwrap a cheap cigar. She pours the coffee in her Make My Day mug before the maker is finished filtering. Coffee droplets hiss onto the burner. The roast smells good. She sniffs her cigar and walks outside.

By the creek is her lawn chair. She sits and smokes. The foggy creek roars with water. On the grass, her bare feet become dewy and cold. It seems to have rained last night. The cigar tastes good. She holds it in her left hand and puffs and futzes with her

ring using her thumb. Occasionally, the tilt of the diamond throws a blue specter over the creek.

Until Aneisse was six or seven, she thought the “Blue Nile” her mother spoke so much about was this creek that ran behind their house, but it turned out it was this ring, the name of the brand. Aneisse nonetheless feels that there’s a connection between the creek and the diamond. She laughs thinking about it. Then her head feels uneasy, and she begins coughing and can’t stop. She puts her cup down, the cigar on top, and goes to the creek and throws up.

The sign says No Dumping. Not that a little throw-up matters. The creek will carry anything to the Cumberland River. Besides, Aneisse has, ashamedly, dumped garbage here before. After her father left her mother, she brought everything that her father had left in the house and threw it all in. Everything drifted on the water for a moment and passed away out of sight. Aneisse told her grandmother, and her grandmother was upset she had polluted, yes, but she was more upset that Aneisse hadn’t donated the items to the underprivileged outreach program at Glendale Church.

Aneisse returns to her chair, feeling better having thrown up, but the sickness is still inside her. She smokes her cigar and drinks coffee and listens to the creek rush with its loud shush. Letting go of her father’s things had been easy, but as for her mother’s things? They’re still in the house. Almost all the clothes Aneisse wears belonged to her mother, also the dishes she eats from, the CDs she listens to, the DVDs of movies and TV shows she watches. Her mother is present with her like this ring and the creek.

Aneisse regrets polluting the creek, and regrets also throwing out her mother’s watch, the one object of her mother’s she got rid of. She tried to wear it for a while, but

the ticking only reminded her of the march of time, the inevitability of death. Aneisse was sixteen when she smashed the watch and threw it in the creek.

Her headache has mostly passed. She tells herself she deserves to feel good. KB crosses in front of her. Aneisse says, “KB, come here,” but KB keeps walking and then squats, pulling her leg over her head to lick herself. She has things to do.

\*

Aneisse pulls up outside her grandmother’s house and walks to the porch. Her grandma Flick lives alone in this home on Catalina Drive, once having lived here with her first husband, Aneisse’s biological grandfather, long deceased, and the second husband, long deceased, and Aneisse’s mother, of course, when her mother was a little girl. Flick has resided at the same house for fifty years, discounting the couple years she moved back and forth to live with Aneisse after her mother died. Aneisse knocks. Flick doesn’t answer.

Inside, through the unlocked door, all the furniture is in its place in the den: the couch against the wall, the coffee table dead center, two recliners on each end of the couch, another recliner hidden on the other side of the entertainment center. The cuckoo clock next to the door chimes and the cuckoo pops his head out three times. The sounds echo off the wood-paneled walls. Aneisse hates the clock—not its cuckoo, not its chimes, but that it ticks.

To the left of the door is a potted pencil cactus. Its ends look like dendrites in the peripheral nervous system. In English comp, Aneisse read a freshman’s paper about the PNS and studied the pictures the student included. She likes when students add pictures

to their papers. She's also always liked the phrase "nervous system." Aneisse is a nervous system.

She holds up her ring like a superhero. In the darkly shaded room, her blue diamond spotlights the candy in the crystal bowl on the coffee table. She plucks a round, red-foiled chocolate and tries to eat it quickly in case her grandmother walks in. Aneisse balls up the red foil and puts it in her pocket and speaks through a mouthful of chocolate. "Hey, Flick, you around?"

The house smells like the type of candle Flick burns often, scented cinnamon and vanilla. Flick has one burning in there on top of the washing machine. Aneisse walks into the utility room, which connects the den to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, the long, fluorescent light of the ceiling glows yellow. The wall phone dangles from its cradle. Red streaks run from the phone to the floor, where a woman wearing a bathrobe lies, Flick.

\*

Aneisse waits in the lobby, her grandmother's purse in her lap, her body shivering, as if she's experiencing her grandmother's pain, like she'd been the one who'd bled out. There's a knot in her stomach. She feels— Anger? Anxiety? Guilt? All three? As she tries to process everything, she twists the wedding band of her ring until the blue diamond faces her palm. She makes a fist and doesn't let go until the diamond breaks the skin and she bleeds.

Her mother's blood, her grandmother's blood, runs through her, now running out of her. She takes a handkerchief from her grandmother's purse and holds it to her cut hand.

Her grandmother's loss of blood had been unlike anything Aneisse has ever seen. She witnessed her mother's breathing tube being removed in hospice, her mother's yellow mouth, the last gasps for air. She sat with her mother and smelled the final stages of death. But she never saw her mother bleed profusely, has never seen so much blood as when she found her grandmother slumped on the floor. The trail led from the bathroom toilet bowl at the other end of the house into the hallway, hand-smearred down through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Flick was lucky Aneisse arrived when she did. Flick hadn't completed the nine-one-one call.

Aneisse's phone rings. "Hello, Professor Allen. It's me, Theresa." This is the bartender, Aneisse's nontraditional freshman comp student.

Aneisse wishes she hadn't put her cell phone number on her syllabus, but she'd wanted to make herself more open to students this semester. "What is it, Theresa?"

"I'm glad we got to talk last night at the bar. I've started writing about my depression after the divorce. Maybe I can use it for the essay."

Aneisse almost forgot. The students would have to write a narrative essay for class.

A moment of silence passes. "Is that all right?" Theresa asks. "You remember our conversation, don't you?"

Aneisse hears in her student's voice a longing to connect. Aneisse knows this longing, too. But she says, "Now's not the time." The interruption annoys her. Perhaps she and the student are both in their own bubbles of self-absorption. Nobody can help anyone in that state.

“You don’t want to talk,” Theresa says. “I shouldn’t have called.”

Aneisse feels bad. “No, it’s not that. I’m in the middle of a family emergency.”

“Oh. If something ever happened to my daughter— Is it your daughter?”

“I don’t have a daughter. My grandmother.”

“I’ll let you go. I’ll pray for you. Will you be in class today?”

“Goodbye, Theresa.”

Aneisse releases a long breath. Tears rattle her throat.

Apart from the watery depths of her drunken nights when her mind occasionally bends toward how much her mother’s loss hurts her, now, here in this waiting room, is the closest Aneisse has come to registering her pain. She doesn’t like it one bit. Her grandma Flick has been the closest person to a helper in her life, and she almost lost her because she was too late. She needs someone in her life, she thinks, to show her how to live— She immediately regrets the selfishness of the thought. Other people can’t solve your problems for you, she thinks. She loves Flick, wouldn’t want to lose Flick.

Somewhere in the waiting room, a watch ticks. On the wall across from Aneisse, two women with sagging faces slump in their hard, blue chairs, no watches on their bare wrists. They don’t seem to hear the sound, that ticking. There’s a wall clock, but that’s not it. Its second hand glides along its white face. Aneisse hears herself speak to the women. “Would one of you cover your freaking watch?” The women don’t flinch. They’re too sad to flinch.

Flick enters wearing her brown bathrobe and bloody pink bunny slippers, the bunnies’ whiskers tapping against the floor. “Are you ready?” She puts a hand on Aneisse’s shoulder and faces the two women, who must also be waiting for their loved

ones to arrive from the emergency room, hopefully recovered. “My granddaughter,” Flick says to the women.

One of the women raises her mouth and feigns a smile, then lowers her head.

In the car in the parking lot, Flick says, “Thanks for driving,” and straps the seatbelt over her robe.

“You were due for a checkup this morning,” Aneisse says. “I was going to take you, anyway.”

“I’m thanking you for driving now. You didn’t take me here. The ambulance did.” Flick smiles.

“Fine. Why does everyone in my life have to be a basket case?”

“You attract cases of baskets. Don’t you think? Can we get out of here?”

Aneisse starts the car. Flick takes her purse from Aneisse’s lap and rifles through it, retrieving her watch and a handkerchief.

Flick spots the blood on the handkerchief. “What’s this?”

Aneisse holds open her hand, showing the cut crease. “My mother’s ring.”

“Poor thing,” Flick says. “Are you all right?”

“I’m all right.”

“It’s nice you still wear your mother’s Blue Nile.”

“I guess. By the way,” Aneisse begins hesitantly, “I met a man yesterday.”

Flick’s eyes sparkle. “Potential boyfriend?”

“No, this isn’t romantic. Trust me. He’s this goofy guy who dresses like Columbo. This long coat—”

Flick laughs. “Sounds like your grandfather. He wore an overcoat, no matter the season.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course, your man can’t be him. Obviously. Sad that he died before you were born. Did you ever see a picture of him? You didn’t, did you? My second husband was particular about not keeping old photos around. Jealousy, I suppose. I wonder sometimes what your grandfather would have thought of my marrying again. Your grandfather’s name was Kelly. He was embarrassed about his name. What am I going on about? What about this man?”

“This guy goes to the same place as me on campus,” Aneisse says. “He said something strange.” Aneisse starts to share the awkward phrase the man spoke to her. Then she says, “Wouldn’t it be nice if someone came along and took away all your problems?”

Flick begins patting her eyes with the blood-stained handkerchief. “The doctor thinks I have cervical cancer.”

Without thinking, Aneisse reaches out to hug her grandmother. The seatbelt catches. She unhooks it and throws her arms around Flick, and she searches for words, but there’s nothing to say to solve this.

“Stop,” Flick says. “Please. Let me go home. You need to go, too. You have work to do.”

“I want to stay with you,” Aneisse says.

“Let me be alone for a while. I need to lie down and let my nerves calm.”

\*

At the front of the class, Aneisse struggles to find her roll sheet as she searches through her manila folders, the white A4 paper scraping the dried blood callous in her palm. Her ring faces those students who have already taken a seat at their round tables. The nontraditional student, the bartender Theresa, sits in front and squints in the blue light of the diamond ring. Aneisse wonders why she has been so neglectful of her students this year as compared to the previous years. It must be all the pressure that has accumulated inside her, like bubbles from underwater breaths surfacing and bursting. Theresa stands and approaches the lectern. "Stop," Aneisse says.

Can't Theresa see her eyes are ringed red and know that something is wrong? Soon, however, it's apparent that this is precisely why she has stepped up to talk. "I hope you're doing okay," she says.

Theresa is the oldest student in the class, older than Aneisse. But Aneisse doesn't have time to listen. "Please. I don't have it in me to talk to you about your divorce."

Theresa's mouth falls slack.

Aneisse looks to her ring, wishing she hadn't let her first thought escape her. Her grandmother could've died. She's allowed to be flustered, she tells herself.

"I was just trying to help." Theresa places her hand on top of Aneisse's, covering the diamond, and for a moment, Aneisse imagines her mother holding her hand. When she was sixteen, visiting her mother in hospice before the breathing tube went in, her mother slipped the ring onto Aneisse's finger and said, "Keep this. It's not a conflict diamond. I helped your father choose it. Wear it, please, in memory of me. In Ethiopia, where the Blue Nile flows, the river is buttressed by mountains that people sling ropes across to get to the other side. Let this be a bridge to me on the other side." Aneisse's

hand begins to sweat in Theresa's clasp and the callous stings. She pulls away her hand, slinging papers in the air. Students turn their heads. A sticky spot of blood has stained a page that floats to the floor like a swaying feather. Aneisse remembers praying this past New Year's Eve for her mother to send her an angel.

"I'm sorry," Aneisse says.

Turning to the whiteboard, her back to Theresa and the other students, her shoulders can't help but shake as she writes a note on the board informing the class that she has to go but to please submit the essays electronically on the Canvas system tonight before midnight. When Aneisse turns back around, her eyes are swollen with tears. She gathers her purse and her folders at the lectern and walks past Theresa and out into the hallway, taking the stairs down so that hopefully she won't meet any more students who could see her crying. Her top folder swings open. The business card of the man who says he can lose things is clipped to the inside.

To get to the bar, she has to walk across the campus quad in bright, sweat-inducing sunlight, a light wind hitting her face, stinging her nose and cheeks, made raw from rubbing them with her ringed hand. At the corner where 15<sup>th</sup> meets Olive, she waits for cars to pass before stepping out onto the white limit lines, laid out like chalk tallies, where she crosses over to the bar's pneumatic door, already propped open with two stacked cinder blocks.

Inside, the bar is empty except for the man who can lose things. She guessed she'd find him here. Her intention is to approach him angrily, asking who he is and why this emotional rupture has occurred at this point in her life. Why, given all the years of heartache following her mother's death, does she feel so bad *now*? Why is her

grandmother suffering now? Does he have anything to do with it? She plans to blame him, regardless. He raises his head when she sits at the stool next to him. She slaps her folders down on the bar top. “Clarence, I want you to know—”

He clears his throat, lifting a paperback of crosswords. “I’m looking for a synonym for ‘recovery.’ Any ideas?”

Aneisse pauses for a moment, blowing air up toward her nose. She shrugs. “Restoration?”

“That’s not it.” His eyes concentrate on the page.

“Rehabilitation?”

He picks up a pencil and puts the eraser in his mouth and shakes his head.

“Anything that begins with a C?”

“Convalescence.” She feels she answers a little too excitedly.

He looks up and smiles. “That’s it.” He tosses the crossword book onto the bar.

She looks from Clarence to the book. “Aren’t you going to write it down?”

“No. I was trying to think of the word for myself.”

Aneisse’s phone rings in her purse. She fishes it out. “Professor Allen? Sorry again. But the whole class is worried sick about you.”

“I’m not feeling well, Theresa. Sorry if I was rude. Are you working tonight?”

“You’re not drinking, are you?”

“Not at the moment. Hey. If you need help with your essay this evening, let me know, all right? I’ll be there for you. No matter what’s going on in a while, I’ll be available if you want to call.”

“I’ll be okay. Thanks. It’s you I worry about.”

When Aneisse hangs up and turns back to Clarence, he's staring at her ring hand resting on the bar. "You must be a good teacher," he says.

"Please. Did you hear any of that? I've been a basket case with them. And speaking of basket cases, why don't you tell me what's going on?" She looks around the bar. "Where's the bartender? Did you make him disappear?"

His eyes are drawn down, and he smiles, but not menacingly. It's an old person's smile on a younger man's face, a smile resigned to life's complications. "No one knows we're here," he says to the floor. "The bar hasn't opened yet. The manager is in the back, I think, unloading the food and alcohol shipments from a couple trucks." He looks up, his brown eyes flashing blue in her ring's reflection. "Anyway, I'm glad you're back. Have you considered my offer?"

"Are you interfering with my life?"

He puts the pencil in his mouth and gnaws on it like a dog with his favorite chew toy, and he ponders for a moment before removing the pencil and rolling it around. He's lefthanded like Aneisse. "I interfered one time," he says.

"What about with my grandmother? Or the taxi?"

"I've not harmed your grandmother. Haven't had a thing to do with a taxi. I made that bar tab disappear, remember? Now, I don't usually do that. It's dishonest, losing someone's tab. Don't you think so?"

Aneisse nods.

"Last night, that was to show you it could be done, that I can lose things."

"Do you really have a wife?"

"Yes. I have a wife."

“I described you to my grandmother. My grandfather dressed similarly, she said.”

He chuckles. “Is that so?”

“You’re not my grandfather, are you?”

He scratches his eyebrow. “How likely would that be?”

“Not very. Especially since you must be my age.”

“That’s flattering.”

“My grandmother’s sick. Do you think you could heal her?”

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

Aneisse crosses her arms. “What good are you, then?”

He bites the metal part of his pencil and sighs.

She leans on the bar and holds her head in her hands. After a while, she says,

“Listen, I might be crazy to ask, but I do need some help.” With her ring, she makes blue light dance on her flustered face in the mirror where her opposite-self holds her forehead.

She turns to Clarence. “You say you can help me lose things. There are several of my mother’s belongings in my house. Almost everything is hers. It’s more like they’re my belongings.” She stops and starts again. “Since my mother’s death, all this time, it’s like I’ve been swimming in grief, like a fish that doesn’t know what water is. Now I know, and the breathing’s painful. Do you know what I mean?”

He nods. “I know what it’s like to lose someone.”

“Could you help me lose my mother’s things?”

He opens the inside of his old crossword paperback and hands her the pencil.

“Make a list.”

“How do you do this? Are you going to come to my house while I’m there?”

“I won’t tell you how. Make a list and box everything according to your list and mark the boxes. Leave them in a room, any room. Leave the crossword book with the boxes. Have all this done by tomorrow afternoon. After that, your mother’s belongings will be gone.”

His pencil and the paperback are poised in the air. Aneisse takes them from him and studies them like they’re magical objects. “That’s all I have to do?”

“That’s all you have to do.”

\*

Aneisse changes into fresh pajamas and sits cross-legged on the living room floor in front of a pile of clothes, the first set of items among her mother’s belongings she intends to get rid of. KB runs around and wags her tail while Aneisse folds a green cardigan, blue blouse, oversized white knit sweater, maroon and red dress, each article of clothing recorded in the front of the book the mysterious Clarence, the young grandfatherly man, has given her. When she’s finished, she boxes everything, writing Mom’s Clothes on the lid. Then she moves on to her mother’s jewelry, placing it all in a smaller box. She leaves the Blue Nile diamond on her finger.

Letting go of everything her mother owned that she has inherited is more difficult than words can describe, more difficult also than if she were getting rid of only her own possessions. There’s something in every room, including, tucked away in the back of her closet, a pillow scented with her mother’s favorite perfume, Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue. Aneisse takes a break and sits at the kitchen table, her laptop in front of her, knees drawn up, the pillow squeezed to her body as she inhales the fragrance. She sifts through the essays her students have submitted online.

She begins reading the student Theresa's essay, titled "My Depression." It looks as though it were composed at breakneck speed, but the final portion is touching. "After all I've been through," she writes, "I'm grateful I'll get to help my daughter grow up to be a good woman, hopefully without the same heartaches. We're in this together. You don't have to get your own mind in order before you help others. You can do both at the same time. Thank God for that."

Aneisse goes to bed feeling like cinder blocks hang from her body. In dreams, it's as though she's drowning. The following morning, she's greeted with the cold. She turns up the heat and considers lying back down, but instead she goes into the living room, checking in on all the boxes marked Mother's Things. Of course the boxes are still here. Clarence said they'd wouldn't be gone until the afternoon. KB leaps up to Aneisse's knee, panting, wanting to go outside.

The grass is cold, dewy, another unexpected rain last night, but the cold day is bright, and the sun is breaking through the trees behind the creek. KB plays near the creek bed, chasing her tail. Animals are usually less self-conscious about dancing than people, though Aneisse did witness once an old man crossing the street on campus, who, before he got to the other side, started fanning his elbows and bobbing his head and clucking like a chicken. He seemed to be having a good time. Still in her pajamas, Aneisse shakes out the heaviness in her head and arms, and before even deciding to do it, she twists her whole body around, chasing the vestige of her tail, spinning, spinning, the grass tickling her feet, her diamond shining with her.

Her cell phone rings in her pocket. She stops, lightheaded, a good lightheaded. "Yes, Theresa?"

“Hey. It’s me, Flick. Are you teaching today?”

“I’m free.”

“Why don’t we visit your mother’s grave? I was thinking about how it might be good for you. For me, too, to see my daughter. I know you haven’t been since she was buried—”

“I don’t need convincing. I’ll go.”

“You will?”

“I’ll pick you up in a bit.”

Aneisse steps inside to change, KB trailing at her feet. Looking through her bare closet, it occurs to her what few articles of clothing she has to herself. She walks into the living room, again examining the outside of the boxes. She considers opening a box and retrieving some clothes, but no: she doesn’t need these things anymore. As a matter of fact, she doesn’t need Clarence to lose her things for her, either.

Aneisse grabs the biggest box and carries it outside, down to the creek. She opens the lid, preparing to dump the clothes. But the creek, reflecting the sunlight, shines as bright as her diamond. The sign to her left reads No Dumping. Aneisse will not pollute these waters. She’s no longer a child.

\*

When Aneisse picks up her grandmother, Flick wants to know why there are so many boxes in the backseat. Aneisse explains that the things inside are her mother’s. “I was going to take them to Goodwill.”

“What about my church’s Caring and Sharing program?” Flick says.

“Even better. We’ll drop them off at your church after.”

Aneisse can't remember visiting the cemetery when she was sixteen. Flick guides her to her mother's grave. The top of the stone reads Allen. To the right, Aida Clarence, Oct. 6, 1959—Aug. 28, 1999. To the left, Sean, Nov. 29, 1952—

“Is this all right?” Flick says.

“I'm all right,” Aneisse says.

“Do you need a moment?”

She still feels lightheaded from this morning. “I'll be okay.”

Flick and Aneisse move to the next stone, the top of which reads Clarence. To the left, Kelly, Pvt. Co. L. 47 Infantry, World War II, June 14, 1927—March 15, 1966. To the right, Florence, Dec. 10, 1953—

“You would have really liked your grandfather,” Flick says. “He was a good man. He would've made a great mentor to you if you ever met him.”

Aneisse feels woozy.

Her phone rings. “How's your convalescence?”

She looks around. No one else is out among the graves. Her phone display reads Unknown Number.

“I'm going to take care of my mom's things myself,” Aneisse says into the phone.

“I thought you would,” Clarence says. “All it took was getting started.”

“I'm still grateful to you, though.”

“You did it yourself. I just guided you in the right direction. We can all do that for someone, can't we? I see you've kept your mother's ring.” Aneisse's diamond gleams blue in the bright sun. “That's good,” he continues. “Hold on to that.”

“Can you see me?” Aneisse spins around, looking around the cemetery again.

“Who are you talking to?” Flick says.

“Here.” Aneisse hands Flick the phone.

There are no people on this side of the cemetery, but there is a yellow excavator nearby with its claw up. Another grave will be dug soon, unfortunately. Aneisse turns back to Flick.

“This man is silly.” Flick returns the phone to Aneisse. “He says he misses me.”

“Thank you again,” Aneisse says to Clarence.

“Pass it on,” he says.

As Aneisse hangs up, she feels better, decidedly unwoozy now and clearheaded. She will make it through all right.

On the other side of the road are more graves beside the church building. And in front of the church doors, on the steps, there’s a man standing in a familiar beige overcoat. Aneisse starts toward the road, as though her heart is pulling her. From here, her diamond ring reflects the shiny buttons of the man’s coat.

The phone rings. “Professor Allen?” Theresa says. “I want to thank you for putting up with me.”

“What are you talking about?” Aneisse keeps walking toward Clarence. Cars pass on the road.

“I’m talking about being such a pain. Bothering you a lot. I’m such a bad student.”

“You’re not a bad student, Theresa. Take it from me, a lifelong bad student.”

“Writing about my depression helped. It hasn’t solved all my problems, but it was a good start.”

“What you wrote was beautiful. I read it last night.”

“How are you?” Theresa really wants to know. There’s tenderness in her voice.

“I don’t know. I just saw my mother’s grave. And my grandmother is still sick.”

Aneisse is almost to the road. “But I’m fine for now. I forgot to drink yesterday. That’s good, isn’t it?”

“That’s good.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Aneisse waits for a car to pass. Then another car passes. And another. Cars keep passing. Then when the road clears, Aneisse looks to the man on the other side of the road and he’s gone.

## GOOD NEWS

In first-century Nazareth, a town of sixteen hundred, there are a lot of women named Miriam. Our Miriam is fourteen, spring-married, acquainted with and dissatisfied by life's everyday rhythms, in a world where men labor for their wives and women keep home. Home is a room on a compound shared with cousins. Everybody knows everybody's private affairs. Life gets lonely amid the gossip-mongering, and since Miriam has extricated herself from these circles, of course she only feels lonelier. She needs love. For her, love is life's most powerful force, akin to the feeling one gets when standing up against a wall, fearless, chin out, as men and women throw stones. Her husband doesn't love her this way. For him, love is infrequent, perfunctory—though he has shown moments of tenderness, kind, quiet words spoken in the dark, long, little kisses on sweaty cheekbones, under the eyes, in spaces where affection feels softest. In their first month of spring together, she almost positively went to pieces for him when he, dissatisfied with the figs she'd plucked, threw them across the room. She wasn't excited by his violence, rather she admired that he could be headstrong in this humdrum world. However, the night of the thrown figs, after they made love, he apologized, vowing never to be outwardly angry again, which was missing the point. She wants these signs of love.

Now spring turns to summer to autumn, and then to winter, when during a period of ceaseless falling snow, a companion makes for sweet comfort. A Roman soldier

stumbles into the middle of this private courtyard while the men are off working. The women cousins hear the soldier's cries and come stand outside their homes. A curly black head and dull red cape writhe in the snow. The Roman soldier is wounded, clutching at his side. Miriam sees him from her door, goes into her house, and brings back water that she's boiled. She descends the stairs and gives the man water and talks to him. Then she takes him into her home and removes his cape and shiny breastplate. The sword's handle sticks out from his belt. She removes his belt and nurses his wounds. "I was delivering a message," he says, then passes out from blood loss. He's been stabbed many times. By whom, Miriam doesn't know, never asks, nor does she ask what the Roman soldier is doing in Nazareth, hillside country. Outside, near the well, a bloody spot, where the soldier fell, stains the snow. Some of the women cousins exit their homes and sweep new snow over bloody old.

Again, spring comes. Miriam turns fifteen. The bloodstain near the well has disappeared. Miriam is aware the stain wouldn't have lasted winter, but she's afraid, because now that the snow has melted, everything doesn't only feel exposed, it is exposed. While the husbands spend more time at work, the cousins gossip more. When will her secret be known? Miriam wonders. The spring winds remind her of winter as they howl in their cryptic language and shake fruit from trees and blow the hood right off her head.

Saturday afternoon, Miriam draws water in the courtyard while fighting the gust, struggling to keep her hood pulled down, when her cousin Elisheba appears at the gate. Visitors provide sweet comfort in spring as well as winter. Miriam abandons her pail and forgets the immodesty of the winds, running at her cousin, her hair exposed and hanging

past her shoulders. She almost knocks Elisheba down. Elisheba backs up, placing her hand on her kidney, which accentuates her round stomach. Miriam gasps. "I didn't know. Come." She takes Elisheba's delicate fingers in her hand and leads her up the stairs. Miriam hopes her cousin will stay a while.

Elisheba examines the small room. "What a nice place."

Miriam starts the fire. "Don't lie. It's crude. My husband has improved it, though." She points at the roof. "He raised those beams. What? We can't all have a big home and a priest husband."

"Mi-Mi, I'm not judging." Elisheba looks at the ladder leading up to the warm, dark loft where Miriam and her husband sleep.

"Get away from there. Sit." Miriam grabs two pillows and they sit facing each other next to the fire. "You never visit. You've never visited."

Elisheba sighs and feels below her stomach, pushing hard enough to make her knuckles turn white. "He's kicking. Goodness, it's like he wants to leap out." Elisheba laughs, and Miriam laughs a little, too, nervously, how insects dance on water. "My child knows a friend is here."

"Would you like some food? Yes, let's eat." Miriam goes to the kitchen and prepares some bread and olives and water. When she returns with the bowls and cups, she touches the table. "My husband made this." A dimple stands out on her left cheek.

"You're proud of everything he's made," Elisheba says.

"I am." Miriam thinks to touch her stomach. "How did you know I was pregnant? I don't show."

"Our other cousins here. Laundry duties."

Miriam narrows her eyes and affects a smile. "You're lying."

"How many months has it been?" Elisheba says.

"Over three."

"Nine months for me, at age forty-six."

"Heavens. And this your first child."

"I might as well be eighty-eight. I've got arthritis in my wrists." Elisheba holds up her hands, making a ring around each wrist with the other hand. "Can you believe it?"

"Oh, cuz, I missed your complaining."

Elisheba grins. "Do you really like it?"

"I love you for it."

Elisheba slaps her thigh. "It's good to be loved."

"Isn't it? My husband works with wood and stone all day. It's like I never see him. Meanwhile, the other cousins keep to themselves." Miriam tilts her head and rests her hand on her chin. "Maybe it's better that way."

"I heard it's not the cousins who keep away, but you who keep to yourself. You pulled away. Or don't you remember?" Elisheba looks into Miriam's eyes and rips off a piece of bread. "How's your romance?"

Miriam breaks eye contact. "I don't know. He's fast."

"If you don't train him, it won't get better. Tell him what to do."

"Sometimes it's fine. He surprised me last night." Miriam blushes. "His beard pokes."

"Make him soften it with oil."

Miriam puts her hands in her lap. Her eyes dart here and there as if a mouse runs around the room. “Cousin, I have something to tell you.”

Elisheba rests a hand on Miriam’s knee. They exchange glances. A knowing flame dances in Elisheba’s eyes the same as in Miriam’s as both their eyes fill with tears and look glassy, the furnace flames causing their pupils to shine like vessels heated in a kiln.

“I know,” Elisheba says. “Your lover was my lover.”

All the air leaves Miriam’s stomach. Her heart clangs against her chest like brass on brass. The room’s furnace makes sweat bead and roll down her forehead. She needs water and drinks quickly, recalling that day, her thirst in winter, when the soldier returned. To thank you for healing me, he said. He held out spikenard in an alabaster box. She couldn’t accept it, handing it back to him. The box alone was expensive. He threw the box to the floor, breaking it and the jar inside it, and began rubbing oil on her face. It relaxed her cheeks and tingled, tickling, his fingertips raising goose bumps on her flesh. She wanted to move forward and bite his lip. Let me put the rest on you, he said. Enchanted, she undressed in the warmth of the fire, the spikenard strong and musty in her nostrils. He rubbed it on her neck, her sides, her legs. She turned around as he massaged her with the oil, holding her for a moment. She leaned into him. Then he undressed, and she applied the ointment to his body, stopping to rest her nose on his shoulder to breathe in the scent, sniffing the oil that mixed with the musky smell at his neck, at his pit. She bit his shoulder. They made love, and the cold room turned hot, hottest in the loft in the bed in the crawlspace. Afterward, she asked him for water and would he go down and get it. Seeing his bare backside as he crawled out, and the awkwardness of those dangling

parts, she had the choice to feel shame but opted for laughter. He brought back the water and propped up his head beside her, and smiled, as her husband would have. The moment felt domestic. She cried. She cries and drinks the water. Her nose runs. The light has shifted, the sun tilting in the sky and shining into the room.

“What am I going to do?” Miriam rubs her nose with her rough knuckle. “If you know, then everyone must know. Our cousins—”

Elisheba pries Miriam’s hands from her face. “Listen,” she says. “I only know that my husband knows. No telling how he knows. The cousins might have told, but maybe your husband guessed. The soldier himself—”

“Is this supposed to be good news to me?” Miriam jerks her fists from Elisheba’s grasp. “The soldier wouldn’t have. He’s a gentleman. Besides, it happened once.” Suddenly, anger overcomes Miriam. She rises and upturns the table. “How do you know you and I have been familiar with the same man?”

Elisheba stands. “How many Roman soldiers have traveled all the way to Nazareth to make love to local women?”

Miriam crosses her arm, studies the wall. “What did your soldier look like?”

“He was an older man. I suspect he’s been at his military post for long. He had straight white hair cropped close to his head. His stomach: there was a bit of a paunch—”

Miriam turns to Elisheba and stomps her feet. “Hah. My soldier had curly hair, and a young, lean body.” She emphasizes *young, lean*, then raises her jaw.

“I forget you’re just fifteen.” Elisheba shakes her head and wipes away sweat. “Guess the Romans are making it out this way after all. Wonder what that’ll mean for Jewish sovereignty.” She holds her back. “I’ll tell you what I told my husband about my

little affair: nothing. He watched the soldier leave our home and came in to find me unclothed. He said, Who was that man? I said, What man? The man who left, he said. There was no man, I said. I had my husband convinced he was seeing things.”

Miriam blushes, lowering her head. But she can't suppress her grin.

“People often see things they don't understand. When they're sick or tired, they see angels, some of them.” Elisheba leans against the wall. “I love my husband and you love yours and I never intended to be unfaithful, but I was and I'm happy I did it. It was delightful. Of course, I regret it, too. No romance comes without its cost. This child inside me may be his, and yours— We suffer. But for the love of God, let's not submit ourselves to public opinion. Do you know the Nazarene men might stone us to death? Meanwhile, they have their prostitutes—” Elisheba talks until she's hoarse. She wipes her mouth with her sleeve. “They'd kill us because of their own fear. They're religious fools.”

“Cousin, don't blaspheme. Your husband's a priest.”

“Fools. They'll get nothing from me. When my husband told me of your affair, I said you're the purest woman I know. Let's stick to the story of our purity.” Elisheba sits down on the pillow and sets the table upright.

Miriam grabs her pillow and joins Elisheba. The low sun shines onto the table where Miriam and Elisheba clasp hands. The light through the window creates a little box around their solidarity. Elisheba lifts Miriam's sleeve past her wrist. Dots of blood, newly congealed, speck Miriam's veins horizontally.

“You don't do it with a stone, but with this.” Elisheba produces a dagger from a pocket in her cloak. “And you do it longways.” She demonstrates with the dagger

hovering over her own wrist. “Several times, and quickly. Why you’d want to do it to yourself instead of the poor dog who comes after you, I don’t understand.” She lays the dagger on the table. “I may be crazy leaving this with you, but I want you to use it for your safety if someone threatens you or your husband or your child. This isn’t to harm yourself. All right?”

“Yes,” Miriam says, the word barely escaping her lips. She rests her head on her cousin’s shoulder. “The first time I saw the soldier, he said he was delivering a message. It may be foolish, but I was hoping his message was for me.”

“What do you wish he told you?”

“That I deserve to be loved.”

Elisheba cries out. She clutches her stomach and struggles to stand.

“What is it?”

“It may be time.”

“Oh, cousin. Come.”

Miriam helps Elisheba with her hood— “I don’t care about that,” she says—and they make their way outside. The low sun and rising moon color the compound orange and blue. Miriam guides Elisheba down the stairs. A breeze moves gently against their faces. At the foot of the stairs, Elisheba stumbles backward and topples to her knees in the middle of the courtyard. The cousins stand outside their doors and stare, loitering like bystanders at an accident. They all look the same, the young tired women. Miriam is young and tired, too. The Roman soldier could have visited any one of us, Miriam thinks. She wonders, then, how special love with the soldier had been.

Just then, both Miriam and Elisheba's husbands appear at the front gate and fall to their knees. "At temple, the angel of the Lord descended," Miriam's husband Yosef says to the sky. "The Lord's angel said God has put this child inside you, Miriam, and sanctified your cousin's child."

Miriam walks to her husband and touches his shoulder. His eyes lose their self-righteous trance. "Very good," she says, "but Elisheba is going into labor."

Yosef and Miriam and Elisheba's husband Zechariah all rush to Elisheba's side and help her deliver the child near the well in the middle of the courtyard.

Six months pass. Miriam is still fifteen, still pregnant, most definitely showing. Many of Miriam's women cousins have become pregnant, too, or given birth to the offspring of winter love. Some men take the pregnancies for prophecies. Some wives come to believe the prophecies. Howls of eschatology are in the air, the end seemingly nigh. How long have the Jews suffered under the yoke of King Herod and the Caesar's oppression? There's talk of revolution and new hope for the world. Miriam views her pregnancy differently. Her child, because it is her child, is a love worth fighting for, and that is enough.

During this sixth month, Miriam travels with several cousins and their families to Bethlehem, the site of their births, to participate in a foolish census ordered by Tiberius Caesar. The travel party is Miriam and Yosef, Elisheba and her husband Zechariah and their new baby, a young cousin Miriam's age and her husband, and an older woman Elisheba's age and her husband and baby. All arrive and declare themselves in Bethlehem when no sooner King Herod, in response to anarchic Bethlehemites challenging his sovereignty in Judea, decrees the slaughter of the future martyrs, ages two and under,

including children in the womb. So a few days after the census decree, the travelers embark on a night journey out of Bethlehem.

On a warm, still autumn night in September, the anniversary eve of Julius Caesar's deification, a caravan pulls up outside an inn and everyone gets in the back, forming two rows, man seated across from man, woman across from woman, old across from old, young across from young, like mirror doubles. These parents regard their children as future saviors and would be unperturbed to learn that other parents consider their children as equally special. Miriam reflects on this fact, how each person in his or her life, is, if not a hero to himself, then the harbinger of a hero. Miriam thinks of herself as no one special, not among this coterie or cosmically, but her child is nonetheless special in her eyes, because she's not afraid to protect him or her, be the child boy or girl. While everyone else listens to the winds for prophecies, she listens to the story her soul speaks of, how once upon a time a Roman soldier sent a message to her, a simple message: You deserve a love that makes you fearless, and here it is.

As Miriam and the cousins sit and wait in the back of the caravan, Elisheba tries to distinguish herself among the travelers, complaining in front of them to her husband that the wagon isn't covered, saying to the others that her husband Zechariah could have afforded better transportation. Zechariah doesn't listen but looks off into the distance as if from the idle wagon he already sees something interesting outside.

"You be quiet," Miriam says to Elisheba. "This is what we have on short notice."

Elisheba screws up her face and pats the back of her baby boy's neck. Six months old and hairy and strong, the baby boy mews like a lion cub. "Your mother is here,"

Elisheba says into his ear. He kicks upward with his hind legs, able to wobble upright at this early age. She clutches his back to her breast.

Miriam talks to the driver, who is a Roman. "Do you know the way to Nazareth?"

"We're going back?" Elisheba says. "Why don't we go far away? Why not to Egypt?"

"Do you know how far that is?" Miriam says. "I'm in charge now. Driver."

The driver squints at her. "If you have a question, have your husband ask me. I don't talk to women and I don't talk to dogs." He faces the asses of the horses. Miriam holds gold coins under his nose. He sniffs at them and smiles, a mouth full of gold teeth. He takes the money. "Yes, I know the way." The driver says *hi-yah*, the horses gallop, and heaven rotates in panorama, the night moon-drunk, blood-black, and full of stars.

The cousin across from Miriam looks a lot like her, black hair, olive skin, her stomach swollen, too. The young cousin sits next to an old woman holding a baby. This older cousin cradles her son at the crown of his skull and whispers "Prophet" in his ear.

Miriam, speaking over the sound of the horse's hooves and the roll of wheels, asks the young cousin when her child is due.

"He's overdue."

"Mine, too," Miriam says.

"Coming soon, if God wills it," the older cousin with the baby says. "Mine was born two months early and survived by God's grace. No one can predict his ways, right?" To Elisheba, she says, "Your little man looks like mine."

"How can you tell?" Elisheba says. "We're in the dark."

"All that hair, little auntie."

“All newborns look alike.” Elisheba’s boy leaps up. “Ow.” She holds out her arm to her husband. “Zeckie, rub my wrist.”

The stars pan past as if the sky is moving. The landscape is obscure and flat and unfamiliar. No one in the party, Miriam included, knows where they are. Miles and miles of sand, few trees.

Miriam stares contentedly at Elisheba, her baby kicking inside her. She laughs.

Elisheba’s baby also kicks, and leaps again. His baby bottom faces Miriam.

Elisheba moves him, putting him high on her chest.

The caravan speeds up. A wheel rolls a stone. The baby kicks once more and leaps from Elisheba’s arms. He falls over the wagon’s side and tumbles into the sand.

Elisheba screams and twists her whole body until she’s learning her torso out into the night. Her husband Zechariah holds her waist to keep her from going over.

Everyone watches in disbelief. Over the rumble of the horses and the crunch of the wheels, they hear the faintest sound, the baby as he mews from where he lies on the ground in the sand, his arms reaching toward the brightest star. The moon reflects off his body. The caravan gets father away. His body becomes a small point of light.

Elisheba cries for the driver to stop, but he only looks over his shoulder and goes faster.

There’s confusion. No one has planned for this. The sky’s panorama and the noises of the caravan have lulled everyone nearly to sleep. What happened? Was the child that jumped Elisheba’s or the son of the older cousin? No, but she still holds her baby, clutching him even tighter. Miriam’s husband lays over her stomach as if their baby will run out of the womb. The older cousin yells for Elisheba to pray, pray, please pray,

and Elisheba says, “Shut up.” No one can stop her from screaming or crying. She sobs against Zechariah’s chest. Her husband’s face looks wretched like a golem’s. She pulls away from him and beats her chest with her fists.

“We can’t do anything,” the older cousin says. “Follow God’s will. It’s his will.”

Miriam, aggravated, pushes Yosef off and tells the driver, “Stop”—though up ahead is a road and city lights. “Stop,” she says again. The driver doesn’t budge. She pulls her dagger from her cloak. The blade points to the side of his neck and pricks his skin. He twists his head and nicks himself and shouts. He halts. The horses brake and sniff and sneeze.

“We have to go back for the baby,” Miriam says.

“Oh no,” the driver says. “There are bigger things at play here.” Miriam stabs the knife at his chest. He slides away and off his seat, his feet hitting the ground. “Fine. You want to go through the desert again? Go. Only not with me.” He hands Miriam the reins. “Take the wagons. Criminals. I’ll report you.” He sprints, his robe a bone-white blur against the yellow city lights.

Miriam grips the reins. But she can’t drive, has never driven. She asks who can. The young cousin’s husband volunteers.

Elisheba bawls hoarsely into her hands. “He’s dead. My child.”

“He’s not,” Miriam says.

Yosef touches her shoulder. “Darling, we can’t know—”

Miriam gently removes his arm and squats in front of Elisheba as best she can with the baby inside her. “Your son is back there, and alive.”

“I don’t have any faith,” Elisheba says.

“We’re all the faith you need. Look at us.” Miriam scans everyone’s faces. Everyone looks scared but seems to trust her. Miriam lifts Elisheba’s chin. “You know the strength of your son. He’s a lion cub. Don’t you think he has the fortitude to survive a fall like that?”

Elisheba smiles.

“I know he has. Let’s go back.”

Elisheba crouches and rolls over the side of the caravan, disembarking. She starts walking, Zechariah following her.

“What are you doing?” Miriam says.

“The other cousins need to seek shelter. I can’t expect them to go with me.”

Miriam steps off the back of the caravan. “Yosef and I will join you.”

“May God keep you safe,” Yosef says to the other kin, then the caravan departs and gets smaller, until from Miriam’s point of view, the people inside the wagon look like dark mirrors against the blood-let sky. The roles could be reversed, easily. The other old cousin could have lost her child and the other young cousin and her husband could have gone searching with them. Bad things can happen to anyone.

Love compels Miriam to persevere. She tells herself she and her family are as pure as they need to be, and how harrowingly so, since they are flesh and blood striving to love in an uncertain world. They move toward their ends.

It’s after midnight. Miriam and Elisheba and the husbands search on foot for the baby. The moon and the stars play tricks with the landscape. The sparse palm trees loom large against the sky like giant menaces, sons of God. Snakes sidewind and rattle, their

eyes glowing. Elisheba cries quietly and intermittently. The city lights are to their backs as they move father into the desert.

At some point, Yosef remarks upon the city that lays behind them. "Bethlehem," he says. "I didn't recognize it. I'm glad you stopped the wagon," he says to Miriam. "The Roman was returning us. Perhaps he would've handed us over to Herod's men. The whole night, we've moved in a circle."

Learning this news doesn't help, but Miriam squeezes her husband's hand regardless. "At least the other cousins took a different course."

"They'll be safe," Elisheba says.

"I think so," Miriam says. Then she bends and hurts. She tries to gather herself and walk but sweat breaks out on her forehead. She stops. "It's happening." She cries out in pain.

"Where's she going to give birth?" Elisheba says. A voice like a lion cub's echoes in the distance. "Is that my child?"

The sky tears open. Water pours down and slaps the earth. The sand becomes wet and red in the glow of starlight and lightning. The storm has seemingly come from nowhere. Winds sweep their cloaks, knocking off their hoods and throwing sand in their faces.

Yosef spots a home in the near distance, the only one in this desolate desert. A fire shifts inside the home. Out front, there's a fig tree. A short, bearded shepherd, unhooded, runs around after a white sheep, puffy with rainwater. He corners the sheep, coaxing it back toward and lifting it into the pen. A woman exits the home and says,

“Come inside or you’ll get sick.” The shepherd goes inside. Through the window, the man and woman dry themselves by the furnace fire.

Elisheba approaches Miriam and they hug in their soggy cloaks. “I’m sorry, little cousin, but we have to find our baby.” The two women exchange quick kisses, then Elisheba and Zechariah walk off in the direction of the crying voice.

Miriam and Yosef arrive at the door of the shepherd. The short, bearded man meets them and asks what they’re doing in the middle of the badlands, and in this unusual weather.

“Take us in,” Yosef says. “My wife is going to deliver a baby. We’re fleeing for our lives from King Herod’s decree. Do you know about it? It applies to our child. Strange circumstances brought us to Bethlehem. We came at the census order of Tiberius Caesar—” The name Tiberius clangs like brass cymbals in Miriam’s chest. The soldier with the message, her lover, was also named Tiberius. She swallows hard and aches. Her body falls and folds to the ground. “Can’t you see what condition my wife is in?” Yosef says.

The shepherd helps her up and he and Yosef get her inside. The shepherd says he has to look after his children. He knows nothing about childbearing, he says, but his wife does and will take it from here. He climbs the ladder to the wide loft, the second floor of the home, while the shepherd’s wife, a Greek woman named Theotokos, prepares the floor for Miriam, laying down straw. She apologizes. On this main floor, they feed the animals. She lays Miriam down and places one pillow under her head and another beneath her bottom.

“I can help,” Yosef says. “I’ve delivered a child.”

“And I’ve delivered many more than you.” Theotokos takes his arm and moves him to the fire. Then she pins her hair and kneels beside Miriam.

The winds blow warm and wet with the scent of the fig tree outside. This land is not entirely desolate. There is this home. There’s this tree next to the window. Miriam can practically taste the figs. As she breathes in, she recalls the spikenard touch of the soldier Tiberius’ fingers. The flame from the furnace dances in her eyes. She eases her muscles against the straw, trying to relax, but she keeps crossing her ankles, holding them together, unable to control this tension that overwhelms her.

Yosef stands by the fire as if to study it, but really to make himself busy, though there’s nothing to do. He watches the shepherd’s wife Theotokos rub Miriam’s head with a cool rag and speak soothing words. He volunteers to help again and Theotokos says no and he says that he could help if she weren’t so insistent on having her way. Miriam is charmed by her husband’s blustering appeals. If he had shown more of this side of himself, this protectiveness, she would have known long ago how much he truly loves her. She smiles at him.

Then something turns. Her eyes roll back into her skull and flutter. Her body jerks.

Yosef starts toward her. Theotokos puts her hand in the air. Yosef moves back to the fire.

Miriam’s eyes flip wide open. Her head tilts to face the open door where the smell of the musky spikenard emanates from a man’s sandaled feet. The man, the Roman soldier, stands inside the door. He is at one moment young, curly-headed, lean, then he becomes old with thin, closely cropped white hair. Then he’s translated back into the

curly-headed soldier but with something still more. White wings, ancient like those of the old birds God conquered, sprout from his back. They extend and flap. His red cape undulates, his eyes burning orange and blue. He unholsters a sword of blazing fire and wields it upright between his flickering eyes. The soldier's armor glistens and his wings fan the flames. Miriam looks down at her stomach and turns to her husband. "This is worth dying for," she says.

"What's this?" Yosef pushes past Theotokos and crouches beside Miriam.

Theotokos rubs Miriam's head. "Her blood is boiling. It's a fever."

Miriam's eyes begin bouncing, her body convulsing, tightening, releasing, repeating.

"She's in a trance," Yosef says. "Do you think God's speaking to her?"

"It's a fever." Theotokos gnashes her teeth. "I said, Get away." She topples Yosef where he crouches. "You'll only worry her and interfere with the delivery."

Yosef wags his finger. "Listen, I'll do as you say. But you'd better do everything you can to keep her well. Despite my faith, I know that nothing is certain in this world except death. My wife had better not die tonight."

Theotokos nods. He steps away. She moves around to Miriam's open legs and spots the dilation and grasps Miriam's thighs. "You may not be able to hear me, but we're going through with this. I need you to push. Can you hear? Please push."

Somehow, even in Miriam's trancelike state, she knows to obey. "Yes. Yes, push. That's it. Good."

Boards creek in the loft. As the newborn begins to crown, Theotokos' three sons peek their heads over the edge. Miriam's sudden screams can't be ignored, and she is

screaming now, fully present, her eyes staring straight ahead out the window at the red sun. She lifts herself at her waist, rising on the heels of her hands. She rises to push but also to witness.

Yosef notices the three boys above watching his wife deliver the child. “Why, you—” he begins, but stops himself. The shepherd’s sons, likely young shepherds themselves, are causing no harm, and the eldest of them isn’t a boy but a young man, perhaps fifteen, Miriam’s age. Yosef bites his tongue and turns back to his wife.

New life, in all its messiness, is beautiful to behold. The child’s perfect world has been destroyed to bring him into ours. The baby boy emerges, punching and kicking. Miriam’s tears grow large and stream down into the straw. Yosef shivers and weeps, his hands covering his face. *I love you, I love you, I love you.* This is what Miriam wants to shout to her baby as she reaches out her arms. “I love you,” she says to her husband.

He uncovers his face. “I love you, too.” He can’t stop sobbing.

Theotokos holds the baby upside down and smacks his bottom. The first cry escapes. He’s safe, Miriam thinks. His little lungs fill with air. Theotokos finds a rag nearby to swaddle him, but before she can hand him to Miriam, the baby goes quiet and closes his lids.

Theotokos turns her back to Miriam and Yosef. The baby looks to be resting against her chest. But his right hand, extended past her shoulder, appears to hang lifeless. Theotokos lowers her ear to the child. “He doesn’t breathe,” she says quietly. She faces Miriam. “I think he’s—”

The shepherd and his sons have come down from the loft and stand at the back of the room, staring in wonder. The shepherd touches each of his sons' shoulders as if to take inventory of his children.

Miriam puts her hand in her pocket and fingers the blade of her dagger. It's there if she needs it.

They all listen to the rains slow as the drops patter on the thatched roof of straw and mud.

The shepherd goes to the furnace to put out the flame. There's been no need for a fire for some time. It's made the house very hot. The shepherd tries to suppress the fire but can't.

Tiny flames dance in Miriam's eyes, the rest of her face tranquil. She hasn't received the worst news. The most horrible news would have been if the midwife said the dead child must go back inside her, that the birth must occur again and again and again until breath animated her child, until her baby was delivered perfectly into this world, as if her body is a reliquary that reveals only holy things. Her body is not a reliquary. Her first duty is to love the husband she has and the child she's made. This husband, this baby boy, before they are anything else, are hers. "Let me hold him," Miriam says. Theotokos shakes her head, but then Miriam raises up on her hands. "I won't ask again."

Miriam bends at the waist, sitting up to receive him. Outside, the sun is cradled between the hills and the rain has passed. Miriam clutches her baby to her breast and rubs her nose against his forehead. He smells like sweet milk. She'd rip open the world for him, just as she's been torn open. She isn't angry as she sits and embraces him. His scent, it won't be here for long, she knows, which is what makes him precious, the

impermanence of his body and this moment she has to love and enjoy him. Yosef sits behind her and hugs her and the baby. She falls into the embrace. She would fall into it a million times until death. The baby stirs. He whimpers, coughs, wiggles, as if this hug were all he needed. His small right hand waves in the air. His left hand fidgets out of the cloth. His tiny fingernails touch Miriam's face. "You see," Miriam says, looking up at Theotokos, "he was only sleeping."

\*

So ends the story of our Miriam, though there are many other women with her name in Nazareth, and some women with variations on the name. This has led to confusion, since some people have taken this chronicle to be a variant of another popular account that has been circulating for some time now. But that account concerns another Miriam. There is nothing more to relay about our Miriam apart from the mythic.

Superstitious, backward people have added to this family drama. We can't know why. Perhaps at night, when the day was done and they had worked for long, they grew tired of studying their firelit shadows on the wall, knowing that in the morning they'd disappear. Perhaps these people were lonely and wanted help overcoming this loneliness. These are among the reasons anyone tells a story.

It's been said that Elisheba and Zechariah found their son, and he became a wilderness preacher and that the father Zechariah became a martyr for the new Jewish movement, the Way. They say Elisheba lived a normal life and thanked God daily for her wealth and family and that she died before her husband and her son, who both mourned her until their deaths. This is what people say.

They say Yosef taught his son woodwork and masonry and died of old age, peacefully and happily, Miriam and his son bedside. Many say the son became a rabbi and that he preached, "Love, because we need one another." They say he died at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities, because King Herod's son mistook him for a political radical. Some say days later he awakened after death and ascended into the sky. Some also say the message of love he taught was modeled on his mother.

Some say that Miriam died an old woman and a few days later ascended into the sky like her son. Others say she never tasted death, that one day, she merely walked outdoors and was assumed into the clouds.

Still others say nothing extraordinary ever happened to Miriam or her husband or her son and that she was as ordinary as you or me. Besides, they say, her story too closely mirrors that other Miriam, whose son was born a healer during the reign of Caesar Augustus, a few decades before our Miriam's son. Our Miriam's family, some say, was like so many others who came to believe that in their humble circumstances, they were blessed. I prefer any good news to bad and give no credence to the detractors of our Miriam. I side with those superstitious, backward people who say that Miriam is stronger than she ever was, as she stands in heaven in her armor at the vanguard of love, the only force that even stands a chance to conquer death.

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