

Long: Six Short Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

Long: Six Short Stories

Pasha Malla

When I initially set out writing these stories, I made a deliberate effort to avoid using my own, mixed cultural heritage as source material. My proposal eschewed the autobiographical in favour of the broader topic of exploring the gaps between adults and children, a focus that later developed into less specific moments of estrangement between people.

Now, looking at these six stories as a whole, I find common themes directly related to what I see as something intrinsic to my own “mixed-race” identity; without realizing it, I have broached the very subject matter I had originally hoped to avoid. These are stories about transition, about people lacking distinct and definable identities. Like Paul in “Pet Therapy” and Les in “The Past Composed,” they are caught in hybrid moments of emotion, location and self. The characters are often at “in-between” junctures in their lives: the young narrator in “Pulling Oceans In and Pushing Oceans Out,” for example, is at the cusp of adolescence and sexual discovery.

The title of my thesis, “Long,” is meant to represent the longing that results from these “in-between” moments – a longing to connect with other people, to create “homes,” to connect the disparate elements of life to form a cohesive sense of self.

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Pet Therapy

The day Ewing tried to bugger one of the goats, it went like this: Sujata Jain let Ewing outside, and right away he started prowling around the pen, knuckles scraping the ground, breath whistling out through his nostrils, big simian head bobbing stealthily with each calculated step. There was something different about his movements, something dubious and predatory, and in that premonitory way in which animals can tell a storm is coming, the goats staggered away from the lustful chimp, mewling. Before Sujata could intervene, Ewing scuttled over and mounted one of the poor creatures from behind and started humping away at its rear end.

It took a moment for Sujata to realize what was happening. For a moment, she stood watching, transfixed, before the screams of one of the younger patients – “The monkey’s killing it!” – brought her to her senses. Rolling up her sleeves, Sujata rushed over, hauled the frenzied chimp to the ground, and then ushered him inside the playroom, to masturbate. By then the kids were hysterical and the dogs were howling and the goats huddled bleating in the corner of the pen, and a bewildered Sujata stood in the doorway, trying to figure out whom to console first.

Ewing, meanwhile, hammered off dutifully in the playroom. After ejaculating all over himself he waddled out back, where he sat, slumped in the corner of his cage, a white blanket pulled over his face, waiting to be locked in.

The rape happened, a few days later the hospital’s board of directors held an inquiry, and then, less than two weeks after that, Paul was hired as support staff – to “watch the horny chimp,” as one senior official put it in the interview.

Sujata loved that horny chimp, though, and spent hours in meetings campaigning to keep him around. Paul’s first day on the job, he walked into the Pet Therapy Ward and

found her curled up on the floor with Ewing, stroking his furry back. Paul stood there for a moment, wondering if they shouldn't be left alone, before both woman and monkey looked up with the same curious expression on their faces.

"I'm Sue Jain," she said, standing up, extending her hand. Paul heard "Sue-Jane," which seemed impossible for this petite, chestnut-skinned South Asian; it was too Arkansas, too arbitrarily slapped together. "I'm in charge here."

Her palm felt greasy. "Hi, Sue-Jane. Paul. The new aide."

"I'm sure you've heard about Ewing." Sue-Jane nodded at the monkey sprawled between her feet. "You ever work with a bonobo before?"

"Bonobo? That's not a monkey?"

Sue-Jane's face crinkled. "You have much experience with animals?"

"Animals. no. Kids. plenty."

"Animals, no?"

"No. But I worked at a day care for years, like, before."

Sue-Jane stared at Paul for a moment, then reached down, took Ewing by the hand and led him, slowly, cautiously, outside. "Judith needs feeding," she called over her shoulder. "She's the pig."

Pet Therapy was set up in the basement of the hospital in a room that had previously served as the morgue. It had been re-decorated in a circus motif, and mobiles made by patients dangled from the ceiling: cardboard lions and clowns and big-top tents. Two picture windows looked out onto an outdoor animal pen that had been, at one point, a little patch of trees beside the hospital. A few stumps remained clustered around the perimeter of the yard, sawed off into flat, perfect stools. Immediately, Paul preferred to be outside with Ewing; the air in the playroom always seemed so still, almost oblivious to the life and action usually whirling around in it.

That first day, after a harried eight hours of vomiting dogs and vomiting children and a runaway Judith and a surprisingly docile Ewing, who hung around in the pen with the goats as if nothing had ever happened between them, Sue-Jane instructed Paul to join her for dinner. Had it been anyone else, Paul might have considered this a romantic invitation, but she seemed so pragmatic about it. Besides, the woman was forty or so, close to fifteen years Paul's senior.

Paul followed Sue-Jane in his Neon to an Indian restaurant near the hospital, one of those all-you-can-eat places with piped-in sitar music and statuettes of deities bronze and holy along the walls. Sue-Jane made straight for a table next to the buffet, nodding at the waiters as she breezed by. She slung her purse over the back of a chair, snatched up a plate and stepped into line. Paul trailed closely behind.

"Hungry," she grunted, leaning around the fellow in front of her, getting a good look at the dishes lined up along the buffet table, fluorescent and lumpy and steaming.

They shuffled along, reaching out every now and then to slop curries onto their plates. "Not that one," Sue-Jane kept saying, steering Paul's hand away. "Take some of this."

Back at the table, their plates both heaped with identical, meatless meals, Sue-Jane sat down with a great, breathy exhalation and began guzzling her food.

"That's the stuff," she said. "Oh, boy, that's the stuff."

Paul folded some eggplant into a piece of naan. "You a vegetarian?"

"Vegan."

"Oh, yeah? No cheese, no eggs?"

Sue-Jane paused for a moment, her fork dripping. "Yes. Vegan."

"You find that hard?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"Sorry - I just, you know."

Sue-Jane shoveled a forkful of okra into her face. "Eat, eat."

Paul watched, marveling at the silent tenacity, the icy resolve. He was used to meals with his Irish mother and Italian father hollering and gesticulating at one another across the table, occasionally roping him into their diatribes on the decay of social values or the price of auto insurance. This absence of conversation, now, seemed wrong. He opened his mouth to speak, and as he did, Sue-Jane looked up, meeting his eyes. She gestured at his plate with her fork. Hastily, almost embarrassed, Paul ate.

When Paul got back to the trailer that night, his cousin Wayne was out, presumably off playing pool at some nearby tavern – how he spent most of his free time. Wayne was only two years younger than Paul, but looked about eighteen, with a Frida Kahlo moustache and the spindly arms and legs of a prototypical heavy metal enthusiast. The day Paul moved in, kept thanking his cousin. "Shit, dude – we're family," Wayne eventually proclaimed, smacking Paul on the back hard enough to leave a mark. "If you can't count on your family when the chips are down, what the fuck? Am I right?"

The trailer itself was a squat little hovel made of plastic and glass, wheels lifted off the ground by concrete blocks. The inside comprised one long, narrow room: the kitchen by the front door, then a small living space which housed the TV, and Wayne's bedroom, sectioned off by a curtain, against the far wall. Paul slept on the couch. Wayne slept in a waterbed.

Alone, the Indian meal a solid brick in his gut, Paul got out his laptop and spent a few hours on the internet, looking up bonobos – who, it turned out, were the primate most closely linked to humans – and relentlessly checking his email. Within the reams of spam promising him larger genitalia and smaller mortgage rates were one message from the newspaper back home, titled, "Interview?" that Paul deleted without reading, and a message from his mother. This he opened with some trepidation.

Hi, Honey.

Just checking to see that things are working out. People here have been asking after you, if you're doing okay. Also, the lawyer dropped by with the paperwork for the counter-suit. We all think you should really consider it. Let me know and I'll send everything to you at Wayne's.

Love, Mom

Paul read the message again and considered a response. With a sigh, he tabbed over to the TRASH icon and clicked. The page refreshed; his mother's email was gone. Then he made his way to the couch, lay down and, after masturbating efficiently into a sock, fell asleep.

That night Paul dreamt he was at the end of a chain of monkeys, meticulously picking burrs and insects from the chimp in front of him. His own back was thick with fur and alive with crackling, crawling things; but while he slaved away, fingers sifting, hunting, flicking, no one offered to take their turn and groom him.

The next day, Sue-Jane and Paul hardly had a chance to talk: the craziness began at nine in the morning with the first patient appearing pale and wide-eyed at the Pet Therapy door, and ended when the last of the children were collected by nurses at a quarter to five. Sue-Jane was occupied pretty much all day, regulating the petting of dogs or the feeding of goats – younger children had this tendency to drink from their bottles – or monitoring the handling of chinchillas, which were on loan from one of the hospital's more prominent donors.

Meanwhile, Paul kept a supervisory eye on Ewing.

Paul found it difficult to imagine the lustful urges that had possessed the chimp that one, unfortunate afternoon. Ewing did his routine for any kids who ventured outside – hooting, throwing things, jumping up and down – all in a carefree, charming way that, from his seat on a nearby stump, warmed Paul to watch.

At one point, he got up to join in. Ewing, who was in the midst of turning somersaults around the pen, stood up and shuffled nervously over to the playroom door. The children glared at Paul.

“Whoa.” Paul said, trying to sound jokey. “I guess I’m not wanted here.”

He went back to his spot on the stump, smiling stupidly. Minutes later, Ewing returned to entertaining the kids, who squealed and clapped with delight.

When Sue-Jane made an appearance outside at the end of the day, Ewing clambered over, leapt up into her arms and clung there like a giant, sinewy spider. He covered her face with wet, leathery kisses; the kids circled around, cheering, while Sue-Jane laughed, and Paul observed quietly from his spot in the corner of the pen.

Thursday of Paul’s second week, Sue-Jane again announced at a few minutes to five that they would be dining together. They made their way over to the restaurant, stuffed themselves in relative silence, and afterwards tottered out into the parking lot, located their respective automobiles and went their separate ways.

Driving home, Paul wondered if these suppers together weren’t some sort of incentive set up by the hospital, part of Sue-Jane’s job description. Or maybe they represented a genuine act of goodwill, even something that might have bordered on friendship. Paul felt himself figuring her out slowly, like a game of Clue, putting her together with little mental check-marks, tick, tick, tick, hoping at some point it would all become clear – who, where, with what murderous implement: Sue-Jane.

The following Wednesday produced another invite. As Sue-Jane's customary assault on her dinner began, Paul brought up one particularly sad-looking girl who had spent the entire afternoon trying to teach Jiva, the macaw they had in for the month, to say, "I love you." The girl had stood there, tapping the birdcage, repeating in a parrot voice: "I love you! I love you! I love you!"

"Man, wasn't she sad?" Paul said. "I think she was in for a marrow transplant."

"That's nothing," Sue-Jane wiped some chutney from her face with her sleeve. "In my religion we are in a period of suffering of twenty-one thousand years."

"I didn't know you were religious."

Sue-Jane shrugged. "Well, I'm doing my best."

"And how much longer do we have to go?"

"About eighteen thousand years."

"Only eighteen thousand? And after that?"

"Twenty-one thousand years of even worse suffering, in which all hope will be wiped from the earth."

"Oh, fun."

Sue-Jane had somehow fit a piece of potato the size of a child's fist into her mouth, and sat in silence, her cheeks ballooned out like a squirrel's, looking unsure what she might do next.

"So what then," asked Paul, watching her, "after there's no more hope?"

Sue-Jane's held up a finger and looked into her lap. Her jaw churned; she swallowed, gasping. "Rain for days and days, then everything is born again."

"And that'll happen when?"

"Forty thousand years. More or less."

"Oh, okay. I'll bake a cake." Sue-Jane shifted, then, and Paul felt something – her knee or hand – brush his thigh. He looked at her and noticed, for the first time, the light

dusting of fuzz that ringed her face. Leaning in, he lowered his voice to what he thought was an appropriately solemn tone. "So, if your entire life is just suffering, what's the point?"

"You do your best while you're here. You make your life worth living."

Paul felt it again, something warm against his leg. This time it stayed there. "By doing what? Like being good to others?"

"That's the idea."

"And what about yourself?"

Sue-Jane moved away. Whatever had been touching Paul was gone. She gestured at his plate with her fork. "Try the dhal, Paul. It's delicious."

The following night, Sue-Jane said nothing to Paul, just nodded and was gone out the door, not even waiting to walk together out to the parking lot. Paul drove home through the city and out to the suburbs, pulled into the trailer park and locked up the Neon with a robotic chirp. He stood for a moment in the dusk on the steps of Wayne's trailer, looking out at the glow of the city – all those homes producing all that light, families and couples circling around tables for supper.

Inside, Paul heated up some dried pasta and store-bought sauce, and ate with his computer on his lap, checking his email, erasing messages, writing to no one, scouring the internet for bonobos, for pornography, for whatever.

While he was online, a message appeared in his inbox from his mother. This chilled Paul, the thought of them both in cyberspace at the same time, as if she might be spying on him, somehow.

Hi.

Still no word from you. Are things okay? Please, Paul, remember that you can come home, any time. You did

nothing wrong. But your dad and I both really think that taking these people to court might give this whole ordeal some closure. Anyway, think about it, and write or call if you can.

Love, Mom.

Paul trashed the message.

Later, well after Paul had gone to bed, Wayne came home and stood over the couch, swaying, the smell of beer wafting off him and slowly filling the trailer.

"Hey, Paul-O," he said, prodding his cousin with his sneaker. "I got a date."

Paul rolled over and looked up at him. "Want me to sleep on the roof?"

"Not now, fucknut. Next week. You'd like her, she volunteers and recycles and whatnot."

"Cool. Can I come too?"

Wayne hiccupped, once, waited, and hiccupped again. He pulled the curtains apart, collapsed on his waterbed with his shoes on, and was snoring deeply within minutes.

Paul's fourth Monday as the Pet Therapy aide he got in early, at about twenty to nine. Sue-Jane hadn't shown up yet, so Paul opened up a tin of food for Judith, and pulled the cover off the parrot cage and fed the fish and checked on George and Martha, the gerbils, to make sure they hadn't eaten one another overnight, and let the dogs out for a pee. Then he made his way into the back room.

Ewing sat there, fingers laced through the bars of his cage. Paul crouched down and unlatched the door, and Ewing came out, plodding past Paul and down the hallway, out to the playroom. Paul closed the cage and followed him.

Ewing perched on a stool by the window, presiding over the room like a judge. Paul squatted beside him and chanced putting a hand on the bonobo's back. Through the hair, thin and wispy, he could feel the tautness of muscle, and beneath that, the knobby cord of a spine. Ewing reached back, took Paul's hand in his, and held it up in front of his face as if he were trying to decide whether to eat it or read Paul his fortune.

Before he could do either, the door opened and Sue-Jane entered the playroom. Ewing sprung off his stool, bounded over, and hopped about jabbering and whacking himself in the chest while she hung her coat.

Paul stood. "Hi," he said, waving.

Without looking at Paul, Sue-Jane swept Ewing up into her arms. "How's my baby?" she sang out, rubbing noses.

Soon after, the kids started filing in – the new ones tentative, the returnees going around and greeting the animals like divas at a cocktail party – and Paul took Ewing by the hand and moved outside. Soon enough, a crowd of young patients came flooding outside to be entertained by the bonobo.

At five o'clock the nurses arrived and the kids dispersed, waving goodbye. Paul headed out back to lock the animals up for the night. When he returned to the playroom, Sue-Jane was gone. As he was turning off the lights, there was a knock on the door.

In the hallway stood a bald man in brown coveralls, holding a clipboard. Beside him was a dolly, and strapped to it, a large, wooden crate.

"Pet Therapy?" he asked, looking at his clipboard. A nametag embroidered on his breast pocket read: *Angelo*, and underneath that: *Tropicarium Exotic Pets*. "We've got your delivery here."

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you..." Angelo's eyes narrowed. "Sujata?"

"Sue-Jane?"

"Maybe."

Angelo turned the clipboard around and showed Paul a name written at the top of a very official-looking form: *Sujata Jain*.

"Sujata Jain," said Paul. "Sue Jain."

"That's you?"

"No, no – but I'll sign. What have you got for us?"

Angelo looked at Paul sideways, grinned, then wheeled the dolly into the playroom.

"You want to give me a hand, here?"

Paul did his best to hold the crate steady as Angelo lowered the dolly. Together they slid it slowly onto the floor, Angelo coaxing. "Easy, easy." The thing must have weighed half a ton.

With the crate resting squarely on the floor, Angelo produced a box-cutter from his pocket, slashed at the bindings holding it closed, and pulled the walls down on all sides.

A few feet away, glinting in the fluorescent lights of the playroom, sat an over-sized terrarium. And inside the terrarium, thick as a curb, wrapped and stacked upon itself in what seemed like yards of earth-colored flesh, was a giant, silent, prehistoric-looking snake. Paul crouched down and stared into the two, black, glistening eyes; his own reflection shimmered on the glass, a vague specter of a face hovering around the snake's flat, angular head.

"Jesus – why didn't you say something?"

Angelo was beaming. "Wouldn't have been a surprise, then, would it?"

"What is that, a boa constrictor?"

"That, Sue Jain, is a reticulated python. Her name is Sally."

"Sally." Sally?

“She’s twelve feet long, but she’s young, and might grow another six feet, if you’re lucky. But lately she’s been refusing food. I think it’s almost three months now that she hasn’t eaten a thing. Maybe down here she’ll get her appetite back.”

“Well, let’s hope.” Paul couldn’t take his eyes off the snake: it just sat there, a lethal coil of spangled, scaly muscle. “Angelo, that thing can’t stay. This is a children’s hospital.”

“Relax, Sue. You keep her locked up and she’ll be fine. Besides, kids love snakes.”

“I’m sure there’s been some sort of mistake?”

“Hey – I’m just the delivery guy. You got problems, talk to my boss.” Angelo handed over a card. Paul crumpled it in his fist as he stared into the terrarium. He felt that if he were to slit the snake open the skin would peel back and reveal foam stuffing or a giant Slinky – never bones, never muscle, certainly nothing organic or alive.

Angelo passed along a booklet of care instructions, displayed how to open and close the lid, and offered additional advice that Paul didn’t really hear. He plugged the terrarium into the wall and flicked on a heat lamp, lighting Sally up like a stove element, checked that the lid was fastened tightly, and then was gone. Paul lingered in the room for a moment, before shutting the lights off and locking up. The musty, burnt-cheese smell of animals filled the car as he made his way home to Wayne’s trailer.

Wayne was on the phone. By the hushed tone of his voice, the unintelligible cooing, he was obviously talking to his new girlfriend. Paul tossed his keys on the kitchen table, poured himself a glass of juice and sat down beside Wayne on the couch.

Wayne hung up and stood, fastening his belt. “Up to anything Wednesday, Paul-O?”

“Um.” Paul swished some juice around in his mouth.

“Come to this thing with me and Maya.”

"Maya? That's your lady's name?"

"It's some charity dinner. For the World Wildlife Fund, or whatever – hey, that's right up your alley, Dr. Doolittle. Except you'd need a date."

"A date."

"You could bring that woman you work with. She likes animals, and whatnot."

"Sue-Jane?" Paul recalled Angelo's sheet. "Sue?"

"That's the one."

"And you really want me to go?"

"Well, fuck, I don't know." Wayne checked his watch. "Sure. Why the hell not?"

"This isn't the same WWF that's on TV on Monday nights – you know that, right?"

"Shut up, smartass. Maya volunteers for them."

Paul suddenly imagined Maya as a glam rock groupie who liked "puppies" and "kitties" and blowing coke off guitar amps. "Tell you what, Wayne – I'll ask Sue about it tomorrow. If she's in, I'm in."

"Prime," said Wayne. He checked his watch again. "Listen, dude, I'm out of here." Then he was gone, out the door of the trailer, leaving Paul alone with his juice. He drained the glass, produced his laptop from underneath the couch, and fired up the internet. There was a new message from his mother: just a single line that Paul read once, quickly, before trashing.

What are you hiding from, Honey?

He closed his computer and rested his hands on the plastic lid. A slight buzz of warmth spread up from the machine, into his palms. The lights of the trailer were off, and Paul sat there, thinking about the snake named Sally lurking in the basement home of Pet Therapy. He imagined her, coiled in the dark: silent, lethal, hungry.

Tuesday morning Paul hurried to work, figuring there had to be somewhere they could stow Sally before any kids showed up. He could only guess how the board of directors might react to a patient getting swallowed.

When Paul arrived, Sue was dangling a frozen mouse by its tail into the terrarium, her hand perilously close to the python's head. The lid rested against the wall.

Sue sighed and stared at the snake. "She won't eat a thing."

"We're not keeping it, are we?"

"No, no," she said, straightening and patting Paul's arm. "They sent the wrong one. We were supposed to get two corn snakes. I don't know how this happened."

"But, in the meantime?" Sue's hand held Paul at the elbow. He swayed a bit and felt the bulge of her hip against his thigh.

"In the meantime, we should enjoy having Sally with us. Do you have any idea what one of these pythons costs? It's a real treat having an animal like this around."

"And the kids?"

Sue looked at Paul for a second, eyes scanning his face as if she were searching for something. The tiny hairs on her cheeks were orange in the light of the playroom. After a moment, she let go of his arm, and pulled away. "Oh, kids are always great, too."

"No, no. Will it be safe? With the kids?"

"Listen, Paul, as long as no one climbs in there with it, everything will be just fine. Even then, she's so lethargic I doubt there'd be much danger. I think she's depressed." They both looked at Sally, who had yet to move anything other than her eyelids.

"Maybe she's lonely," Paul offered.

Sue tossed the mouse into the terrarium. It bounced off Sally, and landed on its back near her head. "Better get that lid back on before the patients arrive."

That morning, Paul stayed outside with the goats, dogs, Ewing, and one thin, jaundiced boy who had gone into hysterics over the snake, and been relegated to the pen. In the playroom, the rest of the kids huddled around the terrarium, whispering and pointing. Sue got out the art supplies, and soon the wall behind Sally was plastered with drawings of a thick, patterned spiral in repose.

Paul sat on his stump, stationed purposefully between Ewing and the goats, while the yellow boy, still whimpering, poked at a clump of dung with a stick. Eventually, the boy grew bored of this, threw his stick into the woods beyond the pen, and, apparently having conquered his reptilian fears, wandered inside. The goats were eating something in the far side of the pen. Paul and Ewing stared at one another, neither quite sure what to do.

“So,” said Paul, squatting in front of the chimp.

Ewing shrieked once, looking back and forth.

Paul held up his hands, which he was surprised to see were trembling. “Hey, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Again, Ewing yelped. His arms flapped at his sides like the wings of some desperate, flightless bird. He yelped and flapped and started hopping in place, eyes wild and manic.

“Jesus,” said Paul. “What’s your problem?”

Ewing ducked past Paul and bounded up to the playroom door. He slapped his hands against the window, hooting, until the door opened and he scuttled inside. Paul was left crouching in the hay and mud of the pen. The goats watched him, chewing.

At five, after locking Sally up, Paul was ready to head out, but Sue intercepted him at the doorway, a hand on his back. “Dinner?”

“Yeah? I mean, no, I can’t. I have this thing tonight. With my cousin.”

“Oh, my gosh, me too. I completely forgot.”

"Yeah, I was actually going to ask -- I mean, it's just some charity dinner, or something."

"The SPCA benefit?"

"Maybe. I thought it was World Wildlife?"

"SPCA. That's what I'm busy with." Sue looked intrigued. "You're going?"

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"Perfect. You can give me a ride -- carpool, save the planet."

The inside of the Neon smelled like wet fur. Paul mentioned this to Sue as they pulled out of the parking lot, but she just laughed and said she didn't even notice that animals smelled different from people anymore.

"So you've worked with animals for a long time?" Paul asked.

Sue smiled out the window and said, "Of course."

"Doing pet therapy?"

Her smile disappeared. "No."

"What, in a zoo or something?"

"Not a zoo." Sue looked at Paul, hesitating. "In a lab."

These three words were like the soft click of a door closing shut on a private, secret room. Paul didn't say anything for a while, just kept driving. The sky was deepening into a somber purple. Yellow lines appeared on the road from the dusk, swallowed by the car as it coasted along.

Paul broke the silence: "I was charged with abusing a child."

He could sense Sue stiffen in her seat. Paul breathed, signaling and turning the car off the main road into a quiet, dark subdivision.

"At the day care," he continued, "where I used to work. I was there three years after finishing my ECE." He had to concentrate to keep his hands steady on the wheel. "Then, one day, my boss came up to me, and she was like, 'There's been a complaint.'"

Sue watched him, waiting.

“It was – I don’t know. It...” Paul breathed. “I just said, ‘What?’ That’s all I could think: ‘What? What?’ Like it couldn’t be real. And I went home that night and my mom and dad were there, with dinner on the table, and I couldn’t even look at them, let alone explain what had happened. I felt like I’d maybe even done it – that I might have blacked out for a bit and done it, or something.”

“Oh, Paul,” said Sue. She reached out and took one of his hands from the steering wheel, cradled it in her lap. He looked over, briefly, and then turned back to the street. Behind the looming shapes of oak trees, identical duplexes slid by, some glowing from the inside, others just dark shadows in the dusk.

“There was an inquiry. It turned up nothing, but it went on for months. You live in a small town, everybody talks, and even when they figured out I hadn’t done anything, I’d go around and people would still look at me like I was guilty.”

Paul drove, his left hand clutching the wheel, his right in Sue’s lap. She ran her thumb over his knuckles. The sky was a deep bruise. “You never get any stars here,” he said, looking up.

They turned another corner, arriving at the trailer park. Paul pulled the Neon into the driveway of Wayne’s trailer and sat there, the engine idling. “Looks like we’re going to be a little late. Do you think it’s a big deal?”

Sue shrugged and stared out at the trailer. “You live in that thing with your cousin?”

“Yeah.”

A chorus of crickets chirped away somewhere nearby.

Paul turned to Sue. “Do you want to see inside?”

In the trailer Paul poured them both glasses of juice. Wayne was nowhere to be found – no note, no phone message, nothing about the charity dinner. Paul flicked on the table

lamp and a yellow splotch of light spread across the couch. They sat down, together, and Sue gazed around as if some detail might have revealed the secret of the place.

Paul sucked back his juice and cupped the empty glass in both hands. "So, you volunteer over at the SPCA?"

"Saturdays," she said, staring at the curtain that hid Wayne's bedroom.

"God, you must be busy, Sujata." The name just came out. Paul felt as though he'd crossed some boundary, but Sue only looked at him and smiled. In the lamplight, the fuzz on her face was golden.

Sue lifted the glass of juice and sniffed it. "What's your cousin like?"

"Wayne? Oh, he's all right."

"All right?"

"Well, he's nice enough, but one of those people who lives totally for himself – 'in the now,' or whatever. Just look at this place. His whole world could up and roll away."

"Not like you."

"Well, no – that's not what I'm saying, that I'm better than him, or anything."

"Okay, then – what are you like?"

"What do you mean?" Paul sat there, staring at the floor, pulling at some loose stitches on the couch with his free hand. "I'm looking for my own place."

Sujata sighed. "You know," she said, "we really ought to get another bonobo in for Ewing. A female."

"To mate?"

"No, no – to control him. Bonobo culture is dominated by the females. The males are pretty much at their mercy. They are told when and what to eat, and sex is used as a sort of regulatory device."

"But if we got Ewing a woman, he'd stop raping the goats, and you wouldn't need me at all."

Sujata paused for a moment, considering. Outside, the crickets were still chirping. Then, she laughed, and her laughter was the muffled twittering of a sparrow trapped under a teacup. "Paul," she said, and smiled.

Paul put a hand on her knee, and Sujata slid her hand over his.

"I don't think Ewing even likes me," said Paul.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I don't know. He's just weird, like he's scared of me or something."

"Hmm..." Sujata paused. "Maybe he's jealous."

They sat in silence, looking around, his hand on her knee, her hand on his hand.

Paul's gaze wandered from the front door, over the kitchen, to the TV, and to the curtain behind which, he knew, Wayne's waterbed sat ready and waiting.

After taking Sue home, Paul returned to the trailer, changed Wayne's sheets, got out his computer, and scoured the trash for his mother's last email. When eventually he found and opened it up, Paul sat reading over that single sentence: *What are you hiding from?* He could hear his mother saying it; he could imagine her leaning toward him severely, some anomalous mix of love and shame in her eyes, his father hovering somewhere in the background. It was nearly four in the morning before he decided how to respond.

Nothing.

-P.

Paul hit SEND.

When Paul arrived at Pet Therapy on Thursday morning, Sally lay coiled up in the same position, shimmering under the fluorescent lights. Sujata had already let the animals

out, and she sat on a stump outside. Ewing perched on her lap, his arms wrapped around her neck; both of them were gazing up at a solemn, overcast sky.

“God, I’m so tired,” Paul said.

“He’s very clingy today,” Sujata said, less to Paul than to the clouds.

Paul stood, wavering. He reached out to put a hand on Sujata’s shoulder, and Ewing hissed at him. “Jesus,” said Paul, but Sujata just stood and carried the bonobo past him and into the playroom.

The kids showed up and flocked to the snake, and Paul was left alone out in the pen with the goats, a Golden Retriever named Laika who was visiting for the day and, eventually, Ewing, whom Sujata ushered outside. He sat by the playroom door with his arms folded, glaring at Paul.

“I’m too tired for this shit,” Paul told him. Then, whispering. “We had sex, you know. Me and her.”

Ewing buried his head in his chest.

“Stupid fucking monkey.”

Paul sat down on one of the tree stumps, figuring a five-minute nap was all he needed, and then he’d be fresh for the rest of the day. He looked inside, through the playroom window. Sujata had opened the terrarium, and the kids were crowding around, more intrigued than ever.

Paul closed his eyes, and was soon tumbling down the dark tunnel of sleep. At its end a dream greeted him, something vague and palely lit. There were dim shapes hovering around what seemed some sort of waiting room, and when Paul looked down at his hands, the black hair that covered them was matted with blood. From somewhere came the mournful, inhuman sound of something crying.

Paul shuddered and the dream was gone. The crying, though, remained, now accompanied by frantic, desperate shrieks. He jumped to his feet and looked up to see

Sujata hollering and smacking with a broom at something black and quivering.

Underneath the black thing – which, Paul realized, was Ewing – was a gray goat, bleating in pathetic protest, legs buckling. Children spilled out of the door, gawking but silent.

“Fuck.” Paul muttered, and scrambled over to help Sujata. Together, they tackled Ewing to the ground. The violated goat wobbled off to the corner of the pen, where its comrades huddled around in solidarity. The sobbing waned.

Sujata glared at Paul. “Get Ewing out of here.”

Directing the chimp’s erection away from his body, Paul carried Ewing under one arm into the playroom and dumped him on the floor. Back outside, Paul stood by the door, watching Sujata pace around the pen. She stopped beside the offended goat and put her hand on its head. The children sat expectantly on the stumps, startled but rapt. Above, the clouds hung heavy and gray with rain.

Sujata stroked the goat’s face. Her tenderness, Paul realized, completely belied what had consumed her the night before: bent over on Wayne’s waterbed, gasping, the flicker of something primal and hungry in her eyes as she watched Paul go to it over her shoulder. Then, afterwards, clawing at something to wipe herself, kneeling there, draining into a t-shirt clasped between her legs, the waterbed lightly sloshing around as Paul had stood to pull up his shorts.

Something wet splashed on Paul’s hand, and he looked down, shaken from the memory. A single droplet of rain trickled along his thumb. Sujata was speaking, he realized, and had been for some time.

“Do you think we can forgive him?” she asked, and the children nodded, murmuring. At this, something surged inside Paul, then receded, as he realized they were talking about Ewing. Sujata continued, her voice soothing and calm, while the children listened in silence. At the playroom door, on the periphery, Paul felt himself fading from the scene, disappearing, like smoke waved out through a kitchen window, like a ghost

banished into the night. Another drop of rain struck him, this time on the face, and it dribbled in a thin rivulet down his cheek.

Paul opened the door and slid quietly inside. He figured Ewing should be waiting in his cage, like the first time, so it would just be a matter of heading out back and locking the door. But his little metal cell was empty, the white blanket crumpled in the corner with no bonobo in sight.

Back in the playroom, Paul stood for a moment, scanning. There was no sign of Ewing, but he could sense – what? Something. His eyes took inventory of the room, processing it image by image. The mobiles, twirling in some imaginary wind. The birdcage, where Jiva perched silent and still. Children's drawings abandoned on the floor. A scattering of paints and markers and crayons.

Then: the terrarium's wire lid, discarded nearby. The terrarium itself, open, winking with flashes of light, and, inside it, Sally, brown and thick and suddenly very much alive, pulling and twisting behind the glass. With the lid off, Paul could hear the swish of her scales, and from outside came the hiss of rain, a steady drizzle now, and somewhere beneath it all buzzed the fluorescent lights of the playroom. Paul stood, transfixed, watching. As Sally turned over once more, from within that scaly knot appeared the gray hand of something almost human, fingers scratching against the inside of the glass. And just as the snake curled around one last time, Paul could have sworn the hand waved, once, goodbye, before Sally tightened, crushing, and dragged it away.

The Film We Made About Dads

In the first scene of the film we made about dads, we caught them as children, well before they became dads themselves, when their own dads were full-on capital-D Dads-with-moustaches who had been in the war. We got some great shots of the dads at age eight swinging from the monkey bars on the schoolyard playground. Afterwards, we interviewed them about their goals. The answers: astronaut, fireman, psychiatrist, florist, psycho-killer, Oscar Robertson. We asked them, "Describe your dad in one word." The unanimous response was: "Mean."

Next we found the dads at sixteen, getting handjobs on the couch. The cameras were rolling. The dads were oblivious and said nothing, just rolled over on top of their lovers and, fully clothed, humped away until something damp oozed through their jeans.

In college the dads grew beards. They bought cars and one night tried acid. We had run out of funding and couldn't shoot. "Remember this," we encouraged the dads, who were giggling at rain.

A few years later, we received a grant and resumed filming. By then the dads were done college and had found wives to marry. At the altars, the dads said, "I do," and the wives said, "I do," and the dads kissed their new wives and the wives kissed back and then they ran out of the church while people threw rice at them and cheered. The dads and their wives went to Niagara Falls where they both stared silently into all that water and thought, "Hmm," and later fell asleep with their shoes on. "Maybe edit in some love," we told the post-production crew, who nodded and, later, did.

The dads and wives bought houses. The wives taught grade school and brought home children's drawings that they stuck to their fridges with magnetic fruit. The wives looked at the drawings and said, "Aw," in a pointed way. The dads were stuck in middle management; they built workshops in their garages. "That's my workshop in there," they told the wives. "That's my space." We went out into the garages and panned over the workshops, over the workbenches in the workshops and the tools that would rarely get used. "This is golden stuff," we said to one another. We were making a film about dads.

There were moments we didn't get. The dads told us about nights of laughter with their wives; they told us about moments of tenderness, shared joy, or sorrow, a walk in the park and ducks. But the cinematographers' union only allowed us a cameraman for a certain number of hours. We would show up in the morning and the dads would say, "You should have seen us last night," but we could only shrug and say, "Sorry."

Then the wives got pregnant. The dads inseminated the wives with their sperm, which shot out of a dad's penis and into the corresponding wife's vagina, etc. and nine months later a baby plopped out like a prize. We had to find some stock footage for this, because the doctors wouldn't let the crew into the delivery room. At the hospital, the dads stood in the hallway with unlit cigars wagging from their mouths, talking to anyone who would listen. "My wife is having a baby!" they hollered, thrusting a cigar in whoever's direction. The person, usually no one the dads knew, would decline the cigar and back away nervously, as if from a bear.

When the dads saw the babies, shriveled and purple in their wives' arms, they declared, "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life," and then cupped the babies'

skulls in their hands like they were testing a fruit. The babies cooed and gurgled and so did the dads; it was unclear who was imitating whom.

Two years later there was a plan for another baby, and the process repeated itself: the sperm, the vagina, the cigars, the unintelligible exchange of sounds. We used different stock footage this time, cross-cut with scenes of the first child, confused and alone in a field of lavender (this we staged using a blue-screen).

Now, with two kids, the dads were really cooking. Along with the children, they had gas barbecues, station wagons, digital cable. They were no longer stuck in middle management; they were somewhere better. The kids got older, and the dads coached their soccer teams. The dads drank beer on Sunday afternoons and watched football. But the dads might add something incongruous. "I also have season's tickets to the opera," they might say. Or: "It's fine if one of the kids turns out gay." This sort of business, we decided, our editors would later snip right out of the film.

When it was time for the children to move away from home, the dads were strong. The wives wept in the driveways as the children pulled away in cars with couches strapped to the roofs, and the dads held the wives and stroked their hair. In post-production it would be easy for us to erase the tears that ran down the dads' faces. We have computer programs for that sort of business.

Then the dads became granddads. Their sons were now dads. The sons brought the grandchildren over and the dads crouched in front of them on the floor and produced similar noises as they had once at their own children. The dads had cancer of the prostate. It was difficult to sit down. They were dying, also. We scored this segment of

the film with a single cello, sawing away, sad and lonely. The wives hovered nearby and drank sherry.

When the dads died no one knew quite what to say. At the funerals, co-workers made speeches about dedication that left everyone feeling empty. This, of course, was impossible to convey in our film – you could just feel it in the air. There were flowers and open coffins with the dads lying inside, silent and still. People walked by, peering in, some of them sniffing back tears. “It was his time,” declared the wives, sensibly. They left and went back home to stand in the parlours of their houses, where they nibbled triangular sandwiches, accepting the condolences of family and strangers with polite nods, whispering, “Thank-you, thank-you. Thank-you, everyone.”

When it was all over, when the wives were left alone in their houses, when even their children had driven away in their minivans, we rushed back to the studio to put together a rough cut of our film about dads. We had spent years making a film about dads. We had been there for all the crucial moments. There were reels and reels of film piled around us in the studio, and we sat there, looking around—at the stacks, at one another—not quite knowing where to begin.

The Past Composed

In the end, all the ruckus seems to be about a boy up Judy's tree. I stand there at the bottom, his backpack in my hand, looking up through leaves just starting to bleed the reds and browns of autumn. He's right near the top, this boy – a dark silhouette against the late afternoon sunlight, perched on a branch, shaking, terrified. Inside the house Judy's dogs are still going crazy.

"Hey there," I say, squinting.

"A squirrel chased me up here. I think it had rabies."

"Was it frothing at the mouth?"

"Frothing?"

"Yeah, like with foam coming out of its mouth."

The boy says nothing. The dogs have stopped barking, and the only sound is the dull, faraway hiss and hum of the city.

"You want to come down? I don't see any squirrels around."

He considers for a moment, evaluating the situation – or me, maybe. Then he swings down effortlessly, monkey-like, and lands with a dull thump on the lawn. His clothes seem to belong to someone years older: a Lacoste golf shirt and beige safari shorts, with a pair of blue socks pulled tightly up to his knees.

"Alright?" I ask, and hand him his backpack. He's a funny little man, maybe eight or nine. There's something familiar, and vaguely cunning, about his face.

The boy stands there, scanning the front lawn, nervous. I look around too, then up at Judy's house where I notice, wedged between a pink triangle and a *MIDWIVES DELIVER!* sticker, the Block Parent sign in the window.

"Oh," I say. "Do you want to come in?"

The boy eyes me, then the house. Eventually he nods and replies, "Okay."

I lead him inside, where the dogs greet us with an inquisitive sniff before letting us through to the kitchen. The boy edges by them, saying, "Good dogs," a gleam of terror in his eyes. I pour him a glass of milk and we both sit down at Judy's tiny kitchen table.

"You know," I say. "Next time you get a squirrel after you, best place to go probably isn't up a tree."

"I came to the door first, but there was no answer."

His glass of milk sits untouched on the chipped Formica tabletop. "You got a name?"

"Pico," he tells me, kicking at the chair with his heels. "Are you even a Block Parent?"

"No, no. That's the lady who owns the house. My sister, Judy."

"So who are you?"

"I live back there." I point out through the kitchen window at the shed in the backyard.

"What?" Pico snorts. "In that thing?"

I tap his glass with my fingernail. "Drink your milk, Pico."

By the time Judy gets home I am making dinner and Pico has left. He thanked me for the milk, then disappeared down the street.

Judy appears in the kitchen, the dogs sniffing eagerly behind her. She slings her purse onto the table and sits down. "Fuck," she sighs. The dogs settle at her feet.

"I've got ratatouille happening here, Jude, and there's tabbouleh salad in the fridge."

"No meat? Pas de viande?" Judy, bless her, is trying to learn French.

“Sorry.”

“Christ, Les,” she huffs. “You’re starting to make me feel like one of those crazy Vegan dykes – living on nuts and fruits and berries like a goddamn squirrel.”

I laugh, and tell her about Pico.

“Pico? What is he, a Brazilian soccer player?”

“No,” I say, stirring the ratatouille, recalling the boy’s face. “He looks more like a mini-Richard Nixon.”

Judy smiles, and points at the *Classified Ads* I’ve left on the table.

“Any luck?” she asks.

“Nothing yet.”

“Not that I want you gone.” She has a grave look about her, suddenly. “I mean, you’re welcome here as long as you need to stay.”

“I know, Jude,” I tell her, sprinkling some salt into the pot. “Thanks a lot.”

After dinner I head out into the backyard and work until dusk. The table I’m redoing right now is some cheap pine thing I picked up for forty dollars at a garage sale. But with the right stain, corners rounded off and a good number of chips whittled out of the legs, it’ll go for close to a grand in one of the antique stores uptown. I can just image some family huddled around it for supper – Mom in her apron doling out fat slices of meatloaf, Dad asking the kids about school, and this sturdy old table anchoring it all like the centerpiece to a Norman Rockwell painting.

Soon it’s too dark to see much of anything, so I head inside my little cabin. Before I moved in at the end of the summer, Judy did a nice job fixing it up for me; she put down rugs and painted the wallpaper a quiet beige color, even brought her fish tank out and set it up in the corner. It’s an A-frame, this thing. Like a tent. At first it seemed

claustrophobic, but it's turned out pretty cozy.

The fish are good to watch. There are three of them, all the same species, although what that would be I have no idea. But there's something soothing about them, these shimmering, fluttering things, all silver glitter in the light of the tank.

We always talked about getting a cat, Rachel and me. But we figured we'd try fish first, and if they didn't die right away we'd chance it with a cat. But less than two months after we moved in together, before we'd even had a chance to go fish-shopping, Rachel got pregnant.

At first having a baby seemed too big, too adult, too far removed from the safe little niche we'd carved for ourselves. But once we got talking to Judy, started considering her as our midwife, things started to take shape and make sense. At night, in bed together, Rachel and I would lie with our hands on her belly, talking about the future, how one day we'd look back on our apprehension and laugh. But I guess everyone constructs, at some point, these perfect versions of how things are going to be.

~

A week or so later I'm in the backyard, down on my knees sanding the table legs, and Pico appears at the gate.

"Hola, Pico," I holler. "Come on in."

Pico reaches over the fence, flips the latch, and moves across the yard toward me, plucking an old seed dandelion from the grass on his way. Today is chillier; he's in a mauve turtleneck and a pair of pleated jeans. Pico leans up against the table, twirling the dandelion in his fingers. He lifts it to his mouth, sucks in a great mouthful of breath, and blows. The grey fluff catches a breeze and lifts scattering into the sky.

"Nice one," I say.

"How come dandelions aren't flowers?" Pico twirls the decapitated plant between

his thumb and forefinger, then flicks it at the ground.

“Because they’re weeds, Pico.”

“But they look like flowers. When they’re yellow.”

“Well, that’s their trick.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. They pretend to be flowers so you keep them around. But they’re weeds.”

“They look like flowers to me,” says Pico, as if this settles it.

He starts walking around the table, running his fingers along the wood. Before I can warn him about splinters, he yelps and springs back like something’s bitten him, his hand to his lips. Right away, I’m up, beside him. “You’ve got to watch that, Pico.”

“Ouch,” he says, wincing.

I guide him into the shed, where he sits down on the bed. I find tweezers, and Pico puts his hand out, palm up, quivering.

I smile, the tweezers poised. “Trust me?”

Pico nods. I raise his hand up to the light, and there it is – a black grain of wood lodged into the skin. I slide the tweezers up to it, clamp down, and pull the splinter free. Pico bucks and yanks his hand away. But after a moment, he examines his finger, and looks up at me in awe.

“Nothing to it,” I tell him. But Pico has already turned his attention to my fish, the splinter apparently forgotten. He sits on my bed, regarding them with vague interest.

“Cool, huh?”

“Great,” says Pico.

I struggle to think of some interesting fish fact, something remarkable and fascinating.

Pico beats me to it: “Did you know fish only have memories for five seconds?”

"Huh. I had no idea."

"Yeah," Pico says, brightening. "They forget their whole lives every five seconds – then it's like they're new fish again."

"Or they think they are."

Pico gives me a funny look. "How come you're the only Block Parent on this street?"

"I'm not – really?"

"Yep. I went around looking for signs, and you're the only one."

"It's because we're the nicest."

"Can I feed your fish?" Pico asks, standing up.

"Sure." We trade places, and I settle into the groove he's left in my bedcovers. "The food's just there. But don't give them too much –"

Pico glances at me over his shoulder, already sprinkling the coloured flakes into the aquarium. "I know what I'm doing, Les."

On my beside table is a deck of playing cards. I pick them up and try making a house, but the cards keep slipping off one another. Pico comes over, shaking his head.

"You've got to make triangles." He sits down beside me, takes two cards and leans them against one another. He succeeds in building a few levels before the whole thing collapses.

"Hey, want to see a trick?" I ask.

"A card trick?"

"Sure. Just pick a card and tell me what pile it's in."

This is the only card trick I know, and it's a simple one: after three times through the same routine, the person's card is always the eleventh out of the pile. But I choose it with a flourish, throwing the cards around the room, and then walking around as if confused, before pulling the right one up off the floor.

Pico claps. "Again," he commands. "Again!"

"Nope." I shake my head severely. "Magicians never do the same trick twice in a row."

"Oh, come on."

"Sorry. Maybe some other time, Pico."

Pico looks at me carefully. "The kids at school call me *Pee-Pee-Co*, sometimes."

"That doesn't even make sense," I say. Here I am, sitting with this boy on my bed, this odd little fellow with the face of a diabolical American president. "You want to stay for dinner?"

Pico considers, tilting his head towards some indefinite place on the ceiling. "I'll have to call my Nanna," he says, nodding. "But I think it might be a good idea."

Judy comes home to Pico sitting on the floor of the kitchen, talking to the dogs. I've got a veggie moussaka in the oven, tomato and tarragon soup simmering on the stove, and a spinach salad tossed and ready for dressing on the counter.

"More bird food?" says Judy. She stoops down to greet Pico and his canine companions. "You must be Pico."

Pico looks up and grins. "I'm staying for dinner."

"Oh, you are now." Judy turns to me. "Did you check with his mom?"

"His Nanna," I tell her. But then I realize I haven't. I had stayed in the kitchen while Pico made the call from Judy's bedroom. Pico and I exchange a quick look, and then I turn to Judy. "I'm sure it's fine."

"She knows you're Block Parents," says Pico.

Judy shrugs, steps over Pico and opens the fridge. "Don't we have any beer?"

"Beer?" I squeeze a wedge of lemon into a glass jar, add some olive oil, salt, pepper.

She slams the fridge door shut and then leans up against it. "What a day. I spend half my week wrist-deep in vaginas – you'd think I've got the best job in the world."

I frown and nod my head in the direction of Pico, but he seems oblivious, totally absorbed with trying to get the already prostrate dogs to lie down.

"Oh, shoot," she says, snorting. "Hey, would you believe I've got another couple who are burying their placenta? At least these two aren't eating it. Still, you'd think people would just be happy if their kid comes out alright, it's not –"

She catches herself.

"Oh, fuck. Les – I'm sorry."

The room has changed. Even Pico is quiet. I shake up the jar of oil and lemon juice. I shake it, I keep shaking it, I stare out the window and I shake the jar, and all I can hear is the wet sound of the dressing sloshing around.

Judy is beside me. She has her hand on my arm. I stop.

"It's okay," I tell her.

"It's okay," she tells me.

We finish dinner by seven o'clock, so Judy and I ask Pico if he wants to come along while we take the dogs down for their evening walk. Before we ate, Judy decided Pico needed to know I had a lisp when I was a kid, and he kept my sister in hysterics, calling me "Leth" and "Lethy" for the better part of the meal.

Everyone helps clear the table, and then we collect the dogs and head down to the creek behind Judy's house. We call it the creek, but it's basically dried up, just a gentle dribble through the ravine. The dogs love it, though; we let them off their leads and they go bounding and snarling off into the woods.

The sun is just setting as the three of us make our way down along the path into the

ravine. Judy's brought a flashlight, but she keeps it in her coat. "It's for when they poop," she tells Pico, and shows him the fistful of plastic bags in her pocket. Pico's eyes widen.

Under the canopy of trees overhead, the light down here is dim – almost as if the ravine is hours ahead of the sunset. We unleash the dogs, who bolt, disappearing into the gloom. Judy and Pico follow them, but I move the other way, climbing over a mound of roots and earth, arriving in the dried-up riverbed. I kneel down, put my hand out, and I'm startled to feel water, icy and streaming urgently over my fingertips. But then I realize I can hear it, I probably could have all along – the happy, burbling sound of it barely above a whisper. I close my eyes, listening, my hand dangling in the thread of river.

Rachel and I went to an art exhibit once, some gallery a friend of hers from college had just opened. There was this room that you went into, and it was dark, totally black. When you entered, a single lightbulb turned on and lit up the room. And in this light you saw, written on one of the walls, text about guillotined criminals who were found able to communicate after their heads had been chopped off. Then, right when you read the last word, the lightbulb turned off, leaving you in darkness.

As we were coming out of the room, Rachel took my hand and whispered: "Man, that was spooky."

"Yeah," I said, but later I realized she was only talking about being left in the dark.

Out of the woods, one of the dogs comes trotting up to me and nuzzles its nose into my hand, then starts lapping at the creek. I smack its muscled haunches and the tail starts pumping. Judy and Pico are close, moving through the trees, their voices muffled. Then Pico starts calling, "Leth-eee! Leth-eee!" and Judy gets into it too, their voices ringing out in chorus. Judy turns on her flashlight – it swings through the darkness,

sweeping the forest in a fat, white band. I hunker down, my arm around the dog, and wait for them to find me.

Autumn has arrived, the smoky, dusty smell of it thick in the air. The leaves are starting to fall, and in the mornings my breath appears in clouds as I putter around the backyard. I figure I'll get a block heater for the cabin once it gets really cold, but the big problem is that I don't know how much longer I'll be able to work outside. I had an indoor workshop at the old house, back when carpentry was only a hobby. It was odd moving, clearing out that room -- with all my tools missing it became just an empty space in the basement, smelling vaguely of sawdust and leather. I'm sure Rachel's since turned it into the darkroom she used to talk about. When their parents would let us, we used to take pictures of the kids at Family Services -- Rachel always thought it would have been nicer to develop them at home, rather than having them done by some stranger at a photomart.

I don't see Pico for over a week. Then one afternoon I'm out in the front yard doing the first rake of the season, and he wheels up on a bicycle.

"Les!" he yells. "Look at the bike my Nanna bought me."

He does a wobbly circle on the street. The bike is a throwback to a time well before Pico's birth -- tassels dangle from the handlebars, and the seat curves up into a towering steel backrest. I give Pico the thumbs-up.

With some minor difficulties Pico dismounts, lowering the bike gingerly onto Judy's lawn. Today he is wearing a pink K-Way jacket about two sizes too big for him, blue sweatpants, and a pair of rubber boots. He runs up to me, and we both stand there for a minute, silent, breathing in the crisp autumn air.

"I'm not scared of squirrels anymore," he says, finally.

"Yeah?"

"I'm doing my science project on them. They bury their nuts in the fall, and then they find them later because they rub their feet on them and make them smell."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep. People think they remember where they put them, but they don't. It's just the smell of their stinky feet." Pico starts giggling.

"Isn't that something else."

"You never showed me that card trick again."

"Help me bag these leaves, then we'll go in and I'll do it. But this is the last time."

In a drawer in the kitchen I find a pack of cards, and I deal them out on the table. Pico, eyes narrowed to slits, scrupulously watches my hands. Then I do my big theatrical bit at the end where the cards get tossed all over the room. I walk around for a few seconds in feigned indecision, before snatching Pico's queen of spades off the floor.

"I saw you counting."

"No, way! This is a magic trick, it's all –"

"You counted the cards, Les, and mine was number eleven."

Pico gets down off his chair and silently collects all the cards scattered around the kitchen. I follow his lead and start to clear the table. "Well, now you know the trick, at least."

Pico picks up the last card and hands me the deck, his face solemn. "Thanks, Les," he says. "But I have to go home now."

And that's it. Pico abandons me in the kitchen. The front door wheezes open, and a cool breeze floods into the kitchen, briefly, before the door slams closed. The house is silent. I look out through the kitchen window at the dining table, sitting half-refinished in the backyard.

I head back there intending to do some work, but I can't figure out where to start. After hovering around the table for a while, I rearrange my tools, then head inside my cabin and, leaving the light off, lie down on the bed. I look over at the fish, their aquarium glowing blue in the darkened room. Five seconds of memory. A lifetime composed of these five second installments, just flashes of existence, only to have them vanish, recede mercifully from you like an accident you'd drive by at night on a highway.

Two weeks later, autumn is in full swing. Every morning I wake up to a backyard buried in leaves, which I dutifully clear away before starting my day's work. By the end of the afternoon the grass is already disappearing again, the lawn just green scraps under a patchy brown cover. I've finished the kitchen table with one last coat of mahogany stain, and I'm keeping it under a tarp out back until I find a buyer. It looks about a hundred years older than it actually is.

Judy has convinced me to go to this thing with her this afternoon – that weird hippie couple intent on burying their baby's placenta. Judy, the deliverer of the baby, is the honorary guest. Last weekend we were down at the creek with the dogs and she told me all about it.

"I'd really like you to come," Judy said. She sat down on an old mossy log and looked up at me. Nearby, the dogs were chasing one another through the trees, the patter of paws on fallen leaves fading as they ran further and further away.

"Who are these people?"

"Les, it'll be nice. Sort of weird, maybe, but... good."

"Jude, I don't know."

"Think about it," she said.

When we got home I went right out into the backyard and sat down at the head of

the dining table, the tarp ruffling in the wind. Judy stood at the kitchen window, watching me. For a moment, we locked eyes, and then she pulled away.

I've decided to wear a suit, a starchy navy thing I used to pull out for meetings or home visits back in my days of social work. In the cabin, I struggle to knot my tie, then head out to the front of the house to wait for my sister. A chill in the air hints at winter; the street is quiet, and still. The neighbours have their Halloween decorations up: front porches are framed with orange and black streamers, cardboard cut-outs of witches and ghosts perch on lawns. Daylight is just starting to drain from the sky.

Some kid is weaving down the street on a bicycle, tracing these slow, arching parabolas from one curb to the other. The kid comes closer, closer – and then I recognize the bike, that retro frame, those tasseled handlebars, the banana seat. The pink jacket. And a gorilla mask.

“Hey!” I yell.

The kid slams on the brakes and looks over at me. The mask comes off, and underneath is the face of a girl. She's probably twelve, and Asian – maybe Vietnamese, maybe Cambodian.

“Hi,” she says.

I walk over to her. My tie is choking me.

“Cool bike.”

“It's from the centre,” says the girl. “It's old. It's only a one-speed.”

“The *centre*?”

“It's the only bike they have.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

I point up to the sign in the window of Judy's house. "We're Block Parents, so if you ever get into any trouble..."

The girl is giving me a look that says, *Can I go now?*

I tell her to ride safe.

In Judy's car we listen to one of her French Language tapes. She practises her verbs along with the voice on the tape while she drives.

"J'ai eu, Tu as eu, Il a eu, Elle a eu," says Judy, and so forth. I sit staring out the window, playing absently with the power locks. "Try it, Les," Judy encourages me.

"J'ai! Eu!"

Judy grins. "Bravo, monsieur."

The woman on the tape continues to chatter away, but Judy seems to have lost interest. We pull up to a red light and sit, idling, while cars stream by in front of us. Out of nowhere, Judy does one of her snort-laughs. She covers her mouth with her hand, her eyes twinkling.

"What's up?"

She turns to me, smiling. "I just remembered how when you were a kid, you used to tell Mom's friends that you could remember being born."

"What? Never."

"Yeah, always. You'd describe it to them and everything."

"Shut up." I'm laughing now, too.

"Christ, Les. You were such an odd little fellow."

We drive for a while in silence, then pull up in front of a grand old house, the front yard full of people. Judy cuts the engine and pats my knee. "Ready to bury some placenta?"

"Yep," I say, and we high-five.

Judy straightens her skirt. "Seriously, though – make me laugh and I'll kill you."

Not only am I the only guest wearing a suit, but there is a couple in matching muumuus, and a woman with an owl perched on her shoulder. Music starts up, and everyone shuffles around until they've formed a delta with an open space in the middle. Judy and I retreat behind a tree. I look up through branches scrawling black and empty into the grey October sky.

The mother and father appear from somewhere, the mother carrying her newborn, the father toting a platter with what looks like a lump of meat heaped onto it. The placenta.

"Jesus Christ," I whisper, nudging my sister. "That thing's enormous."

Judy, the corners of her mouth twitching, does her best to ignore me.

The parents move into the empty space in the middle of everyone, where a sort of grave has been dug from the garden. Dirt lies heaped up around the hole in brown piles.

The mother steps forward and begins talking. I don't hear what she says. I am thinking, suddenly, of Pico, and considering what the three of us – me, Judy and Pico – would look like together in this context. Maybe people would mistake us for a family. Sure: a father and mother, friends of the happy couple, and little Pico, who we might have brought on the way to his soccer game. We'd drive him there afterwards in our mini van, go sit with the other happy, proud parents along the sideline. Later, everyone would go out for ice cream; plans would be made for sleepovers and birthday parties and summer camps.

I look over at my sister and her expression has changed. She seems focused, solemn. There is applause, and Judy steps forward. She waves, then reaches back and grabs my hand, and drags me up with her. The parents take turns embracing us. When

the mother wraps her free arm around me, the baby, resting its head on her shoulder, regards me across her back: it's like we're sharing a secret.

The father lowers the platter into the hollow, and hands Judy a small shovel. She casts me a quick glance over her shoulder, then steps forward and stabs the blade into the earth with a crisp, dry sound. Everyone is silent. Judy lifts a shovelful of dirt and sprinkles it over the placenta, the pattering sound of it landing below like the footsteps of a hundred tiny feet.

When the ceremony is over, after the placenta is buried and the last spade of earth patted down, we are all invited inside for a reception. Judy seems to know everyone. She introduces me to countless midwives and clients and former teachers, all of them wanting to know what I do for a living. At one point, I corner my sister and tell her I've had enough.

"Christ, I can't leave now," she whispers. "Can you stick it out for another half hour?"

"I'll walk – it's nice out."

She looks at me with this weird, sad smile. "Thanks for coming, Les."

"Sure."

With that I leave my sister, I leave the party, I leave them all behind, and make my way outside. An earthy smell hangs in the air, and beyond it, something cold and sharp and distant. I pause for a moment on the front steps of the house, surveying the empty front yard. A squirrel sits in the branches of one of the trees, and just as I notice it, the animal springs to life. It scabbles down the trunk, lunges, and lands silently in the yard. An acorn appears from its mouth. The tiny paws claw at the earth, then stuff the nut into the ground. The squirrel straightens up. It turns, staring in my direction from two black

buttons in its face.

Something twitches inside me, and I have to grab the railing to steady myself. I inhale, closing my eyes, and count five seconds while my breath drains into the autumn dusk. When I open my eyes, the squirrel has disappeared. The neighbourhood is silent, washed in dusty twilight. I let go of the railing, and step down, one stair, then the next, and begin the walk home.

Pulling Oceans In and Pushing Oceans Out

It's April and the world is opening up like a hand with something secret in it. The world is all, Hey I've got something to show you, so you lean in and go, What? You go, Show me! And you look and the fingers peel back and then whammo there it is, green and muddy and fresh and dripping wet with rain.

The world is melting but it's almost all water, anyway. The world is like 75% water. It's a ball made of water and some mountains and other stuff, some trees and hills and deserts. Buildings and roads. People walk around on it and we're like 75% water too. My dad Greg is 236 pounds which makes him 177 pounds of water, like a hundred thousand glasses of water, maybe more. He's a bathtub full of water, bigger than a bathtub, a kiddie pool, enough water to drown a baby or sail a little boat. Anyway, my dad Greg is a whole lot of water. And Mom is the moon.

You learn all this water stuff in grade five science. The units are called The Earth and The Human Body. And in The Human Body we learned about vaginas and wangs. Big whoop, though, right? Vaginas and wangs, big whoop.

It's springtime and you've got to make sure that Brian wears his rubber boots because of all the mud. Like Granny says Brian's slow and only seven and my dad Greg'll forget if I don't do it. But my dad Greg calls me Big Gal or BG for short because I'm responsible and mature for my age (9).

Brian crapped his pants four times in class already this year so one of his teachers called home to see if maybe he needs diapers and my dad Greg said no so they said well okay make sure he wears pants with elastics around the ankles. Get it?

But one time he came home with a diaper on anyway and my dad lost it. He called them up at Brian's school and said fuck and everything, I heard him. He said, Are you telling me how to raise my fucking kid? And then after he went and sat on his bike in the garage for like thirty hours or something.

Today's Wednesday April 8, 1988. That's the first thing you do when you get to school, write the date in your workbook at the top of the page. You're supposed to do cursive but I print because cursive looks messy and in my printing all the letters are the same size, it looks like a typewriter if I do say so myself. Then I sit for a bit and start to pinch my eyelashes and pull away, and sometimes you get a few little curls of eyelash and you sprinkle those down onto your book. You keep doing that and eventually you have a little pile of black eyelashes, and you organize that into a perfect square on the empty page. But I hide it with my hand when Mrs. Mills comes walking by.

There are some things you just have to keep secret. Like for my birthday last year my dad Greg bought me a diary with a lock and everything, and he told me I could write whatever I wanted in it, about my day or if I was mad or whatever, and I could lock it up and they would be my secrets. But you write things down and they can get found. People can read it and know everything. It's better to keep your thoughts in your own head, you have them there for a second and then they're gone and you're the only person who will ever know what they were. You think things to yourself and they're safe.

So anyway it's the last day before Easter weekend. Because it's the last day I haven't done too much work, just wrote the date in each of my workbooks (le 8 Avril, 1988 en français) and did the eyelash stuff and then didn't do anything else because this year I'm going to help and hide the eggs. I've been planning all day where I'm going to hide them – places that are easy for Brian but not too easy. This year it's me in charge of the egg

hunt because last year SOMEBODY forgot where he put them and then like a month later all this chocolate melted into our TV.

Easter's about Jesus or something? We don't do religion at my school.

~

Oh – anyone calls Brian a retard, I'll kick their ass.

~

Another thing we learned in The Human Body was about periods. Girls get their period and blood comes out of their vagina. Not me though, even though it can happen as young as ten. I've been making sure to keep my legs tight together or cross them so nothing's getting out. If I have to pee I hold it to make the muscles stronger so my vagina will never let out any blood. It'll be the toughest vagina in town, not like all those other wimpy vaginas, dripping all over the place like one of Jared Wein's nosebleeds.

You get your period and you also get boobs. Some of the girls in grade six have boobs. Like Kelly Sanchez (she's already 12, though). They stick out of her shirt, she looks like she's hiding Easter eggs, ha ha ha.

What I remember most about Mom was when she came back from the hospital and only had one boob. They cut off the other one and gave her a special bra to make it look like she had two boobs but sometimes around the house she didn't wear it and her shirt just sagged and went all limp on the one side like it was a sail with no wind in it or something. But that's just what I remember, I was only four. She was tired and they'd shaved her hair off. She just lay in bed and my dad Greg made me be quiet around the house, all the time, right until she went back to the hospital and then it was the end.

~

FINALLY at 3:15 the bell rings. Everyone goes running out into the hall and it's Easter. I get my bag at the rack and I'm putting on my jacket and Jared Wein comes up and goes, Wanna walk home? Because we're neighbours. Jared's okay, he wears glasses that are

always falling down his face and he has to scrunch his nose to move them back up. I go, Yeah. Also he usually gets a nosebleed.

On the way home from school Jared and I go down to our fort in the woods to check if it's okay. There's a path with trees that grow over from either side and make a tunnel, the branches bend in and touch over top and you have to duck when you're walking along. Then it opens up and that's where our fort is. We call it The Inner Sanctum and it always needs fixing because teenagers come down and drink beer and light fires and mess everything up.

It's been raining so today The Inner Sanctum is wet and sort of cool, and dark, and it smells like worms. There's a log to sit on so Jared goes and sits there and he pats the log beside him like he wants me to sit down too, but I get a stick and I start whacking the ground until it breaks. It breaks into a smaller piece, and then I whack that on the log, and it breaks even smaller, and I throw that piece into the woods. There's a beer cap on the ground so I pick it up and sniff it: pennies and sugar.

If we stay late enough it'd get dark and we could lay back and look up at the sky and see the moon up there through the space in the treetops, white as a bone, full or half or waxing or waning (part of The Earth was to learn about the moon) and we'd lie back and I'd maybe let Jared put his head on my stomach and we'd both look up at the moon and I might tell him, That's my Mom Jared, that's Mom looking down. Then I'd wave at the moon: hello, goodnight! But I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't cry, or anything.

But we can't stay that late because I have to get home for Brian. Besides, if Jared Wein gets a nosebleed we don't have any Kleenex.

We fix up The Inner Sanctum and Jared goes to his house and I come home but Brian's not there yet. My dad Greg usually gets in at 5:30 from his job. If he's not home for

dinner you got to make hot dogs, one for you and one for Brian. Sometimes my dad Greg'll leave you a note and sometimes he won't.

Ingredients to make hot dogs for dinner:

2 hot dog wieners (in freezer)

2 pieces of Wonderbread

2 Kraft Singles slices

French's mustard

Heinz ketchup

2 paper towels

1 Microwave

Okay. You take the hot dog wieners out of the freezer. You take a paper towel. You put one of the hot dogs on the paper towel and you put it in the microwave and you microwave it for 1:10. You take the other hot dog and other paper towel: repeat. Then you put the hot dogs in the bread and a piece of cheese on the wieners and you can even do them together at the same time, and you microwave them on a paper towel for 45 seconds. I put mustard on mine, and ketchup, in two straight even lines. Brian has them plain. If they're too hot, make Brian wait because if not he'll just stuff them in his mouth and burn himself and he'll cry and then you have to hug him and rub his hair and stuff.

Oh, I forgot to say to WASH YOUR HANDS. Before and after making hot dogs, with hot water and soap. There are germs everywhere and if you get them in your mouth you could maybe get, I don't know, cancer or leukemia? Not really, I'm not an idiot. But kids get leukemia all the time and then they have to get bones from their brothers or sisters. I'd have to get bones from Brian. Or give him some of mine.

It's 4:06 and I'm washing my hands when the bus pulls up outside. It's always the same: it sounds like Granny when she gets all wheezy, then the doors open and you can hear all the kids screaming inside the bus, and then the doors close and it roars and goes away, and then it's quiet. Brian comes in the front door with his backpack and he sees me and yells, Hi! and he gives me this big hug and yells Hi! again, and then I tell him to wash his hands.

Sometimes Granny comes by to see if we're okay before my dad Greg gets home. She's his mom and smells like cigarettes and old people. He doesn't have a dad.

But today it's just me and Brian. We play Trouble. We eat Fruit Roll-Ups – me: grape, Brian: orange. Sometimes I let Brian win Trouble sometimes I don't. I have to help him move his men. He's always red. I'm always blue. Today though he wins by himself.

I let Brian watch TV at 5:00, but only for half an hour. After last Easter when the TV got ruined my dad Greg bought a new big-screen one and put a satellite dish on the roof. There are lots of satellite channels that are inappropriate for kids. We're only allowed to watch Channel 2 – my dad Greg's rule. He watches TV a lot, now. Not me. TV ROTTS YOUR BRAIN! (TV rots your BRIAN, ha ha ha).

I clean up. I make sure the games are all square on the shelf. The edges have to be even and matched up equally, which is called symmetry. We learned it in math.

And then I wash my hands. Sometimes I wash them too long and they get all pink and sore, but that just means they're clean.

Hey, I almost forgot: it's Easter, almost. Moron!

At 5:34 the garage goes up and the bike comes growling inside like always, and then my dad Greg is in the kitchen in his security guard uniform and he picks me up under one

arm and Brian under the other and spins us around. I sometimes forget how big my dad Greg is: he's like four of me, maybe more.

We sit at the table in the kitchen while he makes beans and toast and eggs for dinner. He sings Beans, beans, the magical fruit and makes fart noises and stomps around like he's crazy, and the whole house shakes. Brian laughs but then he does that thing where he starts rubbing his face with his knuckles, so my dad Greg has to come over and put Brian on his lap and hold his hands for a bit. Wanna stir the beans, BG? he says to me, so I go over and do it.

When everything's ready my dad Greg puts the beans out on plates with the toast and eggs. He puts mine down and he points at it to show me the toast is cut in triangles and there's an egg on one side and the beans in a little neat pile on the other, how I like it. Symmetry.

After dinner he tells me to go do my homework while he gets Brian ready for bed, but I don't have any homework (because it's Easter) so I go up and clean my room, make sure everything's straight and lined up and there's no dust anywhere. I have my own Handyvac but I'm only allowed to use it once a week and I already used it last Sunday.

Then it's almost bedtime. I put on my pajamas and go brush my teeth and wash my hands. After, I go into Brian's room to say goodnight, but he's already asleep with this big smile on his face, so I lean over the railing and whisper-yell, Goodnight Greg! to my dad Greg who's watching TV and he turns down the volume and whisper-yells, Goodnight BG! and I go into my room and wait until it's exactly 9:00 so I can get in bed.

For a bit I lie there thinking about Easter and Jared's egg hunt and running my hand over the pillow, feeling for feathers sticking out. I pull them out with my fingernails and drop them behind the bed. One time my dad Greg moved my bed to put up a shelf for my

books and he found a big pile of feathers and asked me, Are you taking feathers out of your pillow? I said no. It felt weird, but my dad Greg just smiled and said okay.

Lying in bed through the window I can see the moon. Almost full, only a sliver missing, almost perfect. All around the world Mom the moon is busy pulling oceans in and pushing oceans out. Tides. And all us people are basically water too and at night the moon sings us lullabies and pushes us into sleep.

11:38. I've been lying staring at the moon and planning the egg hunt for like three hours. I'm going to have to make a list, write it down so I don't forget, so nothing happens like chocolate getting into the TV again. I keep thinking about Easter, imagining Brian going around with his little basket and finding eggs, all smiles and laughing and happy.

But maybe I have insomnia? Insomnia is when you can't sleep, my dad Greg has it, sometimes. You just stay awake for ever. You can die from not sleeping. Yeah, I think I have insomnia. I should count sheep.

One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen nineteen twenty twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three twenty-four twenty-five twenty-six twenty-seven twenty-eight twenty-nine thirty thirty-one thirty-two thirty-three thirty-four thirty-five thirty-six thirty-seven thirty-eight thirty-nine forty forty-one forty-two forty-three forty-four forty-five forty-six forty-seven forty-eight forty-nine fifty fifty-one fifty-two fifty-three fifty-four fifty-five fifty-six fifty-seven fifty-eight fifty-nine sixty.

Nothing. Sixty seconds is a minute. Sixty minutes in an hour times sixty seconds = three thousand six hundred seconds. Twenty-four hours in a day = ?

Hold on, I need to write this down. I just have to turn on the light and find a paper and pen.

24 hours in a day = 1440 minutes = 86400 seconds. And that makes... 604,800 seconds in a week. How many seconds in a year? Whoa, hold on.

31,339,600.

The other thing you can do if you can't sleep is have some warm milk? So I wait until exactly 12:00 midnight and get up to go down to the kitchen. I stop on the stairs. My dad Greg is still up, I can hear the TV. I lean over the banister and look into the living room, all quiet. Like a spy.

The TV's on. There's a lady moaning, like she's being hurt or something? My dad Greg has the sound way down, but I can hear it. He's sitting on the couch, I can see him, just his lap and his feet sticking out from under a blanket. He's sort of twitching or something and the couch is going CREAK CREAK, and the lady on the TV is going UH! UH! and he's making noises too, like grunting. Creak creak, uh uh, grunt, grunt.

And so I take another step down on the stairs and lean even more over the banister so I can see the TV and there's a lady with her boobs shaking and flopping around, like slapping up against herself, and the blanket on the couch is shaking in time with the boobs and I can see my dad's face and his face is different, it's like a secret side of him I've never seen, mean and hungry and weird, and the couch goes creak creak and the lady with the floppy boobs goes uh uh and my dad Greg goes grunt grunt. But then something in my tummy goes gloop and I have to pull away from the banister because my head is all funny, and I turn away and run upstairs to the bathroom.

And then I'm washing my hands. I didn't even turn the lights on so now I'm washing my hands in the dark, hard, with hot water and lots of soap.

One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen nineteen twenty twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three

twenty-four twenty-five twenty-six twenty-seven twenty-eight twenty-nine thirty thirty-one thirty-two thirty-three thirty-four thirty-five thirty-six thirty-seven thirty-eight thirty-nine forty forty-one forty-two forty-three forty-four forty-five forty-six forty-seven forty-eight forty-nine fifty fifty-one fifty-two fifty-three fifty-four fifty-five fifty-six fifty-seven fifty-eight fifty-nine sixty.

One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen nineteen twenty twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three twenty-four twenty-five twenty-six twenty-seven twenty-eight twenty-nine –

The door opens but I don't look. I hear my dad Greg go, BG. He leaves the lights off and comes over, so he's right behind me. I still don't look.

– thirty thirty-one thirty-two thirty-three thirty-four thirty-five thirty-six thirty-seven –

He reaches over and turns off the tap. My hands are sore, my stomach still feels weird and like gurgly. BG, he says again. I don't turn around. We stand there in the dark. Then he reaches out to put his arms around me but he sort of stops, and even though he's not touching me from the way I can feel his body shaking, the way his breath comes short and sort of gasping, I can tell he's crying.

Penis: dink dick wang schlong dong winky wiener cock peter rod pud monkey johnson prick willy member purple-helmeted-warrior tackle twig-and-berries banana sausage meat doodle noodle package privates one-eyed-monster rocket hard-on boner steamer stiffy, erection.

The next morning I wake up at 7:47 but it's not really waking up because I didn't sleep very much, obviously. I have to wait until exactly 8:00 to get out of bed, so I just lie there for thirteen minutes thinking. The curtains are closed now, my dad Greg must have

come in during the night and closed them. Through the curtains the light comes in grey and I can hear the rain hissing outside. It'll be an indoor day.

At 8:00 I get out of bed and go into Brian's room and he's just lying there. He looks at me and smiles and goes, Hi! I lift the covers and crawl under with him. He hugs me and he's warm.

Brian it's almost Easter, I go. Are you excited for the Easter Bunny?

He kicks his legs and goes, Yes! Yes!

That's cute, how he still believes in the Easter Bunny? I put my arm around his chest and I can feel his heart beating. Bub bub, bub bub, says his heart. I rub my hand on his chest and he kind of purrs like a cat. And then I slap him on the tummy and he laughs, so I do it again. I leave my hand on his tummy and it's like round and I can feel the dent where his bellybutton is. And then, sort of quick, I move my hand down a bit and touch his wang, just to see: it's small and weird, a little rubber tube.

Brian's gone all still. I smack him again on the belly. Wanna get up? I say, and he goes, Yes! Yes! and nods his head so hard he nearly shakes me out of the bed.

Top Secret List Of Easter Egg Hiding Places! (so far)

1. Kitchen – between the Wheaties and Sugar Crisp boxes
2. Kitchen – in the handle of the silverware drawer
3. Kitchen – on top of the breadbox
4. Kitchen – in the fruit bowl
5. Kitchen – under the kitchen table (stuck with tape!)
6. Den – between the couch cushions
7. Den – on top of the VCR
8. Den – under the lampshade
9. Hallway – on the frame of the picture of me and Brian

10. Stairs – one egg on every stair, in the corners

My dad Greg spends the whole day in the garage working on his bike, which is good, because at lunch (1:20) when he comes in to heat up some Chunky for me and Brian he's weird and doesn't look at me really. He puts our bowls of soup down and coughs and just stands there for a minute before grabbing an apple and going back into the garage. Then at precisely 4:09 he sticks his head into the kitchen where me and Brian are playing Trouble (I'm winning – two men in my Home versus Brian's none) and says, Hey, stopped raining, taking the bike for a spin. I just nod okay. He's quiet for a bit, then he goes, You okay holding down the fort? So I nod again.

Granny's coming tomorrow to make us Easter dinner. At 5:45 when I'm setting the table (my dad Greg is still out) she calls and says, Happy Easter! and tells me about the great ham she got. Ham? Grody. But I don't say that. I say, Yum. I say, Sounds good Granny. She asks if we're okay. I say, Sure. Then she wants to talk to Brian. He gets all excited and takes the phone and yells, Hi! and Yes! and then just laughs a lot.

When Brian hangs up I notice something sort of smells so I get down and sniff his bum. Yup. He crapped himself. This is one thing I can't handle: crap. So I tell him to just stand in the middle of the kitchen until our dad Greg gets home, not to touch anything. I open the window and sit there watching him, glad he's wearing pants with elastic ankles.

My dad Greg gets home at 5:58 and smells Brian right away and goes, Woo-wee Buddy! He picks Brian up over one shoulder like a fireman and carries him upstairs. The tub goes on. I can hear them both laughing from my spot at the kitchen table and the water splashing around while my dad Greg washes the crap off my brother.

After dinner (fried baloney, Tater Tots, hot V8) we watch a movie on satellite. My dad Greg tries to get us to all sit on the couch together like usual, with a blanket overtop, but I tell him I'm okay and sit on the floor. The opening credits come on and I can feel someone like nudging me in the back with their toe, but I just stare at the TV as if I don't notice.

The movie we watch is *The Parent Trap*. My dad Greg is all excited because it's a movie that was out when he was a kid. At dinner he told me, It's more for girls than boys – you'll like it, BG. When he said the name I thought, Cool, a parent trap, what an awesome idea. You'd dig like a hole and cover it with sticks and leaves, maybe put a case of beer on the other side for dads. Something else for moms? Then dads would come along and be like, Oh great beer! and when they went to go for it they'd fall through and into the hole. A parent trap. Then you could study them and stuff, poke them with sticks, do experiments and tests.

But it turns out to be Disney and sort of gay. There's this girl and she's got a twin sister but she doesn't know, or something, and then they try to get their parents married. There's no trap, really, just a plan, and not even a good one. I squirm around on the floor a lot and my dad Greg keeps going, You want to come up here with us? But I don't say anything to that.

The movie gets done at 8:58, kind of late, so my dad Greg hustles us off to bed. And then goes back downstairs, so I'm left lying there wide awake, thinking about what he's maybe doing down there under the blanket with the groaning ladies on the TV. But I guess I'm tired from the night before so after not too long I forget about my dad Greg King of the Perverts and start to get really sleepy and before I can even check out the window to see the moon, I fall asleep.

I wake up and I feel like swampy and slow but I have this idea there's something I should be doing. It's - 4:17 a.m. There's something, but everything feels cloudy and my brain is only just winding up, still maybe half-asleep. I roll over and then I'm drifting off to sleep again, before it hits me.

Easter.

The egg hunt.

In like three hours Brian is going to get up and go hunting for eggs and I forgot to even finish my list let alone hide any eggs. I wait until 4:20 (which isn't perfect but this is an emergency) and get out of bed, swing my legs over the side and it's like slow-motion, all heavy and weird, and in the dark my room is sort of blue from the moonlight through the window.

I move out into the hall, still feeling sort of underwater, swimming, looking around, trying to adjust my eyes to the dark. Wait. There's an egg on the floor outside Brian's room, a little dark lump against the carpet. I lean down and it's like I can't believe it, and for a second I think maybe the Easter Bunny really did come. But then I realize who would have put it there, who knew it was my job and went and did it themselves anyway.

I pick up the egg. The foil around the chocolate is starting to peel so I smooth it down and put it in the pocket of my pajamas. I look around, at my dad Greg's bedroom door which is closed, with only black showing from the crack underneath, and then I start to tiptoe down the stairs, real slow.

Guess what? There are eggs lined up in the corners of each stair **JUST LIKE I WROTE ON MY SECRET LIST**. The eggs go into my pockets, and it's like I'm doing a weird kind of frontcrawl or something, down one step and reaching, then the next, eggs into my pockets, but feeling I'm maybe sinking, maybe drowning, and the house is dark and still, with only the hum of the fridge from the kitchen to prove the world is even alive.

I move around the house, silent, leaving the lights off, looking in all the spots I wrote down, taking the eggs and loading up. Between the cereal boxes: check. On top of the VCR: check. Etc., all of them. He's put them in other places too, stupid places like lined up on the kitchen counter. Way too easy. But even finding eggs in places I didn't have on my list makes me feel weird – my hands go prickly for a second, I feel my face hot. Once the egg disappears into my pocket the feeling goes away.

Around 4:50 my pockets start to get heavy – they're sagging and bulging with eggs. I look around one more time, but I'm pretty sure I've got all of them. So I go to the back door and put on my shoes.

Outside it's still dark. The sky is navy blue, almost purple, all clouds left over from yesterday's rain. There's no stars. Only the moon, glowing big and round behind the night. I shiver a bit in my pajamas, and it's hard to walk with my pockets full of eggs, the way they swing heavy at my sides, and I have to hold my pants up by the waist to keep them from falling.

I go out across the lawn all wet from a day of rain, soaking the bottoms of my pants and cold on my ankles, and then onto the street where my footsteps echo a bit, tap tap tap in my runners on the pavement. You can see the streetlights reflected in puddles everywhere, yellow and shimmering. I walk past Jared Wein's house and think about knocking on his window, getting him to help, but I decide no this is something I have to do on my own.

Down the hill at the end of our street, along the path, into the woods. It's dark but I know the way by heart: where to step, where to duck. And there's just enough light from the moon to guide me. When I come to the entrance to the tunnel that leads to The Inner Sanctum, I stop. From way up above Mom the moon is looking down. She's faint and like out of focus, and every now and then little wisps of darker cloud go past her face

like smoke. All around her the night sky is a big, murky sea, but she shines out of it, faraway, but silver and watching, up there.

I haven't brought anything to dig with, nothing to make the hole for my Parent Trap. There's a broken beer bottle behind the log so I use that, holding it by the neck and using the jagged edge to carve into the mud. I use my feet, too, and my hands – dirt gets up underneath my fingernails and sticks there. I go down on my knees and can feel the earth cool and wet through my pajamas. But I keep digging, I dig and dig and I'm sweating even though it's cold out and I'm shivering and digging and covered in muck.

As the hole gets deeper and deeper the earth gets wetter, and once I'm a ways down there's water at the bottom, collecting in a little pool. I stop for a second and think maybe it's from the ocean, that this is water that flows in a river all the way from the coast underneath the surface of the world, and I've tapped into it. An underground seaway, linking all the water on the planet.

So I guess I'm deep enough now. I take the eggs in my hands and open my fingers so they plop one by one into the water at the bottom of my Parent Trap. Like: release, plop; release, plop. So after a while they're all down there, all the eggs, my pockets are empty, and I sit back. Right then – I swear – the clouds break up a bit and Mom the moon comes smiling down into the water at the bottom of the hole, lighting that little puddle up silver, and the dull blobs of the eggs bobbing around in the water.

In the Human Body we learned a little bit about all the tubes you've got inside you – fallopian tubes and whatever, all those tubes like canals and rivers carrying stuff back and forth around your vagina, or wang – depending what you've got. So now I've put my own eggs into the tubes of the world, ha ha ha, and I'm sitting here in my pajamas in the mud kind of cold and it's Easter.

But maybe if the world is like a person and these underground seaways are the tubes, making the world go on, then when the tides go in and out it's like the world having its period. Like the blood of the world rushing in and out and making everything grow. Like the world getting ready in private to make something new and Mom the moon leaning in and saying, No. Mom the moon saying, Not this time. And then just smiling down and washing all the world's secrets away with waves.

Respite

On Saturday evenings the writer named Womack takes a break from his novel and looks after the boy. He goes to the boy's family's house in the suburbs, far from where Womack lives among the other writers and artists in the city. It is winter and he rides out to the suburbs on his bicycle, wheels up slickly in the slush on the street and chains his bicycle to the fence that pens in the yard, then comes into the house, and wet.

The boy is twelve, and dying of a degenerative illness. He can no longer see, hear, walk or speak, although there are times when he laughs. This laugh is a crackle, a shriek. If Womack were to describe the laugh in his novel it would become *a sudden bolt of blue lightning over an empty, black sea*. Womack is a writer of prose, but fancies himself something of a poet, also. He wants his novel to be something new, something fresh and free of cliché. Womack has studied writing in university and has learned this; now he hears clichés even in speech and cringes.

Saturdays are the same, almost without variation: Womack arrives and the boy's mother is waiting in the living room, standing over her son in his wheelchair. She offers thanks and passes the boy off to Womack and disappears into her bedroom, and Womack then hoists the boy out of his wheelchair and props him up against his body and carries him around the house, and the boy moans. The boy moans and moves his legs as if he were walking, but he is not; the boy's legs hang limply from his body, dragging on the floor. Like this Womack maneuvers the boy, slowly, step, step, step, from room to room around the house.

The writer Womack used to live with a woman named Adriane whom he had that autumn begun to introduce to people as his partner, as though they were business associates or cops. The word arrived into his vocabulary at a party that was both Halloween party and stag and doe party for friends of Womack's, friends named Mike

and Cheryl who would be married a week before Christmas. Standing in the hallway at this party, his arm draped over Adriane's shoulder, a woman dressed as Fidel Castro introduced them to another woman, also dressed as Fidel Castro, as her partner, and Womack repeated the word in reference to Adriane. At this, like a child escaping the embrace of a foul-breathed and bearded aunt, Adriane slid out from underneath his arm, nodded at the Castros and sipped her drink. Later, she confronted him in the kitchen.

Partner? she asked. The kimono of her Geisha outfit shimmered and swished.

Sure, Womack told her. His costume was Hockey Player: helmet, gloves, stick. That's what people say now, he said.

Straight people?

Sure.

For the rest of the evening, Adriane adopted a Texan accent when addressing Womack – Yee-haw! Fetch me another drink, Pardner! Even so, the new label made Womack feel modern and serious. Gone was the term girlfriend, used for those who had filled that role since his early teens. Now he had a partner. Now he was an adult.

At midnight Womack and Adriane came home to the place that they had moved into together that July, their place that was not quite loft and not quite studio, their place where a wall divided two long, high-ceilinged rooms in defiance of architectural categorization. You entered the apartment to a kitchen and dining space; through an arched doorway in the wall was a living area with a couch and a stereo and the desk with the computer where Womack wrote his novel. At the back of the room, behind drawn curtains, sat their bed. This area they called The Bedroom, even though it was not technically a room, at all.

Adriane, who worked the next day, went straight to bed. Womack ditched the helmet, gloves and stick in a closet, sat down at his desk in his uncomfortable chair, turned on his computer and began typing. The uncomfortable chair had wheels and the floor was warped, slightly. At one point, when Womack's typing relented and he let go of

the keyboard, the desk released him gliding into the room until he stopped with a bump against the window on the far wall.

Sitting there under the window, the computer glowing across the room, he could hear Adriane's breathing from behind the curtains. This is what their weekdays had become: dinner or the occasional outing, Adriane falling asleep hours before him, then up early the next morning and off to the counseling center. Womack would stay in bed until noon, get up, drink too much coffee and eventually make it to the computer, to his novel.

In the summer, when they had moved in together, they had bought tropical house plants and named them: Hangy, the bushy one dangling from the ceiling above the dining table; Jules Fern, whose leafy tendrils spread out over the couch; and, guarding the bedroom, somber and violet – Jacques Laplante. Back then, Adriane would arrive home and it would be sex, first thing, almost before she was even in the door. Their clothes would come off and they would romp for a while on the bed, if they made it that far, and afterwards have a nice meal wearing only housecoats and slippers. Then there might be more sex and snacks made in the toaster oven, gobbled dripping cheese over the sink, and finally, clinging to one another in bed, Goodnight Adriane, I love you, and, Goodnight Womack, me too, and Adriane would go in bleary-eyed to work the next morning.

Now, this, every night: Womack wide-awake at his computer and Adriane asleep behind the curtains. This was the life of couples, he assumed, of partners – functional, pragmatic, a pattern established and repeated with someone who found it mutually tolerable. Womack thought of his parents, marching together through their marriage like soldiers in a military parade. Partners. Life.

But Womack was writing a novel, and he was doing good work. He had written over one hundred pages. The words were coming. Sentences spilled into paragraphs spilled

into chapters, while on the periphery Adriane came in and out of the apartment like the mechanical bird in a wind-up clock.

At the house where Womack volunteers there are two other children, the boy's brother and sister: Jessica and Andrew. They are younger, nine and six, and often play the Game of Life on the living room floor while Womack carries their dying older brother around nearby. Womack and the boy step over the two children and their board game, which it seems only Jessica understands, and wins convincingly, every time, and Womack says, Excuse us, and watches as Jessica takes advantage of the distraction to steal three five-hundred dollar bills and a husband from the box. A nice bit of characterization, thinks Womack.

One cold evening a week into November, Adriane came home from yoga class, which she had recently taken up and went to twice a week, straight from work. Womack was at the stove, making dinner. Outside, the first snow of the season came sifting down like wet flour from the clouds. It lit briefly on the streets before melting into the gray puddle that soaked the city.

Adriane hung her coat and came into the kitchen. Through the doorway to the other room came the sound of the stereo in the next room, playing music. Ah, there's a good Womack, she said, nodding. My little housewife. Her face was pink; icy droplets had collected in her hair and eyelashes.

Womack laughed, stirring a creamy sauce. How were The Youth today?

The Youth were troubled, said Adriane. She pulled the dictaphone she used for interviews from her pocket, placed it on the kitchen table.

Any good stories?

Adriane snorted, shaking her head. This again, she said.

Oh, come on, said Womack. Who am I going to tell?

Adriane started rifling through the stack of mail on the dining table. Hangy drooped down from above, lush and green. What did you do all day?

What do you think?

She fingered Hangy's foliage. Did you water the plants?

I watered them like a week ago. They're fine.

And the R.S.V.P. to Mike and Cheryl about the wedding?

Oh, come on, Ade. They know we're coming.

She held up an envelope. How about the phone bill?

Oh, shoot. Womack stopped stirring.

Adriane looked up. You're kidding, right?

I got busy.

Busy doing what? You were home all day!

Home, working. The spoon stood erect in the coagulating sauce. It's not like I'm just sitting around and picking my ass.

I guess if you ever called anyone, you'd probably care if the phone got disconnected.

Was this a fight? wondered Womack. Were they fighting?

Adriane looked at him, the look of an executive evaluating an employee at a time of cut-backs and lay-offs. Womack wore the cut-off sweatpants and t-shirt he had gone to bed in the night before. She reached out and pocketed the dictaphone, then spoke before he could: When was the last time you went outside?

Two nights ago. I picked up sushi, remember?

During the day. For more than errands.

Ade, this is what I do. I'm writing a book.

A novel, she corrected him, smirking.

You go to work at The Centre, I work at home. Okay?

Adriane said nothing. Womack returned to his sauce, which had developed a rubbery skin he now began to churn back in. After a minute, Adriane stood, moved to the front door and put on her coat.

Where are you going? asked Womack.

To the ATM, said Adriane. She held up the envelope. To pay the phone bill.

What the boy likes is doors. He and Womack stop in front of a closed door in the house, a bedroom or a closet, and the boy takes Womack's hand in his and places it on the doorknob, and Womack opens the door and the boy laughs. Then Womack closes the door and the boy moans, and takes Womack's hand again and places it on the doorknob, and this continues until the boy becomes restless, and then they move to a new door in the house. Womack watches the boy delight in the doors and thinks to himself, I should be able to use this as a metaphor for something.

A few days later, Adriane came home from work and Womack was wearing a shirt and tie. Dinner was on the table: meatloaf and green beans and rice. She disappeared into the living room, turned off the music that was playing, then reemerged in the kitchen.

What's the occasion? asked Adriane. You look like a dad.

No occasion, said Womack. But thank you.

They sat and ate. There was little to talk about; Womack had worked all day on the computer, while Adriane was not at liberty to discuss her clients, The Youth.

How was yoga? he asked.

Good. You should come some time.

Ha! Womack nearly choked on a green bean. Yoga! God, like one of those new age creeps in a unitard and a ponytail, some white guy named Starfire or Ravi. No thanks.

Adriane looked at him, opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to reconsider and instead filled it with meatloaf.

I've been thinking, said Womack, chewing.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. I've been thinking about maybe volunteering somewhere. You know, getting out and doing something, getting involved. In the community. With people.

Adriane took a sip of water, put the glass back down, waited.

Maybe something with kids, Womack said.

That's a great idea, said Adriane. Womack detected something in her voice, though: hesitancy, maybe. Doubt?

After dinner, Adriane washed the dishes while Womack retreated to his computer. He took off his tie and typed and deleted and typed some more. Adriane did paperwork at the dining table, the murmur of voices playing from the dictaphone as she made her transcriptions. Eventually she came into the living room, rubbing her eyes, tape recorder in hand.

I'm pooped, she told Womack. Stood there while he stared at the computer screen.

Eventually he looked up. Sure, he said. I'm going to finish this bit, and then...

Adriane turned and disappeared between the curtains. Womack could hear the whisper of clothes coming off and pajamas going on. And then the bedroom light clicking off and the bedside lamp clicking on. He typed these two sentences into his computer.

I'll come kiss you goodnight, Womack called, cutting and pasting the pajama line into another section of his novel. Let me know when you're in bed.

Another click, extinguishing the glow of the bedside lamp. The rustle of sheets. A pillow being fluffed. Silence.

Womack read the section over, then pushed away from the desk on his wheelie chair. Behind the curtains, Adriane lay in bed, her back to him, facing the wall. Womack slid under the covers and put a hand on her back. He felt a tremor in her body. She was masturbating.

Mind if I join you? asked Womack.

Suit yourself, said Adriane, her hand at work between her legs.

Womack reached into his pants and began to coax himself into arousal. Beside him, Adriane's breath came in gasps. After a few minutes, just as Womack was growing hard, she went limp.

Did you finish? he asked.

I'm tired, she said.

Oh.

Outside the snow had become the hiss of light rain.

Okay, said Womack. Sure. Well, goodnight. He leaned in and planted a kiss on the back of Adriane's head. She tensed, slightly.

Everything all right? he asked.

I'm tired, Womack.

Womack lay there, propped up on one elbow, staring at Adriane's back. Eventually, he got up, ducked between the curtains and sat back down at his computer. He typed VOLUNTEERING into an internet search and, with a licorice-scented marker and a stack of Post-It notes, began taking stock of his options.

After an hour or so of Womack carrying the boy around the house, it is time for the boy's supper. This supper is pureed, and usually cauliflower. The mother emerges from the bedroom looking half-asleep, heats up the boy's supper in a microwave, and gives it to Womack to feed to her son. At this time she also prepares supper for herself and Jessica and Andrew, and she gets out some leftovers from the week and heats them on the stove.

A week after submitting his on-line application, Womack was registered with The Fountain Group, an organization that paired its volunteers with families in need of respite care. Many of their clients had children who were terminally ill. The family assigned to Womack was one of these.

His first Saturday, Womack woke up early. Adriane was sleeping in; it was her day off. Although Womack was not scheduled to be out at the family's home until four that afternoon, he paced about the apartment, wondering what to wear, eating breakfast, then brunch, then a giant toasted sandwich at a few minutes past noon. He felt nauseous and bloated. It was the first day he had not turned his computer on in months.

From Womack's apartment to the family's house took just under a half hour by bicycle. He rode along the major avenues and boulevards of the city that narrowed into the thin, tree-lined streets of the suburbs. The trees were leafless. The streets were black with melted snow. Eventually Womack pulled up to an address that matched the one he had written with a marker on a Post-It note and smelled vaguely of licorice. The family's house was a squat bungalow with a cracked driveway and a lawn littered with children's toys: Tonka trucks and hula hoops and a few upended sandpails.

Inside, Womack met first the mother, Sylvia, then Jessica and Andrew, who both stared for a moment at Womack's outstretched hand before bounding off giggling down the hallway – and then, finally, sitting in the kitchen in his wheelchair and moaning, the boy. Womack approached him as one might a lion escaped from its cage: at a crouch, whispering. Sylvia stood behind the chair and secured the boy's head in an upright position. Saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth, strung to his shoulder in gooey threads. The boy's eyes were milky and gazed blankly in the direction of, but not at, Womack.

Hello, said Womack.

The boy moaned.

He likes to have his face touched, said the boy's mother. She cupped his ears, demonstrating. The boy laughed, a sudden burst like the crack of a cannon. Womack jumped. He composed himself, squatted beside the boy in his wheelchair and, looking up at the mother, replaced her hands with his own. The boy shook his head free, and moaned. Womack stood.

He just needs to get to know you, explained Sylvia.

The rest of the evening Womack spent at a distance observing the boy's routine: Sylvia fed her son, bathed him, eventually put him to bed. He admired her ease with the boy, the mechanical, almost instinctive acts of jeans being pulled off and a diaper being folded on, pajamas, and then the tenderness of her leaning over and stroking his face while he lay in bed and Womack stood in the doorway, dimming the lights. Motherhood, noted Womack. In the front hall, handing Womack his coat, she told him the following week he would be on his own, and did he feel comfortable doing it all himself?

Womack said, Sure, nodding a bit too vigorously.

When Womack got home, Adriane sat at the kitchen table before an offering of Styrofoam tubs. The dictaphone sat nearby atop a pile of manila folders. She was reading a book – a travel guide: *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*.

Planning a trip? Womack asked.

I wish. Adriane stood and began peeling lids off containers, revealing noodles and stir-fried vegetables, barbecue pork and cashew chicken. Sitting back down, she added, I mean, I wish I could afford it.

Sure.

Anyway, I ordered Chinese. She gestured at the food. I didn't feel like cooking.

Fair enough, said Womack. He sat down, pulled apart a pair of chopsticks. Looks good.

While they ate, Womack detailed his afternoon spent with the boy. Adriane responded with single words muffled by mouthfuls of food: Yeah? Really? Uh-huh.

He's more... he's sicker than I thought he would be. Like, he can't really do anything for himself. It'll be me doing pretty much everything – feeding him, giving him a bath. Changing his diaper.

Adriane looked up. Like his mother does every other day?

Oh, she's amazing. Can you imagine? You should see her with him.

Womack didn't know what else to say. What were the words for this? He could only think of clichés – *the power of the human spirit*, stuff like that. Adriane went back to her meal, chopsticks gathering, plucking. They ate silently, methodically, and when the Styrofoam containers had been emptied, Womack put down his chopsticks and looked across the table at Adriane, this woman he had lived with for five months, his partner. She was leaning over the last few scraps of chow mein, eyes on her travel guide.

So, he said, crumpling the empty food containers one by one under his palm, like beer cans. Southeast Asia.

Yep, she said.

Sounds fun.

Adriane speared a piece of pork with her chopstick, lifted it up, bit down and sucked the meat into her mouth. Something to read, she said.

Just something to read?

Sure. She rolled her eyes. God, listen to me – *sure* – I'm starting to even talk the same as you.

Womack ignored this. Well, why not the newspaper? Why not a book? I've got lots of books. He could hear the crescendo of his own voice. You want to borrow a book?

A novel?

Womack paused. When he spoke, his tone was quiet, low, but something uneasy rippled through his voice: What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?

Oh, you know, big writer. You and your *novel*. She slurped a noodle into her mouth. It whacked against her cheek on the way in, leaving a brown stripe across her face. Am I in there? Is there a bitchy girlfriend character? Is she always nagging the hero to take out the garbage and pay the bills?

Since when do you care about my writing? said Womack, aware, immediately, of his own earnestness.

Adriane stared at him, chewing. The saucy stripe lay like a wound across her cheek. *Since when do you care about my writing*, she mimicked, standing, carrying her plate behind the kitchen counter, where she slid it among the dirty dishes piled in the sink. This is my day off, she told him. I have to deal with bullshit all week. I want to have my weekends to relax, not get into these stupid arguments about nothing.

Womack looked away. On the table before him, splayed open to a page titled, "When to Go," sat the travel guide. Womack imagined Adriane surfing on a ratty shoelace along the river from *Apocalypse Now*, heads on spikes lining the shores, bullets whizzing through the air. All around, crumpled Styrofoam tubs sat like ruined sandcastles. Womack placed his hands over his ears, tightly. There was a dull echo inside his skull: the empty, hollow rumble of a stalled train.

Feeding the boy is easy; he eats mechanically, unquestioningly. Womack sits the boy in his wheelchair and scoops spoonfuls of pureed food into the boy's mouth, and the boy swallows. Around the table sit the boy's mother and brother and sister with their plates of leftovers, but they are in a different world, apart. While Womack feeds the boy, Andrew shovels mashed potatoes and corn at his face, spilling most of it on the floor; Jessica eats demurely, telling stories about which boys at school she dislikes this week; Sylvia takes it all in, nodding, smiling, pushing her food around, hardly eating. Womack feels invisible, as if he were watching their meal through a two-way mirror – collecting evidence for a trial, a detective or a spy.

In the middle of December Womack surprised Adriane with dinner reservations at a Vietnamese restaurant. Adriane smiled at this. Encouraged, Womack kissed her on the cheek, and took her hand in his as they walked down the street.

At the restaurant, a woman in a Santa hat seated them at a table for two and handed over menus they struggled to read in the dim light. Womack, squinting, made a few

suggestions - What about number twenty-three? Or sixteen, the shrimp? - before the waitress arrived and Adriane ordered a bowl of soup.

Soup? said Womack. He looked apologetically to the waitress. Why don't we share a couple things?

I'm not that hungry, said Adriane. She gazed around the restaurant, up at the walls decorated with posters and maps of Vietnam, at the shelves of ornaments by the door. A few booths over, a couple were drinking with their arms entwined.

Womack decided on the shrimp dish for himself, plus a half-liter of house wine for the two of them, to share.

The waitress left, smiling. Womack looked at Adriane, then over at the romancing couple, then back at her. He rolled his eyes.

What's wrong with that? she asked, staring back.

Nothing, said Womack. Just a little cheesy.

They were silent until the food and wine arrived, and even then, their meal was only punctuated by Womack asking, How's your soup? to which Adriane responded, Good, how's your shrimp? to which Womack responded, Good, and then Adriane slurped her soup and Womack chewed his shrimp, which were not good at all, but overcooked and rubbery, and when the meal was over Adriane put it on her Visa and they left the restaurant and walked home, Womack behind Adriane, single-file.

Back in the apartment Adriane went directly to bed, and Womack, tipsy from the half-liter of house wine he'd drunk, alone, sat at his desk flipping through an old address book he found in one of the drawers. He stopped at the B's and sat there for a moment staring at the page, before picking up the telephone and dialing a number. A recording informed him that the number had been changed; Womack noted this on a Post-It with his licorice marker, hung up and called the new number.

This time someone answered whom Womack called Bug, and Bug called Womack Man, hollering, Jesus, Man, how long's it been? and from behind the curtain Adriane moaned something, so when he responded Womack dropped his voice to a whisper: Since the summer, Bug. Before I moved out.

So? said Bug. How's married life?

Listen, said Womack. Why don't we get together for a beer?

He suggested a bar, somewhere nostalgic they used to go in college that Bug responded favourably to: Fucking A! he yelled, and from the bedroom Adriane moaned again.

Womack hung up and slipped out the door with his coat under his arm, put it on standing in the street, pulled the hood up over his head. From the purple night sky came a fast, wet snow. He looked up at the window of the bedroom, imagined Adriane in there, alone in their bed. Considering what she might be dreaming about, Womack realized how much of her life existed beyond their world together, beyond him: The Youth, this Southeast Asia business, Yoga. He tried to imagine her dreaming about these things, but found worse the thought of her dreaming about the things they shared and he knew, her version of their life together. Womack turned from the apartment window, shivering, and made his way carefully down the icy street.

At the bar Bug was waiting for him, halfway through a pint, halfway through a cigarette. They shook hands, a formality Womack couldn't remember ever indulging in before with anyone from school. Standing there in the bar, pumping Bug's hand, he searched his friend's face for something familiar, something to reel in what he had expected to rescue him for the night.

So? said Bug, after Womack had gotten his own pint from the bar. How's married life?

Ha, said Womack, and disappeared behind his beer. Hardly married. What about you? What's up?

Same old, said Bug. You know. He paused for a moment, pushing his pint glass around in circles on the table. Hey, how about Mike and Cheryl? Did you think they'd be the first to go?

About fucking time, if you ask me.

Bug took a drag off his cigarette, laughed a tight-lipped laugh while he inhaled. Six years, right? Since second year? He blew smoke in a column at the ceiling.

About that, yeah. Hey, sorry you didn't get the invite, Bug. I don't know what's up with that.

Hey, Man. Not your fault. I barely talk to any of those folks any more, anyway.

A silence followed, which Womack broke by raising his glass. Well, cheers. Good to see you. It's been too long.

Way too long, Man. Bug grinned and they chinked glasses and drank.

So, seriously, said Bug. What's it like doing the live-in thing?

Well, Ade's pretty busy. We don't really see one another too much. But, yeah, things are good. Womack took another swallow of beer, considered this. He nodded, adding, You have your struggles. But things are good, for sure.

Cool, said Bug. Hey, I read a couple of your stories in some magazines.

Oh, yeah?

We all knew you'd be the one to make it – the one who'd actually put his English degree to good use.

Hardly made it yet. But thanks.

And I love your bios, Man – *Martin Womack feels silly writing a bio*. Hilarious.

Womack picked at the edge of his coaster. Yeah, well, that's just because people all write the same thing. And who cares what my publication credits are, right?

Hilarious, Man. Bug ground his cigarette out. So, you're working on a book?

Well, yeah, sort of. I got this grant, so the pressure's on. Actually, it's all getting a bit... I don't know. Narcissistic? Maybe. Womack trailed off, took another big swallow of beer. Anyway, I started volunteering— you know, just for something different.

Cool. Where's that?

Womack paused, gazing across the table. Here he felt something: a slight tug that was not quite guilt, not quite shame – but close, like he was about to reveal a secret, tantalized but knowing he shouldn't. I work with this family, he said, carefully. It's like Big Brothers, sort of.

Good for you, Man, said Bug, and raised his beer in a respectful salute, before tipping it back and downing the last of it.

When he is full, the boy moans. Womack excuses himself from the table with the boy's dishes, rinses them in the sink, stacks them in the dishwasher, and then wheels the boy into his bedroom, where they sit for a while. Womack sits on the bed and tells the boy, You need to digest your food. The boy moans and rocks slightly in his wheelchair.

Womack looks out the window of the boy's room, at the sun setting or the children's swing-set in the backyard, and thinks about the novel he is writing. He has wanted for some time for this boy to become a character - someone tragic, his novel lacks pathos - but how to write about a dying child without resorting to sentimentality, to cliché?

That Thursday, two days before Mike and Cheryl's wedding, Adriane announced to Womack that she would only be able to make it to the reception.

There's this Hot Yoga class starting on Saturday afternoons, she told him over a dinner of fish sticks and peas. If I don't go to the first one, they won't let me sign up.

Hot Yoga? said Womack, stabbing at a single pea with his fork. Ade, these are two of my best friends.

Really? When was the last time you talked to them?

Whoa, said Womack. The pea rolled away; he put down his fork.

I'll be there for the reception -- that's what matters. They won't even notice me missing at the ceremony. And you know how I feel about church and religion and all that.

I've cancelled volunteering for the day, Ade. You don't think you could just do your Hot Yoga some other time? He looked at her. What the fuck is Hot Yoga, anyway?

Sorry, she said, and reached across the table, unexpectedly, to squeeze Womack's hand. He felt something like warmth at this contact, and hated himself for that.

At the wedding ceremony Womack sat at the end of a pew in the back of the church, the space beside him conspicuously empty. When Cheryl came up the aisle he turned with everyone else, beaming, trying to catch her eye. She stared ahead, some strange mix of terror and joy on her face, and walked deliberately down the middle of the congregation as though she were trying to ignore everyone there.

After the vows and photos and everything else, and the two-hundred person congregation had shifted to the community centre across town, Womack found his seat at a table with strangers, right near the front of the reception hall. The folded card on his plate read *Womack + Guest*. The room began to fill, and Womack kept asking the woman on the other side of the empty chair between them what time it was, before, finally, just as the head groomsman was about to give his speech, Adriane came breezing in. She was dressed in black pants and a black sweater, and her hair was still wet from the shower.

Thanks for showing up, whispered Womack as she sat down.

Adriane shook out her napkin and laid it across her lap. That was some *hot yoga*.

Right, said Womack, and pulled away.

The speeches began. They were long. Adriane sat there, her back to the stage, staring into space. Womack drank a few glasses of wine and began to feel disappointed that he hadn't been asked to speak. He would have been good. He was a writer, for fuck's sake.

Then the speeches were over and Cheryl was standing up at the front with a big white bouquet, facing backward, and a cluster of women were gathered jostling at the front of the hall. The DJ got on the microphone and everyone joined in the countdown, and at Zero! Cheryl launched the bouquet upwards over her head, and even before it landed, Womack could trace the trajectory, could see in horror that it was coming toward his table. When it smacked down on Adriane's plate he could only stare into all those flowers, the ivory gloss of them. He was aware vaguely of Adriane saying something like, Oh, fucking fantastic, and felt nothing, later, when they got home and her first move was to the kitchen, where she stuffed the entire bouquet into the trash underneath the sink.

After the boy digests his dinner it is time for his bath, and Womack fills the tub and strips the boy down and lifts him up and eases him into the water, which Womack takes great care to ensure is the right temperature. The water sloshes around and Womack struggles for a simile to describe it to himself in his head, but the boy is floundering about in the water and needs calming, so Womack abandons similes and instead attempts to soothe the boy by putting his hands over the boy's ears. The boy's thrashing subsides; he sinks down into the water with Womack's hands on his face, smiling, laughing. Then Womack sponges the boy down, and shampoos his hair, and when the boy is pink and rosy and clean, Womack lifts him out of the tub and towels him off.

It was just over two weeks until Christmas, and Womack decided to buy a turkey. At the supermarket he scooped one from the deepfreeze and brought it home on his bicycle in his backpack. When Adriane came home that evening from yoga, after she turned off his

music and reappeared in the kitchen, Womack opened up the refrigerator door and displayed it to her, proudly, as if it were something he himself had constructed or laid.

Better keep it in the freezer, said Adriane.

Yeah?

Well, it's not going to keep in there for ever.

Doesn't it look delicious?

Adriane eyed the turkey, a pinkish lump nestled between the milk and pickles. It looks like a dead bird, she said.

Womack slammed the fridge door. For fuck's sake, Ade.

What? She was laughing at him.

Can you get excited about anything?

A turkey? You want me to get excited about a turkey?

Well, something.

Adriane shook her head and went into the living room. Womack followed her and stood in the doorway, watching her remove the dictaphone from her pocket, place it softly on the coffee table, then pick up *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*, and start reading.

So when are we going? he asked.

Adriane laughed, turning the page. You think you could afford it?

Womack faltered. He could feel what was coming, knew it from so many bad movies, the script of *The Couple's Fight*. How was it supposed to begin, again?

What is this? he asked her, finally.

What is what?

This. You. Never home. And when you are, acting like I don't exist – not talking, disappearing into that book, going to bed.

Don't you ever get tired of just sitting around? There was something tired and pleading in Adriane's eyes. Womack did his best not to read it as pity.

You want to take a vacation? he demanded. Take a vacation. Go. I'm not stopping you. I'll lend you an extra shoestring, if you want.

Oh, put it in your novel, writer. Adriane sighed, closed the book and flopped back on the couch. She was silent. Womack was silent. Then, there was a loud click from the dictaphone, and they both looked down at it, sitting almost guiltily on the coffee table.

What the hell? he asked, moving across the room.

Adriane stood. Don't, she said.

But Womack was already there, the recorder in his hand, hitting the EJECT button, popping the cassette out of the recorder. What's this? You're taping our conversations?

Adriane was reaching toward him, a nervous expression on her face.

Give that to me.

Womack slid the cassette back into the dictaphone, hit REWIND for a few seconds, then PLAY.

From the speaker, his own voice – tinny, but audible: *Can you get excited about anything?*

And then Adriane's: *A turkey? You want me to get excited about a turkey?*

His, more incredulous and desperate than he remembered: *Well, something.*

And so on, their voices, back and forth. Finally, Adriane's, *Oh, put in your nov-* was cut off, and the tape began to whine before snapping to a stop.

Womack stood for a moment, silent, gazing at the dictaphone in his hand as if it might speak up and offer an explanation. Adriane sat down on the couch.

How long have you been doing this? Womack asked, his back to her.

Adriane said nothing.

He rewound the cassette, farther this time, letting the counter wind backward a few hundred digits. He pressed PLAY.

Here he was: *I guess so, yeah.* This was followed by hiss, the odd clank of something metallic. Chewing. Womack watched the wheels of the cassette turn, waiting. Then, himself again: *So, Southeast Asia.*

Yep, she said.

Sounds fun.

A pause. Her: *Something to read.*

Just something to read?

Womack hit STOP. Christ, he said. You're messed up, you know that? He took the cassette out of the recorder, turned it over in his hands.

There was a sigh from the couch, but Womack refused to look over. He wiggled his finger into the empty space at the base of the cassette, hooked it under the tape, and began pulling, pulling – not angrily, but purposefully, the wheels spinning, however many of their recorded arguments unraveling into piles of glistening black ribbon at his feet.

After bathing the boy, Womack has to get a diaper on him, which is always a struggle. With one hand Womack lifts the boy's legs and holds them together at the ankles, knees bent, while with the other he hoists up the boy's backside and attempts to wedge the diaper underneath. Occasionally the diaper ends up the wrong way on, but by then Womack is often so exhausted he says, Fuck it, to himself, and pulls the boy's pajamas on over the backwards diaper, and gives him some pills. The boy might at this point again be moaning. Womack does the hands on the ears thing. It has become a reflex. The boy grins, gurgling, cooing. With his hands cupped over the boy's ears, Womack looks down at him, at the boy lying on the bed in his pajamas, something like delight on his face, and he tries not to think the expected thoughts of fortune and misfortune, chance and fate.

After the incident with the recorder, Womack and Adriane had another argument, which, that night, with Adriane in bed and him sitting before his computer, filled Womack with shame and embarrassment. He recalled himself screaming things like, Will you think of someone other than yourself, for once? and Adriane crying and screaming back, When was the last time we did anything fun?

There was nothing here he could use. These moments, he knew, did not for good writing make. He needed tension, not fighting. He needed exciting words with weight and substance, not tired old phrases that would only read as familiar and done.

His thoughts turned to Adriane in The Bedroom. From behind the curtains came the light whistle of a snore, the creak of bedsprings as she turned in her sleep. Womack pictured her, cocooned in the covers – but the image included him, lying next to her, staring into her face as she slept. A hard knot rose in his throat. Womack sighed, deeply, rose from the uncomfortable chair, pushed through the curtains, and stood looking down at Adriane, eyes closed, mouth half-open, hair splayed across the pillow.

Hey, he said.

A pasty, smacking sound from her mouth.

He sat down on the bed, reached out and prodded her with his fingertips. Hey.

Adriane rolled over. What time is it?

Ade, this isn't right. Us sleeping in the same bed.

What? She sat up.

Us, like this. I can't do it, act like nothing's wrong, lie down next to you. I can't sleep like that. Like, physically, I can't sleep.

Okay?

So maybe one of us should sleep on the couch. Like we could take turns, or whatever.

Look at you, she said. Her mouth was a crescent-shaped shadow in the dark.

Me?

Making decisions. I'm impressed.

What are you talking about?

I'm talking about you, actually doing something for a change. Not just sitting back and watching and then going to your computer and typing it all down.

I'm sorry?

You know, it's too bad you wrecked that tape I was making. I was planning on playing it back for you, so you could actually hear yourself. Like, for real, instead of the version you make up in your head.

What would you know about that?

Listen, she said, kicking the covers off. I think one of us sleeping on the couch is a great idea. And I volunteer myself. Seriously. No problem. The bed's all yours.

And then she ducked through the curtains and was gone. Womack looked down at the S-shaped indentation her body had imprinted on the mattress. Lying down, curling his own body to fill the shape, he could smell Adriane's hair on the pillow. He pulled the sheets around him and could feel the heat she had left behind.

Womack's last task before he puts the boy to bed is to give him water. This is not as simple as running the tap into a cup and tipping it down the boy's throat; while pureed foods are not a problem, the boy chokes on liquids. Drinking is a complicated, almost medical procedure. The boy has been outfitted with a sort of valve above his bellybutton. It looks to the man like a valve you might find on a pair of children's waterwings: a little tube that juts out of the boy's stomach, and a stopper on a flexible hinge that plugs and unplugs the opening of the tube. In the corner of the bedroom, the man sits the boy down in his wheelchair, lifts his shirt to expose the valve, and attaches a tube connected to an I.V. bag hanging from the ceiling. Water from the bag drips into and along the tube

and directly into the boy's stomach. The man sits back, waiting, and watches the boy drink.

One of the last nights before Adriane moved out, Womack came home from volunteering and she was sleeping in the bed, the curtains open. The blankets on the couch were still there, crumpled in a woolly ball from where she had kicked them that morning. It was early, barely nine o'clock. Womack stood between the open curtains, looking down on her lying there, listening for the whistle of her breath. There was silence. Womack knew she was awake.

Hey, he said, getting into bed.

There was no reply, but Womack could feel her shifting, moving closer.

Hey, he said, again.

Adriane turned over. Womack reached out and put his hand to her face, felt the wetness of tears on her cheek.

Just sleeping, right? said Adriane. No fooling around.

Just sleeping. For old time's sake.

He slid one arm underneath her neck, another around her back, his thigh between her legs. Their faces were close. Her breath was salty and hot.

I miss you, he said.

Adriane sniffed.

He kissed her, then, felt her lips against his, but the kiss felt only like a gesture: a handshake, a nod, a wave goodbye. Then she turned and he curled tightly into her back and closed his eyes. After a few minutes like this, he felt her body relax as she fell asleep. Her breath came in deep, restful sighs.

Womack lay there, the tickle of Adriane's hair against his face. Sleepless minutes became an hour. An hour became two. He was hot. He kicked the covers off. Another

hour passed. Womack thought, Sleep, sleep, to himself. He tried to match his breathing to hers. Eventually, he rolled away, releasing her and sitting up. Legs dangling off the bed, Womack looked at Adriane over his shoulder. Her face. The deathful peace of sleep.

In the kitchen Womack filled a mug with milk and put it in the microwave, which whirred to life and cast a yellow glow into the dark kitchen. He leaned back on the counter in front of the refrigerator, smiled, then reached forward, opening the freezer. A cold blast of air, and there was the turkey, surrounded by ice cube trays and TV dinners and Tupperware.

In the living room, Womack sat down with his warm milk on the uncomfortable chair and turned on his computer. He sipped at the milk while it booted up, thinking of the turkey in the freezer: a last, sad attempt at domesticity, futile and abandoned and collecting the white fur of frost.

When the computer was ready, he opened up the file on the desktop that was his novel, and sat there, reading it over, rolling slightly this way and that. He leaned back. The milk was done. He let the cup rest in his lap, stretched out his legs, and that morning, when Adriane woke and found him in the chair underneath the window, the computer's screensaver whirling around on the other side of the room, he was sound asleep.

On the boy's bed are a harness and guardrail to prevent him from rolling out over the course of the night. These Womack once forgot to put in place; he realized the following morning, and promptly called the boy's mother to make sure the boy had not cracked his skull open over the course of the night. The boy had not. Sylvia explained that every night after Womack leaves the house, she checks on her son, and kisses him goodnight.

Now it is the last Saturday before Christmas. Next week the family has told Womack to take the day off. A holiday. But today Womack is scheduled to head out there on his bicycle, to go through his routine with the boy of opening doors and supper and bedtime and bedtime.

In his place that he now inhabits alone, in his place that is not quite loft and not quite apartment, his place that contains just under half as much furniture and two less tropical house plants than it did a few weeks prior, Womack gets ready for his day of volunteering. He eats a sensible lunch of a bowl of soup, a bagel and an apple. The coffee maker is gone, so instead Womack makes a cup of tea, which he sips while he edits a draft of his novel, not yet complete but still printed out and lying in two stacks on the kitchen table. He works with a blue pen on the stack of paper to his right. The completed pages he turns over and adds to the stack to his left. It is going okay, he thinks.

When it is time to leave, Womack finishes the page he is working on, stands, puts on his coat and hat and gloves, checks for the key to his bike lock in his pocket. At the door on his way out, he pauses for a moment, looking back across the kitchen, at the refrigerator, at the freezer.

At the family's house Sylvia is waiting, as always, with her son in his wheelchair, but this time the other children are decorating a Christmas tree in the corner of the room. Andrew is hanging ornaments with methodical symmetry; Jessica is wrapping the branches in silver tinsel. A blue macaroni angel looms above. Womack removes his coat and hat and gloves, lowers his backpack to the ground.

What's in the bag? asks the boy's mother.

Ah, says Womack. A little present.

He opens the zipper, and, shaking the backpack a bit, produces the turkey.

A turkey, says Sylvia. Beside her, the boy begins to moan.

I thought we could maybe have it tonight, says Womack, cradling it like an infant, together.

That's very kind of you, says Sylvia, but I think it's still frozen. It'll take at least a day to thaw before we can even think about cooking it.

Womack wavers at this, feeling exposed and foolish and, above all, hopelessly young.

Hastily, Sylvia rescues him, holds out her hands for the turkey. But if you're not going to eat it, we'd love to keep it for another time.

Womack smiles. The boy moans. Okay, says Womack.

The rest of the afternoon is spent predictably: the walking about, the doors, supper, the boy's bath. Womack lies the boy down on his bed, lifts the boy's legs up in the air, does his best to get the diaper on. Next: pajamas. Outside the December sky glows a dull orange. Womack closes the blinds of the boy's bedroom, pulls back the covers, starts to lift the latches on the guardrail to secure it alongside the mattress.

When the boy is safely in bed, Womack's duties will be over for the evening. He will cross the hall and knock on Sylvia's bedroom door. He will hear the click of the lock and the door will open and Sylvia will smile a tired sort of smile and say, Thank-you, Martin, and Womack will say, No problem. Womack will say, See you next week, Sylvia, and Sylvia will say, Yes.

But tonight, Womack realizes, in the living room Jessica and Andrew will not be packing up the Game of Life, Jessica having won again, her little car packed with the blue and pink pegs of a successful family, her bank account bursting, her assets bountiful. They will have finished decorating the tree. They might be watching a movie, a Christmas movie, the tree blinking coloured lights from the corner of the room. Goodbye, Womack will whisper, as he puts on his coat. Jessica will say, Bye, not turning from the movie, and Andrew will wave and grin.

And so Womack will leave the family. He will head outside and unchain his bicycle and hop up onto it and push off and begin to pedal his way home, where his half-written novel waits for him on his kitchen table. The bicycle will cut down the darkened streets of the suburbs, heading toward the city and the novel. The streets will be black and wet with melted snow and spangled golden with streetlights, and riding back home along them, through the winter night, will tonight feel to Womack a little bit like falling.

The Day Jacques Cousteau Gave Pablo Picasso a Piece of Black Coral

On one of their many dives in the Red Sea, Jacques Cousteau and his crew excavated a piece of rare black coral from the reefs off the shores of the Sudan. Months later, Cousteau sat with Pablo Picasso on the white-washed balcony of the painter's villa in Cannes, drinking wine of an inconsequential vintage and gazing out over the Mediterranean.

"I've brought you something," Cousteau said, reaching into his satchel and producing the coral. He handed it to his friend. "The Saudis use it to make prayer beads."

Picasso nodded, turning the coral over in his hands. It was a small branch from one of the great underwater trees, brownish and knobby. Beneath them, the sea crashed frothing against the seawall.

"It took one of our men over an hour to saw it off." Cousteau smiled. "He came up covered in coral mucus. Two days to wash himself clean."

Picasso nodded again. He ran his thumb over the coral's rough terrain, cataloging its crevices and ridges by touch. Then, with a jerky motion, the painter tossed the coral into the air, caught it, and dropped it into the pocket of his baggy velvet trousers, where it became a vague lump in the soft fabric. Picasso raised his glass to Cousteau. "Thank you," he said, and swallowed the wine in a single gulp.

Inside, Cousteau moved inquisitively around, admiring the art that filled every room of the villa: paintings piled on floors, drawings pinned to walls, sculptures clumped in corners. He stopped before a sketch of Picasso's mural at the UNESCO building in Paris.

In its centre was what looked like a spindly, blue man, falling downwards, arms flailing over his head.

Picasso slid up beside Cousteau and placed a hand on the explorer's shoulder. Cousteau pointed to the man. "What's he meant to be doing?"

"You know," Picasso said, "art critics have written extensively about that figure. Some say it is the fall of Icarus. Others that it is Lucifer being cast from heaven."

"So?" said Cousteau, still staring at the drawing.

"Don't tell anybody, Jacques." Here Picasso leaned in closer, his mouth almost touching Cousteau's ear, the wine sweet and lemony on his breath. He whispered, "I was just trying to paint a diver."

When it was time for Cousteau to leave, Picasso walked with him down the stone stairs of the villa. With one arm he held the heavy, wooden door open as Cousteau stepped outside onto the street. Picasso's other hand remained buried deep in the pocket of his trousers.

"Sorry to run, Pablito," said Cousteau, "but I'm playing truant from my crew."

Picasso laughed. "Back to discovering lost worlds," he said.

"And you, back to inventing new ones." Cousteau reached out to shake hands.

Picasso hastily removed his hand from his pocket. In it, a rusty, mottled husk, sat the piece of black coral. He paused for a moment, locking eyes with his friend. Then, before either could speak, Picasso slapped his hand into Cousteau's, claspng the coral between their palms. Cousteau felt it there, the sharp sting of its knobs and spines. Picasso pumped his arm vigorously, crushing the coral into the soft flesh of Cousteau's hand. Then, abruptly, he pulled away.

"Take care, Jacques," Picasso said, grinning. He dropped the coral into his pocket, waved, and closed the door.

Cousteau was left standing on the street, the midday sun slicing down and carving shadows from the rooftops, the thunder of surf in the distance. His palm still stung. Turning his hand over, looking down, Cousteau saw what had been etched there: a pattern of holes and furrows and puckered wrinkles, carved deep and pink into his skin.