



Quercus



# Quercus

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(kwîrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

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cover image:

**Sarah Holst '11**

*Vrindavan*

Pen and colored pencil, 11" x 17", 2015

back cover image:

**Sarah Holst '11**

*Chesler Park*

Pen and colored pencil, 11" x 17", 2015

inside back cover image:

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*International Barf Bags*

Mixed media, 7" x 14", 2015

Special thanks to Kathryn Anderson, Clea Felien, Joseph Lappie, and Kristin Quinn.

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September 29

I like this in-between, this green and gold  
of grass and field dividing countryside  
where emerald lanes wide yellow swaths enfold,  
of sun-drenched stalks with husks down-bent and dried.

These verdant glossy stripes that line the road  
hold summer fast while fall asserts its grasp;  
the bean leaves gleam like gold coins stowed  
in giant chests. The gods above must gasp!

A closer look finds yellow in the green  
where goldenrod and sunflowers grace the ditch;  
above sere ears of corn hues are still seen,  
a leafy lingering resisting autumn's switch.

Between extremes of life and death I write  
and try to keep joy's treasure map in sight.

—Nancy Hayes

## Resolution

My father used to watch the birds flee,  
Dream of the places they might go  
When their feathers ruffled at first touch  
Of autumn's sudden chill.  
Taking flight above the frothy swells  
Of Mississippi waves rocking listless fish to sleep,  
They'd make their way.

I would mourn their disappearance,  
Come to dread the smell of fall, the taste of rot  
Shellacked to Wind's broad shoulders,  
An omen for the ebbing of all life.  
The leaves would drop; the birds would flee;  
Even clouds would crumble.

My father would say, "Our friends will be back soon."  
I escaped the joyless fog—the loss of all things bright—  
But he held strong to his position: witness to their flood  
As though this great migration could manifest  
Only if someone made a point to stand and watch it pass.

He played this role as long as he could bear  
And now I'm back to mime his watchful eye,  
Cold scraping frigid fingers through my hair  
And tracing roughly down my wind-burnt cheeks  
As I stand witness to the grim procession.

I use my springs and summers to prepare, collecting fragments—  
My face turns west to watch the sun bleed out;  
I press soft petals—war paint—underneath my eyes.

—Bailey Keimig

## Shelter

My hands have spent a lot of time hiding—  
burrowing in dens of cloth like nervous foxes,  
making homes inside pockets and sleeves and underneath thighs.

It used to drive my mother crazy;  
she'd say I looked homeless  
as my sleeves crept further down.  
My cheeks would blaze and my eyes would lower,  
because eight-year-olds don't have words to say  
that hands exposed mean vulnerability,  
that hands hidden make it easier to hide their emptiness,  
that being lonely doesn't matter as long as no one notices.

I always thought that by the time I got older, I'd feel a lot braver.  
The adults in my life seemed to flit around like little bees  
with a purpose and a place in the world.  
I tried to grow fast so I could find my own hive,  
but I knew even then that I'd feel a little lost  
a little longer than most.

I'd watch people glitter around me, ethereal forms  
forging ersatz bonds to muffle the nakedness of emotions  
I was somehow sure we all shared—  
it's funny the way kids assume everyone knows what they're thinking.

As I grew I began to wonder why each day seemed so heavy.  
Like Atlas holding up the heavens,  
I tried to keep my head up high enough to breathe.  
I guess I'll take it as a sign for good to come  
when breathing in starts to feel like waking up  
and the metallic zigzag of orange juice on freshly cleaned teeth  
starts to feel like an accomplishment.

—Bailey Keimig

## The Wait

It is noon and little has stirred—  
Only their eyes, shrill as screech owls,  
Guarding this fusty-walled

Garden of their kin.  
They sit aside with puckered lips  
Prim as tulips, merciless,

Mouthing a batter of words.  
These scolds of old  
Entangle us as we falter

Through the desiccated path,  
Our blood-union  
Frailer than a matchstick

As tufts of dried  
Ribbongrass and cockleburrs,  
Snapping and cracking underfoot,

Catch our skin like shamed fists.  
My shoulders, arms  
Like windless porch swings,

Useless from the crush of the wait.  
But there was never room for us,  
Not a mark of a grin to let us in.

Outside their walls,  
No longer smacked with sin,  
We will never walk so again.

—Carrie Chesney '02

## Gethsemane

You must remain loyal. You must learn to hear me in coin-clinks as in lepers' groans, recall how the silver thief drank well beside you, as if to say, *I owe you nothing*, and how you did nothing, lamb, as if to say, *I know*. A fog will descend upon *owe, nothing*. I will send a poison to approach your lips, you will repeat only *I, you*, when other words crackle your throat: his name, your farewell cries. Someone will trace a fish in the sand because he is hungry. You will point to it, *I, you*, and he will hear, *let us feed on each other*. He will invent a promise of bread rained down to baskets. Baskets soon will appear by the thousands, as baby beaks jawing at a breadless sky. Lamb, you must endure it. You must be silent when you bleed and when the vinegar offends. You must keep from the fishermen, the door-makers, saints, that a threshold is a threshold, that there is no kingdom of anything inside but their sorry, slow hunger of flesh, all vessels borne empty of food.

—Emily Kingery

## History Lesson

One of us says, *Wait, when?* about a story that hasn't been true for years. What remains of it is shirt-tucking, the dark of a public playground. I remember the slit of each nail head; I have invented the nighttime creak of the chains.

*September*, I suggest. *But what about*, you say—how we fed ourselves to mosquitoes, the gravel roads where we shed their black-crumble bodies, weeks of getting stoned in hayfields to erase children who would never be made.

I make a cradle of my handwriting, say, *the bites, the bodies*—whose car would it have been, the place we tasted to each other like tar? *Tea*, you say, but I knew the cough. You point out my letter-curls slumped up like drunks. They give in when there is nothing better to drink.

*November, maybe*, I revise in the end, disowning the month when the lives disappeared. I form crude X's and scrawl your notes in. The binding loosens. The squares line up like strangers' graves.

—Emily Kingery

## A Careful Mess

“It’s okay if you make a mess,  
little one.” She sticks her own finger  
in the paint and carelessly sets it  
on snow-white paper.

I nod and bite my lip,  
trying to copy her actions  
because I am six  
and I hate getting things wrong.  
She takes my small hands  
into her worn ones,  
trying to disband the fears  
my small body has against  
finger painting.

“Much too careful.” She smiles,  
shakes her head, and leaves me  
alone with countless sheets of paper  
that I can’t imagine ruining.

“You won’t hurt it; just hold it,  
honey.” She picks up the newborn lamb,  
all legs and ears, and shoves it  
into my arms.

I focus my attention on the newest thing  
I have ever seen.

I can already feel it growing cold  
between my palms.

It spends its whole life  
in my arms.

“Too cold for the babies.”

She sighs,  
shakes her head, and leaves me  
alone with my tears—  
a silent funeral

for the things I cannot keep alive.

“You won’t get through life  
without a broken heart.”  
She lifts her body, old but strong,  
and hugs me until I let go.  
I dig my nails into my skin  
to distract myself from crying  
in front of her.  
I have built a careful wall  
that even the closest  
can’t break through,  
but I watch her try.  
“Still too careful.” She sighs,  
shakes her head, and stays with me,  
her tears falling  
for the broken pieces of me  
that no one else was careful with.

—*Hannah Blaser*



## An Empty Gaze

Something missing  
Behind and below your left eyebrow,  
Something screaming in the hollow  
Of your sinus bone, as if someone took  
An ice pick and a bendy straw  
And mummified the gap of air just underneath  
Iris and eyelash. Maybe it happened  
While you slept, that the exodus  
Of sinew and will began and ended  
With little enough pomp: a funeral  
Uncelebrated and an absent crowd  
Gasping in unison—enough, at least,  
To leave you gaping back, all bug-eyed  
And vacuous, with gauze stretching  
From shoulder blades to reincarnate you  
Into something unwelcome,  
Something hollow and screaming  
Behind iris and eyelash.

—*Irene Herzig*

## Sediment

It's nothing so dramatic—  
Just flat plains of ochre grass  
stretching on and on into a yellow sky  
the color of a computer screen gone  
dead and cracked here and there  
with thunder. Sometimes  
the storms refuse to break.  
They sit there full of tension,  
full of rope frayed thin and taut,  
and the calm that is not calm  
paints a still pool of water  
in the hollow inside—deep and  
cold and full of spilled milk fish  
that slide heavy and unseen  
against my legs like an old guilt in the night.

And there, I drown.

Piece by piece, the red brick  
in my throat crumbles  
and the wet sediment of it sits  
against my maladapted windpipe—  
it's learned to make do with water,  
to grasp it hard enough for stolen  
moments of oxygen that taste  
like strawberries in January.

But now there is dirt between  
my teeth and in my lungs,  
dust turned to rust-colored mud  
occupying every corner of me  
as if winter-thickened blood  
had fallen to the earth like rain,

but these storms herald no spring,  
coax no new life to cover the plains  
with green. They just paint the grass  
another shade of brown  
and bury me all over again.

—*Irene Herzig*

## **pick a path**

My blood is slow today.  
It has forgotten how to fly.

Every time I ask God for humility,  
I swear I have learned my lesson  
And won't be asking again.

Then I do.

Still, if I could have one thing,  
it would be a heart burning  
as orange as these leaves.

—*Sarah Holst '11*

people too

the dead like  
to dress in daffodils

and do a liturgical dance  
where they pass lightning bugs  
from hand to hand and  
over their heads  
while standing in a circle

some say the dead do not play  
but that old man has seen them

he can be found standing  
in the graveyard

the daffodil dancers  
bring oceans to his eyes

—*Sarah Holst '11*

## wingéd

I watch my shadow  
running before me

and like the way  
her hips move

pop-popping  
through one easy mile  
after another

Victoria Rue said  
that feminist theology  
should be about  
embodiment

and I know that truth

in an air  
of sweat

the sunshine balm  
on my skin

breathing  
the tempo of the  
world thrumming  
past and through

this is how I interact  
with the eagles  
flying  
at the edge of  
universe

the washes of jasmine  
that nearly overtake me  
beg me to come lay  
in their siren smells

the freshest of fogs  
grey clouds  
resting with intimacy  
on the bosomed  
mountain rises

holding me  
close  
in this soft valley

this chalice of wine  
lift a hand  
to the endless dry blue  
of the sky

catch a seagull  
in my palm  
pocket it for later

—*Sarah Holst '11*

## when giving a tour

of the farm  
it is important  
to let the basil speak

it is not “holy” in a  
way your guests might be  
used to

but it is resurrection  
nonetheless

ask them to stick their  
face into the plant  
or touch the leaves  
both tough & tender  
without digging in their  
teeth & fingernails

yes it melts like butter  
yes it’s made of atoms

when touring the lake  
remember  
to let the wind speak

do not fill the air with stories  
that do not match her tenor

the way the sheets of ice  
dip & float  
a gentle rocking between  
water & sun



if your voice cannot paint  
with the dry reed's dance  
silence it  
& let your eyes  
& fingertips do the speaking

you will find that  
your guests leave  
with an understanding  
of what it means

to move with undulating  
windows of ice  
how it is to use  
ordinary things  
like death  
to grow

they will find  
that the holiness  
has stained their  
hands green

and that a smile  
stays warm  
on their lips

their breath  
and insides  
are less afraid  
and more alive

—Sarah Holst '11

## Vagabond Spring

I haven't seen much of him lately.

The miserable dragging of winter's feet  
comes between the people we wanted  
to be. O *reckless desire*, I think,  
but the heart of that has faded anyway,  
and the sweat of it all has staled,  
dried up, and the smell is gone.  
I've creased the things I cannot say  
into hawkish paper airplanes  
and flown them each into sucking puddles.  
Forlorn and damp, the springtime  
drags his feet, as if he's little interested  
in the melt and the shine and all the other reasons  
I loved him. And whoever we thought we could be,  
loosely, freely, in the fullness of dreams uncorked.  
That pendulum spring swings, unfulfilled.

*Incapacity*, I think, and the tyranny of time.  
Just us, and the justice of decay.

*Pain*, I think, and the pain in not knowing,  
or in having what you think you know change.  
Today he looks to me with the beast on his back  
and the I CAN'T DO THIS AGAIN on his lips  
and he bleeds; he says, "Do you ever wish  
it was just us again?" *Scream*, I think,  
and I let drip the lungs, saying,  
"All I'll ever need is just us."

*Scream*, I think, and the hollowness of space,  
and the fluency of fear,  
and the certitude of doubt.

Just us, and the justice of decay.

And the hate and the heat of the vagabond spring,  
and the space made persisting through time.

*Scream*, I think, and I let slip the weight,  
saying, "All I'll ever need is just us."

Somewhere in this fray that is us  
and is ours, forgiveness lives and breathes  
by the by. Time spent and lost and wasting still,  
by that smile, by that shine,  
and the ache made persisting through time.

–Seth Kaltwasser '09

## An Angel

There is an angel who comes to visit me at the café. He only comes when I am washing the dishes.

Here's how I know he is an angel:

1. He visits only when I am alone. And only when I am washing the dishes.
2. Every time I've seen him, he's been dressed in a perfect white shirt. September, October, April, July—doesn't matter.
3. The sun—which shines through the white curtains behind where the morning customers stand to place their orders—always seems brighter when it shines behind him.
4. I find him wildly, drop-dead attractive, even though he's not my type. My types are kind of dirty, sweaty, thick-haired formerly types who wear thrift-store flannels and never shave or cut their hair—but this angel has fine blond hair, closely cropped, without a shade of stubble gracing his glowing chin. I also noticed that he has nice teeth.
5. Lastly, I know he is an angel because I knew he was an angel the first time I saw him. Which is a strange thought for a person to have, but that's what I thought the first time I saw him: "This person is not a person. This person is an angel."

Give me one good reason why you think I'm wrong. I bet you can't.

The first time I saw him was in mid-September of last year. He ordered a gingerbread latte, which is so excruciatingly adorable that I wanted to die. We don't have gingerbread syrup at our café, so, regretfully, I had to inform him that a gingerbread latte was not in his cards that beautiful morning.

I relayed this information fearfully—hesitating for a moment to consider the possibility that if only I had faith enough to believe that The Good Lord Will Provide Gingerbread Syrup, that perhaps He would, and that I would be rewarded for my childlike belief in the midst of this test. But I am not a child anymore—I am twenty-four and disillusioned and faithless and stubborn—and while I can believe that this boy is and was and will

forever be an angel—how could I not believe it when he was standing right in front of me?—I could not take the risk that The Good Lord Would Provide Gingerbread Syrup out of an absence of gingerbread syrup (particularly if it meant embarrassing myself in front of a shimmering angel-boy), and so I simply sighed and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, we don’t have gingerbread syrup at this café,” and then I sort of half-cried, half-smiled to show him that I was truly sorry and that I also hoped we could still be friends.

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Then I’ll take a raspberry white-chocolate mocha.”

Which is so excruciatingly adorable that I wanted to die.

The last time I saw him was today, which is my last day at the café, my last time washing the dishes for this particular establishment. He was here and then he was gone and then I realized I wouldn’t see him anymore. I was alone, and I wanted to run, catch him in the parking lot and say, “Wait! Tell me your name!” and then he would smile and that would be just the beginning of something new. But I was at work, and that seemed like not the right thing to do, to be chasing an angel when you’re getting paid to wash the dishes.

It’s funny how something can be here and then be gone and you’re left carrying the weight of something you never held. Something you can’t name.

*Wait! Tell me your name!*  
*It’s nice to finally meet you.*  
*Are you free tonight?*  
*I like your smile.*  
*I feel the same way about you.*

I know an angel—known and loved and lost and missed—when I see one.

—Seth Kaltwasser '09

englewood, a high school, november 2014

they solicitous,  
defining *solipsist*  
for one another on a bus.

they part-time nihilists.  
low-hanging jeans,  
low-hanging fruit from proud trees  
growin' straight out cracked streets.

they raw.  
but they kids, man.  
they fucking kids.

working jobs without diplomas.  
raising babies without spouses.

dead friends jailed neighbors fourth-grade reading levels,  
killer smiles sly grins double chins dirty fingernails,

they sing.  
but they tired, man.  
they fucking tired.

—John Kuhn '09

## without shoes

man, it's like, sometimes, i only want you sometimes  
and then, like, other times, i can't get you off my mind.  
i'm not really sure what that says about me, y'know, as a person,  
but . . .  
i know it's not just about sex.  
it's definitely not about sex.  
i've controlled for it, man, like eight times,  
and i know—that shit's just not it.  
maybe it's about facebook.  
i've been pushin' through your profile pics  
like pusha t used to push product,  
like jay z pre vodka dreamin' of dollas,  
deaf fingers searching for signs,  
a young rapper struggling with rhymes  
and settlin' for slants.  
it's like i just can't  
make sense of my sometimes,  
but god, you have the most beautiful eyes,  
the kind that kinda crinkle up on the outsides  
because you smile so damn much,  
the kind neruda wrote about.  
those ojos azules  
just welcome you in anywhere  
and then it's, like, comfortable,  
and all of a sudden my shoes are off  
and i'm sitting on the coziest couch in cape town  
staring deep at two deep oceans,  
not caring whether or when or where  
they ever touch,  
thinking  
how good this all is—  
you . . . and me . . . and no shoes—

thinking  
how good it *could* be,  
thinking,  
*why did i wear these socks?*  
but then, then, it's like nah, forget that;  
i'll wear whatever socks i want  
'cause that's the kind of guy i am—  
a sock guy—  
and sock guys can put off decisions,  
dwell hard on inhibition,  
drown their wishes alone  
at night,  
and dream of the place  
the oceans meet—  
sometimes.

—John Kuhn '09



## **latter climbing**

i am in my best suit  
skipping  
on the heads of children  
with a tie knotted windsor  
pinned bijou to the stripes  
genteel punctilio!  
and my bloated pink feet  
shoehorned, corseted  
into high-shine, apex-bound wingtips  
coal-black and skidding  
atop rashly parted infant hairs  
tap-tapping on baby crowns  
(chipping their eggshells!)  
splitting little swan necks  
(so tensile!)  
and the vault!  
from my fleshy springboard  
into a cornered office with a view  
of the toddled rendered mute  
yes, i am in my best suit  
skipping  
on the heads of children

*–Holly Norton*

## This Is Serious

Yes, I'd like a large substantial  
and a side of extra large big  
a small immense  
with tremendous vast sauce  
for dipping and  
DON'T FORGET MY STRAW!

Last time you forgot my straw and I was forced to do a U-turn in the parking lot.

No, that's not all! Throw in a gigantic titanic mega too.

Oh, you're out of mega? What a shock.

How

about

mighty?

No mighty either? Perfect.

[sigh]

I guess I'll have to settle with a gigantic titanic whopping.

I guess.

While driving between windows, let's mumble to ourselves:

*I don't know why you'd be out of mega AND mighty.*

*I mean, that's your business staple right there.*

Let's toss our hand in the air like we're shooing away a fly and say: "Whatever!"

Now, point our fingers down and tap haughtily on the rim of our current-model car door and tell ourselves off:

"I come here EVERY day, you know . . . that's like \$1800—a year!"

Then, make yourself big, like a bar (that's how they say bear somewhere south or north), and get on your hindquarters so when we get to the window we're high enough to piss and moan about the serious condition of our own importance and, of course, for the sake of big things to put squarely in our mouths by yelling:

This is ridiculous!  
I wanna see your supervisor!  
Oh—you ARE the supervisor—  
How old are you anyway—  
I see—16 must be the new 50 (roll eyes).  
Well.  
Let me tell you,  
I can get jumbo anywhere in town.  
Do you know who I am?  
Do you?  
Does the little gold stitching on men's black socks ring a bell?  
Yeah, that was my fucking idea, so THAT'S who you're dealing with,  
and might I suggest that if humongous  
is your thing,  
then keep it on hand, man.  
Damn, is massive so hard?  
What? Did you just—  
did you just offer to throw in an undersized tiny for free?  
How will that make up for either a mighty OR a mega?  
It's bad enough I'm settling for a whopping, but an undersized tiny?  
Since you seem to be hell-bent on screwing me hard today,  
while you're at it  
why don't you just complete your insult and throw in a petite minute?  
Now, scream!  
Stay in school, kid!  
and burn out of the drive-through at 30 mph—  
because lunch is served, asshole,  
and this extra large big  
isn't gonna digest itself.

—Holly Norton

## A Year in Retrograde

October: You eat; laugh; smile at your friends, the unwashed tabletop, at a point to the right of my head. My fingertips tingle. I fight the familiar urge to lift my hand. The cerulean blue of your eyes is slick when they meet mine. A halo of lashes hangs over them. A storm front breaks across your brow as the gentle up-curve of your lip trembles, falters, falls. Before I can find an empty seat, you're out the door, stirring up dust, memories, and empty promises.

September.

August: We're friends. The thought swims through a river of vodka. I want to drown it, reach out and hold it under the surface. My palm finds yours and presses against the sure, solid resolve of your skin. You slip away like so much water through my fingers. You flood my senses, but I'm not afraid. My mind screams it loves you. The skin of my chest pulls tight over shards of a broken something—my heart or ribs. I can't think of how it got there. I wonder why it doesn't hurt. As I sink beneath the waves, bubbles escape my mouth. They carry words that pop in your ears until you finally walk away.

We're friends. We curl up on your bed, under your comforter, wrapped around each other; you're a breathless whisper saying you're sorry. You want to try again, to regain my trust. You'll work so hard. You promise. But your lips taste like whiskey and running. And you call me her name.

July: Today my co-worker asked if I had a boyfriend. The word sliced from temple to cheek to collarbone, like when you traced from my throat to my shoulder with your lips. Memories bleed as you cut down my chest, over the bruises you left with your caress. When it reaches my wrist, it's too late, every inch a crosshatching of touch, scars you won't remember leaving. I take a breath as a smile carves itself onto my mouth. I respond, polite and composed, "No."

June: We've been dating for about a month. It's not long, but we've replaced sleep with sentences, your voice like summer in my curls. I look forward to my alarm at 5 a.m. Instead of a sunrise, my eyes open to your smile on my phone. Each letter tugs at my eyelids, drawing me out of dreams of you with the word beautiful, which I'd never connected to myself until it was pressed by your lips to mine, until your name fit into my palm like your hand, engraved in the lines on my skin until you were spelled out across my heart line. And I know there's a break in it, and sometimes I talk about my ex, but you say you don't mind. You want to know everything about me, like a landscape you're aching to explore; the gait of my walk is a language worth learning. Sometimes you say her name, but I don't worry. You close your eyes and trace the freckles on my arms, speaking words in Braille you never knew existed.

May: After eight months of chance sightings in the cafeteria, a courteous wave on my way to class, and a few admittedly pathetic inquiries to my more outgoing friends, we meet. I'm not entirely sober, so I spend that first night thinking your name is Jake. I notice that your eyes are blue and spend the next five minutes staring into them, wondering how long I could hold my breath. You're only gone a few minutes before my phone lights up with your name. The first time we hang out, I avoid saying your name until someone else does. But then you lace your fingers with mine. It's more than just skin against skin. Our first kiss tastes like poetry.

April.

March.

February.

January.

December.

November.

October: I see you for the first time in the cafeteria. You smile and laugh, and I stop you before you leave. It's spur-of-the-moment. I'm not really sure what to say, so I compliment your shirt. It's the first time I make you smile. If I could go back to that moment, I'm sorry, but I would have turned around and said nothing.

*-Livv McDonald*

## Blue

Genus: *Cyanocitta*

Species: *Cristata*

Common name: Blue jay

One of the toughest of the backyard birds.

Fact: The cry of the blue jay bothers me more than the caw of the crow.

Crows gather in twisted trees in merry murders. Watch. They choose a branch that breathes in unison with its boarders, but they also know the ground. Nothing comforts me quite like the sight of those obsidian omens exploring the straw-like stubble of a November field.

But a lone blue jay finds a perch at the top of a birch to terrorize the smaller birds just because he can. He hops up and down on the branch as if to test its patience, as if to see how many times he can do this before it crashes to the ground in a flutter of flustered leaves. Someday it will snap, and he'll have to choose between flying away or plummeting with it.

Fact: The blue jay's blue hue hinges on relations with the sun's rays. (See also: refraction.) Other birds are born with the pigment in their plumes and needn't rely on manipulation of light.

Month: December

Birthstone: Turquoise

Not the same as the bruises the shadows leave on snow. Not like Orion's unreachable velvet skin.

Whoever picked the birthstone for December did a horrible job. This is the color of the deep end of a chlorinated swimming pool as seen from the windows during a summer thunderstorm. This is not the color of December.

Make: Ford  
Model: Focus  
Year: 2010  
Color: Flame Blue  
The family wanted an Escape.  
The family bought a Focus.

D.O.B.: 12/15  
Eyes: Hazel  
Relationship: Daughter  
Current activity: Writing a note to Dad on a blue laptop  
(A prayer for understanding and an apology for the references.)

They came with the education. The education came with the scholarship.

Artist: Crosby, Stills, & Nash  
Album: *Crosby, Stills, & Nash*  
Song: "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes"  
Year: 1969  
Lyric: "It's getting to the point where I'm no fun anymore. I am sorry."  
(I am sorry.)

Month: March  
Birthstone: Aquamarine  
Not the same as faded jeans with oil smears at the knees and buck blood  
at the cuffs. Not like the ghostly glow of the TV in the dark.

Whoever picked the birthstone for March did a good job. This is the  
color imagination chooses to paint the sky when recalling the way things  
used to be. This is the color of March.



Author: Wallace Stevens

Poem: "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

Year: 1937

Excerpt: "And they said then, 'But play, you must, / A tune beyond us, yet ourselves, / A tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are.'"

And they said then, "But write, you must, / A poem beyond us, yet ourselves . . ."

Artist: Pablo Picasso

Painting: "The Old Guitarist"

Year: 1903-04

I saw "The Old Guitarist" at the Art Institute of Chicago. I felt Atlas's ache spread across my shoulders. Gravity became unbearable. My bones could have splintered through my heels from the massive weight. The lady guiding our class blamed the blues.

(Macbeth: Throw [intellectual explanation] to the dogs; I'll none of it.)

My soul cried for the Old Guitarist.

(Macbeth: Come, put mine armor on.)

Author: Allen Ginsberg

Poem: "A Supermarket in California"

Year: 1955

Excerpt: "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?"

See also: the American Dream.  
Some lived the dream once.

Illusory deep pockets are nothing, were nothing, and will  
never be anything.  
You cannot replace a thing that never was.

D.O.B.: 3/15

Eyes: Blue

Relationship: Father

Current disposition:

Blue.

–*Kayla Kuffel*



















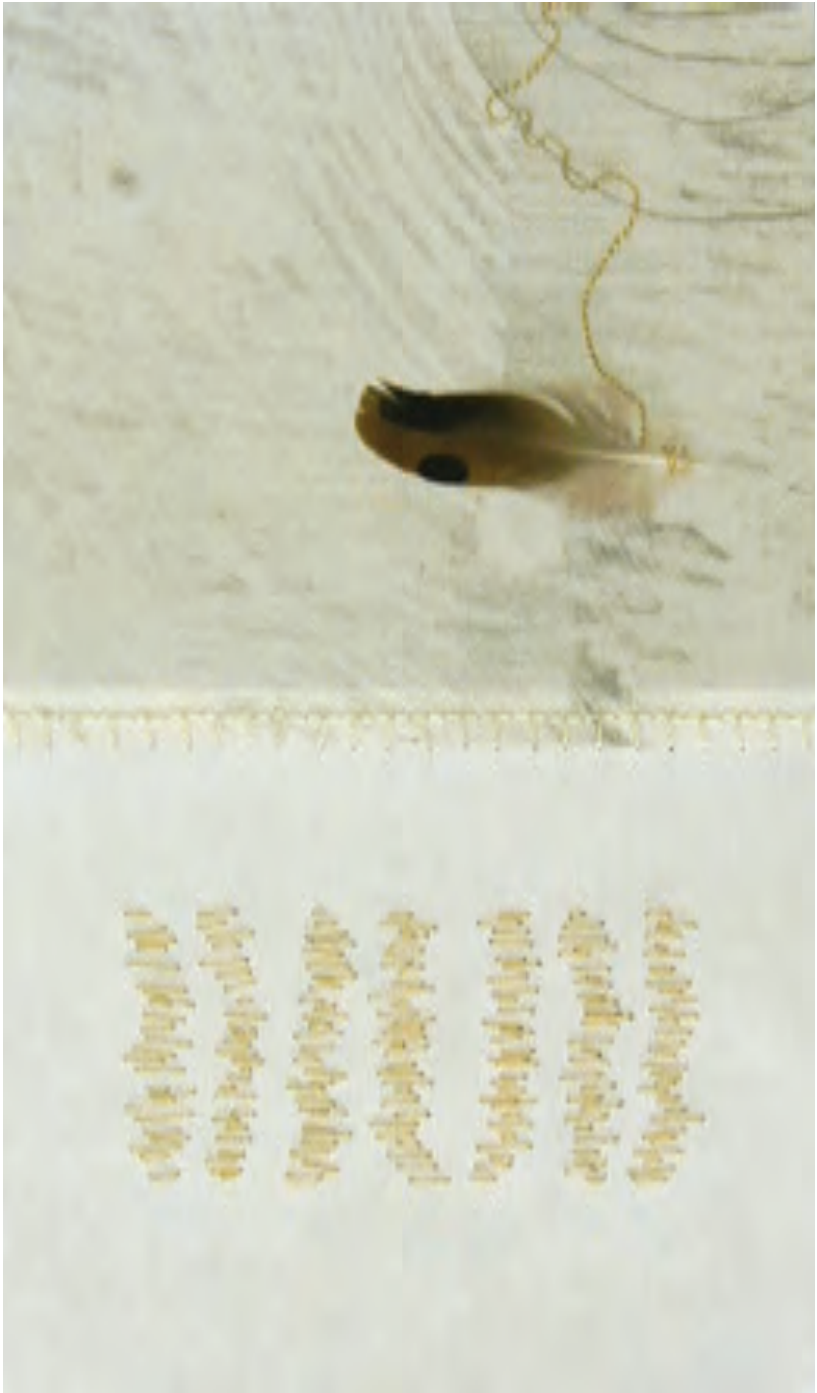


























## Requirements of Dancing

I sighed heavily and drummed my fingers on the white linen tablecloth, but the sound was muffled by the tinny whine of a cheesy love song churning through cheap speakers. People were standing all around, watching my cousin Kate and her new husband, Michael, take partner after partner for the dollar dance. She pushed her veil behind her shoulder to keep from overheating, but even I could see from where I was sitting how badly she was sweating. I knew she'd get a chance to sit soon, but I still turned away so I wouldn't have to watch. I wasn't really in the mood.

The dollar dance ended just as my mother sat down with a fourth glass of wine. "What's wrong with you, sourpuss?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Well, you look like your panties are caught in your crack." Her wine was already half gone.

"No, I'm just bored." I tried not to growl at her. It wasn't her fault my night had been so awful.

"Everyone's dancing. Doesn't that interest you at all?"

"Not especially." I crossed my arms and stared at a crack in the wall. She gulped more wine. "Why not?"

I glared at her. "Who exactly would I dance with? I'm related to most of these people."

"Your Uncle Mike isn't as handsy as he was before the arthritis. I'd say that's an option," she said and snorted at her own joke.

"Gee, at this rate I'll definitely be the next to marry."

"God, lighten up. Weddings are supposed to be fun."

"Like you're any less miserable right now," I snapped, and immediately regretted it. She leveled her gaze at me and I hung my head. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're right. This has been a . . . *difficult* evening. For both of us."

I picked at the hem of my sleeve. "I didn't mean anything."

She didn't answer. Instead, she looked to the dance floor, where people were starting to gather for the bouquet toss. I absentmindedly

tapped my phone screen again, but it was still free of messages.

Frowning, I tucked my leg under my thigh.

The crowd cheered as Kate threw the bouquet. The women jostled each other and reached up high, but a pretty blond woman snatched it. She thrust the bouquet in the air as everyone clapped, and a drunken man ran out onto the dance floor. We watched as my father picked her up and spun her around. Mom laughed sarcastically when he almost dropped her.

I hated Dad's new girlfriend. She was way too young and fake and just not *Mom*. I had the feeling she was a bit of a gold digger, but I had yet to prove it. I especially hated how Dad fawned over her and forgot about me. And he in no way needed to bring her to the wedding to flaunt in front of my mom. So I stuck next to Mom; I knew he was gutless and wouldn't come near her.

"I thought you were going to bring a boy," Mom said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I was."

"And . . . ?" She swished the last of her wine around in her glass.

"And nothing. He didn't come."

"Obviously," she said as she downed the rest of her wine. "But why? Did something come up?"

I clenched my teeth. "No, I asked him not to come."

Mom shook her head. "And why'd you do that?"

"Can we just drop it?"

"All right, all right—I get it. Lover's spat. Nothing poor old Mom can do to help."

I just sighed.

"I wouldn't even know what you kids fight about nowadays anyway. Was it something on the Twitter?"

"Mom, it's just Twitter, and no, it's nothing like that."

She tapped her fingernail against her wine glass, making a *ting* sound. "Ah, so a legitimate fight. That's why you're so concerned about it."



“Mom. I’m not *concerned* about anything.”

“Hmm, doesn’t seem like it,” she said and quirked an eyebrow toward my fingers on my phone screen again. I hadn’t even realized I’d been checking it.

I clasped my hands together in my lap. “Mom, please. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay, then. If you say so.” Her words slurred ever so slightly. The wine was starting to hit. “She looks so happy, doesn’t she?”

My gaze followed hers toward where Kate was spinning in a circle, holding hands with Michael and her new five-year-old nephew. She laughed as the little boy danced in silly rhythms and then flashed her smile up at Michael. “Well, I hope it lasts,” I said.

Mom turned to look at me again. “What do you mean?”

“Michael is a dick.” I probably should have hushed my voice in case any of his relatives were near, but I didn’t really care.

Mom sat back in her chair, intrigued. “And why do you say that?”

“At Grandpa’s birthday party I heard him say that the family only invites you to things because they have to. They wish they could invite Dad instead of you, but he’s technically not in the family anymore, so they can’t. I mean, who says that? Especially since he’s marrying in. What’s it matter to him?” I fidgeted, wishing I could have a drink of my own.

She smiled a little, almost smug. “I see.”

“You aren’t upset about that?”

“Not really. I figured that was how they all felt.”

I couldn’t believe she was being so calm. “Why would they feel that way?”

“Oh, it’s how everyone always felt about us. Sweetie,” she called, pausing to get my cousin Leo’s attention as he passed. “Could you top me off?”

Leo took her glass up to the bar, and I waited for her to continue. “As you can see, your father is always the life of the party.” She gestured to where he was doing the chicken dance with all the kids. “I always had

to be the serious, responsible one. When we split up, everyone thought it was because I was a heartless nag. And who wants one of those around at a family celebration?" She smiled, like it should be funny, but I knew it must have been eating away at her.

"You never told them the truth?"

"What, that he was cheating? Oh, no."

"But why?" I asked, incredulous.

I remember the day Mom caught him. I came home from school late after basketball practice. Mom was in the dark living room drinking a cup of black coffee. Dad's bags were packed and sitting by the door. Without even acknowledging her, he came down the stairs and looked at me as he picked up the bags. "I'll see you in a bit, huh, kiddo?" And just like that, he was gone.

Mom winked as Leo returned with her wine. "You're a doll."

"So?" I pressed.

She took a swig. "Honestly, what would that accomplish?"

"But you're letting him get away with it! Everyone thinks it's your fault!"

"And what does it matter to them?"

I paused, considering. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"It's none of their business," she continued. "If they want to judge me for something they know nothing about, that's their flaw to deal with, not mine. I shouldn't have to explain myself."

She had caught me completely off guard. I'd never known she felt that way. "But wouldn't it be easier on you if they knew?"

She sipped her wine. "Perhaps, but we got divorced either way. I would prefer to live without all the condescending sympathies from my brothers and sisters."

I didn't say anything; I knew she was right. They had always been that way, most of them feeling that their perfect marriages and their perfect lives were something my mother should strive to attain. One summer in particular I broke my arm on a swing set and all my aunt Brenda could ask was where Mom had been when it happened.

Mom sighed and looked back to the dance floor. “Well, I hope your boy problems are a bit less dramatic.”

They were, and I was feeling kind of bad about it after Mom’s confession. “Yeah, actually.”

She perked up a bit. “Do I get the story now?”

I rolled out my neck and repositioned in my chair. “He wants me to meet his family.”

“And you don’t want to?”

I fidgeted. “I feel like that’s something you do when you’re serious. I don’t know if I am.”

She surprised me by laughing. “Honey, you’re taking *yourself* too seriously. You’re in high school. Just because you meet his parents doesn’t mean you’ll marry the kid.”

“I think it means something more to him, though,” I said, frowning.

“Wait, how did all this come about?”

“I mentioned the wedding to him, and I said we should go together. He got excited and said I should meet his family too. I didn’t want to introduce him to everyone; I just wanted to have a good time.”

Mom scoffed. “You know everyone would have wanted to meet him.”

“That’s what he said. He got mad because he thought I just didn’t like his family, so I got mad because he was accusing me of things, and I told him not to come.” I traced the rim of my water glass with my finger so I wouldn’t have to meet her eyes.

“And?”

“And what?” I did look at her then.

“Are you glad he’s not here?”

“No,” I said grudgingly. “I still want him here, but then I’d have to admit that I don’t feel about him the way I should.”

“And what way is that?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what it’s supposed to feel like! I’ve never seen it!” Maybe I shouldn’t have said it, but it was true. I grew up thinking that the calculated way my parents acted around each other was

love, but it wasn't.

"Claire . . ." She paused, weighing her words. "Do you want to be with him?"

"Um, yeah." Where was she going with this?

"And does he want to be with you?"

"I think so?"

"Then what does the rest of it matter?"

I started to answer but stopped short.

She gave a humorless laugh. "The details certainly never stopped your father. But that's the difference. He had obligations he should have been thinking about. You don't. If you want to be with your boyfriend, just do it."

She had never spoken so candidly with me, and I assumed it was because of the wine. I could smell it on her breath when she spoke. I nodded, because what she was saying was actually making sense.

"Your father doesn't think; he just acts. You're thinking, Claire, and that's how I know you'll be fine. Just try not to think too hard, okay?" She walked around the edge of the table and hugged me. "Are you sure you don't want to dance? You don't get to wear a dress like that very often."

"No," I smiled. "I'm fine."

"Suit yourself. I'm gonna go find Uncle Terry." She walked away, toting her wine glass.

I watched the dance floor for a while—all my drunken relatives and their embarrassing dance moves. The women had long ago kicked off their heels, and the men had loosened their ties. The day had taken its toll.

A slow song began, and Kate and Michael were dancing together. He held her from behind; her head was tilted back on his shoulder, and his face was nestled in the curve of her neck. They swayed gently, and Kate held a bottle of her favorite beer curled to her chest. Her mascara was starting to flake, and they were both sweaty and exhausted, looking like they could drop at any moment. But they kept dancing, propped

up against each other. I couldn't shake it; something about that picture struck me as a reason not to care that Michael was a dick.

Making a decision, I slipped my feet back into my heels and stood up. I was already dialing Dean's number as I stepped outside of the reception hall. I shivered a little in the cool evening as the phone rang.

"Hello?" Dean answered.

"Hey, it's me," I said. "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I know we have a lot to talk about, and as soon as we get a chance, I want to hash it out, everything. But for now, if you're free, I could really use a dance partner."

—Paige Allen



## A Serpent in Eden

Frank Hayes waited in his beat-up Chevy Nova as his Marlboro burned to the filter. He took a drag and flicked it, then checked his watch. *It's a quarter to*, he thought. *Where the fuck is he?* His hand moved instinctively to the radio dial, but he stopped himself, knowing that the only thing on would be corporate propaganda and the pop garbage that passed for music. He pulled down the vanity mirror and grabbed the note he had gotten from Chavez. 3 TONIGHT. USUAL SPOT, USUAL TIME. He looked at the mirror and grimaced. His hairline seemed to recede daily, and his old scar wasn't healing the way the doctors had promised. *I oughta get a refund*, he thought. The demon tattoo on his neck was the only thing that brought a smile to his face. The traffic buzzing on the overpass provided a fitting beat to the dingy locale where he made his living. The refuse of the sewers had come up to its usual spot after the acid rain and mixed with mud to refresh the eternal layer of sludge that encased the back streets and gutters.

Frank spotted Chavez's big black van rolling down the street. "About fucking time," he said. He got out of the car and faced the van as it came to a stop. The bloated Chavez struggled to get out of the car and not slip on the street's grimy sludge. When he finally emerged, he waddled over to Frank. "We really should get a new meeting spot," he grumbled as he wiped the sweat out from under his third chin.

"And where would that be?" Frank asked. "If they don't have a camera watching you, it's a microchip that will trace you or a drone that will see you thirty thousand feet up. Under this overpass is the best spot you're gonna find without getting pinched."

"I suppose you're right," Chavez huffed, running a hand through his gelled black hair. "Is the ship ready?"

"Would I be here if it wasn't?" Frank snapped. "I'll do my part; you do yours."

"Okay, Jefe," he grunted. "Whatever you say."

Chavez opened the van's side door, and Frank inspected the three people inside.

"Are you the one getting us out?" asked one of them, an old man.

“Yeah,” Frank grunted. “I just gotta make sure you aren’t the type that’ll attract attention.”

“We’re all pretty normal,” the old man replied. “We won’t be raising any eyebrows.”

“Really?” Frank interrogated. “You’re sure you’re not terrorists? You got no beef with the government or any of the assholes up there?”

“I can’t say I’m their biggest fan, but I don’t want to blow ’em up.”

“What about disease?” Frank pressed. “Do you got something that could get half the place infected? Is that why they didn’t let you go up there?”

“Healthy as a horse,” the old timer shot back.

Frank turned to the third passenger in the van. The slanted eyes, small chin, and protruding tongue told him all he needed to know. He turned to Chavez. “What the fuck are you thinking? I can’t take a retard up there! He’ll be exposed as soon as he gets off.”

“That’s not true!” the old man objected. “I have a brother who will shelter us up there.”

“Even if you get past customs, you won’t make it two seconds in the open without a camera or a cop spotting you,” Frank said. “You’ll be found out and executed in no time, and then you will lead them right to me.”

Frank turned to Chavez. “You never said anything about smuggling a mongoloid into the fucking station!”

Chavez said nothing but opened the passenger side door, removed a backpack, and threw it at Frank. “That’s your cut,” he said. “They paid double to get to the station.”

Frank unzipped the bag, and sure enough, the piles of cash stared right back at him. “I still won’t do it,” he said. “It’s too risky. I won’t jeopardize my whole operation for a kid with Down Syndrome. Not even for double.”

He dropped the backpack and walked back to his car.

“Don’t walk away, Frank,” Chavez called out.

“Fuck you!” Frank said, pulling out his snub-nosed .357 magnum



revolver and aiming it at Chavez.

“Put the gun away, *cabrón*,” he soothed. “Listen, you and me have been doing business a long time and I like you. But I got bosses, Frank. You’re the best damn coyote in the business, but the cartel is trying to answer to market demand. Everybody wants to go up—the poor, the sick, terrorists, Muslims, commies, anybody who has a chance and everybody who wants something better. The station has issued fewer and fewer visas every year, and these jobs will get riskier. Either change with the times or don’t. But you will do *this* job. We’ve been paid, and if you don’t do it the cartel’s reputation will suffer.”

Chavez inched closer to the barrel of Frank’s gun. “And if we suffer, you suffer.”

Frank thrust the revolver back into the pocket of his denim jacket. “Jesus, fine!” he resigned.

He picked up the bag and went back to the van. “Take the Chevy back to my place, and make sure you put it in the garage! I don’t want the damned thing rusted to shit when the rains roll back around.”

“Whatever you say, Frank,” Chavez said as he waddled back to the Chevy.

Frank got into the van and drove. The trip was silent at first; the tension of the earlier altercation hadn’t fully worn off. “You know that this is insanely dangerous,” Frank said aloud. “You better have a damned good plan.”

“My brother owns a business and a truck,” the old man said. “He knows what ship we’ll be on and when we arrive. When we get to the station he’ll pick us up and put us in the back of his truck, and then we’ll go to his house where we’ll stay in the basement. Believe me, I’ve thought this out.”

“Really?” Frank said. “You do know that if they catch you up there with that retard they will kill all of you?”

“He has a name,” the old man snorted. “What’s your name son?”

“Danny!” the third passenger piped up.

“Well you better tell Danny to be quiet, then,” Frank said. “If they

hear him, we're dead. No trial, no jury—straight to execution. Dr. Kampf makes all the rules up there.”

The rest of the trip was silent. Frank's spaceplane, *The Serpent*, was parked at the end of the private airstrip. Frank stopped the car. “Stay inside for a minute,” he instructed.

He stepped outside and was immediately met by a young, large olive-skinned Albanian man. “What took you so long?” the man said. “We were supposed to launch twenty minutes ago.”

“I was delayed, Ismail,” Frank said. “Chavez threw me a curve ball, and I nearly lost it.”

Ismail took a deep breath and stuck his hands in his pockets. “What did he do this time?”

“Well, it was three like he said, but he didn't tell me one of the passengers had Down Syndrome.”

“What the fuck is Downs Syndrome?” the Albanian asked.

“Down,” Frank said. “He's retarded.”

“That's just what we need!” Ismail raged. “He'll mess up everything and we'll be caught for sure!”

“They paid double to get on this flight, and they seem like they know what they're doing,” Frank said. “They got people inside, too.”

“Most do,” Ismail grimaced. “What about the money?”

“It's in the van; I'll grab it.”

Frank went to the van and opened the door. The three emerged from the vehicle and stood before *The Serpent* while Frank brought Ismail the bag.

“Spaceship!” Danny exclaimed.

“That's right, Danny,” the woman said.

Frank threw Ismail the bag. “It's for both of us.”

Ismail's grimace turned into a grin.

“Just don't shove it all up your nose,” Frank said.

The inside of *The Serpent* was cluttered with gadgets and computers. Behind the two large black seats for the pilot and co-pilot were two rows of four smaller, cramped spots for passengers.

“Before you get comfortable, there are a few things you’ll have to do when we dock with the station,” Frank said. He walked past the seats to a small door. “This leads directly to the cargo hold.” He slid the door open. The hold was filled with large crates, including one close to the door. “This particular box, you will notice, is empty. It’s yours. When I tell you, go back here and open the box like so—”

Frank pressed a small button on the side of the crate, and the side unlocked and opened. “It will be a tight fit, but it’s better than getting spotted.”

“What are you hauling?” the old man asked.

“Blue jeans,” Frank replied. “The people on the station may have left behind this world, but not its fashion. What exactly is the nature of your brother’s business?”

“He owns his own auto repair shop,” the old man said.

“All right,” Frank said, running his hand through his thinning brown hair. “I’ll add auto parts to the manifest so your brother being near *The Serpent* won’t look strange.”

“Can we go now?” Ismail bleated. “The air tower will start asking questions.”

“You heard the man, folks,” Frank said, shooting an irritated glance at Ismail. “Take a seat and get ready for takeoff.”

The three did as they were told—even Danny, who was quick to buckle in, much to Frank’s surprise. Frank went to the head of *The Serpent* and took the captain’s seat. He put on his raggedy Chicago Bears cap and buckled in.

“Is everything ready?” Frank asked. “Fuel? Life support? Stabilizers?”

“All good, man,” Ismail said with annoyance. “I checked everything like three fucking times before you showed up.”

Ismail removed a small vial from his coat pocket and emptied a small portion of its white contents to his index finger.

“Seriously?” Frank lectured. “What the fuck did I tell you about that shit?”

“Chill out, man,” Ismail said. “It’s just a bump before takeoff.” He

lifted his finger to his nose and snorted.

“Are you doing drugs?” the old man recoiled.

“It’s all right,” Ismail laughed. “Standard procedure.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” Danny muttered.

Ismail turned his head. His smile had deteriorated into cold anger.

“Don’t tell me what to do, tardy-boy, or I’ll kick you off this fucking plane.”

“That’s enough!” Frank shouted. “I’m the captain of *The Serpent*, and I say who stays and who goes, so watch it both of you!”

Danny looked down as the other two passengers consoled him.

Ismail did a final preliminary check and gave Frank a silent thumb up.

Frank flipped on the radio. “Air tower, this is *The Serpent*, requesting permission for takeoff.”

“*Serpent* you are cleared and ready for takeoff,” the tower responded in a hostile tone.

*They’re probably irritated about how late I am*, Frank reasoned. *If only they knew the crap I have to put up with.* He started the ignition sequence and in moments the ship was making its way down the runway. He increased the throttle and within less than a minute they were off the ground and had reached over 60,000 feet. “All right, everyone,” he warned. “Hold on.”

Frank flipped a switch and engaged the Helium-3 rocket engines. *The Serpent* accelerated and climbed higher and higher into the sky until it entered the black vacuum of space. The familiar tug of weightlessness from the lack of gravity always made Frank crack a smile.

Danny could hardly contain the glee at being in space and was laughing with delight.

“Pretty cool, isn’t it?” the old man asked.

Danny nodded. “It’s awesome!” he exclaimed.

“Just keep yourself strapped in,” Frank said. “I don’t want to have to come back there to get one of you back in your seats.”

“The station should be in range within minutes,” Ismail said after a quick look at the navigational computer.

“The sooner, the better,” Frank muttered. “The anticipation kills me.”

“Nah,” Ismail said. “It’s the unloading that’s the worst, the before and after’s easier.”

“So, why do you want to go to the station?” Frank asked the old man. “You know how dangerous it is.”

The old man turned away from Danny. “Why does anyone want to go up?” the old man said with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “Cleaner air, cleaner water, sunshine, more opportunity, a chance at a better life, being at the center of the future.”

“C’mon,” Frank pressed. “Everyone and their brother say that’s why they want to get into New Eden. Why do *you* want to go up?”

The old man thought on it for a second. “When you have a child like I do, you get sick of him living in the same squalor, sucking in the same poison each day when he goes outside, having to settle for mediocrity. When I was rejected for my visa, it was like having the one hope, the one thing that was keeping me going, ripped away.”

“Your kid?” Frank said with a cynical chuckle. “You mean Danny? He’s never going to be able to leave your brother’s basement. If he does, they’ll kill him and all of you on the spot. Admit it; you’re going up for *you*.”

“Don’t even start,” the old man rebuked. “I have a plan. I’m one of the best damn engineers in the States. As soon as I buy the proper credentials, I’ll get a great job with one of the firms up there and buy a place far away from the cities, with no cameras or surveillance—lots of room for Danny, lots of room for all of us!”

“Whatever you say, old timer,” Frank said. “Just don’t get caught.”

The rest of the trip was kind of quiet, with only updates from Ismail to break the silence. “New Eden in range,” Ismail reported. “Begin final approach.”

When the space station came into full view, the passengers’ eyes widened. “Wow,” Danny said.

The wonder of New Eden was made up of four massive biospheres

connected by metallic corridors to a central hub known as the Genesis Module. The biospheres resembled large blue marbles, each much like Earth.

Frank took the radio, “New Eden, Gideon docks, this is *Serpent*, class B freighter. Requesting permission to dock.”

“*Serpent*, this is Gideon station control,” the voice responded. “What is your intention?”

“Freighter,” Frank said. “I repeat, freighter incoming for scheduled commercial delivery.”

There was a pause, presumably as the man checked to verify that *The Serpent* was scheduled to make a delivery. “*Serpent*, this is Gideon station control. You are cleared for docking.”

Frank put down with the receiver. “How many times do I gotta fucking repeat myself?” he asked himself.

The spaceplane slowed for spacecraft docking with and departing from the station. They inched closer and closer, then docked with the massive biosphere known as the Gideon, and the artificial gravity that kept the inhabitants of New Eden on their feet took *The Serpent* under its control. Frank got up and, without saying a word, directed the passengers to the cargo hold. He put a single finger to his lips and the trio understood—there were many ears in New Eden. The old man went through the door to the cargo hold, followed by the woman. When Danny turned, Frank was afraid he would speak, but Danny only mouthed two words. *Thank you.*

Frank stopped for a moment, nodded and gestured for Danny to join the rest of the passengers. *I guess he gets how high the stakes are*, he thought. Danny passed through the door and closed it behind him.

“Ready?” Ismail asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” Frank replied.

Frank waited for a minute or two to give the passengers time enough to get into the crate and then opened the doors. The docking station was crowded with crews from docked freighters unloading or picking up product. New Eden was known for having one of the richest economies

in the solar system, and her goods were prized.

“Frank!” called a woman in uniform.

“Hello, Martha,” Frank said. “So nice to see you again.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Martha muttered. “How’s *The Serpent*?”

“She gets me where I need to go.”

“What about you?” she asked Ismail.

“Fine, fine,” Ismail said.

“Before the check, is there anything I should know?” Martha asked.

She was a large woman, almost as tall as Frank, but beautiful in a sort of utilitarian way. Her face had no trace of makeup, but she didn’t appear to need it. Her short hair, smooth face, cleft chin, and high cheekbones gave her a natural, strong beauty.

“Three,” Frank said as he slipped her a wad of bills.

“Pretty thick for three, Frank,” she said. “Is this someone who will attract attention?”

“We’ve seen to it that it won’t be an issue.”

“All the same, it might be good to tell me.”

“One of them, Danny is his name, has Down Syndrome.”

“That’s a tall order. What kind of guarantee do you have that if they get caught they won’t rat you out?”

“None.”

“The risk is a bit out of character, Frank,” she said, her eyes scanning him. “I could take care of them. No one would know they were even here. I could do ’em and have their bodies incinerated before anyone was the wiser. The Gideon’s got the least amount of surveillance.”

Frank shot her an irritated glance. “You could be a bit louder and get us all killed.”

“Don’t worry, I know where all the bugs are,” she said. “I work for the bastards. I’m serious, Frank. I could take care of it.”

“I’ve got a job to do,” Frank said. “Besides, they got family up here who would know.”

“I could take care of them too,” she said. “They may call this place

paradise, but there's plenty of dying here, same as on Earth."

"The cartel is getting pretty particular about their rep," he said. "They're responding to demand and expect me to as well. We go with the plan. I don't care what happens after the job's done."

"Whatever you say," she said.

A truck pulled up to *The Serpent*, and a tall, gawky figure emerged from the cab with a clipboard. "You got the jeans?" he asked.

"Yeah," Frank said as he opened the cargo doors. "You got eight of the nine, all except the one furthest in the back."

The driver backed up and removed an electronic pallet jack from the truck, and within minutes the eight crates were loaded into the truck.

"You got the money?" Ismail asked.

"New manager wants to make sure he's not getting gypped out of anything," the driver said. "Once it's counted, we'll come by with the money."

"What the hell is this new waiting bullshit?" Frank asked.

"Hey, man, chill out," the driver said. "I only work for the guy. Look, here's the order form. You can come by and get the money yourself if you feel that shady about it."

Frank grabbed the paper and looked at it. "How long do you think it will take to get back to us?"

"Don't know," the driver said as he hopped back into the truck. "Just sit tight. Shouldn't take more than an hour or two."

The truck drove off, leaving an irritated Frank and a slightly amused Martha. "They're very thorough," she sniped.

"Too thorough," Frank said.

"When's this guy supposed to get here?"

"Any minute," Frank replied.

"Can I ask you something?"

"If I said no, would that stop you?"

Martha's amusement faded. "I need a ride."

Frank turned. "What?"

"I'll pay for the fuel and your time," she said. "I got the money. I just



need a round trip.”

“I’m not a cabby,” Frank said. “What is this about?”

Martha seemed to be at a loss for words and Frank thought he spotted a tear. “I’m late,” she said. “Three weeks. The son of a bitch told me he was wearing a rubber.”

“Martha,” Frank said. “Are you sure?”

“The morning sickness is when I knew for sure,” she said. “I can feel it, inside me. They just don’t hand out test strips up here. Kampf’s fucking rules. If I go to the clinic, everyone in the New Eden Police Force will find out and I sure as hell can’t get it out of me once they know.”

“There must be someone up here that can take care of it,” Frank said.

“I don’t want some moron with a coat hanger mutilating me,” she said. “I need to get to Earth. I have this weekend off. If I go with you today I can be back for my shift Monday without anyone suspecting anything.”

“You think I can just take you back Monday?” Frank asked. “I can’t just make this shit up. I have to have a reason just to be able to dock.”

“Then get a reason,” Martha pleaded. “Please.”

“Why not just have it and give it up for adoption?”

Martha looked at him like he had just slapped her in the face. “If that happens, I’m fucking done. Unmarried women having kids out of wedlock isn’t exactly encouraged here, Frank. I’ll be blacklisted. And it’s my fucking body. I am not going through that hell.”

“How would you even do it?” he asked, nodding to the cameras.

“You can’t just waltz onto *The Serpent*; they’ll see you.”

“Camera maintenance is scheduled for one hour today,” she said.

“They won’t see us, and as for getting back, just get me in the same way you get all your people in.”

“It takes time,” Frank said. “This doesn’t just happen overnight.”

“If I don’t get this taken care of soon,” Martha said, “people *will* notice.”

Frank sighed. *Dammit*, he thought. “When’s the one-hour window?”  
“Exactly a half hour after I’m done with my shift,” she said with new life. “Thanks, Frank.”

“Just be here,” he said. “You owe me after this.”

Martha nodded. “I gotta make my rounds. I’ll be back when my shift is done. You got my number, right?”

“Yeah, but do you trust the line?” he asked.

“Just dial my number, no one will be listening.”

Martha walked away just as a small truck pulled up to *The Serpent*. A short, chubby man emerged from the truck cab. “You have, um, the auto parts?” the man stuttered.

*So this is the guy, huh?* Frank thought. “Yeah, last one near the cab. It’s really fragile, so be careful.”

The man nodded, removed a small dolly from his truck, and entered the spaceplane. Frank’s heart beat faster and faster as the man went deeper inside and came out with the crate. The man carefully placed it on the lift-gate and took it up into the truck. Methodically, he positioned it at the end and strapped it to the wall of the truck. Then he climbed down, put the lift gate into place, and closed the doors of the truck.

Frank took a deep breath of relief.

The chubby man came up to Frank and shook his hand. “Thank you,” he said, his eyes glistening. “You did a good thing today.”

“Don’t thank me,” Frank muttered. “They paid a fortune.”

“All the same,” the man said. “Thank you.”

“One more thing,” Frank said. “This Monday I need you to pick up another crate from me. Take it home and open it. Consider it a favor.”

The man hesitated. Then he said, “Sure, whatever you need.”

The chubby man got into his truck and drove off.

Frank turned to find Ismail heading back into the ship. “I’m gonna get a drink,” Frank said. “Wanna have one with me?”

Ismail shook his head. “You know I don’t touch that stuff, man.”

“So you can snort coke but can’t have a beer?” Frank asked. “The Prophet’s got some weird rules.”

“Shut up!” Ismail flared. “Don’t talk about shit you know nothing about!”

“All right,” Frank said. “Chill the fuck out. Do you at least want to sit with me while I drink? You can have a Coke or something. You know, the kind you drink.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” Ismail drawled. “As much as I would love that, that guy who took the jeans could come back with the money anytime. I’ll wait here and make sure we get paid.”

“Whatever you say,” Frank said, and he walked out of the docking area and into greater Gideon.

New Mumbai was bustling with people flooding the sidewalks and backed up traffic cramping the narrow streets. The city was the most populous in New Eden and the economic and social hub of the Gideon. Shouts of “Chai” from the vendors and hollers of “Taxi!” from anxious pedestrians filled the air. The smells of curry and pizza from opposing restaurants duelled one another for potential customers. Out of the chaos of sound and smell came the sight for which Frank was looking. The small, but bright neon silhouette of a pint of Guinness beckoned him. He followed the sign like a beacon until he reached his destination. The pub was a dingy joint with two grimy windows and the name Patrick’s written in large, dirty green lettering above the door. Outside, an elderly black man with dreadlocks was playing George Michael’s “Careless Whisper” on a sax. Frank headed straight into the bar.

The place was pretty much empty except for the bartender, a couple of drunks in the corner, and an Indian woman in a red dress with fishnet stockings sitting at the bar. Frank took a seat at the bar, a couple seats away from the woman. “Gimme a Guinness,” he called out.

The bartender said nothing, but popped open a black bottle and placed it on a napkin on the bar, in front of Frank.

“No tap?” Frank asked.

“We don’t got it on tap,” the bartender said. “Just bottles.”

Frank handed the bartender a single bill. He tilted the bottle to his mouth and let the thick black stout go down his throat. On his left, the

woman was staring at him. He kept to his beer. The woman moved down a couple of seats right next to Frank. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Frank,” he said. “How about you?”

“Jasmine,” she replied.

“I bet that wasn’t the name your parents gave you,” he said.

“How’d you know that?” she said.

“The Adam’s Apple is a dead giveaway,” he said, and took another swig.

“Well, I can’t hide everything,” Jasmine said.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I can dig it. Besides, it must take some balls to do what you do in New Eden.”

“Ha,” Jasmine laughed. “Please, this is New Mumbai. Anything can be bought for the right price—drugs, cops, guns, *anything*.”

Jasmine’s hand began to make its way up Frank’s thigh. His face turned solemn with lust. “It’s a good thing I got plenty of cash,” he said. “You got a place?”

“Yeah,” Jasmine said. “It’s not far.”

“What’s your rate?”

“Reasonable, it’s—”

The door to Patrick’s suddenly swung open, and a New Eden police officer strode into the pub. Jasmine got up and walked to the back.

The policeman was an older, wiry man with large hands, bright white hair and sandpapery skin. He walked in casually and took a seat at the bar. “Give me a Bud Light,” he said.

When the policeman received his drink, Frank moved to a booth. He looked at the TV, but was disappointed by a low-budget daytime soap opera. He took another drink. Then the soap came to an abrupt halt, replaced by a New Eden news bulletin with two smiling anchors staring into the camera.

“Good afternoon, citizens of New Eden,” the charismatic male anchor began. “I’m Kirk Williams.”

“And I’m Molly Thompson,” the female anchor added with a synthetic grin. “We interrupt your regular programming schedule for this

breaking news. “

“Three illegals and a citizen collaborator were caught just moments ago by police in New Mumbai,” Kirk said.

*Oh shit, Frank thought. Did they get busted?*

“Reports indicate that the man in question, Robert Henderson, was smuggling the illegals from the Gideon docks.” A picture on the television screen appeared and Frank felt a shiver go down his spine. *The guy that picked them up*, Frank thought.

The chubby man’s picture on the screen gave way to a live feed. From the town square of New Mumbai the old, ever-smiling face of the seldom-seen Dr. Kampf glared from a long banner. Below the banner was a series of tall wooden posts, fastened into the bloodstained concrete. A small rat of a man appeared in front of the posts. “Three illegals were caught just moments ago in our fair city. As commandant of the police and master of justice, it is my job to see to the protection of New Eden. These illegals are the cancer of our glorious society,” he ranted. “One of them is even feeble minded!”

The crowd booed and hissed and became filled with a potent hatred.

“Behold!” the commandant shouted. “The undesirables!”

The three were dragged by New Eden police officers to the posts as the throng around them went into a rage. The old man was shouting back at them. The woman was sobbing; Danny just stared at the ground.

“Jesus,” Frank whispered.

A rock came flying from the crowd and hit Danny directly on his left cheek. Blood splashed on the concrete with a couple of his teeth. Danny began to sob. “Mom!” he cried out.

The woman wept.

The police officers tied each of them to the tall wooden posts.

“Momma!” Danny cried out.

“Close your eyes!” she shouted.

“On behalf of the people of New Eden,” the commandant said. “I sentence you to death!”

“Close your eyes, Danny!” the woman shouted.

A row of five police officers lined up facing the old man, their rifles pointed directly at him.

“Any last words?” the commandant asked.

“God damn you,” the old man cursed.

“On my count!” The commandant said. “Ready! Aim! Fire!”

The police officers fired.

The woman let loose a howling screech.

The commandant smiled as he approached her. “Any last words?”

“Murderer!” she cried.

The commandant backed up and repeated, “Ready! Aim! Fire!”

The bullets ripped the woman apart, splattering blood and shreds of flesh across the pavement. Frank tried to remain strong as he watched the commandant shift over to Danny. “Any last words, simpleton?” the commandant asked.

Danny opened his tear-soaked eyes. “Why?” he asked.

The commandant smiled. “Ready! Aim! Fire!”

The police fired a full volley. The boy’s blood soaked face fell; his body went limp.

Frank fought back tears as the broadcast returned to the two anchors. “The smuggler who brought the illegals into New Eden remains at large,” the female anchor said. “Police have been provided with a picture of the suspect. If you have seen this man please contact the police immediately.”

The TV screen panned to a picture of Frank’s face. The tavern’s patrons’ faces filled with alarm. Only the police officer continued to drink his beer. The whole place was silent until the policeman got up and headed to the bathroom, his boots clicking through the crypt-like pub.

When the officer closed the door behind him, Frank rose and went straight for the bar. No one moved or spoke as he reached behind the bar and retrieved a corkscrew. He walked back to the bathroom, where he found the policeman standing in front of the urinal taking a piss. With

one motion, Frank plunged the corkscrew deep into his neck, squirting blood across the dirty tile.

Frank tried to regain his composure, but the rage took over and he removed the corkscrew from the man's neck and stabbed him again and again.

When the door opened, Frank dropped the corkscrew and he reached for his pistol, but he stopped when he saw who it was. "Jasmine," he said.

Jasmine took one look at the body and then at Frank. "Why?"

Frank walked past Jasmine and headed for the exit when his phone began to ring. He answered it as he pushed opened the door. "What?" he nearly yelled, dizzy with all that had happened.

"You've been made," Martha responded. "Your face is plastered all over the station. What the hell happened?"

"I have no fucking idea," he said as he walked out onto the street.

"Where are you?"

"Just outside Patrick's. I'm going to the docks. I gotta get outta here."

"Don't do it; the place is crawling with cops. Are you listening to me?"

Frank stopped, hung up, and vomited on the sidewalk, then continued on his way.

The recent bloody events seemed to have little impact on the residents of New Mumbai. The shouts of "Chai" and "Taxi" remained the anthem of the streets, but to Frank it was like the buzzing of insects. He gagged at the smells of the street food and reeled at the constant stop and go of the vehicles on the street.

The docks were deserted save for the cluster of police officers surrounding *The Serpent*. Frank reached for his gun, but felt an immense pull on his collar and the barrel of a pistol jammed into the back of his neck.

"Play along," Martha's voice soothed. "And you may live."

"What the fuck?" he cried out.

She pistol-whipped him across the face and dragged him before the police officers. "I got him!" she called. "Maybe he knows how to get in, so you can get his accomplice."

"We shot your friend in the gut and he locked himself in that spaceplane of yours," a sergeant told Frank. "Tell us the passcode and this'll be over quickly."

"Ismail," Frank muttered.

"What's the passcode to get in?" another officer asked.

Martha threw Frank down in front of the cops and they surrounded him. "Tell me how to get in!" the sergeant screamed.

Frank braced for the inevitable kicks and punches. The sergeant got to his knees and raised his fist when suddenly a spray of gunfire ripped him and the rest of the cops apart.

Martha approached the curled-up Frank with her machine pistol in hand. "Let's go; there will be more here any minute."

Frank got to his feet and dialed the passcode to get into *The Serpent*. Ismail was sitting on his seat near the ship's controls, clutching his bloody abdomen. "Frank," he muttered. "I didn't think I would see you again."

"Apparently you did," Frank said. "Or you would have left already."

"We can't leave," Ismail said. "*The Serpent* is locked down. We cannot start any kind of undocking sequence. We're fucked."

"He's right," Martha said. "Without clearance from the Gideon docking control, we can't unlatch the ship from the docking mechanism."

"Shit!" Frank roared.

For a moment the whole spaceplane was silent. Martha stared at Frank with a mixture of frustration and melancholy. "Well, we gave it one hell of a shot," she said.

"Why did you kill them?" he asked. "I was the one who was already dead. You didn't need to throw your life away, too."

"I suppose I was sick of the bullshit," she said. "It was either help you or become a pariah when I had the baby I didn't want."



Frank tried to think of something to say, but nothing came out. The sound of shouts and the insidious boot-clicking of policemen outside shook him back to reality. “There’s one thing we can do,” he said as he went to the controls. “Everyone take a seat; we’re getting out of here.”

“How?” Martha asked as she helped Ismail buckle in.

“It’s not like they shut the engines off,” Frank explained. “I’ll start *The Serpent* up and turn on the thrusters. We may take a bit of the Gideon docks with us, but we’ll get out of here.”

“That’ll rip a hole in the Gideon’s hull,” Martha said with horror. “The entire biosphere will be compromised.”

“Fuck ’em,” Frank said. “I sure as hell won’t cry for any of these assholes. Besides, they got safety features right?”

“Yes, but they’ve never been tested!” Martha objected. “The Gideon’s biosphere is not just a city, but a self-contained ecosystem conducting photosynthesis and oxygen production. There’s no telling what will happen if all of that is exposed to the vacuum of space.”

“Should make for an interesting science experiment,” Frank said. He started the ignition and the engines came alive. When he pushed hard on the throttle the spaceplane began to nudge.

“More power,” Ismail said.

Frank gave it more power, and *The Serpent* gathered more momentum as the Gideon docks creaked and groaned.

“You have to break away from the station or else we are just wasting fuel!” Ismail shouted.

Frank flipped on the Helium 3 engines and put them to full power. The creaks and groans turned to high pitched metallic screams until the docking mechanism buckled and gave way. *The Serpent* broke from New Eden with part of the Gideon docks still attached to the craft. Frank turned the spaceplane around and headed back to Earth, passing New Eden one last time. The void of space began filling with the debris of the Gideon biosphere. Chunks of metal, polymer, ice, and fuel as well as cars, buildings, and bodies were swallowed by the blackness. Frank looked at the various signs of death and destruction left in the wake of

his escape and felt no remorse until out of the corner of his eye, one small fleeting image caught his attention. It was the body of a woman, dressed in a bright red dress. Frank turned his eyes to Earth and tried to forget.

“Frank,” Ismail said. “Could you reach into my coat pocket and grab something for me?”

Frank looked at the floor and noticed Ismail’s coat. “Now’s hardly the time for a bump, Ismail.”

“That’s not it,” Ismail said as he coughed up blood. “It should be in my left pocket.”

Frank took the coat, reached into the left pocket, and pulled out a long ring of wooden prayer beads. “Really?” Frank said

“Just give them here,” he said. “I must make my peace with God.”

Frank tossed him the beads. The dying man took them close and began to chant the 99 names of the Almighty. “Al-Malik, Ar-Rahim, As-Salam, Al-Aziz . . . Do you think God will forgive us for what we have done?” Ismail asked.

“I don’t care,” Frank said.

Martha remained silent. The quiet chanting began to fade just as *The Serpent* was about to attempt re-entry. Frank turned, his copilot’s pale face was cocked back. His eyes were wide open and blood dripped from his mouth.

Martha leaned over to examine Ismail. “Is he—”

“Yeah,” Frank said.

*The Serpent* re-entered Earth’s atmosphere at a furious speed, burning off whatever was left of the Gideon’s dock, and soon the familiar private airstrip where Frank started his journey came into view. “This is *The Serpent* requesting permission to land,” he radioed.

“Permission granted,” the tower responded. “The runway’s all yours.”

The spaceplane made a graceful landing on the airstrip and parked in the private hanger leased for Frank’s use.

Frank got up from his seat. “Let’s put him in the cargo hold until we

figure out what to do,” he said, gesturing to the corpse.

Martha helped him move the body into the cargo hold. Frank grabbed his cut from the original job, and the two exited the spaceplane and got into the black van that Frank had used to drive Danny and his family to *The Serpent*.

“Where are we going?” Martha asked.

“My place,” Frank replied. “As soon as we get there, we’ll take my Chevy and skip town.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s something that keeps bothering me,” Martha said. “I’m just trying to figure out who tipped off the New Eden Police.”

“How do you know they were tipped off?” Frank asked. “They could have searched the truck.”

“Possibly,” she said. “But I know a lot of the patrolmen who walk the New Mumbai beat. They spend most of their day eating Indian sweets and drinking chai. The whole thing reeks of a tip-off.”

“Seems like bullshit to me,” Frank said. “Who knew and would tell?”

The drive over the dull landscape was long and tedious. After nearly an hour behind the wheel, Frank stopped the van and parked it in front of his two-story house. “I have to run in and grab something,” he said. “You can come in if you like.”

“Sure,” she said.

Inside, Frank ran upstairs. He grabbed a satchel from under his bed, looked inside, and smiled at the sight of several stacked rows of bills.

“What’s that? Martha asked when he came down.

“It’s my go bag,” Frank said. “Every good crook has one. It’s got enough money and fake IDs for a fresh start.”

“Smart,” Martha remarked. “You must be a good crook.”

In the garage, Frank found the keys that he had given to Chavez exactly where they always were, on top of the hood.

He opened the garage door and was about to get into the driver’s

seat when Martha asked, "What kind of car is this?"

"'68 Chevy Nova," Frank said. "Best there ever was."

"Mind if I give it a drive? We only have electric cars in New Eden. I've never driven a muscle car before."

"Don't scratch it," Frank said as he tossed her the keys. "I'm gonna go grab the other bag from the van and make a call."

Martha rushed around to the driver's side as Frank dialed Chavez's number and made his way to the van. The call went directly to voicemail. *Fucker never picks up his phone*, he thought. After the beep Frank began, "Chavez, it's Frank. The job went whacky and I'm out. I'm done for goo—"

Without warning a massive blast threw Frank on his stomach as the garage was engulfed in a fireball. He tried to get to his feet but fell again, this time on his side. His ears were ringing and he found it difficult to breathe. When he managed to turn, he saw pieces of his Chevy strewn about the yard, driveway and street. He felt warm blood trickling down his ear lobes; his left leg throbbed. "Martha!" he called.

There was no answer. He grabbed the money and pulled himself in the driver's seat of the black van. *What the fuck just happened?* He thought. *Who wants me dead? The same person that set me up on New Eden?* He ran down a long list of people who might want to kill him, but then he realized it could have only been one person. He put the keys in the ignition and drove.

Night had come like a thief, or at least that's how it seemed. Frank's struggle to remain conscious was his biggest concern. *Stay awake!* he thought. *Just a little more, just a bit longer.* He kept his eyes wide open and on the road until the house came into view. It was a ranch-style in the middle of the sticks. He pulled up close. *No time to be subtle.*

Frank put the van in park and hobbled out. He removed the pistol from his jacket and backed along the side of the house. Inside was a single man sitting in the kitchen holding a sawed-off shotgun. *Bodyguard.* The man appeared oblivious, holding his shotgun in one hand and playing with his phone in the other. The only thing separating the

kitchen and the outdoors was a thin glass sliding door.

Frank took aim and squeezed the trigger twice. The bullets ripped through the glass and found his mark. The bodyguard fell to the kitchen floor. Frank opened the door and moved in as quickly as he could. His left leg didn't seem to be working right, but he dragged it along, past the kitchen and into the study.

A familiar face sat at the desk, pouring himself a glass of tequila. "Hello, Frank," he said. "You look like hell."

"Chavez," Frank snarled, pointing the gun at his head. "Why'd you do it?"

"I never wanted this to happen," Chavez said with seemingly genuine remorse. "You were good, Frank, real good. I fought for you, I really did."

"What do you mean you fought for me?"

Chavez took a sip of tequila. "You see Frank, the cartel has a reputation to maintain and—"

"I did the fucking job!" Frank shouted. "Why would you sabotage your own operation?"

"It's not what you did," Chavez said. "It's how you did it. You can't just point a gun at one of the cartel's people. I have bosses, too, Frank. They take that shit very seriously."

The memories flooded back. Frank remembered the initial altercation under the overpass. He pointed the same gun he was now holding at Chavez. "So, all this because I put a gun in your face?" Frank said. "How would your bosses even know?"

"I never told you this, Frank, but every meeting we've ever had has been recorded by a small bug I keep on my person. Company policy, Frank. Just good business—keeps everyone accountable. There is always someone watching or listening. *Always*. Even now, my bosses are listening and sending men here to kill you."

"Is it good business if New Eden's outta commission?" Frank said with a perverse pride. "Last thing I saw was everything in the Gideon being sucked out into space."

“Ah, yes,” Chavez said. “That hull breach has caused quite the stir up there. They say the Gideon, and especially New Mumbai, was very densely populated. They had to shut down the whole biosphere. They are still trying to find survivors, but the death toll is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands at least.”

“Good riddance,” Frank muttered.

“I didn’t know you had such an appetite for death, *cabrón*.”

“I’m dead already,” Frank chuckled. “That little present you left in my Chevy broke me to pieces.”

“A little back-up plan in case you somehow survived after we tipped off the New Eden Police Force,” Chavez said. “I have to admit, I’m surprised you survived both. That was unexpected. Did you have someone start the car?”

Frank’s thoughts drifted back to Martha, and his white-hot rage returned. “She risked everything to get me out. She threw away her whole life. Not to mention the other people you fucked over—Danny and his family, Ismail.” Frank cocked his pistol.

“This coming from the mass murderer—”

Frank unloaded on Chavez, enjoying each shot until he only heard the clicking of his empty gun. He sighed. Then he took the bottle of tequila from Chavez’s desk and brought it into the kitchen. He placed it on the table and picked up the dead bodyguard’s sawed-off shotgun. “Might be able to take a couple of those cartel fucks with me,” he said aloud.

He took out a cigarette, lit it, and sucked deeply. He took a long, hearty swig of the tequila, held the shotgun firm and waited.

—Brendan Bakala

## Low and Away

When Clare tells me she's ready, I'm not surprised. I've watched her implode, becoming smaller, her features caving in on themselves. What she says is true. I see it when she wakes, over meals, on drives to the clinic, in how she keeps the remaining strands of her once-thick hair hidden under scarves.

Soon she will be gone.

I've always been good with excuses. Even when I spent the night with Clare's best friend, Amanda, and then the next night, and then the sudden "business trip" I had to make to Chicago, where Amanda would be, and we stayed in the hotel for three days, venturing out only for meals, a walk along the Chicago river, and an afternoon Cubs game.

We talked about feeling guilty. Amanda and Clare had been college roommates. Placed together based upon a checklist of likes and dislikes, they remained roommates all four years despite being told by the dean a week before first semester's midterms that the office had made a mistake. Clare Stuart should have been placed with Amanda Petty, not Amanda Perry. The dean explained that based on his checklist, their profiles were so dissimilar as to make them completely incompatible. That was news to them. Instead of moving, they remained together, finding the idea amusing that somewhere on campus two roommates were at that moment arguing over the condition of the room, the use of each other's dental floss, the frequency of boyfriends entertained, their different musical tastes.

We talked about guilt, but not too much or for too long, and when we parted at Central Station after waiting for trains going in opposite directions, we made plans to do it again. We kissed goodbye—people knowing, of course, that we had to be lovers, since married couples our age don't require long kisses goodbye. On the way home I thought more about Amanda than I did about Clare and told myself that Clare would understand. More than anyone, she knew my appetites, my passions, how I loved doing things she no longer enjoyed. If anyone wanted me to be happy, it was my wife.

Besides, didn't Clare have her own guilt, as she became her illness? When I got back, I didn't tell Clare. I shielded her, no longer sure she would hear the news and wish us well.

Clare and I never talked about faith. Once I started to make better money, I tithed my ten percent to food pantries, relief agencies, and homeless shelters. I paid my taxes and never argued for more generous exemptions. Given Clare's background, she didn't have to wait for a good income. She donated to the symphony, the art museum, and the local Shakespeare troupe. We attended fundraisers for public schools even though we had no child, participated in silent auctions for the community playhouse, gave money to the Friends of the Library and to the Little League. We voted in every election and learned to live with the results. But whether God existed, if an afterlife waited, if sins could be atoned, whether forgiveness was possible—about those we never spoke.

Watching Clare sleep, I regret not knowing what she believes in. Does she scream at an unfair God? Does she wonder what she did to have caused this? Does she bargain, debate, plead? Or does she sleep, wake, and wait, ready for it all to be over?

Janice, the hospice nurse, comes every other day to see her and will stay over when I'm away. Sometimes they talk; sometimes she just sits with her. She leaves medication and gives me instructions.

"How soon?" I want to know.

She looks away, then back. She knows this period is hardest on the living. The dying are being comforted. Medication. Time.

"Not long," Janice says. She starts to remind me about that support group she mentions every time she comes. I have the brochures.

I hold up my hand.

"At least think about it," she says. "You're not alone. Really, you're not."

She leaves and I'm alone.

Clare's parents visited us only three times, and each time coincided



with a tragedy. The first time was for our wedding. The second time was following Clare's miscarriage after carrying our daughter for six months. But it was the third visit, after her diagnosis, that finished them. Upon returning home, her father had a stroke while watching the *Nightly Business Report* and died three days later. Her mother, prescribed a mild sedative, lost her balance while descending the stairs and fell, shattering her tibia and fracturing her hip. Unable to care for herself at home, she remains in a rehabilitation home, putting little effort into physical therapy. Clare saw her as often as she could, until she too became unable to travel.

I met Clare in an unlikely place: the men's locker room after the Rocking Raiders destroyed her college team twelve to nothing. The game was little more than an exhibition for us and was over after the second inning. Yet for the Stratton Coyotes, the game represented a chance for the small private school to play a nationally ranked program. In the two innings the coach had allowed me to play, I had come to the plate three times, hit three home runs, and driven in five. The coach had removed all our regulars by the fifth inning and had put in our worst pitcher, a non-scholarship kid. He pitched like Koufax.

Clare interviewed me after the game. I knew at once that she had no understanding of baseball. She tried to get me to sound like a bully picking on someone weaker.

"So, Big Tommy Moran, do you feel good about yourself right now?" she began.

"Thomas," I said. "Tom's fine, too."

She paused, looked surprised, and then barreled forward. "Will the rest of your schedule be so mismatched?" Before I could finish, she interrupted—"At what point in a ball game should a referee just halt the silly game?"

Referee? Silly? Despite her lack of knowledge, I admired her passion. I began to interview her. Clare, as I suspected, was not a sports writer. To complete her schedule, she had to take a journalism class, and she

was now filling in for someone who just hours before had undergone an emergency appendectomy.

A week later, I tracked down her article. The piece, under her byline (that's when I learned her name), cast the competition as a David-and-Goliath encounter, with the giant winning, as giants normally do. She portrayed us as over-pampered, semi-professional athletes versus a team made up of the righteous. Little David battled hard but in the end could not overcome the disadvantages.

She had depicted me (had even called me Big Tommy Moran) as a bumpkin—all teeth and muscle, a kid too dumb to know his own strength—being used by the tax-supported university to jack up revenues and give boosters more reasons to contribute. We were nothing more than gladiators.

I sent off a letter to their paper challenging her allegations (Stratton's athletic director had begged for the game, had known what he was getting his boys into, had appreciated the chance to test his team against the best). I laid out the life of a college athlete: meetings, practices, weight lifting, training, more meetings, more lifting, more practices, the year-round focus, and the fishbowl. Yes, the university had its advantages. That's why David winning was such a big story.

Then I went back to work, trying to shake off a slump that saw my batting average drop and my power numbers fall.

Two weeks after I mailed the letter, I was at the plate facing a junkball pitcher. In my first at-bat I had chased a slow curve outside the strike zone, sending a weak popup to the first baseman. In the fifth inning both teams were scoreless. I was standing in the on-deck circle loosening up when I looked into the stands and saw Clare Stuart sitting alone in a sleeveless blouse, wearing sunglasses and a ball cap pulled low over her brow. I gave her a head nod, to which she touched her cap in acknowledgement.

At the plate I watched the first two slow-bending curves float in from way outside to drop over at the last moment for strikes. I let the next one go for a ball. Then the pitcher wound up and delivered his

version of a fastball right down the middle. I had it, I thought. I coiled and unleashed that smooth swing coaches have always told me I have, expecting to see the ball travel into a gap or even over the fence. Instead, my bat struck nothing but air. I didn't look at her during the long walk back to the dugout.

When I emerged from the locker room after the game, walking with Trent Gandy, our catcher, I saw her looking out from a viewing window onto the field with her back to us.

I said, "Just a moment. I want to say hello."

Trent didn't remember her, had never read the article, and was more concerned about the two foul tips he'd taken off his facemask. "Coach wants to leave soon," he said.

"I'll be there."

Clare turned. "This is a surprise," I said.

"What makes you think I'm waiting for you?" Her ball cap read *Stratton Coyotes*.

"A long way to come for a story." Her arms had turned pink from the sun.

"It's not that far. Anyway, my sports-writing career is over. I've been moved to features."

"A promotion?"

"It's something I know more about."

"Sports writing can't be that difficult to learn."

"You went oh-for-four today. One strike out, two pop-ups, and a ground out to second base."

"But we won," I said.

"An unearned run in the top of the ninth. It's called a gift."

"You do know something about sports."

"I overheard the Trinity fans talking."

"Why did you come, if not for a story?"

She paused, looked back at the field. "Your letter. It was well written."

"You think my tutor wrote it?"

She shifted, uncomfortable. "It crossed my mind."

"A dumb jock—that's what you were thinking?" She turned, acknowledging the truth by her silence. "I probably didn't match your ACT scores, but I work hard."

"Listen, I came to apologize. I was unfair and unreasonable."

"In other words, a total jerk?"

"That wasn't me. I embarrassed myself."

I heard the bus driver honk. "I have to go," I said.

"I can take you back, if that's what you're worried about. Unless that's breaking some team rule."

"You'd drive me back to campus?" The bus's horn blew a long and impatient blast, making sure I could not mistake its meaning. "Why?"

"Teach me about baseball, Thomas," Clare said. "I want to learn."

So we talked about baseball and other things on our drive back to campus.

Before our promising season ended when we lost in the bottom of the ninth after our sure-handed second baseman booted an easy ground ball, we wrote and called. Little did I know that I would never again play on a team so highly rated or with such grand expectations. Injuries and suspensions reduced our squad to mediocrity by my senior year. A torn Achilles early in my final season ended my college career and any hope I had of playing professionally. But all that was to come.

The next time Clare and I were together was in Chicago for a concert, the evening I met Amanda.

I caught a ride with my roommates Willie and Nick. We met Clare and Amanda at the Hilton and went to hear the band Open Doors play at the Aragon Center. We were stoned, all of us. Amanda had the pot. My roommates had never met Clare. Amanda kept things loose. She was brash, outspoken, and relaxed. She enjoyed double entendres and edgy humor. I watched Clare react, smiling sometimes, other times shaking her head in surprise or disbelief, but always amused, always entertained. Did she envy Amanda, I wondered, seeing in her an outrageousness and

spontaneity she lacked? I was aware of Amanda looking at me—at first quick, furtive glances, later long enough to hold my eyes. Was she sizing me up or drawing me in? Flirting or judging?

At the concert we crowded near the stage packed together, not caring what the volume did to our hearing. By the time Open Doors had left the stage for good, I no longer stood near the others, having drifted with the tide and the dancing, my clothes wet with sweat, my exhilaration having peaked and crashed, leaving me exhausted.

We met on the sidewalk. Somehow in the din Nick and Amanda had become attached. They took off, Willie tagging along, leaving Clare and me alone. We walked to a late-night cafe and drank coffee.

That night we stayed together when Amanda ended up with Nick in the room she shared with Clare, leaving Clare needing a place to sleep. Willie turned up later, having become separated from Amanda and Nick on Rush Street. That put Willie and me in the same bed, leaving Clare in our room on a double by herself.

Neither did we sleep together the time I drove to Stratton for the weekend and we saw a comedian and a performance of Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid*. I stayed in her dorm room, in Amanda's bed, while Amanda stayed with her Economics TA at his apartment off-campus.

And we didn't stay together the next time either—that summer, when Clare invited me to her parents' lake cottage. I expected something rustic, an old cabin rarely used. Instead, the place resembled an estate with gates and passwords. If there had been any question about social class and our positions in it, that weekend answered it. I understood where she had come from, the burden of family expectations, and the position I occupied along the continuum of privilege.

Amanda and I meet over the Memorial Day weekend in Milwaukee. I tell Clare that I have another business trip, but that this will be the last. If she wonders why another one, she doesn't ask. I get a room in the Sutherland Hotel and concert tickets for the indie band Potemkin Villagers.

Books on local history claim that the Sutherland Hotel is haunted. Guests report hearing footsteps in an empty hallway. A phantom chambermaid changes a bed and scours a bathtub before the Hispanic housekeeper arrives to do the same. Over the decades there have been repeated sightings of a well-dressed man with vest and watch fob rocking on his heels waiting for the carriage to take him to the train station.

Amanda seems different, worried.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“Wrong?” she says, scratching her arm, touching her hair, her cheek, keeping her hands busy. “Not really.”

I sit on the bed and watch her hang up a blouse, then take her toiletries into the bathroom. When she comes out, she says, “What’s the big secret, right? Eamon and I are separating.”

I stand up. “Did he find out about us?”

She looks repulsed at the suggestion. “This has nothing to do with us.”

“What then?”

“Don’t tell me you’re shocked.” Her mocking laugh sounds contrived. “There’s someone else,” she says, pauses, and then adds, “Now you can be shocked.”

Clare never cared for Eamon. Didn’t like his pretenses or consumer-driven habits. She thought him too shallow to value Amanda’s wit, her interests, her need to experiment. Clare never saw Amanda staying, certainly not the fifteen years that she had. Even Amanda had joked that it was temporary.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She raises her hand. “Don’t start.”

I go to the window. I hear her open and close a dresser drawer. Then she’s beside me, asking about Clare. I repeat what the hospice nurse told me. She touches me, but not as a lover. I wonder if she is thinking what I am: that we shouldn’t be there.

“He’s moved in with her,” she says a moment later, starting to rub my back.

“You know her?”

She removes her hand. We stand beside each other, looking out onto the street like ghosts upon the living. “I didn’t ask her name.”

Amanda had been Clare’s maid of honor. Clare had been hers. Amanda had hosted the baby shower a week before we lost our child. In college Clare had tended to Amanda when Amanda became too drunk, too wild. Clare had often saved her.

Amanda, I knew, went by her own rules. Willie had that night with her in Chicago and was infatuated. They got together afterwards, once in Chicago and another time when he spent a weekend with her at a motel near Stratton’s campus. But last-minute Amanda issues often canceled his visits. She always had good excuses. But the more Willie got strung along, the more irritable he became, until he stopped talking about her and met Laura.

The plans Clare and I made did not always work out, either. Not only was she a year ahead of me, but because of baseball I needed an extra semester to graduate. By then, Clare and Amanda had moved to Chicago. Clare became an intern in the Chicago Art Museum’s archives. Amanda sold advertising for a weekly newspaper. She learned the arts scene so well that she discovered two artists who later became first regionally, then nationally, known with exhibitions in San Francisco, Austin, Santa Fe, and Boston. She promoted a band from clubhouse obscurity to a minor label and a national tour. That was how she had met Eamon Carrier. The band needed financial advice, and his firm, Greenhouse and Charles, had a reputation about which even Amanda had heard. Eamon, fresh out of the Chicago School of Economics, was assigned the task.

When we get to the Riverside Theatre a long line has formed. We smell marijuana as we walk holding hands against that line until we find the end. We’re older than everyone and better dressed, despite wearing our most casual clothes.

Once inside, we're fitted with wristbands. Most head for the balcony. We find what look like good seats downstairs and wait.

Three guitar-strumming women open, play several songs, and then leave to mild applause. The crew rearranges the stage for the feature band. When the music resumes, we find ourselves standing with the others. Ninety minutes later, Potemkin Villagers play their last number and return for an encore before departing the stage for good.

We remain in our seats and watch the young depart. Amanda leans away from me, crosses her legs, and bobs a strap-sandaled foot. Her toenails are painted a red polish rich as a Porsche's finish.

Like my great-grandfather and grandfather, my father was a mason—until a fall from a scaffold broke his back. When he recovered, he used a brace to stand and with his settlement money bought a tavern near Allied Chemical, where he poured beers and shots for the factory workers coming off their shifts. In the beginning the plant ran three shifts. As time passed, that number dropped to two, then one. When the plant closed, my dad was left with a worn-down tavern in a forgotten part of town. I cared, but the university had offered me an athletic scholarship. I would be the first in my family to attend college. While their lives crumbled around them, I was on my way out.

Amanda wants a drink, so we stop in a tavern near the theater. We claim a table by the wall. She orders a double martini on the rocks. I get a Spotted Cow. Mounted televisions broadcast the Brewers game, now in extra innings. The sound is too low to hear.

After stirring her drink and eating the olive, she says, "You're not surprised about Eamon?"

"This is what I know about him: He's a bookkeeper. He makes good money. You have different interests. He golfs, watches the weather channel, wants low taxes. You like loud clubs, spicy foods, edgy movies with too much violence. You bicker about what to do, where to go, his weight, how much you drink. He thinks you drive too fast. I can go on."



She takes another drink, shifts in her chair. “He’s a CPA and senior partner. He’s not some number-crunching nobody. He knows his stuff. He says numbers never lie. Numbers have no opinions. You can only argue about where the numbers go, under what category, that sort of thing. But once decided, they tell a story more straightforward and honest than anything possible.”

“That’s what you talk about?”

“It’s something he said after we met. He tried to explain what he did. And for that, yes, there are people willing to pay him very well.”

“He and I played racquetball once. He’s aggressive but not very good. He lost every game and still thought I was lucky. Why did you marry him?”

“He’s the one who left, remember. He’s the one who figured a mistake had to be corrected.”

“We thought you’d be the first to leave.” Wanting another beer, I look for our waitress. When I get her attention, I raise my glass. When my beer arrives, Amanda looks surprised. I say, “Did you want to go?”

She turns away and shakes her head as if disappointed.

On the morning Clare and I wed, her father pulled me aside and said, “Let’s take a drive.” I remember walking to his Lexus, as black and shiny as obsidian, with apprehension. Although not handsome, and standing no taller than his Lexus, Leonard Stuart was a man people noticed. He spoke in a way that made you obey, more four-star general than investment banker.

“Clare tells me you’ve been hired by Pitts and Roberts,” he said.

“I’ll be starting in two weeks.”

“It’s a good company. They seldom take on inexperienced associates. I see Charlie Pitts at the club, have a standing golf date with Stan Roberts.”

He drove through the upper-middleclass neighborhoods. He wore a suit, like always. I tried to picture him at the club wearing a golf shirt, plaid pants, and visor, teeing up with Stan Roberts.

“I want to show you something,” he said, turning down a street tunneled by the branches of older trees. He stopped in front of a set-back two-story stucco house shielded by two large maples. On the lawn was a *For Sale* sign with an angled banner that read *Sold*.

“Shall we go inside?” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re marrying my daughter. She needs a nice place to live.”

“You bought this?”

He studied me, displaying no emotion.

“Mr. Stuart, you know I’ve signed a lease for a condo with an option to buy. Movers are packing us up tomorrow.”

“If it’s that lease, I’ll have my lawyers look at it. I’m sure there’s a hole somewhere. If not, they’ll create one. You’ll like it here.”

I couldn’t argue that the house wasn’t nice, or that the gift wasn’t generous. Still, it didn’t sit right. Was he starting me off indebted to him? Showing Clare she’d always need him? Bitter to be losing her to someone like me? “You’re sure about what I might like?”

He sat back without taking his eyes off mine. “Think of a beautiful home with no mortgage.”

I looked at the house and then down at my hands.

“I hope I haven’t offended you,” he said.

My heart beat as it had my freshman year when I had for the first time faced a university pitcher. I’d struck out on three pitches. “Clare tells me she likes where we’re moving.”

He smiled, or at least what passed for that. “You’re sure about what she might like?” he said. “Clare has been raised with certain standards that her mother and I wish to maintain. Give her a home she can be proud of. Not some condo a fly-by-night developer threw up on the edge of the prairie.”

I looked back at the house.

“Take a good look.”

I did. To my disappointment, I imagined getting the newspaper in the morning, drinking coffee in the breakfast nook, watching our

children play in the backyard, talking to neighbors across hedgerows. Sitting beside Leonard Stuart, the gray force that soon would be my father-in-law, our condo became cheap, tawdry. Had Clare even been honest with me about liking it?

While he waited for my answer, a moving van stopped in front of the house. A sedan pulled up behind the van, and out jumped two children who ran, screaming, up my lawn. A couple followed behind. They walked up the edged sidewalk to my front door and then inside.

“You didn’t buy it,” I said.

“I’m still waiting for your answer. Will you take a house if I give you one? If not this, then something even better?”

“What is this? Some kind of test?” I faced him, his eyes gray as his hair and hard as drill bits. To sit across from him at a negotiating table must have been terrifying. “I suppose I owe the job to you, as well.”

He relaxed, sat back, tried to smile. “Listen, Clare’s mother and I want you to reconsider. We think this affair has moved too fast, and we blame ourselves for letting it go as long as it has.”

I forced myself not to turn away. “Isn’t it a little late to be having this conversation?”

“I’m thinking about what’s best for my daughter. Having that conversation is never too late. Listen, Thomas, I don’t doubt that you’re a nice enough young man. But we don’t know you. This isn’t what we had in mind.”

“What you had in mind?”

“Let’s back up. I can make life easy for you, and easier for your parents. Isn’t that what this marriage is all about anyway? I can do that if you just leave my daughter out of it.”

“Besides Clare’s hand, I don’t need anything from you.”

“You’re not going to admit it, but deep down you want me to make it easy for you. You want the short cut. I saw it in your eyes when I showed you that house. I didn’t know much about you. I know more now.”

As we drove back, I wondered if he had been right about me. In the

span of a few minutes in front of that house, had I not become someone able to be bought?

I never told Clare about this.

Once we moved into our new home, I wrote Pitts and Roberts, declining their offer. I thanked them for their time and consideration but said another opportunity had presented itself. That hadn't been a lie. I had had other interviews. One had offered me a lesser position, assistant construction manager—a glorified foreman, really—at a small salary. I'd have to put my steel-toed boots back on, find my leather gloves, and prove myself, but it was a start. I feared Clare's reaction, was afraid her father may have been right about her requiring certain comforts. Yet, she never asked why and seemed fine with my decision. Her father's experiment had revealed her character.

The very day I posted the letter, the first piece of mail I received in our new home was a letter from Pitts and Roberts. In two sentences, and signed by both men, they formally rescinded their offer.

Amanda finishes her Martini, sets the glass on its coaster, and pushes it away.

"Another?" I ask. She shrugs a *Why not?* I get the waitress's attention and order. While we wait, I ask about the concert. As she speaks, I think how she's surrounded by bad news: her marriage, her best friend, and me reminding her of all that has gone wrong. I am old enough to realize how this will end.

I take her hand. Her long, tapered fingers look out of place against my knuckles, gnarled from being hit by inside fastballs and from a home-plate collision with a catcher who didn't move.

Our drinks arrive. When the waitress leaves, Amanda says, "Clare changed after she lost your child. Did you notice?"

I release her hand and sit back. "We both changed."

"No—you felt bad for Clare, but to you it was like an illness she would get over."

"Why bring this up? You don't know."

“Eamon’s the same way. To him something isn’t real unless it can be counted or touched. Something might not be present, but its absence isn’t to be mourned. He broke my favorite sculpture once, a piece I’d had before I knew him. An accident, I know. Walked into it. Wasn’t looking. Something for me that had meaning, context, a story. For him, well, let’s clean it up and get something else.”

“You’re not seriously comparing your busted artwork to us?”

She looks away, embarrassed. “I’m just saying ask him now and he may or may not remember. Wasn’t important, anyway. Just something else in life that didn’t work out.”

“She had a name. I’d painted her room. Read parenting books. I went to all the appointments. Spent three entire weekends putting together her Swedish furniture. We’d started Lamaze.”

“But did you have to dismantle it so fast? Repaint the walls?”

“I thought it might help.”

She looks at me as if seeing something she didn’t like. “Give away her clothes?” Amanda turns away, finishes her drink. Perhaps Clare’s parents were right to see me as a man not worthy of their daughter, a man made inferior by his past and his ambitions. Amanda must have seen it, too. No wonder she stops talking. She can’t stand to.

“Okay, so I’m a lousy husband and a bad man. But you’re her best friend.” She pulls back. “You haven’t visited, haven’t called in weeks. And here you are with me.” It’s cheap shot. I turn to the television above Amanda’s head and watch a Brewers’ player end the game by swinging at a ball out of the strike zone. Two men, each sitting at the bar alone, get up and leave.

“That was unfair,” I say.

She waves it off. “I deserve it.”

I wonder whether we’ll still be together after Clare dies, then hate myself for wondering. After a moment, I say, “Lauren May.”

“What?” She sounds confused.

“That was her name. Our daughter.”

We leave, my beer unfinished, barely touched. In the room we

undress, but not each other. I watch how she removes and hangs each item with no excitement or urgency, like she's alone and we've never met. She slips into bed naked and without a word. When I get in she turns her back to me. I touch her hair, feel her warm shoulders. I want her to say something. I want to be comforted. I turn off the light.

Amanda says, "You're right. I haven't been a good friend. I'm going to visit. I want to see her."

In the parking garage the next morning we kiss and hold each other before driving off in opposite directions.

To Clare's parents my father's business may have sounded interesting, but interesting as if read about in a novel, not as an environment capable of producing a boy worthy of their daughter. Even my parents resented me. Like me, they felt uncomfortable around my in-laws. Mom worried about whether her dress was too shabby—about how she spoke, what fork to use. My dad was mad that I was marrying a woman whose father was not a better drinking buddy, the kind that belched, laughed too loud, and argued pennant races and football officiating. The times I looked over at them I could tell they had nothing in common to talk about. Politics was out, given my father's union beliefs. Investments were out, since my father understood only Social Security and passbook savings. But they smiled, nodded, and shifted on their legs, my dad tugging at his tie to get comfortable. I was in over my head.

Nurse Janice is at the house when I return. She looks at me in a way that I interpret as an accusation. I ask about Clare.

"She's awake now."

A song the band played last night goes through my head. Despite its upbeat pop melody, the lyrics tell about misfortune, misunderstanding, poor decisions, and a bad ending.

Clare's eyes are open. I sit beside her and take her cool, fragile hand.

I whisper, "Good morning."

She rolls toward me and tries to squeeze my hand. When she looks at the water glass, I pick it up and place the straw near her mouth. Drinking exhausts her. She is weaker than she was two days ago.

She tries to speak, but I can't understand what she says. She tries again, and this time I hear her whisper, "I dreamed about college." She looks back at the water glass, and again I place the straw to her lips. She swallows.

I say, "That's funny. I heard from Amanda. She's coming tomorrow."

She makes a face I can't read. Then I see what for Clare has become her laugh. I stroke her face. Her cavernous cheeks are almost unbearable to touch. I'm aware of becoming angry with her—for becoming ill, for lingering, for being hard to understand, at what she's caused me to become. But it isn't Clare who makes me angry. I continue stroking her face. She sighs almost sensually and falls back to sleep. I remain with her for a while, then leave.

I wonder if it's common that when thinking back upon a relationship one recalls not only what was accomplished but also what was discussed but never realized. I'm consumed now with things we put off until later when we had more time and fewer obligations. We talked about hiking Colorado's fourteen-thousand-foot peaks; snorkeling off Aruba; swimming in Lake Atitlan; having breakfast in Dublin, lunch in Paris, and dinner in Athens. We talked about walking along the Great Wall, climbing Mt. Olympus, renting a cottage in a small village on Crete. We talked about many things.

When Amanda calls the next day, she says Eamon wants her to have the house, the two cars, everything in their joint accounts—that what he wants are not possessions but to be free. A CPA wanting to be free, she scoffs. Does he not know how much freedom costs?

"Still coming?" I ask.

“I’ll be there,” she says. “I have to make arrangements for Sasha.”

“He left you the dog too?”

“Freedom. I thought I mentioned that.”

I wait, but she doesn’t come or call. I look in on Clare. Her room smells stronger now of something unpleasant. It’s a smell that won’t go away, and I can’t get used to it. She stirs when I close the door behind me.

Clare told me about the time her college orchestra played their annual graduation-week concert. The elderly conductor, her favorite professor, had just started the piece when after several measures he collapsed on the stage. So stunned was everyone that at first no one reacted. Finally, the fifth-chair cellist turned the conductor over and began CPR. Still, no one moved until the cellist yelled for help.

Clare learned later that Professor Neilsbecker had died the instant he toppled from the rostrum. That incident became the one memory from college she would share when asked about a most significant event. I often wondered why that tragic moment would be the one she’d tell. I now believe it had to do with its suddenness, its unexpected nature, and how it had a beginning, middle, and end compressed in a few seconds. Before Professor Neilsbecker had motioned for the orchestra to begin, Clare said, he had introduced the composition as his favorite and, while looking at her, complimented the musicians on their preparation. When the music started, Clare remembered him closing his eyes and smiling right before his heart seized and he was lost. She did not play in the orchestra her senior year and has seldom played her violin since.

The next morning my phone rings. When I answer, I hear music by Potemkin Villagers. Amanda’s listening to them in the car.

“Soon” she says.

Janice is there when Amanda arrives. Amanda’s wearing a white blouse, khaki shorts, and leather sandals. She’s more tanned than I remember, and I suspect she has either applied it herself or been to the



booths. Sunglasses sit on her head holding back dark hair, and I wonder for the first time whether she treats it. I find the smell of her sweat from the long drive erotic.

“Well?” she says.

“There’s been no miracle, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She gives me a look that makes me shift my weight from one leg to the next. “I can get you a drink,” I say.

“Gin and tonic.”

“I don’t have limes.” She waves that off.

I fix the drink and hand it to her. She’s sitting on a chair, sandals off, legs crossed.

“I remember when Eamon and I were here last. You two played golf. Clare and I went to a play. She wasn’t feeling well. She didn’t look good.”

I sit on the couch across from her. “I thought it was, I don’t know, menopause or something.” I watch her drink. “You okay?” I ask.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You know what I mean.”

She sets her drink down. “I hear Eamon’s dropped ten pounds and bought a motorcycle. A Harley, I understand. Sounds like they’re on the road.”

“Freedom,” I say.

“He’s become the man I wouldn’t have let go for anything.” She resumes drinking. When her glass is empty, she says, “I’m ready.”

The bedroom door is open. Clare is sitting up, and Janice is reading to her. Amanda walks in as if entering from stage left and says, “Does this mean we put off shopping until tomorrow?”

Clare sees Amanda, smiles, nods. “Tomorrow,” she whispers.

Amanda takes the book from Janice’s hand. “I got this,” she says. Janice and I leave.

I go outside and walk around the flowerbeds, for which I pay big money to some landscaping company who then pays a fraction of it to Mexican, maybe Guatemalan, workers who may or may not be legal. They do nice work and deserve better than they get. I slip them cash when I

can. This is the kind of day Clare once loved. Warm. Nice breeze. No humidity. Enough clouds to hide the sun's glare. A Mimosa, the Sunday paper, a jazz station playing in the background.

I'm on the deck at the table beneath an umbrella, drinking my second screwdriver when Amanda comes out. I see she's fixed herself another gin and tonic. She sits beside me. We remain silent for a few moments before I ask, "You two get caught up?"

"I should have come sooner. I should have come more often."

"It's not easy seeing friends change. Nothing prepares us for it."

"I told her about Eamon. Wasn't going to, but she asked. You didn't know, but we had a bet on whose marriage would go first. My money was on hers."

I'm surprised. "Why?"

"Your pride, her family. And she's smarter than you. More talented too."

"Did you bet on who would have the first affair?"

"Even if we had, I wouldn't tell you who won," she says, and looks at me in a way that says a lot but not everything.

"I never liked waiting," I say. "Appointments, intermissions. Not even the seventh inning stretch." I swat at a fly on my knee, missing it.

"Clare doesn't like waiting, either. You should know that."

"Yes, but she's more patient."

She puts her glass down. "Go see her. She asked for you."

The bed lamp is off in Clare's room, and the room feels colder. I let my eyes adjust to the dark before I sit on the chair beside her. She's no longer sitting up. I rub her face, massaging her temples the way she likes. I hear her breathe. I know she's awake.

I begin talking to her, unsure of what to say, but I start and go on about our lives, how we met, her article, and my letter. I talk about our daughter that was never born, and how much I think of her and even imagine her having grown up with us. She would now be sixteen, I remind her, and starting to cause us grief. I laugh when I say this, and

she does too. She says something so soft I don't understand. Instead of asking her to repeat it, I wait, letting her again form the words.

"Tell me more," she says loud enough for me to hear.

I make up stories of life with Lauren May, a name we had agreed upon one night over dinner at Paisan's, Clare's favorite Italian restaurant, a small place with wood floors and no neon. Four months pregnant then, Clare drank water while I worked my way through a bottle of Chianti. The name was a combination of our grandmothers' names—Lauren from Clare's mother's side, May from my father's. Clare was fond of her grandmother, having spent two summers with her in Boston. I remembered my grandmother as the one, besides my mother on occasion, who could get my father to see reason when all he saw were absolutes. She could do the same with her husband, or so the stories went, for I never knew my grandfather, he having died when my father was young, leaving behind a small savings and creditors who wanted it all.

So I tell Clare stories of Lauren May, about how she became both a musician and an athlete. Her friends liked soccer, but she preferred softball. I encouraged her to become a corner infielder—third and first, like her dad. I hit her ground balls and fly balls, and we played catch. I tell Clare how she became disciplined at the plate, able to wait for the pitcher to throw what she wanted to hit. For Lauren May, a two-strike count was as comfortable as a count in her favor. She would foul off the close pitches and let the bad ones go until the pitcher finally threw the one she wanted. Then she would drive it, extra bases for sure, maybe over the fence. She always led the team in RBIs, batting average, and slugging percentage.

"Tell me more," Clare whispers.

I tell her Lauren May thought it silly having one boyfriend when she could be friends with many. But that never stopped the phone from ringing, and Clare and I would look at each other, pleased that she was popular, more pleased she never took that for granted. We knew Lauren May would wait for the right one just like she would wait for

the right pitch. “In that way she was like you, Clare,” I say, teasing her, touching her face. “One day while going about her business, something unexpected and unplanned would happen, like it did to you the day you interviewed me, a young ball player so full of himself that you couldn’t stand it. Maybe it would be while interviewing someone for a story, for Lauren May loved to write, had written for her high school paper, and was asked to be guest columnist for our neighborhood gazette.”

So softly now that I have to lean over her mouth to hear, she says, “More.”

I let go of her hand and go cross to the other side of the bed and get in beside her. I gather what is left of her in my arms and set her head on my shoulder.

“I’ll tell you more, Clare.” And so I do. I tell stories about Lauren May’s college graduation and her career as a journalist, starting out as a restaurant and movie critic for a small-circulation daily in Colorado before moving up the newspaper chain until she became, at thirty-one, the youngest editor of a flagship paper. She would be married by then, I say, having had a nice wedding paid for by her very proud and by then rich father, soon after her twenty-sixth birthday. Lauren May planned it all by taking charge, like she did with everything she undertook. There would be conflict, of course, and disagreements. “You wanted her announcements to be more formal, and found her choice of caterer suspect,” I say. “Lauren May was sensitive to your feelings, letting you have your victories, and so by the time the reception was over and you and I were all that remained in the hall, you would reflect and think, *Yes, we pulled that off* and feel good about how well you and Lauren May had worked together. Like always.”

“More,” she whispers.

I kiss her on her forehead, feeling her cool skin. Her breath is so shallow I can neither feel nor hear it. Lauren May had a son two years later, I tell her. They named him after my father, a nice gesture to acknowledge her hardscrabble half. Lauren May liked my father, I remind her, and Big Mike adored her and his first great-grandchild. He

didn't live long enough to know Little Mike well, but there was enough time for him to buy his namesake the necessities: ball, glove, and bat, but not batting gloves, for a true ball player needs to feel the wood, the dirt, and the tar in bare hands.

And, of course, we adore Little Mike yet are curious how Lauren May, the one with a plan and the drive, could have produced a child as sensitive as he. "He's not like anyone in either family, except for you, Clare," I say. "He comes closest to you. I would see you two reading, both in your favorite places. You sit that way for hours, you looking up to watch him, you smiling your sly half-cocked smile, he too absorbed to notice. Once, I had to turn on your reading lamps because neither of you noticed how dark the room had become."

I pause, wanting Clare to tell me to go on, but she can't. Our wait is over. Still, I continue talking about our lives, how we age, the things we do, that month we stayed in Barcelona, the side trips to Morocco and Portugal, our grandchildren, our seven-day hike along the Continental Divide, our time in Athens and then in Crete, where we stayed six weeks in Palaiochora. Until I have no more to say.

I lay Clare's head back on the pillow and cover her arms with the sheet. I find Janice and Amanda at the patio table. Janice is reading the newspaper, her half-glasses down her nose. Amanda's eyes are closed, her glass empty, the ice melted.

Janice looks at me, and I nod. She goes into the house. There's paperwork to complete, calls to be made.

"It's over," I say to Amanda. I hear the wind through the trees. I see the branches sway. She reaches for my hand, but I don't want to be touched. I think about the last twenty minutes and say, "Life turned out the way we wanted it to." She looks at me, confused. I don't explain.

"I can help with the arrangements."

The word "arrangements" feels like sandpaper across a wound. "Clare didn't want much. She wrote it down. All I need to do is follow her directions."

Amanda nods, and asks, "Want me to stay?" I see it has little to do

with arrangements. She has a house but nowhere to go. There are too many questions.

Janice returns and says something about being sorry, and I let her go on. I believe her. People develop relationships. Death is personal. “I know, I know,” she says, producing another flyer for the support group. “Just think about it.”

I take it from her. She goes back inside.

Amanda stands and walks across the deck to the far railing. I think she is waiting for an answer. “That would be nice,” I say.

I wait to hear from Lauren May. I wait to hear from Little Mike. I wait.

—*James O’Gorman*



