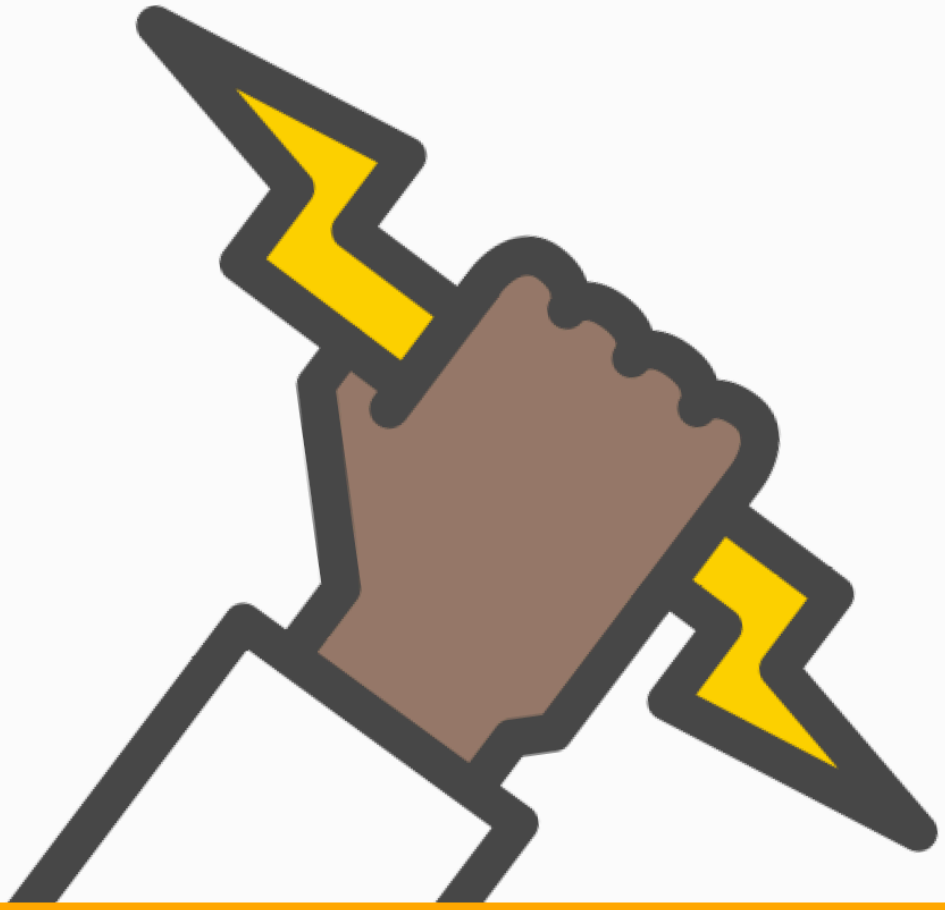
LITTLE FICTION



THE 2018 FLASH ISSUE

Featuring: A.C. Warner, Anna Vangala Jones, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Ciera Horton McElroy, DeMisty D. Bellinger, Jennifer Todhunter, Jim Warner, Kate Gehan, Kelly Wisdom, Lori Sambol Brody, Marta Balcewicz, Maureen Langloss, Pat Foran, Pete Stevens & Ruth LeFaive.

WESTBOUND on I-74 we drive into the storm looming like a tidal wave over the state line. Like the sea churning upside down. Like the kind of storm thunder gods are made of. Double yellow lines—lightning we could hold in our hands if we stay still enough. But we aren't still. Jack Daniel's Tennessee Honey coats our throats at eighty miles per hour.

With the ghost of Berryman in our ear we mine our lives out of the Appalachia and travel in the direction of our fear. Things piled window to window. Antique end tables. Couch cushions. Garbage disposal mangled heirloom silverware. Backpacks bursting at the seams with clothes, wrinkled money, and fraying pearl strands with memories threatening to break free.

A flickering laptop of our meshing mythos nestled in ski masks. On the dashboard The Blessed Virgin Mary cracked from the last time we spread our wings and fled.

It is an insomniac summer. Ordinary angels live in static.

If we'd known back then, we would've never learned how to fly—that we could fly. We refuse to place blame on who was first to start. A knick knack here, a salt shaker there. Quick fixes. Then cafeteria trays, then store display perfume bottles, then an art deco Jesus, then, then, then—

Big and bold, *Welcome to Illinois* sits at the bottom of the hill.

We will rebuild on glacier leveled plains where there is no shattered glass window panes. There will be jobs. A down payment on a house. Block parties and barbeques where we can leave our neighbors without a souvenir.

We slam against our seatbelts as the car swerves onto the welcome center exit. Bottlecaps and lockless keys clatter across the dashboard. Two tires roll over the divide between car and semi parking. Narrowly avoiding

clipping a red sedan, we skid across two parking spaces. We kill the engine and hear the first rumble of thunder.

The rain is coming. It will hit hard. So hard we can't see.

As we step out of the car, mist spritzes our faces. In the backseat of the red sedan someone has left a handmade quilt that grips our hearts. Scraps of old memories—Sunday best florals, strawberries, and blue paisley—bound together with yarn tassels knotted at every other corner. Green trim and an ivy underbelly. The door unlocked.

Opening our trunk, we pack our wings in boxes and bet who will be the first to forget how to fly. I hope I win.

BHAVI'S parents had long raised him on the bitter and sweet life has to offer by, each morning, scattering over the top of his head a mixture of the two. The fine grains and crystals of mustard colored turmeric and beige sugar interwove among the strands of his thick, dark hair like a comforting, invisible crown. "In this way," his mother had said, "today's difficulties will be lessened and overcome by its beauties."

And yet, he'd come home each evening with a new tale of woe. His locker at school had been decorated with toilet paper, his books found

lurking in the cavernous depths of hallway trash cans, and his teacher had called him a "know-it-all" again for simply providing the correct answers to questions she'd posed to the whole class, including him.

"If she didn't want to know, why did she ask?" Bhavi fretted over dinner.

"It's not about you," his father said. "The problem is with her. Don't let her bother you."

"Maybe you're using too much turmeric, Mom," Bhavi said. "You're giving me only the bitter, not enough sugar."

"If I use too much, you'll get a toothache, and grow to take it for granted or even dislike it." She stroked his hair with fingertips stained yellow from the guilty spice causing his misfortunes. "Take heart. There are always lovely little treasures buried in darkness." When he frowned, she kissed the tip of his nose. "It just makes it feel that much better when you find them," she said.

When Bhavi first saw Soo standing at the front of his second grade class, staring at her shoes and letting her black hair fall forward like a

gleaming curtain to conceal her face, he didn't think much of it. *Hard to be the new girl mid-year* was all that briefly flitted between his oversized ears. But as she wound her way through the tight aisles to her empty desk two rows behind his, he started to pay attention. He saw her sidestep the outstretched foot of Billy Perkins with pride. He resisted the temptation to reach over and smack Billy for trying to trip her so soon on her first day. He thought of speaking up.

Then he realized she wasn't frightened of Billy. She was mad. Dark, red mad. Blood coursing through the fierce expression in her eyes. He loved it and he felt his bones strengthen and harden in her presence. Her friendship would be the sugar he'd been waiting for, finally emerging to conquer all the turmeric. Bhavi's cold teacher, who often glowered at him like he was an unpleasant scent lodged in her flared nostrils, called out his name and he turned to face the front, startled. He felt safe enough a few minutes later to glance back at Soo.

Seated at her desk, she looked up like she felt him looking. Her face was diamond shaped like home plate. The lids guarding her brown eyes were pink petals. It seemed others had tried to rob her of her shine, too,

but he could still see it there—like his—a candle wavering in the dark winds of childhood, its flame not yet gone out. Ready to burst and scorch, as well as light up, the night.

YES, I am weird looking. Yes, it does make me a better writer. But what if despite being weird looking and a good writer because of it, I never write a novel? I want desperately to write a novel so as to realize my full artistic potential. Not only am I a weird-looking writer, I am also a writer who is queer and NDN. What could be queerer and more NDN right now than the act of writing a novel? We are all bearers of the brutal inheritance of history and this is being revealed to us with each passing month; to me, the novel is the most hospitable form to tell a story about how despite my

ability to diagnose the horror behind what animates the world, it still feels awful to exist. I could write an unduly long novel about the burden of being a person in Canada. I could write a novel about how taxing it is to talk to white people who are afraid to say the wrong thing to me. Even better, I could write a novel, in vignettes, about all the outlandish things white people say to me when they are trying not to say the wrong thing to me.

I tell everyone who will listen about the experimental novel I want to write. I tell them it will pressurize form and narrative and ask the reader to do a lot of work; I want to write a novel that will not disappear the labor that goes into writing it. I tell them the novel will register the blood and sweat and tears of writing at the level of typography.

I hate the idea of writing a novel teeming with dialogue and description, I confess to everyone repeatedly. I will not shut up about how I want to write a novel about what it is to write novels in this day and age, which means that I want to write a novel that interrogates ideas and idea-making. The novel will be like a child to me and thus I will be like its

mother. I want to be a mother terribly, to give birth to words and to treat them all equally on the page.

My friends say encouraging things to me:

- I am so here for this!
- This is a work of staggering genius!
- You ARE the Cree Judith Butler—so productive!

When I tell strangers or acquaintances about the novel that I have not yet given birth to, they say things like:

- That sounds like a great idea for a short story.
- Sounds interesting, but not really like a novel.
- Who reads novels anyways?

I am upset with my friends who do not have the guts to tell me that no one gives a fuck about the novel anymore. Why do they withhold from me the cultural belief that novels are like damp firewood, untenable no matter how

much gasoline you throw onto them? Social media killed print journalism, so why not the novel too? Why do I feel more like an artist and less like a writer when I tell people I am working on a novel?

I am writing from my deluxe dorm in the Cassiar Residence at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. I was invited here to take part in a residency that coincides with an Indigenous Art Intensive. When I arrived on the weekend, I was picked up from the airport by a fellow poet and, predictably, he asked about what I was working on (I asked this question myself at least a dozen times in the subsequent week).

ME, NOT-YET A NOVELIST:

(In a coy tone) I think I am writing a novel, but that is still to be determined! I was up all night yesterday turning over an idea that came to me out of the blue.

HIM, NOT A NOVELIST:

(laughter) That's why I don't write novels—they keep you up at night! Sure I have read novels and thought, *I could do this too!* What are you writing about?

ME, NOT-YET A NOVELIST:

I want to write a novel that expands on what "the NDN novel" can be and do. No one is really writing novels that take the novel into uncharted waters. There's nothing wrong per se with the NDN novel as it is, but there seems to me to be an opportunity to have the form articulate what language cannot, especially when that language is not our ancestral tongue.

HIM, NOT A NOVELIST:

That sounds to me like a fair assessment. Whenever I try to write a novel it always descends into a meta exercise *(laughter)*.

ME, NOT-YET A NOVELIST

Right. I guess what I am trying to say is that I want to write the first-ever postmodern NDN novel in Canada.

The Okanagan is subliminal and this does not change because I am not yet writing a novel. I am such an unfree person, will writing a novel make me freer? There is so much an NDN has to say to properly render the diminished life he lives—will a novel afford me enough space to do this? What if I wrote a novel and I still did not like what I saw in the mirror? Worse, what if I wrote a novel and it did not make NDNs happier or want to live fuller lives? If I don't write a novel, no one will know how unhappy I am.

Ciera Horton McElroy | Orchestration

SAY there's a girl. Say she's in college—twenty-one, an anthropology major—feeling older and more enlightened than she is. Have her sense the immensity of the world and want to swallow it. On the weekends, she protests with pink hats, joins hunger strikes, raises money for sea turtles. Let her have dark hair—obsidian—or blonde with frosted tips. Make her tall, muscly, like an Olympian.

Say there's a boy. Say he wears the same Patagonia coat and Swedish sweater. Have him be a homebody, a real introvert type. Make him lean

with cheekbones like blades, though tall like the girl. He passes evenings with a telescope staring at the sky, wondering how many of him could fill the earth, and how many earths could fill the sun. Unnecessary questions haunt him.

Somehow (the details are up to you) arrange their schedules so they will meet after New Year's at a bar where they know few people.

Orchestrate it like this: She'll ask if she knows him from somewhere and he'll say yes, Astronomy on Tuesday/Thursday. They'll get a drink, then move through the bar, find a table sheeted in quiet. She will ask his major, hometown, favorite book. He will ask her favorite planet. Let them bond over firmly held views on Palestine. Love for the Bee Gees. Agreement that yes, Dylan deserved the Nobel. Then they'll share their shadows in broken bits. The girl will talk about her childhood. Hatred has inked like an oil spill, polluting every good memory. Her father, a serial cheater. Her mother, a whimpering martyr. She, a born protester, wailing against this life. (Insert fuller backstory here.) The boy's hatred is more complicated, not yet fully formed. A father who lived on disability checks and Miller Lite and a mother who worked as a county nurse, saving every

life but his. A first girlfriend who died in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. Let them look at each other and see themselves, see someone else hiding from the world.

They'll start dating.

In those first months, make her focused, sharp-tempered, quick-tongued. Make him sensitive, relaxed, artful with romantic gestures. And when they fuck, it should be tender, hushed, quick. Sometimes, he will place his hand on her face, but she will bat it away, say "No!" and he will finish in seconds.

Then. Have her worry that he won't stay. Have him wake with dreams that she died, her car rolling off a bridge. Make her disappear for whole weekends to march in foreign cities without so much as a note. Make him eat alone. Compound this (naturally) with other anxieties. Tuesday's final in Astronomy. Rising student debt. What to do after graduation. Give him just enough patience for her outbursts that he knows to be quiet, just enough frustration to question if he should leave. (But don't let him. Not yet.)

While they totter on the precipice of graduation, bring back the parents. Have her mother call to announce that her father (the serial cheater) has died. Have them grieve and stress together. Of course, you must make the girl afraid of what loving him means, having seen what love can do. Make the boy scared of losing her, having lost more than his share.

And then, the question: Will they make it?

(Here is where you have some options.)

Option A:

They graduate and get married. The wedding is small and simple. They honeymoon in Costa Mesa. They start jobs that have nothing to do with their degrees. She will work from home—a copywriter—and he will go to grad school for Clinical Psychology, where he will learn to diagnose his own past. He will bring home theories on how to raise children. Together, they will agree on proper discipline, on Montessori methods. They will live like this: have five babies, mortgage a house, buy some shit, grow old and fat together, and then their children will move away. Later, the children (now believing themselves enlightened) will announce all the things their

parents did wrong. Even though they had it easy, without all the cheating, drinking, and disability checks. Still, the children will say *remember that one time?* And the parents will not remember. Until the day they die, they will not remember.

Option B:

Have the girl say: *Long distance*. Have her move to grad school with a promise to email daily. She will do this for a year, and the boy will always write back, until she doesn't. Have her marry someone else, someone as dark and sharp-tempered as she is—until she realizes that he's even darker. Give her enough sense to divorce and start over. The boy: have him marry a girl from a good family, whose childhood he envies. She will never understand him. She will always wonder why he cries in his sleep.

Option C:

Have the boy—still in college, still that first year—reach for a condom under his bed. Say it has a pinprick hole, and the girl gets pregnant. She will panic. How to have a baby at twenty-one? How to juggle dreams and life?

The boy will make lavish promises—how he'll get a job and sell his telescope for extra cash, how they're in this thing together. Let her have the baby, keep the child (a boy, a girl, your choice). Let them scrape away a living and learn how cruel and hard the world is for young people in love.

Option D:

Have them make no plans.

As graduation looms, have him show her how to use the telescope to see the milky rims of planets, the husk of the moon. Have him say that five hundred trillion of her could fit on earth. And a million earths could fit in the sun—and doesn't that make her feel small? Have her say something sappy or sweet, something out of character like, "I may be small, but you make me feel important." Let them have the kind of memory they will carry in their pockets, take out and examine like shells when the world inevitably meets them.

Then, choose A, B, or C, and go from there.

FRANKIE Baker, grey as a Missouri storm, stood so tall the room grew close. She yelled, "He wasn't named no Johnny. You listening to those songs on the Victrola and the radio. His name was Allen and he was nothing but a struggling, loser pimp who I thought loved me." She swiftly moved from anger to tears, her sobs came quick and transformed her to a small, lesser thing. She was now a woman who put too much of herself into a prospect worth nothing. "Guess you'd call me his whore. But he was mine. My man! He played piano."

She sat down and turned away from us. Her tired, black hand reached up and caressed the padded walls. Then the other hand joined in. Her

fingers played invisible notes, her left hand striding along the lower register. "Ragtime. It was still fairly new. He made up songs, too."

She stopped playing her soft piano, then turned to us, looked at us over her shoulder. "The girl wasn't named Nellie Bly. That's them Victrola and radio y'all hearing. She was another whore. And I didn't shoot him there. I shot him at home because he tried to stab me. I shot him as God would have me do. That's why I'm still alive. I'm a Christian woman."

Miss Baker pulled a folded-up piece of newsprint from her bosom. Unfolded it with care. "They all got it wrong," she said. "I was nice and thick. Beautiful." She passed me the sheet and I see a print of the Thomas Hart Benton painting. "That woman they depicted there is as thin as a whisper. She shoots Allen in his back. I shot that motherfucker in the chest a couple of times. He too evil to die right away. And look at that woman. That's how they make us look. That wasn't me! I was beautiful."

I gave her the engraving back.

"I had curls," she said.

Jennifer Todhunter | Anna Gets Her Numbers

Read at a Swim-up Bar in Mexico

ANNA sees her husband's ghost at the pool, sitting two stools over at the swim-up bar. He is drinking beer, something dark despite the heat. He skirts his thumb around the lip of the bottle, picks at its label between sips. *Ben used to do that*, Anna says to Molly, *Ben used to do that all the time*.

Molly is distracted by a numerologist. She signals the bartender for another round of tequila and pushes one Anna's way. Anna doesn't want to bother her sister with Ben, the way she sees pieces of him everywhere, in everyone. *Try focusing on something else*, Molly said halfway through their flight, *maybe on someone else, too*.

Anna stares at the ashtray on the bar, thinks about how she and Ben used to share cigarettes in bed, thinks about the way the smoke bungeed to the bottom of her lungs before trickling out like feathers.

She wonders what it feels like to have your breath taken from you all at once.

She looks at Ben's ghost, the man two stools over. Thinks about how they used to sit lip-locked, their legs draped limb over limb. How they'd lie on the floor still touching when they couldn't recycle their air any longer. *It's like we're keeping each other alive*, they'd laugh, *it's like I'd be dead without you*.

It is terrible tequila, the kind one might expect to find at an all-inclusive, and it is their third shot. Molly pushes her empty glass across the bar, excuses herself to the restroom, and Anna finds herself sitting next to the numerologist. He asks if she'll write her name and birthdate on a napkin.

Anna is unsure which name to use; if she is legally allowed to keep Ben's surname now that he's dead, or if she'll be forced to revert to the name she bore as a child. *I love my new signature*, she thinks, *I practiced that signature on our honeymoon, the swooping arc of the vowels, the roll of the r at the end.*

She doesn't like the sound of her maiden name anymore. Its syllables feel forced, foreign in her mouth. She stumbles over their sounds while mumbling them under her breath and writes her married name on the napkin instead.

Where are you from? the numerologist asks. Anna isn't sure what to say, doesn't feel like she's from anywhere any longer. *I'm in between places*, she says, running her finger around the edge of her shot glass, mirroring the ghost of Ben. Anna is fixated on his fingers—their knuckles, their lines. She'll recount this to Molly tonight when she can't sleep. She will close her eyes and trace Ben's fingers on her pillow. She will pretend the folds in the sheets are the bend behind his knees, the length of his forearms, the dip in the small of his back.

Molly returns as the numerologist finishes scribbling on the napkin. She half-swims, half-slides onto the concrete stool submerged in the water, and watching this, Anna realizes the water feels like the air. The elements are the same temperature. Anna wonders how this sort of equilibrium happened unnoticed; if it's an adjustment on her part or on the world's part. She wonders if the same thing will happen with Ben—if his edges

will even out until he's no longer visible to her in other people. She wonders how much that final exhale will hurt.

The numerologist waits for another round of tequila before announcing Anna's life path number is three: she is a creative soul, an expert communicator, a loyal lover.

Those are my things with Ben, Anna thinks, *those things aren't mine anymore*.

The numerologist carries on, and Molly sucks down every one of his words, but Anna wonders how his words would differ if she'd given him her maiden name. She wonders what trajectory she'd be on. If she'd be drinking tequila with her sister and this numerologist, or if she'd be somewhere else. With someone else.

What do her numbers say, Molly asks, *about moving on, about letting go?*

Three's, the numerologist says, *three's tend to stay hurt for a very long time*.

Anna doesn't like this conversation, doesn't like Molly and the numerologist discussing her like she's not there. She slides down the bar, sits next to the ghost of Ben, looks at his hands.

Do you always do that? she asks, motioning to his thumb, to the bottle.

The ghost of Ben eyes her up, sort of smiles. *Yeah*, he says, *I guess I do.*

Anna takes his bottle, runs her thumb around the lip, listens to the familiar hum of its whistle.

He holds out his hand, says, *Hi, I'm—*

Shhhh, Anna says, taking his hand in hers. There is surprise on the man's face, but he lets her hold his hand, lets her feel its weight, its skin.

Anna takes a sip of the man's beer, thinks about where she's seen Ben back home: on the train, walking up the front steps of the library, in the grocery store. His laugh, his gait, the way he smelled each orange. It's as if Ben has split into tiny pieces and grafted himself to everyone around her.

Anna will try to explain this phenomenon to Molly tonight, when Molly asks her where she's been. She will explain how she's trying to move on, how difficult letting go is.

I've been trying to collect pieces of Ben, she'll say, and Molly will give her a knowing look.

He had his fingers, Anna will say. *He had Ben's fingers and I didn't want to let them go.*

ANNIE Technicolor stretched out like an August Wednesday; dipped finger tips in the small puddle of chocolate milk. A short, fuzzy cross running dead tributaries at her hem.

fingerprints

on a mirror

naming the scapegoat

Her parents wore gardening gloves. Father held a spade; mother dragged a potting soil bag of drugs. Annie's nose pinched, head tilted, a mouth filled with medical topsoil. Body slowly sinking into linoleum.

Good catholic girls who dream of rosaries always learn Latin at the damnedest moments.

The tiny crawl space where they worked through Annie's growing season was wet with Time Square street smells. Father picked at scabs nerving and curving up his arm. Mother clutched at Annie's stain. An overturned bookshelf looks like an altar or a raised garden bed.

hunger strike

War cry

with a throatful of seeds

That night

- $100 cash tip
- "I'd prefer it if *you* were served to me"
- Catering hall uniform: black flats and prim skirt, white button-down shirt
- So little exposed skin—neck, wrists, calves, mouth, ears—hair tied back to show mother's antique butterfly earrings
- 2 hours setting tables before reception, 5 hours serving, 5 minutes assaulted, 2 hours clean-up
- No witness, told Sarah later

- So tired

Fox girl

She had drawn it on paper now delicate and forever creased along the folds. Her jagged preschool crayon lines went every which-way, yet never strayed from the shape of the animal. Four bulbous legs attached to the orange body, penciled wheels ready to zip away. Excellent ears, sharp triangles, with a smaller pink-shaded triangle inside each. The eyes off kilter, the mouth a circle, an O, an Oh, an Ohhhh.

Forbidden—stop buying

- Boston cream pie
- Chocolate covered pretzels
- Sweet rolls
- Pop Tarts

Pinned

The Nymphalidae butterflies were spread open on the white linen, organized by size and color. She had gone back to the entomology room of the museum to take a photo of this particular display case, just a few weeks after the wedding guest had stalked her down to give her a tip, push her against the wall, drive his hand between her legs. She pitied the smallest grey and yellow insects. So basic and obvious, so easily overlooked. Before the incident she loved the larger whites with their orange and black tipped upper wings, but afterwards she preferred the grey bodies etched with black. Their bottom wings ruffled out like petticoats to expose velvety points, like delicate fawn legs.

Shifting

That afternoon her boyfriend pulled the white and orange bandana tight around his head, over his ears, to protect them from the sand whipped up by the approaching storm. She tied a shirt around her head to keep herself from the relentless noise and pain, from insanity. His tattoo tentacled out from the edge of his of his t-shirt—a tease of skull—and

the pale print of his missing watch encircled his wrist. They lost time together. Over and over he said it was his favorite place. He wanted to hike further in, just one more dune, hour after hour. There was no shelter between the silver plate of sky and the sand and when the thunder drummed, he did not keep her safe.

Inner wrist

- Infinity symbol
- ~~Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.~~
- Triangle outline
- Curled kit fox, asleep

THREE weeks after the flu takes my last child, I load the old dog in the car and drive to the shelter. After sizing me up, the woman working the desk leads me to a cage shared by three dogs—a small terrier mix and two medium-sized mutts.

"I really only wanted two," I say.

But they've already shoved their wet noses into my hand, snuffling at me like they're starved for human scent. I'm starving, too. I sign the paperwork. The dogs are mine.

On the way home, I stop at the store for more food and extra bowls. When I slam the car door and walk toward the entrance, I look back to see the little terrier peering out the window at me. Her paws splayed against the glass, she shakes with anxiety. I know then that she'll be the one under the covers with me that night, her furry warmth pressed into my belly as we sleep.

That afternoon, we take our first walk. Down the street and into the woods, up the trail by the abandoned rock quarry. The path arcs up a hill beneath a heavy cover of maples and oaks. It's February, so the forest is thinned of leaves, the bare branches reaching up into the gray sky. At the top of a steep incline, the land flattens out and the trail divides, north and south, circling a patch of land adjacent to the quarry. Barbed-wire fencing separates the trail from the quarry property, but holes have been snipped here and there. Several of my neighbors, in the course of their own mourning, have chosen to put an end to it with a plummet to the rocks.

The dogs and I walk both loops of the trail. First the one that wends through dense deciduous forest, where the trail is a soft bed of mud and dead leaves. The dogs sniff and squat, lift their legs to mark the

undergrowth. Then we do the second loop, exiting the cover of trees. The path turns from leaf to dusty rock. It creeps near the barbed-wire boundary, then curves around a sprawling field of blackberry bushes. The thorny vines crawl over the land, obscuring what's beneath. From under the tangle of creeping stems comes the skittering of unseen creatures.

One summer, I spent an hour plucking fat, dark berries for cobbler. I paused to taste one, then found myself overwhelmed with anxiety. What if these weren't actually blackberries? What did I know? What if I'd just poisoned myself? Had I been about to poison my whole family? I dumped the bucket. Hours later I was still alive, but I never went berry picking again. We bought our pies at the store, left the berries for the deer.

At a bend near the midpoint of the blackberry loop, the little dog begins to growl. I look up to see an animal moving slowly toward us. Before my rational brain kicks in, I think: *tiger*. Then, less absurd: *fox*.

It's possible. There is a den in this forest. In the midst of a stand of pines, the earth curves into little hills. Among these I once found a couple of large holes, invisible until I was standing right over them. I imagine the creatures underneath, huddled together to sleep out the day. A few years

back, one of them haunted the woods by our house for a spell, disrupting our sleep with its horrific bark. Like a giant bird being tortured, or a woman screaming in pain. I saw the fox twice—once at night, a set of gleaming eyes crossing the dark yard. The second time was just after dawn. I stepped onto the back porch to see the rust-red fur glowing in the morning mist. We locked eyes, then it darted away, a ghostly, bloody blur.

The animal before us is neither ghost, nor tiger, nor fox. Only another dog. A long-bodied mastiff mix with collar and tags, it must belong to one of the houses nearby. It moves slowly toward us, oblivious to our presence. As it approaches, I see the swollen teats drooping from her chest. They sag heavily beneath her.

I jerk four leashes and reverse our direction. We retrace the loop and head home.

Later that night, with the dogs settled around me on the couch, I put on a nature documentary. Since the deaths began, I haven't been too keen on ingesting human drama for sport. Insects and amphibians and geology I can take. Tonight the documentary fails me, though. A mother bird, a fairy tern, assumes a laid-back parenting style, like the one I always prided myself

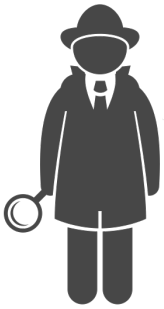
on. She doesn't even build a nest, simply rests her egg in the crook of a tree branch. I first suspect gravity as the culprit, the one coming to teach this mother a lesson, but I'm wrong. Another bird spies the exposed and unattended egg. Hungry, it swoops and pecks, consumes and departs.

The mother returns. She doesn't immediately realize what she's lost. "She knows something's not right," the narrator intones, "but the brooding instinct is powerful." The tern tries to settle back on the branch, coating her snowy feathers in the goo that was once a child.

Later in bed, I wish I were rid of the dogs. I think about the bottom drawer of my nightstand, where I've gathered a decade's worth of prescriptions for pain. I imagine a drowsy slide into sleep. I consider the quarry, imagining my frenzied leap, the fall.

But what I really want is the fox. Her teeth. Her fur. A final, hungered embrace.

Tomorrow, I think, I will take the dogs to the den beneath the pines, lay us down on the needled ground, and wait in peace for dusk.



YELLOW police tape surrounds a forest glade, a hollow between some trees you don't recognize because you've never been to the UK. A tent has been erected over the place where the body was found. A child's pinwheel spins and you're sure it's a clue, but the police ignore it. This crime scene is in the forest. Other crime scenes in the television shows you've watched since the baby was born: a beach, a London townhouse, a gorge, a peat bog, a lava field, a flat, a river. The UK is full of murdered bodies, from London to the Shetland Islands, from Wales to Belfast. Scandinavia is

filling up too, Sweden and Norway and Finland and is Iceland part of Scandinavia? You don't know. You're too tired to think.

The top half of the television screen dissolves into a digital matrix, then the image returns. Something wrong with the transmission. You're on the couch, where you always are since the baby's birth, breasts swollen and aching, cradling your daughter on the Breast Friend nursing pillow. You try to get her to latch on. When she does, you shiver at the sting of the letdown. You curl your palm against her skull, over the fontanel. You've read a lot. The bones of her skull have not yet fused and if you put the baby to rest always in one position, the skull will flatten on one side.

The detectives inspect the scene. The main detective is usually a man, haunted by his past: his child's or wife's death, mental illness, an unsolved case he handled years ago. (If the main detective is a woman, she's hard, she's sexy, she's stymied in her job by male arrogance.) The DCI may have just moved back to his hometown, or to a town on an international border, or where ocean meets land. That must be a metaphor. Here, in this forest, in this crime scene, the DCI is some guy who played a minor role in *Dr. Who* and was killed in *Game of Thrones*. (There's a finite number of British

actors.) The DS is a woman. She wears a red parka, puts the DCI in his place.

The baby lolls her head back, a drop of your milk on her lips. *You take care of all the nights when you're breastfeeding*, your husband told you. *I'll do it when you stop*. (You have no way of knowing that he'll deny making this promise months later.) You've read the books. If you put the baby down now, she'll startle awake. You need to wait until her fists relax, until she's in deep sleep, and then, only then, you can lay her in the portable crib in the living room.

The victim is a young girl. This is not a surprise. Schoolgirls, older woman, housewives, sex workers, bankers, even the DS. Their limbs posed like mannequins, stuffed in car trunks, abandoned in woods. Beaten, strangled, stabbed, or staged to look like a suicide.

The baby's hands open. Your body still lumbers, although she's no longer inside you. You set her into the crib, on her back, so there's a lower chance of SIDS. Her arms above her head as if the detective is holding a gun on her. As you back away, she stirs. She screams. On the couch again, waiting, her heaviness in your arms.

The detectives take the body to the coroner. (Always a woman.) She examines the girl with almost maternal reverence. Weighs her heart, inspects the contents of her stomach, picks fibers from her skin with a silver tweezer, washes her down to collect evidence. Behind the coroner, the girl stands, a watery outline, still naked, her neck raw where the murderer strangled her. Another girl appears, and yet another, crowding around the coroner's table. They wear their wounds like medals. The coroner's breath clouds before her. She doesn't notice the army of murdered women.

You remember the monitors on your stomach, on your thumb, the pain and its short release, your breath filling the room, your mixtape making your mind and skin itch, your husband coaching you like he practiced in the Bradley Method classes and you want earplugs and time to stop and to scream and then you are split with fire, wasn't there some torture method where the prisoner was pulled apart by his limbs, and you are rendered and no longer one but two.

The army of murdered girls follows the two detectives. They crowd into a farmhouse, hover in the interrogation room, or stand in front of the

police station's bulletin boards. The DSI reaches through a girl's torso to pin the photo of another suspect on the board. The girls watch as the detectives examine another crime scene deeper in the forest. The detectives again ignore the spinning pinwheel. Perhaps you're imagining the toy, you're sure you're imagining the ghosts, because you've never seen a crime show with ghosts. Just as they may have done in life, the ghosts watch men: men working, men playing soccer, men throwing darts, men talking, men exacting violence. When the DSI interrogates the man who runs the town's garage, the girls howl. No one notices.

The baby's palms bloom, her pupils move under the thin bluish-red skin of her eyelids. You wonder what she dreams of, given the smallness of her world: the arms of you and your husband, the shag carpet, the crib. Your dreams are vivid and horrible. You're not going to let her go, not just yet.

WHEN the clock strikes seven, my father buys me a mocktail. It's my third of the night. "Go easy on that one," he says, smacking my arm and winking.

I take a sip and tip the glass toward the ceiling. "Look, Dad: a slug," I say, pointing at the impression my lipstick has left on the rim.

"A *red* slug," my father says, taking the glass from me and pretending to study it.

"A slug that has trailed itself through blood," I say.

My father laughs and smacks my arm again, closer to the wrist this time. We are at the annual Father-Daughter Ball, inside the domed palladium, inside the Charging Arms Hotel—a swanky venue, outfitted in streamers and balloons and heart-shaped Christmas lights for tonight.

Someone has also taken the time to depetal a bayou's worth of orchids. The petals lie scattered across our utensils. "What's the entrée—orchid steak?" I say. I pick up a petal and set it on my salad plate.

"Orchid fillet," says my father.

"Orchid omelette!"

We leave our seats and dance to a waltz, a Taylor Swift, a Little Richard. With each step and pivot, my dress gets sucked into the space between my father's thighs. He has wide-set hips, knees that are far apart, so there's ample room for the tulle to balloon inside.

"They should shut the windows. There's a cross-current," my father says, stumbling over my dress.

"They should shut the doors," I say.

"Anyway, there's a cross-current," he says, looking at his legs, his face tortured. "I feel like I'm giving birth." He stops mid-dance, with his legs parted. "I can't," he says and throws his arms up. He squats a little. "This is awful."

He squeezes his legs together but it's as good as trying to squeeze shut a nutcracker.

"You're built in this way for a reason," I say gently. "It's OK."

My father flushes and looks around the room. This leg business is not happening to any of the other fathers.

I look around as well. "It's OK," I say again. I take my father by the elbow and lead him to the terrace door.

• • •

"If I could only push them harder," my father says, sitting down on the grass, in the garden of the Charging Arms Hotel, under the cypress and next to the gazebo, pushing his legs together.

I kneel beside him and set down the mocktail I picked up on the way. I place my hands on his kneecaps and help push. "Nothing," I say, grunting for his sake. "Nothing."

"Push," he says. "Push them!"

"It's the angle at which they grow out of your pelvis, Dad. You can't change who you are," I say.

My father lets go of his knees. He looks down, into the murky bottom of my mocktail. He picks it up, sadly, and tilts it toward the ground. I let him do this for a minute. "Alcohol won't solve a thing," I finally say. I give his knuckles a little slap.

My father lifts his face and smiles, remembering, I'm sure, just how our night began—jokes about the mocktail, the ha-ha of its mockness. Slugs. Orchids. Salad forks.

"You're growing up, aren't you?" he says.

"I am," I say.

"Soon you won't be my little girl."

"Don't, Daddy," I say.

"I guess that's the point of the Father-Daughter Ball," he says, giving the terrace of the Charging Arms Hotel a wistful look. "That we fathers make memories which will forever live in our daughters' minds. That's the point of it all."

As if on cue, the back door of the hotel slides open and more father-daughters file out. Maybe there's a break in the music because suddenly the father-daughters have nothing better to do but point their hands at the moon and laugh. Some just sit on the terrace benches and talk. One father —a muscular redhead—starts climbing the trellis but gives up once its grid threatens to snap. He hops back onto the tiled floor and waves his hand like it was nothing. But the other fathers don't see it that way. They crowd around him, slapping his back and congratulating. They group closer and tighter, knitting themselves into a single father-mound. Then, just as quickly as it came to be, the mound crumbles. Fathers spill away from all sides but the spill serves as a call to arms, it seems, because more fathers emerge from the back door of the hotel, and some fathers come from around the front of the building, running on the grass.

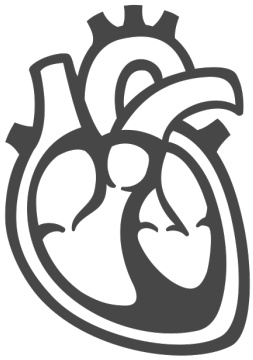
Fathers without daughters run down the stairs of the terrace and down the length of the lawn, together, some loosening their ties as they run. Closer to us now, in the garden, to the left of the gazebo, fathers with loosened ties drop onto their hands and knees. Some fathers drop onto the mulch, some quickly climb one level higher, onto the shoulders and backs of other fathers.

Yet another level forms, on the shoulders and backs of fathers who already stand on the shoulders and backs of fathers. There are fewer and fewer fathers with every level so that the shape they're promising to form will be peaked—the peaked, insolent face of the Father Rat King.

My father watches them, and when the King reaches four stories, he rises.

"Daddy?" I say. But he doesn't answer, he only runs. My father runs to be a part of the rat that will forever impress in me the image of him as a victor, even as I grow old. He climbs fathers upon fathers, aiming for the top. I salute him with my mocktail, only he doesn't see me, of course. He scales the other fathers, his legs forgotten, crushing his polished brown

loafers into their shoulders and hands. The King grows stouter—it is a tower. It is now part of the evergreens and the owls.



HE'S in the silver compact again, parallel-parked beside the hospital. Eating cold cuts on floppy bread. There's a newspaper spread across the steering wheel, but he never reads it. His jaw is working, working like everything in life's a job—even his sandwich. I walk my dog here each night to relieve himself because there's no exit on this side of the hospital, no doorman or shopkeeper to give me the evil eye just because my dog has needs too. Max knows the routine. He holds it all the way from Second Avenue and then easy-does-it by the silver car.

The man in the car is the kind of old when each day takes a big toll. The aging process goes express train this close to the final stop. It took my dad seventy-three days from diagnosis, with one unexpected bonus stop at Coney Island. Wheelchair thumping down the boardwalk. Clams on the half shell.

I first noticed the old man on New Year's Eve. I felt sorry for him—hunched over gritty headlines while the big, glittery ball was about to drop downtown. I count the days since January first. I count out loud, right in front of the old man. He never notices. Night after night his gaze is an empty room. February comes and I count to thirty. Then forty. Forty-one. I'm forty-one. Still living in my post-college studio apartment. I recently replaced the oven and made room for two new orchids though. I named the plants Oscar and Larue. I give silver-car man a name too—Fred, because my dad was Ted, and they have a lot in common. Gravity carved the same ruts in their cheeks.

I think about Fred, not just when I'm out with Max, but when I'm at my cubicle too. I wonder who he's waiting for inside the hospital. His diabetic wife? His daughter with multiple myeloma? I Google health

conditions requiring long hospital stays. I look forward to seeing Fred each night and dread the day he's gone. What will I do then?

On Sunday, I move Larue closer to my bed. I roast a chicken in my new oven, shred the breast meat with my fingers and toss the carcass in a pot of boiling water with onions and celery. In the evening, I remove the bones.

I'm not sure how to knock on the car window without startling Fred, so I just startle him. Not enough to give him a heart attack. He fumbles with buttons in his armrest and opens the window. A crack.

"I brought you a gift."

"Do I know you?"

Fred closes the window and looks down at his headlines. The passenger door isn't locked, so I climb in. Max jumps on my lap. He's big for laps, but we make it work. The smell of thyme overwhelms the tight space; maybe I used too much.

"What're you doing?" Fred shouts. "Get that thing out! I'm allergic."

I hadn't imagined Fred's voice so robust. Still seated, I open the door, set Max on the curb, and shut it again. I grip the leash—half-in the car, half-out.

"It's cold, but I never see you eat a hot meal."

"You got the wrong guy, lady."

"Fred, I'm Maggie."

I extend my hand, but he doesn't take it, which surprises me. I'd pictured him being painstakingly polite. My dad kept a freshly ironed handkerchief in his pocket; he always looked for reasons to offer it up. A sneeze. A daughter's heartbreak.

"Fred? I'm Joseph."

"Could've sworn you'd be Fred. It's OK though. Joseph works."

Not-Fred looks confused. Max barks, and I soothe him through the crack in the door.

"I made you soup," I say.

"But I don't like soup."

A Metro North train passes under us. I notice the vibration before the sound. The noise seems almost vestigial. An appendix noise. When they removed my appendix last fall, I asked Miranda from the office to pick me up. She had another commitment, but my taxi driver avoided every pothole, which was probably better than a hand to hold. I pass Not-Fred the bag with the thermos, spoon, and wet naps.

"Chicken soup helps sick people get better faster."

"Chicken, huh? I hate chicken soup." He returns the bag. "Maybe if it was tomato… or mushroom."

"You need nourishment. You need to stay strong for your wife in there."

"In where?"

I point at the hospital.

"I'm just waiting for my shift." He nods toward the fancy building with arched windows across the street. "I'm a doorman."

"You're not here for dialysis?"

He shakes his head.

"Chemo?"

"God, no."

My eyes heat up. They sting and suddenly I'm boiling over. I'm crying. Holding back sobs.

"Geez," Not-Fred says, handing me paper napkins from the center console. The brown, recycled kind. "Don't cry. I'm sorry I'm not on chemo."

Wind gusts through the car and I notice air bubbles in my ventricles—in my heart and maybe my brain too. I open the thermos and gulp even though it burns my tongue. Not-Fred sits quietly beside me while I slurp. There's a sudden bang on the window, and we both jump. Soup spills all over me.

"You can't leave your dog out here," a woman in a fur coat yells. "It's below freezing!"

Not-Fred holds the door for me as I get out. He's good at his job—reassuring, with a firm hand. I thank him for the napkins, thank the woman for caring about my dog. I try not to get tears on his hand, soup on her fur.

I fight the urge, the thumping urge, to hug her, to kiss Not-Fred's rutty cheek.

The hospital entrance is automatic; the glass opens for Max and me, just like a subway car. Broth drips onto the linoleum as I tell the nurse it's serious inside my ventricles. They're bare, I say.

Pat Foran | For My Dearest Claire, The New CEO

of Airport Therapy Dogs, LLC

1. I AM your father and I love you.
2. We are golden retrievers.
3. We bring comfort and cuddles to the haggard, the away-from-homers.
4. With a wag and a welcome message we smuggle in through security, we make stressed-out travelers feel better. Or try to.
5. We are airport therapy dogs.

[photo: golden retriever in a periwinkle "Pet Me" vest]

6. Your mother and I built this airport therapy dog contract services business from scratch 15 years ago.
7. It's been quite a ride.
8. The one-horse airports. Indifferent municipal planners. Ill-conceived energy policies. An increasingly fragile airline industry. Increasingly fragile airline passengers. A ride. A satisfying one, for the most part. Yes.
9. This business is changing. So's the world. As you and I have discussed in recent months.
10. We've also discussed this: It's time. For new ideas, new service delivery methods, new data-driven analytical processes. New ways to *relieve*, as we say.

[graphic: "Big Data" image with numbers in the shape of an unscalable mountain]

11. It's also time for new-breed leaders. Again, as we've discussed.

12. I feel a little strange thinking it, stranger still writing it down. But it doesn't make it any less true. It's time to hand the reins at Airport Therapy Dogs LLC to you, dearest Claire.
13. And on the eve of this transition, I'm anxious. Nervous, maybe. I find myself searching. Struggling to figure out what I want to say to you. What I *should* say. How to organize my thoughts. I'm making a listicle, for chrissakes, if that's what this is.

[image: only known photo of a golden retriever's soul in limbo]

14. Is this the right time? The right moment? The right thing *right now*?
15. Am I leaving this place in a position for you to succeed? To carve your own path?
16. There's also this: What have I accomplished? Did I do right by our customers? Did I do right by the canine comfort profession? Did I do right by *you*?
17. I know I was gone a lot. It's this business, yes, but still. I know I missed things.

[photo: Claire graduating from her first therapy dog training class, Oneonta, NY]

18. I know, too, I haven't been all that open at times. Although I think you know—I hope you know—I've always been here for you. At least I hope have.
19. You and I are somewhat alike in this area. It's not like you've confided in me all that often, either. We don't talk about things. Maybe that's my fault, or partly. I'll try to do better.
20. I'm confident you haven't felt pressured into this succession thing—at least I hope you haven't. I'm pretty sure I never said "Some day, this will all be yours." If I implied it, I didn't mean to. If I did, I'm sorry.
21. Because I know you could do anything you wanted to do. Be anything you wanted to be. You're amazing, Claire. I've known it forever.
22. Remember the time I got stuck on a job? It was before we opened this place, and I wasn't there for your first gig—that airport in Schenectady.

[photo: "Welcome to Schenectady County Airport, Andy Capp Fries Now Available in

Vending Machines" sign]

23. I know you know I wasn't there, but I don't know if you know what your mother told me about that day.
24. She told me you were nervous, but that nobody knew it. She said you wore a vest I'd given you. The yellow one that was out of style and didn't fit right.
25. She told me, too, about the rumpled man in a navy pinstripe suit. The unreachable man with the weight of the world on his mind. A shell of a man who didn't smile, maybe couldn't. Maybe hadn't in years.
26. Your mother told me you saw all this, but that you also knew better. How you could just tell.
27. She told me how you somehow—*somehow*—caught this man's eye. How she saw him see you looking so welcoming. So friendly. So guileless. So beautiful.
28. God I miss your mother. I know you miss her, too.
29. Your mother told me how the unsmiling man saw you and stopped in his tracks. How he hesitated before approaching you. How you half-

smiled like the Golden you are. How he reached down and awkwardly patted your head. How he looked a little less rumpled afterward.

30. It was a gorgeous, perfect moment, your mother said. She said it was like nesting dolls. You open one and it reveals another. And another. And another. Seven nesting dolls in all.
31. And in the seventh doll, the smallest doll, you see something. It's Scotch-taped to the bottom, your mother said, something you need a spyglass to see. And through the spyglass, you see it. A message written in a child's hand, in Crayola: "What it means to be alive."

[photo: from left to right, seven nesting dolls, biggest to smallest]

32. If your mother could see you now, Claire. If she could see what I see. How smart you are. How unobtrusively empathetic you are. How alive you are. How the world is better because of it. How I am.
33. This transition will be a process—I hate that word "process" and I'm sorry to use it, but it doesn't make it any less true. Succession isn't an event. It's a, well, the p-word. It'll take awhile.

34. There's a lot more I could say and will say, if you want me to. But I'll leave it at this: Know I'm here if you need me.
35. Know, too, that I'm not here if you need me to be that, too. You know this, Claire. Oh my dearest Claire.
36. Ever yours and in comfort and cuddles I remain,

Pete Stevens | Broken

MY soon-to-be husband, James, holds an egg in his fist, estimating, to my guess, how he got to this point in his life. He was able to convince me that breaking a concrete slab while holding an uncracked egg somehow symbolized commitment.

Together we had watched Jackie Chan on YouTube, a clip from German TV, where he broke through bricks of concrete while holding an egg. The display got James off the couch, got him to reposition the coffee table. He'd brought his hand up and down, down and up, like he was about to chop the table, but he didn't. He said that if he were ever going to break boards with his hands it would require total dedication. This from a man

who listened to music in the shower, on the toilet, mostly classical, a man with two tree-shaped "Black Ice" air fresheners hanging from his rearview. His plan was to perform the stunt with the egg at our wedding.

When I first told my mother I was getting married she said, *Why?* Without an immediate response, I let the dead air hang. She didn't fill the silence, either. Together we stayed on the line and listened to each other breathe.

James says he only wants to break a single concrete block at our wedding, not twelve, like Jackie. I take this as a sign of his sensible nature. I take this as a sign of his cowardice.

This fiancé of mine, my beau, breaks the egg every time he brings down his fist.

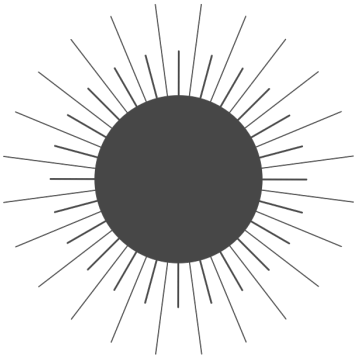
Shit, he says, wiping yolk from his palm.

I tell him that maybe it's like the wedding dress, that I'm not supposed to see his performance before the actual day, that maybe it's bad luck. He agrees and I leave. I haven't told him that I don't have a dress yet. I haven't told him about my mother, or sister, and their disapproval. I keep telling

myself to wait.

The other day I held an egg in my hand above the sink and tried to break it. No matter how hard I squeezed it wouldn't break.

I return to the video, looking for a clue, an answer. First, I watch it with the sound on, then off, then I watch it again. With each view the facts change. Where I once saw Jackie's fist, I now see the focus lower, there, at 7:03, with his arm held above the first stack of bricks, egg in hand, when he must've understood that there are choices in life, and that these choices have consequences, then at 7:04, the moment of impact, and yes, it's his forearm, not his fist. So the egg doesn't break. Jackie flips it in the air. And how do I tell James that the video isn't real? And how do I tell him that I don't want Beethoven at our wedding, that Black Ice smells like cough syrup, and that we have to make a decision, here, the forearm or the fist.



MY hands are free when I go to meet Switch after school at the power lines. The gin he told me to bring is in a mason jar in Margo's khaki bag, slung over my shoulder hanging down at my hip. I feel pioneery with my arms unfolded and loose—no books to clutch—like I can catch anything coming at me. Plus, the strap of the bag has me antsy, diagonal and taut against my chest. This is new and Switch is new, and he's taking me off the map to see the old coaster where Dead Kelly lost her head.

• • •

What Switch calls me before this afternoon: Margo's Little Sister, Little, Never my name—never Lucy.

• • •

We walk beyond the crest of the hill, under the zaps and hiss of electricity, away from the neighborhood traffic below. Just me and Switch. We've never been alone before. We've never been anywhere except in front of his locker when I circle around everyday after chem. I bring out the gin when I'm told. He unscrews the lid, gulps, and wipes his chin with the hem of his t-shirt. I see his hipbone shine at me, but he doesn't notice me looking; he's watching the strap at my chest.

"Have some too, Smiley."

I'm so happy with the latest nickname I overlook how he's offering me something that's already mine.

• • •

What I don't overlook: He doesn't say much, but when he does, his voice is softer. Gentle. Maybe it's because there are no walls or maybe it's being near the power lines, like a sound wave thing, like physics. Or maybe he likes me. And if he likes me, maybe this is a date.

• • •

Dead Kelly's fame reached our street six years ago when I was actually little, long before anyone like Switch called me Little. That June I beat Margo at sun staring. We'd sprawl on lawn chairs, dig our toes between the plastic webbing, and clamp our eyes open with our fingers. First to blink lost. Loser paid at the ice cream truck. Over Nutty Buddies we heard about the headless girl roaming the crabgrass and thistle out past the power lines where Cedar Fun Grove used to be. Word was she tricked her way onto the

coaster, stretched from the balls of her feet at the height chart, slipped from the lap bar. Would have bled to death even if she'd kept her head.

• • •

What I learned that summer: The words decapitation, coagulation, ejaculation. The fact of hardness altogether, as told by Margo, who learned it from her sex ed teacher. The difference between the piercing itch of the sun in my eyes and the sharp pain of a lash under my lid.

• • •

Two hills and three sips of gin later, we're in the woods and Switch hooks his finger on my belt loop as we walk. My cutoffs are loose, so his gait tugs the denim around me this way and that. I'm glowy linked to him, pulled along, steered—like a ray he's unspooled. The tree bark resembles nooks of brownies hot from the oven and I remember I haven't eaten all day. I don't

want to say I'm hungry because I don't want him to think I'm thinking about food. And I don't want to mention my shoes being too small and hurting, either. Still I'm giddy. Maybe from drinking gin or maybe from being on my first date, if this is a date. And then there it is, across the sweep of ragweed and brambles, high and spiny like the skeleton of something gigantic that needed to lie down—the craggy remains of the coaster that killed Dead Kelly.

• • •

What I can't possibly know: In three years, Switch will leave for college where everyone will call him by his given name—Charles. Six years after that, he'll watch a video on how to please women. He'll kneel in front of spread-kneed lovers, feigning admiration for their vulvas, which he'll euphemize as *diamonds* and *butterflies* the way the video instructs. He'll end up ghosting every person he dates, and will eventually resent actual butterflies and diamonds. Playing poker will become unbearable.

• • •

Switch lays his flannel on the dirt under the biggest drop—the place where there would be tracks if the cops hadn't removed them after the accident. He says if we lie back and look over the tops of the cedars, we can see the last thing Dead Kelly saw. He draws me down easy by the strap. "Come here." From there all I see is the lowering sun. I start to tell him how I'm the champion of sun staring, but his mouth covers mine. His tongue is clumsy on my teeth and I barely stifle a giggle. I like the weight of him, but too soon, he rolls me on top. He's gentle when he pushes my shoulders lower. He's gentle when he says, "Little," and unzips his jeans. And when I see his gentle eyes asking or telling, I understand how I can want something without choosing it.

• • •

What won't occur to me for years: The afternoon I spent with Switch, my feet were still growing. I had yet to buy a pair of shoes without first nestling my heels into the back of one of those metal devices. All the infatuations I ever had stemmed from a wish to orbit myself. It took seeing the milky spines of books shelved next to a window before I began to worry about my own retinas.

• • •

On his flannel over the dirt and clover, my tongue figures out what Switch is after. I'm propelled by a toggling power—present one second, gone the next—a flicker of my own strength. But his eyes are closed. Watch me, I want to say. Look. Don't you know I'm the sun champ?

About the authors

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