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Author

Cortes-Chaffin, Natalia

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Vegas People

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Natalia Cortes Chaffin

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Thesis Committee:
Professor Mary Yukari Waters, Co-Chairperson
Professor Laila Lalami, Co-Chairperson
Professor Mary Otis

The Thesis of Natalia Cortes Chaffin is approved:

Co-Chairperson

Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

1.

The conundrum of how he progressed from good Catholic boy to disturbed old man in white underwear, sock garters and a veil hastily fashioned from the silk organza canopy draped over the king size bed is one Elton Norton will have to ponder, but first he must decipher how to get out of the current situation without a helping hand from death. He stares at the replica of a poppy painting by Georgia O'Keefe hanging above the couch in the Bellagio Hotel suite he chose for his Las Vegas tryst with Elsa, imagines the grim reaper just a few feet away washing the stink off his hands under the bathroom's gold faucets. He gasps for air. It will only be a matter of time before he succumbs to his own stupidity, pure dumbness that was the result, like most ill advised undertakings, of desires born below the waist. He tries to slip his pinky finger between the silk hose tied around his neck and his skin like wrinkled linen, but his niece's panty hose is a tightly wound ascot of death. His dandy of a pinky can't ease the knot. This leaves rescue resting on the only other finger remaining on his right hand: an elongated thumb that's too weak to grasp the silky hose and free his neck from garment tyranny.

As for his left hand, the good one, the one with all five fingers, the hero he'd come to rely on and train beyond what anyone had thought possible, he'd had the bright idea of handcuffing it to the canopy bedpost. He should have stuck to the image he'd found in his nephew-in-law's XXX magazine. The pictorial showed only a large-breasted woman in a black necktie anchored to a ceiling fan. She had left both her hands free. After hanging himself from the canopy with the hose, Elton added the handcuffs thinking

he was being clever, though he was really being stupid. Now the confluence of all his dumb actions is leading to a death that will make the front page with a picture of him above the fold. He can see the headline: Old Man with Neatly Trimmed Nose Hairs Asphyxiates in Strange Sex Act.

“Can anyone hear me?” he says.

The words scrape against his tonsils. He’s no longer excited by the lack of air flowing through his lungs and the pleasant orchid scent being pumped through the vent. His breakfast order, Belgian waffles with whipped cream, sits uneaten on a porcelain plate. A fly that managed to bypass the Bellagio’s high security lands on the strawberry he’d planned to feed Elsa.

He looks around to see what items he might reach to either release himself from the noose or provide comfort while he waits for rescue. His watch, an old-fashioned ticker he’s kept in working order for several decades past its prime, says it’s one minute past noon. Though Elsa should arrive momentarily, he’s too uncomfortable to wait.

“I am an engineer,” he says as a challenge to himself. He must stop dillydallying and force a solution. He closes his eyes. The idea comes to him in the ticks of his watch. The gears, sharp and jagged, should tear through the hose, if only he could open the back. He grips the leather band with his teeth, removes the watch from his wrist and holds the timepiece in his mouth like prey that’s still beating. Because his handcuffed hand is useless, secured too far away to do anything, he’s left to make do with his two-fingered one. He presses his long thumb against the gold backing, tries to wedge his pinky

underneath the glass cover, but his remaining fingers lack the leverage to pop open the watch. They also lack nails. He shouldn't have listened to his niece when she insisted on trimming his fingernails. Then proceeded to declaw him like a rabid dog. Stephanie won't allow Elton to trim his own nails or be within reach of sharp implements of any kind. This situation is her fault. A long fingernail would have done the trick—though so would have a full-fingered hand. He lost his fingers doing the stupid things of a horny twelve-year-old boy with someone to impress, and a bag full of firecrackers.

Unable to open the watch, Elton flings it across the room. It crashes against the poppy painting and plunges to the red couch. He doesn't understand why Elsa hasn't already flown through the hotel door with her faux fox stole flung over one shoulder and picked up the cuff keys from the carpet where he, in an oxygen-deprived moment of ecstasy, dropped them. Maybe if he were twenty or thirty, he might possess the agility to pick up the keys with his toes. At 70ish, he often forgets his age and, occasionally, his name, he fears he will lose his balance and collapse like a display skeleton with its pins removed. Normally not such a dire thing, except his engineer's mind constructed the panty hose getup in such a way as to ensure death should he lose his footing. Lately, he's needed a little extra something to jumpstart his thrill for life. This need may have something to do with his brain. The doctor explained his cerebrum is a circuit whose connections are slowly being snapped like cables in a hurricane.

The cell phone his niece bought him rings. The vibration causes it to dance on the nightstand. He realizes he can reach this electronic jumping bean. He's not sure why he didn't think of phoning for help before.

"Uncle," his nephew says. Elton hoped it might be Elsa explaining she is mere moments away.

"David. Help," Elton says. "I'm in Las Vegas."

"Really? I thought Stephanie wouldn't let you travel to Vegas."

"Call Elsa."

"I thought Stephanie wouldn't let you see your hooker."

"Help." Elton wants to say more, but with the hose constricting his neck, he can manage only a few words at a time.

"I understand men have needs, but I'm not crossing my sister. You know how she is," David says.

"I need Elsa."

"I know you love her. Where's Stefanie? You sound terrible."

"Can't breathe." The phone slips from Elton's two fingers. It snaps shut and lands a few inches from the cuff keys. It begins to play *Moon River*, the song he and his niece settled on as his favorite. At least he'll go out listening to Old Blue Eyes.

His mind drifts to when he heard Sinatra sing while in New York to see the great Miss Liberty on her 100th birthday. This was before his brain's deterioration ended his life of building roads and bridges. He went alone. At the time, his closest companion had been a sharp number two he used to scribble in the margins of his equations, factoring the maximum tonnage and stress capacity for the ramps and overpasses that were crucial in southern Louisiana if anything on four wheels was ever going to traverse the swampy terrain. Twenty years he put in at the engineering firm of Smith and Savent, until it became Smith, Savent and Norton. Then he devoted another twenty to ensuring those public works bearing his signature could never be blamed for someone's death. Yet many did die on Elton's roads due to stupidities. He used to clip the newspaper articles and paste them into a leather bound scrapbook. On the cover he wrote "Kindred Spirits." He doesn't know where the book is now, perhaps lying at the bottom of the Gulf with shoes and toilets and cradles: the various things Katrina swept away along with his independent life, forcing him to exchange his apartment over a lovely jazz bar for his niece's guest bedroom in Malibu. The guest room has wallpaper patterned with Mallard ducks.

Elton decides he hates the pleasant orchid smell being piped through the vent, but loves the velvet and cigarettes voice of Sinatra oozing from his phone. If there's a heaven, and if St. Peter should give him the nod, perhaps he can play craps with Frank.

"We're after that same rainbow's end," Sinatra sings.

"We're after that same rainbow's end," Elton says. The pressure against his Adam's apple hampers his singing. His mouth is cotton. Perhaps this time really is the

end. He wonders what will go next: his ability to speak, his ability to breathe, his ability to meander through the forest of his memories looking for crooked trees.

The shadow of an overweight Peter Pan moves outside his window. Elton spots the figure through the translucent silk curtains. He's balancing on a lift, holding a squeegee. Elton's luck is still fluttering about the room. He only needs to catch it.

"Help, help," Elton says. The cleaner scrapes his squeegee against the window and wipes the excess water with a towel hung from his belt. The glass is too thick and Elton's voice too strained for the window cleaner to hear him. He's the proverbial sound in the forest. With all the memory lapses of late, Elton can't even be sure he's hanging from this bed looking like an aged drag queen. He might be dreaming. He might be already dead.

He waves his free arm, hopes the cleaner will spot his shadow. They are standing directly opposite each other and, in the strange and humorous way events tend to turn, they are both secured by ropes.

"Over here. Over here," Elton says. His voice is shattered glass. It cannot pierce the outside. He would jump up and down, but that would finish him off.

The window cleaner leans closer. Elton waves frantically. The window cleaner brushes hair from his forehead, returns to the tedious task of removing raindrop marks from the glass. Elton stops waving. The cleaner was only looking at himself, perhaps checking out some lettuce from his lunch that got stuck between his teeth. Of course, the

sun is too bright for the cleaner to see inside. Elton should have realized this earlier. It's not his luck fluttering about, but death's idea of a joke.

“Damn hose. Damn knot. Damn me,” Elton says.

He was an idiot for making the knot so tight. Until now, the square had always been his favorite kind of tie. He prefers it because the knot exudes the elegance of a woman and the strength of a man, much like himself. He mastered its intricacies as a child during a short stint as a decorated member of Troop 43. The skill earned him yet another badge his Creole mother would sew onto his uniform with the same needle she used to poke at a voodoo doll that looked too much like his father. His father might have deserved it. He'd owned and run an instrument repair shop from which the sweetest melodies would waft across the alleys to summon pretty things he would invite into the restroom. His father could blow and, like most men of extraordinary talent, he was paid in kind by the fairest damsels his mother ever had the pleasure of spitting on. Elton looks a lot like his father. He never saw his mother prick the doll after he lost his fingers. He wonders where the doll is now, if it's somewhere forgotten, hanging by a thread.

He tries to swallow, coughs instead. Even without his watch, he knows Elsa is twenty-three minutes late. Despite what the doctors say, his mind's clock is very precise. He saw her just months, maybe a couple of years, ago. She'd let some of her new gray hairs weave in with her natural blonde. He likes her this way, an aging Eva Gaborish woman who would be mortified if she knew during their last session he'd discovered trace scents of Ben Gay on her inner thigh.

The window cleaner releases some rope and lowers his platform. Elton has no choice but to count on his angel Elsa. He tugs again at the knot. It won't loosen. His brain floats and his lungs shrink. He reminds himself it's not unusual for Elsa to be tardy. Occasionally one of her other clients requires a little extra servicing. He sympathizes. Viagra can only start what Elsa, with her strong, lubricated pelvic muscles, must finish.

He won't allow himself to panic. There's no reason to doubt Elsa's imminent arrival. He calculates the lovely Elsa has saved him four times prior from similar, self-imposed situations. Mathematically his odds of survival are very good, as long as he doesn't factor in his age, penchant for cigars, and the possibility that the asthma he suffered as a child is not subsided but waiting to shove out of its cave with a roar. These details make his odds very bad. A 21.3 percent chance he will survive he thinks, give or take a calculation error of plus or minus 10 percent.

"Help," he says.

He gathered all the force left in his body for this cry, but his mouse scream goes unanswered. He is unable to suck in the air necessary to push out a louder call. It's his own fault no one hears him. He chose this suite at the Bellagio Hotel both for its soft bath slippers and its thick, sound-minimizing walls. The room is designed to eliminate the contamination of noise from disparate guests. It's exactly as Elton would have built it.

He glances at the taxidermied armadillo, his former nemesis when alive and present companion once dead, lying in a chair patterned with fleur de lis. Ollie has fallen

onto his armored back. The hairs on his furry belly are sticky with this morning's cranberry juice. Elton had meant to clean him before their date with Elsa.

Next to Ollie is a plush white bathrobe embroidered with a green crest. The golden B, embroidered onto anything and everything the Bellagio sells, is absent. Elton looks out the window again for the outline of the Paris Hotel's Eiffel Tower, finds only shadows of palm trees rustling in the wind. He searches for impressionist art, sees the red poppy painting. Elton's heart, whose pounding has been a steady bass drum in his chest, rips into a drum roll. Elsa is not late. He is not in Vegas. He's not sure how he could have mistaken The Beverly Hills Hotel's modern interiors with the Bellagio's French provincial décor. He's always been a man of detail. Didn't he board a flight this morning?

He might really die. The lovely Elsa is probably waiting for him under the Chihuly sculpture she loves for its vibrant glass flowers in blues and reds. She probably thinks he stood her up. There's no one to tell Elsa her most devoted client of twenty some years will no longer be needing her particular services.

He will miss those services. He chastises himself for thinking this. Air still moves through his chest. His thumb still works. The handcuffs could break at any moment since they are cheap ones purchased from a toy store rather than a sex shop he could never bring himself to enter. The silk hose, stolen from his niece's chest of unmentionables, might also tear and prevent a death others would say was overdue. He would argue it's untimely. He is supposed to die in his New Orleans apartment, with the horns from below

beckoning the angels from above. He's not quite sure how many years have sung out their melodies since the hurricane blew glass across his face and stranded him atop a floating house with Ollie, his already dead and stuffed armadillo, tucked into the crook of his elbow. Elton's demise seemed certain then, yet rescue arrived with a warm blanket.

An increasing lightness in his head is hindering his chances for escape. So much so he can no longer calculate his rate of diminishment. He thinks back to his many boyhood badges, all earned by mastering one survival skill or another. Spotting poison ivy is no good. Building a fire is irrelevant. But signaling is a skill worthy of a man in his predicament. Of course, flags won't do. It will have to be Morse code. He balances his body against the bedpost to lift one bare foot and stomp the proper short and long sounds. The long sound is tricky. The plush carpet, lush and soft like the chocolate pubic hair of a young girl he once bedded mutes his efforts. He has no other way of producing a sound loud enough to alert others.

He tries to undo the knot again. Under other circumstances, he would be proud of his knot-tying prowess. He wonders if the policeman who finds him turned blue with death will admire the knot, speak of it to his buddies over a beer. Elton would like to tell that fine man of his many other accomplishments. No one knows of the bridges he helped build or the overpasses upon which semi trucks rumble. No one knows he put his right hand in the cement of a ramp's support column only to have some punk graffiti "Fuck you" over the imprint of his palm. But you can still see the outline of his thumb and his

pinky, the stubs of his missing fingers, the impressions he made to create the illusion of wholeness.

So many things he has done to benefit his fellow man. He's told Ollie. He now wishes his many exploits had produced a son he could also enlighten. A porcelain lady his father used to frequent knocked on Elton's door once with a toddler hanging from her neck. She told him the child was his brother, but the infant was the color of tar. At the time Elton, skin like wet sand, could think of no one in his ancestry whose hue might have swam through his father's lineage to surface then. Perhaps he should have pretended. The kid looked like a good listener.

He's tried to tell his niece, but when he whistles his tunes of glories past, she pokes at his stories. He doesn't understand why others don't care, unless the not caring is a reflection of his choice to put math over men. The life he valued might have no value. He stands on the precipice of death as naked as he was on the verge of birth. He should have slipped a diamond too small for his love on a girl's finger, learned to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with their crusts removed. The numbers and transactions he relied on to fill his days have only added up to one lonely man with a noose around his neck.

He must right this miscalculation. The cuff key, lying on the carpet just inches from his foot, is his last hope. Elton looks at the armadillo. "There's a mathematically significant chance I may be joining you dear friend." He wiggles his toes. They are long with unclipped yellow nails, but fortunately they survived his various stupidities. He

imagines himself a slender and lithe creature whose better years are cherry cordials still wrapped in a box. He stretches his age-spotted foot, aims his big toe at the keys.

2.

Ashes fly like confetti over the passenger seat of Malena's cobalt hatchback. The silver urn she wedged between the seatbelt and a taxidermied armadillo has fallen over. The urn lies across the beast's belly. The remains of fingers and eyeballs and what she imagines was a very fine nose are mixing with the Snickers wrappers and empty Coke cans piled up on the floor mat. The ashes float in drops of soda. She just passed a waffle house. Hopefully that's the source of the new burnt bacon smell flooding her car.

Someone honks. She slams on the gas and crosses three lanes to pull into a Dairy Queen with peeling paint. She parks crooked, cups her hands to scoop up the remains. Specks of ash are lost in the threads of the floor mat, more jam under the tips of her fingernails. She drops a handful into the urn, wonders what parts of Mr. Elton Norton are swimming in her manicure.

"Awesome," she says.

She wipes her ashy hands on her jeans, makes a mental note to burn her pants, then tries to retrace her path from accepting Mr. Elton Norton's remains to having them strewn all over her car. She doesn't know what religion, if any, Mr. Elton Norton practiced, but she imagines this situation would be condemned by every sect on the planet.

A girl with a neck tattoo and wearing a Dairy Queen cap raps on Malena's window to say she can't park there because she's blocking the drive-thru and it's almost lunchtime.

"It's an emergency," Malena says. The Dairy Queen girl points at the manager standing in the doorway spooning a shake.

"He's a hardass," the girl says. She looks past Malena. "I've got a hand vac." Malena declines the appliance. She's not sure what the Dairy Queen girl imagines the spill is, but sucking up Mr. Norton feels more or less inappropriate.

Truth is no matter how mind numbing the drive from LA to Vegas is, she should have never ever ever unscrewed the urn's steel lid to use as an ashtray just because her car's ashtray was still stuffed with stolen McDonald's Trick or Treat coupons from her heyday as the drive-thru girl. That heyday, possibly her only hey day, was back when she lived in Vegas under her mother's roof and under Jimmy's spell and the I love yous between her and Jimmy were the kind that carried a "Malena + Jimmy 4ever" subtext.

Her idiotic idea to create an impromptu ashtray from an expensive vessel for carrying the remains of the dead resulted from a total collapse of her backbone in the face of tobacco's wiles. She'd been able to resist buying a pack all the way from San Bernardino to Barstow, but the thought of crossing the desert alone with nothing to do but stare at miles of sand dirt broken-up by Joshua trees and blown-out tires made her mouth itch. She succumbed to a ménage a trois with cigarettes and coffee after being nicotine-free for twelve years, ever since the day she left her hometown with its plaster of Paris

statues and creepy obsession with Elvis thinking LA would have kinder sunshine and prettier people and lack those constant reminders of decisions made that perhaps were not so good. She was eighteen then and still gripping a glass half full mentality. She's thirty now, recently blew out a pink candle she herself stabbed into a Hostess cupcake.

But the real reason for the ash catastrophe, the one that made removing the lid a huge mistake rather than a creative solution to her nicotine addiction, was clearly the fault of the shithead tow truck driver who grazed her front fender and forced her to slam on the brakes. Across the tow truck's side was a cartoon logo screaming Jack 'er Up, an omen she should have acted upon by steering clear of the tow truck driver who was too busy owning the road to notice her geriatric hatchback chugging along at the average speed of a Model T. She didn't see the truck because she was totally distracted by a guy dancing on the street corner dressed as a monkey. The monkey man's similarly pathetic job had sent her zoning back to those long ago afternoons when she still had potential, but chose to fill her hours with sex and cigarettes and French fries that always left grease stains on her mother's daffodil sheets right next to the wet spots Jimmy liked to point at and say: "Gotta gusher."

She screws the lid back onto the urn, which should have been equipped with an interior baggy. This oversight by the caretaker means a large portion of Mr. Norton has now become forever part of an economy car that still has roll-up windows. He will be sat on over and over again. She doesn't know enough about Mr. Norton to decide if this is poetic justice or tragic irony.

She uprights the stuffed armadillo, debates whether to place it to the left or to the right of the urn. The left appears to offer more support. She secures both with the seatbelt. The scarce amount of ash in the urn will probably affect the terms of her payment, but there is nothing she can do to retrieve the ashes smudged into the floor mat or the ones buried under her fingernails. She will have to find a way to replace them later or making the rent will be yet another dream that floats past like a butterfly she can't ever catch. There is her mother, or more specifically, her mother's fireplace. She's not proud of herself for thinking this, or happy that now she really will have to visit her mother, but she is impressed she came up with a suitable solution so quickly. So much for that bitch boss who said Malena didn't have any problem-solving skills.

She checks the directions, looks ahead at the backed up stretch of Durango Avenue she's been stuck on for ten minutes. She finds the dress shop her mother recommended three blocks down next to a store that only sells Teddy bears. The Teddy Bear store is new. It's rectangle-shaped and beige like every other strip mall shop in Vegas, except for a bright green awning where a Pooh-like character, but not actually Pooh to avoid the inevitable lawsuit, appears to be falling off while reaching for a jar of honey. Honey is spelled hony. The store is the kind of place she and Jimmy would have snickered at and possibly, probably, vandalized for kicks by manipulating the display bears into the preschool version of the Kama Sutra. She thinks of buying one of those "BFF – Bear Friends Forever" Teddies for the eldest daughter of Stephanie Norton Gorton, the woman whom Malena will be impersonating per the stipulation in her

contract and whose uncle is now scattered about Malena's car. The girl may be twelve. Twelve may not be a Teddy Bear age.

Maybe she should give Stephanie a discount since the majority of her Uncle Elton will now never become one with the chlorinated waters of Bellagio's manmade lake. But telling Stephanie could affect Stephanie's inheritance and, subsequently, Malena's payment.

She leaves the urn and the armadillo in the front seat and steps out into the long shadow cast by the dress shop. Someone exits and a little bell rings. Once she would have believed Mr. Norton had just gotten his wings, but now she's pretty sure there's a big pile of wings up in heaven and very little demand.

She enters and is greeted by two salesgirls chirping around the register. A heavy lavender scent anchors the air. She imagines in this store it's always spring, wonders why her life is stuck in winter. The kind of winter where there's no pretty white snow and the sun laughs at folks from behind gray clouds. Someone once told her if she wore brighter clothes, she'd have a brighter outlook. It might have been Jimmy. Occasionally, he was deep.

The sale rack offers nothing appropriate for the requirements of her latest gig, just ugly patterns in sizes too small or too large. Though she's not exactly sure what is appropriate for pretending to be Stephanie, meeting up with Mr. Norton's best hooker, and together dumping his ashes into the Bellagio's lake while Mr. Norton's former pet armadillo observes the ceremony. She reaches for a bright linen halter spotted with

strawberries she might wear on a first date should she be asked on one. The dress is a summer cloud in her hand. She finds herself smiling. She lets the dress go and watches it swing back into place. She wonders if it would swing around her body like that, show off her pretty calves and obscure her less-than-pretty thighs.

Her eye catches a black smudge along the bodice. There's a big ash thumbprint smack in the middle of a strawberry that makes it look like it's rotting.

"May I help you?" says a salesgirl in an orange wig. Malena quickly wipes her hand on her jeans. She stands in front of the dress to hide the stain.

"Anything black?" Malena says.

"Nightclub?"

"Funeral." The salesgirl swallows, stumbles over an "I'm sorry" and leads Malena behind a display of pantsuits.

"This will look nice on you." She holds out a frilly, A-line number with a scoop neck.

"I don't feel that young," Malena says. "Or that old."

The girl gathers a few options for Malena to try on. Some push and squish her boobs. Others show off her underwear whenever she sits down. None are the thing people put on when they don't want anyone looking at them. She thanks the sales girl and leaves before she gives into the temptation to ask what's the deal with the orange wig she's

wearing. Malena might want to buy one herself, take Jimmy up on his bright clothing advice and wear it to Mr. Norton's funeral. Though the hooker might not like that. Malena's not sure if the hooker's presence is for sentimental or verification purposes.

Someone opens the door to the dress shop and she again hears the little bell. It could be another angel, or it could be an alarm against her plan to pass off log remnants as Mr. Norton's remains. But her choices here are limited to rocks and places made from concrete.

She slams the car door and slips back onto Durango behind a blue minivan with a DVD player. Through the van's rear window she watches Elmo tap dance, wishes she were a puppet with someone smarter pulling the strings. If you wade in what ifs you'll drown. She read that in a self-help book she bought while wearing sunglasses and hat. The book didn't explain what to do if you were already breathing out bubbles at the bottom of the ocean. She lights another cigarette, focuses on getting a black dress and replacing the ashes. The funeral is tomorrow night. She can't screw up. This time she can't screw up.

3.

It's only eleven am and the tail on the monkey costume Big David is wearing has already been run over by an Asian woman on a motorcycle with a Hello Kitty helmet. The breeze he felt yesterday has fled to whatever city it came from, probably with a hangover and diehard promise never to return to Vegas. The sun is in full-out scorch mode and Big David, what his young son likes to call him in lieu of dad, realizes the awful smell of industrial sewage invading his nose is emanating from his own armpits. There's nothing he can do to shut down the sweat factory.

On the bright side, the street corner he's been assigned to is 215 and Durango, a busy highway ramp along a road undergoing perpetual widening and adjacent to an abandoned lot where developers of a fancy high rise broke ground then went belly up. They left behind a billboard reading "Pinnacle: High Rise Living Gets You High." He's supposed to stand here, technically dance rather than stand, and wave his huge sign for Going Bananas in an effort to convince people hurrying to work that they need a smoothie now. Because of the ongoing construction on this part of Durango, the noise of which is not muffled by the costume's enormous head, drivers who stare at his monkey ass too long run into orange cones. One tow truck driver nearly ate a girl in a cobalt hatchback. This provided some amusement.

Luckily, if Big David can dare to think luck might be setting up camp in his vicinity, across the tumbleweed lot there's a Chevron/McDonalds with public toilets he can use to escape the July in November weather, which is clear evidence the earth is

spinning inside a heating tin of Jiffy popcorn. He's exchanged a few manly glances in the "What up" style with a guy in a cap who keeps going outside the McDonalds to dangle cigarettes from his lips. This behavior seems absurd, but Big David realizes the way he's dressed he's a very black kettle.

The monkey business began yesterday. It was a classic bait and switch deal. Thinking he might have finally scored a legitimate job interview after months of searching, Big David instead found his gaze kidnapped by a poster of five pink babies dressed to look like five pink tulips.

"Do you have a monkey costume?" The woman in the role of interviewer played off the question by tucking her hair behind her ear and revealing a streak of gray that appeared to have called in sick during the dye job. Big David played the part of interviewee in a suit he hadn't worn or dry-cleaned since his wife's funeral six months ago.

The interviewer, he discerned her name was Carmela from the business card she'd left tossed on her desk, typed and mumbled to herself as she waited for him to respond. He didn't know how to answer the monkey costume question so he covered up the red stain on his pants with his briefcase. The briefcase had been a present from his wife. "Never know when you might need one again," she'd said the day after his layoff. He'd caught the smirk she used when she was particularly pleased with herself. The red stain, he distinctly remembered, had come courtesy of the fruit punch popsicle someone gave Little David as a consolation prize after losing his mother to an aneurism that had been

stalking her brain since she was a girl. As for the briefcase, by the looks of the monkey job, he still wasn't going to need it.

“Not gorilla. Monkey. Or chimp. Even orangutan would work. For some reason everyone just owns gorilla suits,” Carmela said. Her eyes scanned something on her monitor that made her right eyebrow arch.

“This is for the Marketing Representative position?” Big David said. He shifted his weight and the gray folding chair he'd been asked to sit on creaked. She pushed a Xerox towards him that read: Marketing Representative - Job Description.

“You can dance? The dancing is required.” She handed him a list of costume stores. Some of the names had one star next them, others had two stars. One store had a frown drawn in green sharpie.

“This really isn't for me,” Big David said. At breakfast, he'd told Little David he had an interview for a Marketing Representative position, which was a few rungs below his glory days as an Account Executive at 66+6 Advertising, Big David's new affectionate nickname for the bastards who laid him off, but a few rungs up from unemployed for the last eight months. Little David, being hardly six, hadn't known the difference. The kid simply smiled at the news while he chomped on chocolate puff cereal and flew his silver spoon through the air making engine sounds. This caused milk to spew from Little David's lips and onto Big David's tie.

Little David was going to notice a monkey suit. He was going to ask questions. There'd already been too many questions to answer in the last six months.

“Look. Just stand on the street corner, shake your tail and wave the sign. It's good money in this economy, especially for someone with an arrest record,” Carmela said.

“One arrest. I was acquitted. And released.”

“Casinos still won't hire you.” She typed something on her keyboard and banged the enter key. “Do you have questions, honey?”

At 6'3" and 240 pounds he'd been called bear and big guy and sir by strangers, but never honey. Honey belonged to his wife, like his old Rolling Stones *Dirty Work* album she had insisted was hers and the black sweatpants he could no longer pull up over his thighs.

“Is there a bathroom anywhere near this street corner?” Big David said to Carmela. He could think of no other pertinent question. The job didn't appear to involve any skills.

“If you have a documented dysfunction in that area we are required by the Disabilities Act to supply a port-o-potty.” She looked at him, her eyebrows once again aligned. “I got a full lobby.”

He considered the letter he'd received the week prior from the unemployment office declaring the end of his benefits in a typeface he hadn't seen since the Reagan administration. The letter had been accompanied by an invoice from Oak Tree Academy

and a knock on the door from Mr. Armand Dasari, AKA Fast Cash Freddi. Big David had been waiting for *the* job when maybe he just needed to take a job, something to get him and Little David through this awful period which everyone said would make him stronger, but was actually siphoning away his ability to rise and shine.

“I’ll keep the coffee to a minimum,” Big David said. His head shook yes; his face produced a stupid smile. All he needed was a \$2.99 sticker and a place next to the other bobble heads in a trinket store.

He pushed himself up from the chair and grabbed the surfboard size sign that read: “Goin’ Bananas Smoothies –Turn left here.” The monkey job would keep him and Little David rolling in cereal and ramen for a while, but he still was going to have to contend with the tightening financial nooses of Mr. Dasari and Oak Street Elementary. Two weeks ago his Uncle Elton died. Big David had hoped he might get a small inheritance, the poor guy was loaded, but his sister said Uncle Elton had left it all to an armadillo rescue habitat. Big David was not surprised. Uncle Elton had offered his hooker to David on several occasions, even suggested they take a trip together to some brothel in Pahrump. He wasn’t in his right mind.

He thrust the list of costume shops between his teeth, dragged the sign out to the rusty sedan the bank had no interest in repossessing in lieu of the SUV. A cool breeze teased him with the prospect of a real fall in Las Vegas. He let the breeze ruffle his hair, imagined it was a kiss from his dead wife.

4.

The fry girl is a dewdrop on the tip of a leaf and Chris wants to catch her on the tip of his tongue. He presses sweaty palms against scratchy slacks. She lifts the fry basket, dumps golden sticks onto a metal tray. He tucks his polo into his pants, straightens the brown belt to hide the frayed waist. She brushes black bangs from her forehead. He steps up to the McDonald's counter like a castle moat between them and she is a trapped princess he'll rescue with a swing of his sword. She shakes the salt canister. He sees the soft hair on her arms, green eyes like pools of radioactive waste, thinks of her and him sharing hot cocoa under a snowfall. Naked. She grimaces as if she caught a reflection of his thoughts in her scooper. He steps back wishing he'd worn his wingtips instead of tasseled loafers with no socks like he's still holding onto the eighties and the one true accomplishment he ever had, which he is. She licks salt from a fry, her tongue sliding up and rolling over the tip. He licks his lips. There's a vibration in his pants.

It's his wife.

She's calling, sending the phone in his pocket into a tizzy. After ogling the fry girl, he feels obliged to answer.

"Did you go to lunch yet?" she says. "How about Applebees?" Her voice is deep and smooth, which once turned him on but now he associates with taking out the garbage.

"Already got something," he says.

"Dr. Nova confirmed your colonoscopy tomorrow. Want me to go with?"

He can't imagine a more awkward situation than having his wife reading *Vanity Fair* in the waiting room while Dr. Nova explores his anal cavity for signs of a tumor, or that stick everyone keeps talking about. He avoids her question, instead says he has to go because he's running late for a meeting, an important one, maybe the one he's been waiting for so they can finally afford that tour of Northern European castles she's always wanted to take as a second honeymoon. He promised her this trip long ago and, over the years, he's come to want it as much as her. Maybe if they were in a different place the similarities: a shared passion for black coffee no sugar, a distaste for the awful smell of zoos, shame over their outwardly protruding navels, that first drew them together like magnets might reverse back to their original state and stop repelling.

"We don't need to go to lunch," she says.

"Elsa," he says. He's too late. She's already hung up, sounding disappointed about lunch, and mad because he used this same excuse last week. Their therapist suggested they rekindle their romance and his wife has taken this to heart. He imagines she did up her hair in curls and put on that blouse she thinks he likes because he bought it for her last Christmas. It's an ugly blouse with a tiny rose print even his grandmother would scoff at. He should have bought her a nicer blouse, or at least one that doesn't wrap a purple sash around her neck like a metaphorical noose. And for the last five of the twelve years he's been married, he should have been a nicer husband. One who welcomed the appearance of cellulite across her thighs like fresh donuts from the bakery. When he gets back to the office, he'll admit all of his shortcomings to his partner in

hopes that in revealing his faults he'll somehow be less of a jerk. His partner, Cheryl, will shake her head and glare at him with disgust, but he knows this is because she thinks, as a portly woman herself, she needs to forge some sort of cellulite alliance. Her marriage is even more dysfunctional. Last week she admitted to purposely making her husband a sandwich with ham that had expired, though it was hardly a confession and more of a detail within her larger saga of victimhood. Chris hangs on to stories like these like ledges in the bottomless gorge of his marriage. They remind him there are depths of meanness below he has yet to excavate.

He slips the phone back into his pocket. The McDonald's is bursting with nurses in their blue scrubs. The ones who work in Labor and Delivery having sprung for tops patterned with Mickey Mouse and Cinderella. The enhanced dollar menu has made double cheeseburgers more affordable than the subsidized hospital cafeteria so they descend like pigeons at noon. Chris hears them chatting about gunshot wounds and vomit with equal gravity. They complain about the upcoming full moon and subsequent rush on the maternity ward, which reminds Chris he's yet to process a stack of maternity insurance claims from last month, a task recently made distasteful by the new company policy denying coverage for more than one night's hospital stay. When he was a kid, Chris thought he would grow up to be a fireman driving a shiny truck. Instead he gets hate mail addressed to Satan.

The line moves forward giving Chris a better view of the fry girl. She's scooping fries into red cartons, swaying her hips to some silent tune and mouthing ooh. He wants

to know what the song is, what someone like her listens to, and if someone like her would tolerate classic rock and wear his old Kinks concert tee as a nightshirt with no panties.

“The usual?” says the skinny manager when Chris reaches the counter. The manager’s breath smells of rum. Chris concludes he must wash down his usual with Bacardi. Chris would like some of that Bacardi. Being drunk might excuse the ridiculous compulsion he feels toward this girl who could be his daughter if his wife didn’t have fallopian tubes more twisted than the triple x images making up the current blockbuster in his brain.

“Yes, a dozen this time,” Chris says. He wants to watch the fry girl fry some more, bask in her glow as she glistens under the heat lamp, black strands of hair fleeing like snakes from under her cap to coil and curl against her sweaty cheek. If she turns her head, he will be stone.

The manager whistles at the fry girl. “A dozen large ones,” he says.

“Got it, Jimbo,” she says.

Among the racing thoughts in Chris’s head appears a memo about his meeting this afternoon, which was not a complete fabrication concocted to pacify his wife.

“To go. To go,” Chris says. She laughs. He laughs to show he’s not a stiff, that he gets this little joke where she is a goddess and he is a middle-aged creep with hair growing in his ears. She stuffs white bags with red cartons, walks them over to him. He

weighs the consequences of jumping over the counter and planting one on her purple glitter lips. Will she think him a rapist or John Wayne?

He goes with sniffing her, draws in the surrounding air, detects a hint of summer in Savannah and girls sucking on watermelons. He inhales her again. She asks if he's having trouble breathing. He shakes his head. His heart is a jackhammer.

"You're shy for an old guy," she says. He's not sure, but he thinks she might have winked.

"Older guy," he says.

"You a stalker?" She says this like she's been stalked before and has a stack of restraining orders in her purse. He wonders what has caused her to be so jaded, though it is the jadedness he finds attractive, and hopes will play out in his favor.

"Claims adjustor," he says.

"Got a motel room? Usually these things involve a motel room." She points at the ring on his left hand.

"My wife died." He blurts this without thought, and realizes he's dropped further down into the meanness gorge.

"Really?"

"No," he says. She holds out the fries. They are lilies, lilies that reek of grease, but lilies all the same. He wishes he could tell a lie that big. He is not yet Cheryl.

He twists the ring on his finger, takes the white paper bags with golden arches he'd like to walk through holding her hand. During the exchange, the tip of his finger brushes the tip of hers in a poor man's Sistine Chapel. He apologizes to her for the touching. He rejoices to himself for the touching. The angels in his head sing Halleluiah. He hopes he doesn't do anything premature.

"Come back tomorrow. I'll make you a fresh batch. We don't have to tell your wife," the fry girl says. She looks at him like he's a mangy dog she might adopt to save from the vet's needle. His heart is wrenched by her lashes. He fetches his order like a good mutt and scurries past the life-size Ronald McDonald knocking it over. Both he and the cardboard cutout crash to the floor. The clown grins up at him like the whole world is a happy place despite his pleas for quarters to save cancer-ridden kids that Chris's insurance company would leave to die. Lying on the dirty linoleum staring at heaven through the skylight, Chris can't help think his own death is imminent. Will it be his colon or his wife in the garage with a 9 iron?

"You ok?" says the manager. He holds out a hand to help Chris up. A few of the nurses are eyeing Chris, but none have made motions to implement first aid procedures.

"No need to resuscitate," Chris says. He waves the manager away and rolls up to his feet. He keeps his back to the fry girl. His face is most definitely red. He felt this way once before, almost daily, when he was fourteen. At fifty-four, he's finally become the creep his childhood nemesis Susie told everyone he was when he accidentally walked into the girl's bathroom and caught sight of unicorn panties shackling her ankles. It'd

been an accident, the fault of a prankster who'd switched the girls' room sign with the boys, but one Chris envisioned over and over again until Susie drank three shots of tequila at prom and showed him her black lace G-string.

He hurries out the door into the blaring sun, shields his face with the bag of fries. Once he's safe in his compact car he checks his watch. The meeting with his boss starts in ten minutes. His office is mere blocks away. He tosses the bag aside, slumps into the bucket seat, imagines the sweet little underwear the fry girl must be hiding under her polyester pants.

5.

The armadillo had it coming. It was ten years ago, a 2000 June with July heat. The beast kept burrowing through the swampy Louisiana backcountry Elton and his team of engineers were inspecting as a potential site for a new road complete with carpool lane. Every day Elton examined the soil, the level of inclination, the depth of the water table and other such factors he considered indispensable to his calculations. Every night the armadillo scattered chunks of grass like shrapnel. He left droppings like pellets of shot. Elton, who worshipped precision and order, could not function surrounded by so much displaced earth. The armadillo might as well have dug a hole in Elton's head.

Elton's team laughed at him, asked if the severing of his fingers had also snapped a few connections among the synapses in his brain. He heard them flinging jibes, whisper he was going crazy. They mumbled he should have retired two years ago when the Alzheimer's first began emitting its unwashable stench. He couldn't believe their audacity. His name shined on the building they entered each day. His signature endorsed the checks they jauntily cashed at the bank and went on to pay for mortgages and braces and date nights with their wives that ended in mediocre sex, not the kind Elton had with Elsa. It took every ounce of his strength to refrain from summarily dishing out pink slips. On the days when the snickers would balloon to circus proportions, he'd retreat to his office and slam around the rocks in his Zen garden. Over the previous dozen months he might have forgotten a client name here, missed a someone-will-die-if-missed deadline there, but Elton's employees blamed him for every mishap, though no one did die and the

most damage inflicted by the widening gaps in Elton's memory was the embarrassing revelation of a client's sex change during a business meeting. He'd kept calling the CEO Ken rather than Kendra. What was he to do? The she-man had stubble.

That overgrown rodent, however, was not going to make a fool of him. Elton had learned a few moves back as an Eagle Scout, and that part of his memory had so far evaded Alzheimer's reach. He asked the hotel manager to wake him at four in the morning. When the phone rang at three minutes after the hour, he woke, showered and put on a tie as if it were seven o'clock and he was on his way to purchase fancy coffee that cost more than a full breakfast at a diner. He explained to the hotel personnel who asked why the early hour that he needed to perform certain measurements at sunrise for optimum data retrieval. He left the receptionist standing behind bouquets of magnolias and drove himself in the rented Land Rover to the jobsite, ignoring his partner's request that he let his assistant do all the driving. Elton was not about to be replaced by a younger model who was shiny and new, but lacked the craftsmanship of someone with his gray hair.

When he arrived at the stretch of backcountry selected to become the next superhighway, he saw the armadillo had already tossed plenty of dirt while looking for his treasure of ants. The armadillo must have found a cache of six-legged meals for he was focused on excavating one particular spot near a bush with tiny indigo berries. Unfortunately for the armadillo, his eyesight lacked sharpness even in broad daylight. Fortunately for Elton, vision was one of the few faculties that had yet to fail him. He

boasted only this advantage out here where humans had, until now, surrendered the land to its wilder enemies. He was alone and he was surrounded. A boar eyed him from behind oak trees standing like angry octopi balanced on their heads. A heron played sniper perched atop a broken fence post. Tree frogs ribbited commands to their infantry of amphibians. The only light in Elton's heart of darkness was a sliver of sun muscling its way up over the horizon's ledge. But this light was just the edge his stellar eyesight needed.

Elton loosened the knot at his neck with his thumb and removed his tie. He wrapped each end of it around each hand. He stepped through the grass crunching blades with Italian shoes. The armadillo grunted. Its armored back shielded the frantic digging underneath. It was a heinous creature, gluttonous and lumbering and metallic like a collaboration between Dr. Frankenstein and the US Army. Elton pitied the beast. His own disfigurement had rendered him a freak of nature as well, but this empathy was a firefly in the night. Elton waved it off. He hooked the armadillo's neck with the tie.

Elton flew back into a ditch. He hadn't expected the armadillo to shoot up like a bottle rocket, but he held onto him, kept squeezing the rodent's neck. Scaly legs kicked. Claws scratched at air. Elton lay on his back with the armadillo flailing on top of him. Rocks dug into his kidneys. He ignored the pain and looped the tie. The armadillo gasped for breath. Elton explained to him the order of things: how man is at the top of the evolutionary ladder, how the rodent must not blame Elton. It's only natural for man to build his roads without the pesky interference of an overgrown rat.

Elton pulled. The armadillo pushed, clawed Elton's thigh. Elton felt blood trickle down to his knee. He flipped the animal onto his belly and sat on its back. The armadillo squeaked. The armadillo whimpered.

"Who's laughing now?" Elton said. He heard every joke ever directed at him and his Alzheimer's and his fingerless hand. For sixty years people had been looking at his sufferings like a welcome mat upon which to wipe their feet. Fingers don't make a man. He was still a man.

Elton screamed and pulled on the tie. Brown thread escaped from a seam. He pulled harder. The armadillo thrashed. The armadillo stilled. Its legs went limp.

Elton listened for breath. None came. He rolled off the warm carcass. It lay there splayed, the smoking gun of Elton's signature tie, the one patterned with yellow pencils, tight around its neck.

During the fray, the sun finished pulling itself up over the horizon. The dark sky was now the blue of baby boys. When Elton first looped the tie Elsa had given him around the armadillo's neck, he felt two thousand years of civilization retreat like the tide. He was left like wet sand, without moral or cultural imprint, and he felt the goodness that comes with being all Id. Then the armadillo stopped moving. Civilization tsunamied over Elton and he felt the guilt that comes with being all Id.

The armadillo's frozen eyes gazed towards heaven. Elton looked at the ants scrambling in the dirt. He shouldn't have killed the creature. He should have dialed

animal control and had the rodent removed in a manner more consistent with his beige slacks and collared shirt.

He heard a car rustling over fallen leaves. His assistant must have commandeered a second rental. Retreat was no longer an option. Elton had but a few minutes to decide whether he was a man who owned up to his less than worthy actions or one who lived in shame while he smiled and said hi neighbor. Throughout his life, he'd usually felt more comfortable with closeting his less than glorious moments.

He stood, lifted the armadillo in his arms. It was heavier now. He carried the beast over to the car and placed him under a blanket in the trunk. The creature's musky stench stuck to Elton's clothes. There was nothing he could do to flee the smell.

The car rumbled up behind him. His assistant was yelling. Elton fished out the phone in his pocket. He dialed his partner. The end had come for Elton, too.

Two weeks ago, Elton had been ruminating over the day he'd murdered Ollie, finally coming to a few necessary conclusions regarding the sort of life he'd led and the ways in which he might correct his poor decisions before he paid for them with hell's flames burning his flesh. Elton, like his Catholic praying, dark arts dabbling mother, believed in a God who was as vengeful as he was almighty.

He shook the arthritic kinks from his only hand with all five fingers and picked up the fountain pen, a present from his niece for his seventy-sixth birthday. He sat down at

the oak desk to revise his will while surrounded by wallpaper stamped with Mallard ducks. He'd spent the better part of the last five years, maybe more, maybe less, in Stephanie's guest bedroom. He'd tossed and turned under red plaid covers. He'd stubbed his toe against the bed's claw foot. In his mind he'd followed the roads he once built and the dead ends he'd created, turning on the ancient TV in the corner to interrupt his own thoughts with a DVD of *The Andy Griffith Show*. The whistling soothed him, awakened memories of hunting baby alligator in the Louisiana bayou with Grandpa Alcee before the firecracker blew up his fingers. Sometimes he would play the opening credits over and over again until Stephanie's husband barged in and confiscated the DVD for the day. He'd already lost it today, looked forward to tomorrow morning when his niece would deliver it with his coffee and one of the pastries the cops who watched her house brought in exchange for a thermos of her gumbo.

He brushed aside his memories and stared at the stark page awaiting his markings. He began: *I, Elton Laura Norton, wish upon my death to distribute the things my niece has not confiscated in the following manner.* He stopped there, looked over at Ollie. The stuffed armadillo was seated next to him on a pillow that once belonged to Stephanie's dead terrier. The dog's fur had not been entirely removed from the crushed velvet cover and it stuck to Ollie's armored back.

"I don't think my father would have named me Laura," Elton said. He stroked the armadillo's belly, sipped his lemon water and reached across the desk to open the shutters

Stephanie always kept closed. Sunlight charged his face. He blinked and closed them again, decided instead to turn on the lamp and start over.

I, Elton Linus Norton, wish upon my death to distribute the things my niece has not confiscated in the following manner. I don't know what she has taken or not taken. There was a trumpet. There was a painting by someone French. I asked her to keep a ledger, but she has not complied with this request. Instead she tells me I do not own half the things I think I own. She also insists all my possessions, excluding Ollie, floated away when Katrina trapped me atop a shingled roof. This scenario is not accurate. My mind is a kaleidoscope of images that once played linear, but if I twist the dial I can spot Elsa's engagement ring hidden somewhere in the nooks and crannies of this bedroom with the ducks that whisper.

These are the things Stephanie did not want him to write. Stephanie was up to something. She'd already made an appointment for Elton to meet with her lawyer. He needed to work quickly to secure his wishes on paper before they were mangled like trees in the hurricane that was his niece. It was critical his wishes be followed. He'd already deciphered God's formula for entry into heaven and calculated, after considering Ollie's murder in relation to the amount of charitable donations he'd made to the Armadillo Rescue League, that he was in a dead heat for either afterlife. The decision to revise his will was an attempt to throw favor toward the one where cherubs play horns and harps.

He heard Stephanie's heels on the wood floor, pushed his papers together and slipped them inside a drawer. She'd already sold many of his things to the highest bidder

or anyone willing to hand over cash. Elton didn't blame her though. The IRS was keeping an eye on all the debits and credits to her account. Her husband, from what Elton had gathered, was not a scrupulous man. Elton was still deliberating her case.

Stephanie skipped into the room.

"I've asked you to knock," Elton said.

"You're deaf," Stephanie said.

"I most certainly am not,"

"Okay. I say uncle, uncle." She flew across the room and picked up his water glass. "Does the Alzheimer's stop you from remembering to use a coaster?"

He eyed the water marks across the desk's tired surface. What was one more?

"Your pension didn't arrive yet," she said.

"I'll call Savent," Elton said.

"Your partners are all dead. Remember? They died when that bridge they designed collapsed. Ironic." She dropped a paystub in his lap with a phone number highlighted in yellow. "Call today, please."

"When are we going to Vegas?" He tried not to cry when he said this, but the tears would not dam.

“I’m sorry, Unc. Vegas is outside my travel zone.” She raised her pant leg and showed him her ankle bracelet courtesy of LAPD.

“My apologies. I forgot,” Elton said.

“Maybe David can come and get you. For now, I’ll have the driver take you downtown tomorrow. You can spend the day at the Beverly. It’s just like the Bellagio.” She tossed him a kiss and breezed out the door.

He decided not to wait for Stephanie to arrange his affairs. He would send Elsa a postcard notifying her of his impending visit. He would call David and invite himself to his nephew’s home. Not simply for the chance to pay a side visit to the lovely Elsa, but to acquaint himself with his nephew’s young son whom many in the family insisted had inherited Elton’s long fingers. He had already resolved to leave his most prized possession in David Junior’s care. Elton had no son of his own; he’d shunned that opportunity, and he felt, because Stephanie had been benefitting from his income for several years, he had to bequeath the Davids something dear and worthy. It was only just. A boy surely like an armadillo.

I, Elton Lucas (Is it Lucas?) Norton, would like Elsa’s ring, if Stephanie has not cashed it in, to go to my nephew David. He just lost a wife and this might help him get a new one since it is big and expensive. I would like Ollie to go to David Jr, to keep him company. He might be a lonely boy, no mama to tuck him into sheets and kiss away tears with chapped lips. Ollie certainly helped me through lonelier times. A man without a wife

and a boy without a mother are not so different from a man without fingers. Pieces of yourself are forever lost.

He must find the ring. The last time he remembered seeing it the ring was nestled in the white hairs sprouting from his knuckle. He'd shoved this enormous representation of his love onto his little finger when Katrina arrived to sweep man away like ants in her kitchen. He couldn't take everything up onto the roof so he chose the ring and Ollie, already dead and stuffed, to keep him company while water swirled sneakers and feces and baby bottles around his apartment building near Bourbon Street. Sitting on the roof, he'd looked into that diamond and seen Elsa and a little boy and Ollie still alive and scrambling across the front lawn of a house that might have been his.

Elton focused his mind on New Orleans, on the shingled roof, on the raindrops bursting against his head. A vague feeling crept up his veins. He might have removed the ring, might have thought it best if it floated away, if he floated away. That's when a man with an ax anchored his boat to the chimney Elton leaned against. Elton asked him for butter so he might slip the ring past his swollen knuckle and send it to where dreams go when their chance of coming true dies.

"Only blankets and axes," the fireman had said.

Elton asked him for the ax. He would not miss one less finger on that hand.

"You might need that pinky finger someday," the fireman said. Then he lifted Elton and Ollie onto his speedboat as if Elton were a boy with a Teddy bear.

Elton reached for the handkerchief in his pocket, dabbed his eyes, soaked up the teardrops plopped onto the paper and smudging the ink that told of his life. He wondered if he cried enough, if he turned himself to liquid, could he soak up his whole being with his hankie. And if he soaked up his whole being, would Stephanie merely wring him down the drain.

“Why the waterworks, pops?” said Jiff, his niece’s husband. He’d come in without Elton knowing it, reminding Elton he’d requested they install a mirror above the desk. Jiff had spilt droplets of protein smoothie on his pink button down shirt, which he wore with gray slacks around the house during business hours. Elton could spy on the front driveway from his room and he hadn’t seen clients arrive in months, though he understood from what others said of his memory lapses that perhaps it had only been weeks or days. He did know that each day at five, Jiff promptly changed into a tank and shorts to commence preparations for his next Bod by Jiff video. The bass from his music shook Elton’s bones.

“Here,” Jiff said. “Seems like you need this today. And a little something that always makes me feel good.” His nephew-in-law slipped the Andy Griffith DVD into the player and tossed onto the bed a magazine featuring a woman in a leather bustier outfitted with metal spikes.

“Thank you,” Elton said. Jiff pumped his fist against his chest and then pointed at Elton. In return, Elton saluted him. Jiff left and closed the door with a snap.

Elton turned to his papers, not sure where he'd stopped. He decided to start with the one he'd loved most.

I would leave Elsa my heart, but she took it years ago when I called her a whore, though technically, she was a whore.

I will leave David Elsa's ring, if I can find it. I should have phoned him more, went to see him when I was in Vegas rather than spending weekends sandwiched between Elsa's legs, though if he'd taken up my offer to share in her pleasurable activities, he would understand.

I will leave David Jr. my Ollie. The poor boy looks like me. What a fate to have.

I will leave my life insurance payout to the legless boy as final atonement for my mea culpa.

I will leave any possessions that once belonged to my father to the chocolate boy who might be my brother—if he can be found.

I will leave Stephanie the rest of the money she thinks I'm hoarding and I might be hoarding on the condition she follows the instructions for my cremation noted under Appendix 1.

I will leave all other known and unknown possessions to the Armadillo Rescue League for killing one of its own.

Elton tossed the coaster into the trash and placed his lemon water back on the desk. He watched as the sweat beads slid down to the wood and formed rings, joining the others he'd been leaving like years on a tree. He'd made his corrections, but as the DVD automatically started and the Andy Griffith theme began to play, the notes pierced the bubbles of Elton's relief. He listened to the whistling, watched as Andy and Opie walked to the river, realized his corrections would not be enough for the selfish life he'd led. Even if they countered Ollie's murder, they certainly would not reverse the damage he'd caused to the legless boy and the chocolate boy and to his dear Elsa. If the good Mr. Griffith were ever to escort Elton to a stream, it would be the river Styx. And they would be whistling a very different tune.

6.

The itching of Malena's right breast started three months ago after a run-in with a drunken man whose face resembled a Brillo pad. His torn jacket had pockets of various shapes and sizes that could have contained any number of sharp implements. His slacks looked new. He was propped up against the stucco wall in the courtyard of her apartment building. She considered heading up the metal stairs, pretending she was the wife of the guy with the skinny mustache or the wife of the woman who body builds, but she craved the couch in her apartment, even if it was covered with crumbs.

She hugged the stucco wall while she walked, keys in hand and eyes on the number 15, the only differentiator between her door and the other 30 in her late seventies apartment complex with a pool that looked like it would give folks a rash. Her cotton sweater got caught on the wall's rough peaks causing threads to pull as she moved. She pretended nothing was happening, noticed the man had shaved in the last day or so. For a second she wondered if perhaps he wasn't one of her neighbors and she, being overly paranoid, really had nothing to worry about. She tried a small smile, the one she used when she was pretending to know someone.

"That's my apartment," the man said. He pushed himself off the wall and blocked her path, then reached for her keys with a prosthetic hand that looked like it was intended for a woman. The fake nails were painted red. She wondered why crazy and drunk were always stuck together like Siamese twins.

If she had run at Olympic speed, she might have made the back exit, maybe even the ghetto Starbucks at the corner where she could have hidden behind a Venti latte like some starlet who was slumming. It was her own fault for thinking she could live in a neighborhood where the average blood alcohol level on any given day could easily power a fleet of ethanol cars. She spun on her heels, but his hand grabbed her shirt collar. He yanked. She flew into him like a cartoon.

“Help.” She screamed as loud as her lungs would allow. Not a single doorknob turned, though she was sure there were plenty of ears pressed against the metal doors.

“Fuckers.” It was the last thing she remembered saying as a mushroom cloud erupted inside her head. She woke to the flashlight of a policewoman who was whispering miss. Her right eye was a rainbow of purple clouds, but her underwear was surprisingly clean and intact.

“He was too drunk to really molest you,” the cop said. “He passed out with his hand on your breast.” Malena spit out a piece of prosthetic red fingernail. The cop bagged it up with a tweezer.

“Which ones?” Malena said. It seemed like an important thing to know, which breast had been touched, which hand, real or creepy fake one, had trespassed under her shirt where few, despite what others whispered, had penetrated. Not knowing was too much. She needed every detail, didn’t the cop understand, if only to give her traversed breast a good extra scrubbing.

Malena has two seconds to decide which lie from her pantheon of untruths she's going to dust off and offer the cop who's pulled her over. The cop, a woman with a gait like molasses, must not be near quitting time. She strolls with a thick pad in her hand and pen primed for taking down names. Malena scratches her breast while she waits in the hatchback, parked in a bus stop along Durango that overlooks a flood basin. The basin doubles as half a dozen soccer fields. On the weekends, families flood this depression, but today the kids are in school. Neither she nor Jimmy were ever one of those kids kicking soccer balls while their parents cheered and yelled at the ref. Her mother was too crazy to be a mother. His parents worked multiple jobs so they could raise their son in a house too big for a threesome. She notices the goal posts have been put away, presumably to prevent theft by the homeless man pushing a grocery cart over the dying grass. He'll be the sole witness to her impending traffic ticket, which might as well be a red V embroidered on her chest to alert insurance companies of her violation.

She wasn't speeding. She knows this. The twisting, cone-lined stretch of Durango she is still trying to navigate doesn't allow speedometers to rise above 20 miles an hour. Not sure why the cop has pulled her over makes it difficult, though not impossible, to choose words which might earn her enough sympathy to keep her driving record clean. It's already been made apparent though, that luck is not her friend today.

The cop, black hair that's too black to be natural pulled into an askew ponytail, continues her dilly dallying, stopping midway between her cruiser and Malena's

hatchback to answer her cell phone, which is probably outside of protocol and something Malena may be able to use to her advantage. She gestures for Malena to stay put, then laughs in a way that suggests she's either having an affair with a detective above her pay grade or accepting an invitation to Starbucks from the devil. Malena glances at her watch, still an hour ahead though daylight savings was weeks ago. The leech of a dress shop her mother had recommended already sucked thirty minutes from her life. She suspects the next few hours, now committed to stealing ashes from her mother's fireplace, will be similarly wasted by awkward pauses between the dozen or so questions her mother is sure to ask. Things like where's she been and why she doesn't call. Things she never cared about years ago. Her mother already knows the answers. The whys are headlights on their relationship's dark winding road and Malena is the baby deer.

She hears the cop say my place, or something that sounds like my place. It's hard to tell since the cop has turned her back to Malena's car, apparently not concerned that Malena might be a raging criminal. Malena brushes a few stubborn remnants of Mr. Norton's ashes from the passenger seat. Fortunately the spill blends in well with the slacker style her car already has going for it. She straightens the urn. The metal, hot from sitting in the sun, sears her fingers. Instinctually, she licks the tips, then remembers her hands are mired in human remains. She spits and spits and wipes her tongue on her shirt. Unless he beat his wife or burglarized homes or exposed himself to children in soccer parks, Mr. Norton doesn't deserve her idiocy.

“Sorry I lost some of you, Mr. Norton,” she says. She hopes his ghost isn’t watching. The last thing she needs is a haunting by an old man and his former pet rodent. Though spirits and the like are not typically part of her worldview, it’s not every day she disturbs the dead by mishandling their former bodies with a carelessness that usually precedes the phrase: “Cleanup on aisle eight.”

The cop snaps her phone shut, picks up her pace and appears by Malena’s window. Malena assumes she now has someplace to go and won’t have time for Malena to talk her way out of whatever traffic crime she’s committed.

“Did I do something wrong, officer?” Malena says.

“License and registration,” the cop says. She raises an eyebrow when she spots the urn and armadillo. “You have a permit for that?”

It hadn’t occurred to Malena that permits might be necessary, but now the illegality of her current job illuminates the neon sign for trouble in her brain. Her breast itches even more, but she fears scratching it in the cop’s presence.

The cop taps her pad. The sun, high in the sky, reflects off the cop’s sunglasses into Malena’s eyes. Malena squints as she looks up through her car window, wonders if this woman in blue has ever shot anyone. The cop is shorter and thinner than the one who discovered her in the hall with a drunken lunatic’s rubber fingers tweaking her left nipple.

“Do you have a permit?” the cop says again, more slowly this time as if Malena might be deaf or foreign.

“Permit for the urn?” Malena says. She gives in and scratches her breast.

“The rodent. Can’t bring dead animals across state lines. You’ve got a California license.” This was a turn of events Malena had not expected.

“It’s stuffed,” Malena says.

“Still dead,” the cop says. “Can I see it?” The cop reaches through the window and lifts Ollie by his tail. “I’ve never seen anything so ugly.”

“It’s critical I get him back.” Malena says, instantly realizing she might have to explain why it’s critical, which will lead back to the human remains scheduled to be illegally dumped into the Bellagio Fountain.

The cop ignores her, picks some dog hair off Ollie and swings him like a yoyo. His head thumps into the rearview mirror. The cop slips two fingers into the toothy mouth and pushes out the dent.

“Got something in here I should know about?” The cop shakes Ollie, sniffs his belly. Mr. Norton will most definitely haunt Malena now, but she can think of nothing to say. Fear is interfering with her ability to lie. There shouldn’t be anything in the armadillo, but Stephanie’s insistence that this dead rodent attend the funeral was a strange request, even by LA standards. She could be an unwitting mule for Stephanie, and Stephanie could be a drug pin in Prada who hires people under the pretense of delivering urns and eccentric possessions in order to traffic cocaine. Mr. Norton might be no more real than Mickey Mouse. His ashes might be some new form of crack. She should have

checked Ollie out earlier, asked more questions of Stephanie. There are probably enough grams inside the rodent's one leg to put her away until menopause.

"Can't let you go unless I know for sure," the cop says.

"You want to look inside?" Malena says.

"Or we can go to the station." The cop shakes Ollie and holds him to her ear. Malena eyes the cop. "Knowing for sure" could lead to a number of scenarios that'll make her life more difficult. Stephanie was very clear about the requirements of her contract, one of which was to deliver Ollie to the hooker intact. Why else would she be transporting a stuffed armadillo across state lines only to give it to some hooker? It must be drugs. Malena can't believe she's such an idiot.

"Really? You need to see inside?" Malena says.

"Really, I need to see inside," the cop says.

If Stephanie's last words hadn't been: "That armadillo is worth more than you," and if she didn't live in a house whose size evokes suspicions about the legality of all her income, Malena would gladly turn the stuffed rodent over to the cop. But the unknown variables are too many. The potential of illegal substances lurking inside Ollie's gut too great. Dumping human remains into the Bellagio Fountain was only a misdemeanor whose small fine, if Malena got caught, Stephanie had promised to cover. Malena did not agree to commit a felony. For the most part, she stays on the right side of the law, unless you count the time she and Jimmy stole a car, but that was an emergency.

“What the hell?” the cop says. She pokes her head through Malena’s car window. Her cheek is mere inches from Malena’s nose. Malena detects a hint of musk aftershave and, maybe, an Adam’s apple.

Malena checks out the passenger seat, glances at the cup holder and floor mats covered in soda and Mr. Norton’s ashes. She has no idea what has caught the cop’s eye. She can’t think of anything incriminating that might be in her car, though over the last decade, incriminating joints have fallen into the crevice between the front seats.

“What the hell?” the cop says again. Behind aviator sunglasses, her eyes are undetectable. Malena can’t tell in what particular direction she’s pointing her gaze.

“Do you want me to answer?” Malena says. With the cop so close she can count the vestiges of former ear piercings. Malena is afraid to move.

“Not you,” the cop says.

The cop pulls her head out from the window and flies down the hill leading to the soccer fields with Ollie under her arm and her hand on her holster. Her black rubber shoes kick up tornadoes of dust. Malena looks out the passenger window, sees the homeless man has removed his clothes and spray painted “Where’s my bailout?” on his waxed chest. He is doing cartwheels and back flips with such impressive technique she wants to clap. The shopping cart is on its side, white underpants and gym socks discarded as if he were a stripper. The whole show has an air of performance art and Malena can

only assume he's a disgruntled Cirque du Soleil employee. News of layoffs at the renowned theatrical group reached LA last week.

The man spies the cop, launches into a triple twisting something that should never be performed without a jock strap. The cop races toward him, hollers for him to stop.

"I expose corruption," the man says. He stands still for a moment. Malena notices he's painted his face to look like a frog.

"You ain't exposing anything," the cop says. She launches the armadillo at the frog man. The rodent smacks him in the face, but because it's not made of lead, it merely bounces off and lands on the ground. The man laughs. The cop tackles him. Malena sees her opportunity.

She jumps out of the car, scoops up her license and registration from the ground where the cop dropped them and sprints down the hill at the speed she should have used when the drunken fake arm man accosted her. Gravity does wonders for her pace. Adrenalin suppresses any pain. She's at Ollie's side in moments picking small twigs from his fur. She smoothes the new scratch above his right eye, examines the torn seam of his leg. It's hanging by a single black thread, not unlike her life. She always considered herself to be smart and, at the very least, capable of average success. Yet nothing she's done supports her theory. She lacks all the vestiges of adulthood: a responsible career, a mostly happy marriage, dependents she must feed and clothe and generally consider before championing her own welfare. She's tried to rescue cats, but they run away with alarming frequency. And this job, so simple a job, something intended for kids who

flunked high school or the mentally challenged, has turned out to be beyond her capabilities. In a mere 24 hours, she's managed to mess up the two items she was entrusted to transport. It's unbelievable that she should still be this incompetent at thirty years of age. It's unbelievable that she's less successful than her parents were when the barometer they set was inches high. And yet, she can sink lower. She can still end up living at people's feet, performing naked cartwheels in public. And not even Jimmy will want her then.

She looks up from the bottom of the basin, sees the mountains like a child's paper cutouts against a slate sky. She watches shiny cars carrying people to jobs and schools and kids and homes with neighbors who were not recently released from prison. Those shiny cars driving past those paper mountains. If only she could hitchhike.

"Motherfucker," the cop says. About twenty feet away the cop is rolling around on the ground with the homeless naked man. She is trying to cuff him. The naked man has a hard on. His frog makeup has smudged onto the cop's uniform.

Malena scoops up Ollie, considers how she might fix him and find a suitable substitution for Mr. Norton so she'll still get paid the tidy little sum Stephanie promised. Without it she won't be able to afford even her cockroach-friendly apartment in a sketchy part of town. Unfortunately, the torn leg doesn't afford a peek inside the armadillo. She shakes it. Nothing rattles. It's probably best if she doesn't look inside, if she doesn't know anything.

“Williams. Come in Williams.” A voice pops up behind Malena. She startles, then realizes it’s coming from the cop’s radio. She finds it lying in a divot next to a pile of dog shit. She grabs it.

“This is Williams. I need backup at Desert Breeze. Pronto,” she says. She drops the radio. It accidentally falls into the dog shit. Malena feels really bad her clumsiness caused such a lack of consideration, but not bad enough to pick up the radio and clean it off. She races up the hill where her trusty hatchback awaits. This time gravity is not so helpful. Her thighs burn. She breathes like an asthmatic. She thinks she hears the cop yelling where the hell are you going. She won’t dare look back. Instead keeps her eyes focused on her car while she digs her feet into ground that won’t give. She didn’t realize how hard it would be to climb out of this hole.

7.

Big David stands at his intersection doing his best impression of the hustle while encased in a sarcophagus of fake fur. He is a poor dancer, made poorer by the cumbersome monkey costume and its tail that whips around his ankles. His designated location, the abandoned construction lot at the corner of 215 and Durango with weeds growing around rusty rebar, is just a block from the smoothie shop he's supposed to be directing traffic to, and miles from all the places he would rather be. Standing next to a treeless site where fumes from the highway like to pool isn't helping matters. He could use a smoothie himself, but the store he's advertising for with his pathetic "Going Bananas" sign won't give him any freebies because, as they explained, he is a large man and likely to consume too much inventory. He already finished his only bottle of water, wonders what it will feel like to pass out, if there are any warning signs he should be looking out for. He guesses he'll know when he wakes up on a gurney.

A mom in an SUV with stick figures representing her three kids stuck to the rear window off-roads to get around an old man driving like a tortoise. Her tires bulldoze over a tumbleweed and leave a wake of sand storm that blows through the breathing holes in Big David's monkey costume mask. His nostrils fill with dust. He wants to flip her off, but the costume has no middle finger. This is probably a good thing considering the number of jackasses who've driven by already. He realizes he's being overly irritable. He blames profuse sweating. In the few hours he's been shaking his monkey tail, he's produced enough sweat to end the drought in Vegas, if only he had a means of collecting

the water pooling in his belly button. He's not sure the monkey costume can survive all this moisture. It didn't come with a guarantee or any sort of instructions for care, and it was the only monkey outfit he could find. He spent yesterday afternoon driving to all the stores the interviewer had starred. The only available get-ups in his size were for Fat Elvis. Then the guy from the green sharpie frown store called.

"Baby monkey is all I got," he said through what sounded like a mouth full of corn chips.

Big David had never considered he might be too big to dress like a monkey. He was about to thank the Lord or whatever deity made this costume happen when the guy from the store continued. "The costume has a diaper. And no, the diaper does not come off."

He pictured himself dressed like a chimp in an oversized diaper. He'd been happy to get a job, now he wondered if he was the beneficiary of a small miracle or a devil's prank. He often had trouble telling these kinds of things apart. For him they might as well be identical twins who switch names for fun.

"I can't thank you enough," Big David said.

He remembers he's supposed to be dancing, attempts a pirouette and steps on a nail left behind by the laid-off construction crew. He screams. Some college kids in a VW bug scratch their armpits and yell "oh oh ah ah nice diaper." He yanks the nail from the bottom of his foot, thinks the costume's monkey feet stopped the nail from piercing

his skin. He wiggles his foot. All seems to be in working order, but he can't be entirely sure without disrobing. This will have to wait until his next bathroom break. In any case, he lacks the funds and the insurance to cover the precautionary tetanus shot.

The kids' in the compact are still waving their arms at him and this asshole behavior reminds Big David of Neil. He'd meant to call his supposed best friend yesterday to thank him for getting him this job. He dials Neil's number. When Neil picks up, Big David calls him an asshole.

"You wanted a job in marketing," Neil says.

"This job is wrong. It shouldn't exist as a job."

"Hang on a sec."

Big David waits, listens to Neil hitting on someone. He can't tell if it's a man or a woman. The word humptastic comes through loud and clear.

"I'm back," Neil says.

"I should kill you and sell your organs," Big David says. If only he lacked the moral imperative against committing cold-blooded murder, because the situation might just come to that. He already asked his rich sister Stephanie if she could help him out, but she had tiptoed around the subject, finally admitting the IRS froze her assets. At that point, Big David stopped asking questions and started assuming the worst.

"Organs don't go for much. I Googled it," Neil says.

“Why are we friends?”

“Look friend, you’re robbing your 401k to invest in kindergarten,” Neil says.

Big David hasn’t told Neil he’s already finished off his retirement fund and moved onto the bullet proof, customer service window at Mr. Dasari’s Fast Cash Freddi. Big David was forced to get in bed with Mr. Dasari, who possesses the right shade of gray morality to think nothing of stealing his check cashing business model from the mob, so he could cover Little David’s school tuition last month. Forty percent interest shouldn’t be legal. Big David was fully prepared to wake one morning and find himself snuggling up to the Hindu equivalent of a bloody horse’s head. Then he got this job and Mr. Dasari, who is a devout Hindu and believes monkeys, even humans dressed as monkeys, deserve some regard, extended Big David’s loan period. “You are blessed,” Mr. Dasari had said from behind his counter window. He pulled out a few hairs from his head and set them on the counter. Big David had heard his trichotillomania cut short a promising Bollywood career. “I appreciate your generosity,” Big David said. He thought: *Thank God for the Monkey God.*

Neil is still yapping away on the phone about the merits of public school, claiming Nevada’s 50th place rank in education is a bogus conspiracy.

“We went to public school here, “ Neil says.

“And I’m a chimp and you’re a chimp enabler,” Big David says.

“Ivy Leaguers wear monkey suits, too, my friend.”

Big David is not so sure about this. The Ivy Leaguers he worked with at 66+6 Advertising are all still taking home paychecks with multiple zeros.

“Besides, the monkey thing’s temporary. I’ve got a plan to help us both,” Neil says. The last time Neil had a plan is what led to Big David’s one and only arrest, which was accompanied by a lovely afternoon behind bars with a homeless drunk who swore Big David was Jimmy Hoffa still alive and well and working at a Quickie Mart. Neil also famously posted Big David’s mug shot online, which is what created this can’t-get-a-job situation in the first place.

“I don’t need any more trouble in my life,” Big David says. History has proven that for every good idea Neil’s brain produces, it shits out a dozen piles of crap with buzzing flies.

“But I finished the box,” Neil says.

“You finished the box,” Big David says.

“Finally put my genius IQ to good use.”

“Well, genius, count me out,” Big David says. Neil means well. The guy always means well, but Mr. Dasari and Oak Street Elementary are pressing in on Big David, and soon Santa will add his girth to the mix. Big David can’t afford to brush up against the law.

“We’ve been dreaming about this since high school. I’ve been working on this since high school,” Neil says.

“Dreams don’t seem to work out for me, “ Big David says. “Thanks anyway.” He hangs up on Neil, wishing as soon as he flipped closed the phone that he had changed the subject instead. He searches his address book for someone else he might call to pass the time, but somehow he’s managed to construct a life in which his only friend is still learning right from wrong. Left with no one, he allows himself to dial his wife’s old cell, which he pays \$35 a month to keep operational. He listens for the five rings, knowing her voice will then greet him with a hello like warm peach pie.

“Sorry, I missed you,” she says. Sorry I miss you, he thinks.

“I’ll call you back,” she says. The word “call” hinting at her Atlanta roots. The beep sounds. He pours out his week, tells her how embarrassed he was last night when Little David caught him painting the costume’s diaper yellow with paint his wife had used to transform the office into a nursery. They’d chosen that honey yellow because Little David’s sonogram had been less than conclusive about his man parts. Big David figured if he couldn’t remove the monkey’s diaper, he’d transform it into a yellow Speedo. A monkey in a Speedo seemed less humiliating at the time. Little David liked the yellow, thought Big David’s job was cool, cooler than Jacob’s dad who wears high heels and glitter. He wanted to tell his friends. Big David yelled too loud for him not to.

To avoid silence he explains to his wife how he tucks their son underneath fresh sheets, how he launders them every week now because he knows that’s how she would do it. He asks her if she knows what the going rate for drag queens is these days, if waxing is a deal breaker. He imagines her laughing. He doesn’t tell her that while spitting

glittery green toothpaste into the sink, Little David reminded him Santa would soon be landing a horde of reindeer on their dead front lawn. Big David's present budget is nil.

He hears a sixteen wheeler squeal into the nearby gas station, notes the sun is halfway across the sky on its way to the gray mountains it will sink behind. Red Rock canyon juts out among the sharp ridges like a heart exposed. When the snow comes, it'll soften those peaks. It'll blanket the red stone. In time he might, too, cover up this period of his life. Maybe he'll find a new job to support Little David. He'll get Mr. Dasari off his back. He'll burn this costume from hell. Maybe.

"We'll miss you at Christmas," he says into the phone, but everything after "miss" is cut off. As usual he's talked past the voicemail's limit. He didn't get a chance to ask his wife to please call him back, to tell her he needs her breeze. He waits for an hour dancing and sweating and waving his sign. The air stays anchored to the earth. He searches the sky. He calls Neil back.

"So what's this plan you've got," Big David says.

"I'll be right over," Neil says.

8.

After spending his lunch break fantasizing about the fry girl, Chris returns to work sweaty and smelling like a McDonalds. Because of his lateness and his coworkers' Type A promptness, all the covered parking spots are taken and he is forced to leave his car in direct sunlight. He can now look forward to driving home in a sauna after a long day under fluorescent lights and an air conditioner set inhumanely low for a company located in the Vegas desert valley. Cheryl, the most Type A of them all with hair cut so short it can never look messy, is already in their shared office shooting for insurance employee of the year. She's typing away with stubby fingers; he's noticed how she chews on them when she thinks he's not looking. There's nothing they can hide from each other in this eight by eight foot cell stuffed with a metal filing cabinet, two pressed wood desks and rolling chairs ordered from a cheap business catalogue. He knows she had to borrow tampons from the receptionist yesterday because the early stages of menopause are making her periods erratic. She knows he often unbuttons his pants after a big lunch.

She removed her flowery outer blouse while he was gone and now sits in a mint green camisole he's sure she hadn't planned on wearing alone because he spots stubble under her arm when she reaches for a file.

"It's hot in here," he says to soothe any embarrassment. She doesn't seem to notice or care that he's seeing her this way. She points at the bag of fries in his hand. He points to her bottle of Windex, which she uses to wipe down her desk every hour, and

occasionally sniffs when her inbox gets too full. The constant smell of ammonia has killed three ferns, hers, in five months.

“You’re going to die,” she says. She continues to type while she reminds him of the trifecta currently doing him in: high cholesterol, high blood pressure and middle age.

“I need some magic in my life,” he says.

“I see death in your near future.”

“I’m not too old for magic.” He pulls the top three claim files from his inbox and stamps them all approved without reading a single line. Let the people have new hips and lipo suction and experimental treatments for diseases named after obscure scientists from Russia.

“So you know, if you lose your job and I have to share an office with Lenny, I’ll kill myself and haunt you,” Cheryl says.

“You haunt me now,” Chris says. He shoves a handful of fries in his mouth, pulls up his bookmarked webpage on origami and begins to transform a red fry container into a bird. He’s filled half a drawer with his creations: flowers, butterflies and a Gila dragon that took him two days to master. Sometimes he pulls them out and arranges them on his desk so he can imagine himself in a Japanese garden, his index finger held out like a perch waiting for some beautiful creature to land.

He’s smoothing a bird wing between pudgy thumbs when the phone rings. The man upstairs wants to start the meeting. He has his assistant summon Chris.

Cheryl sniffs her Windex. “The promotion you’ve been waiting for. Of course, those chauvinists passed me up,” she says.

“I’ve been here twenty years. They probably want to know what to carve on my headstone,” Chris says.

Despite what he’s told his wife and Cheryl, Chris is pretty sure this meeting is not about what a great job he’s been doing saving the company money. He’s done very little of that lately. Six months ago, along with the cancerous cells excised from his colon, he lost his mojo for the insurance business.

“Promote Cheryl is a good start,” Cheryl says. She dumps several thick blue folders in his inbox.

He leaves her mumbling something about the Equal Rights Amendment and takes the stairs two at a time until he reaches the second level. He slows here, uses the railing to pull himself up to the third floor. He will have to take the stairs more often if he ever expects to be fit enough to keep up with the fry girl.

His boss is waiting behind a steel desk with no drawers. Across from the desk, which gleams against a backdrop of high gloss white paint, are two orange chairs shaped like eggs his boss had custom-made. Chris’s boss is a bit younger than he is, but he chooses to shave the hair on his head and grow the hair on his chin as if he were going bald. The hair on his chin is the color of fallen leaves and no one is sure if this is natural. All Chris knows is that he used to be some sort of tennis phenom. Then a motorcycle

accident left him with a mechanical knee and one ball. Rumor has it he has a standing game with Agassi and Agassi lets him win.

His boss points at an orange egg chair. His desktop is surprisingly lacking in files and papers and the usual items that accompany hard work. Instead there's an oversized plaque with a picture of him serving at the U.S. Open. This information is relayed through a story of the last match engraved next to the photo. The story insinuates that his boss's second place finish was the fault of the ref, which implies to Chris, who remembers seeing the match, that his boss wrote the thing himself.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Bleek,” Chris says.

He squeezes into the egg chair. He's sat in it only a few times before: when he was hired, when he discovered the loophole which allowed the company to avoid paying millions in claims to overweight people suffering from ailments related to being overweight--a discovery which led to Chris's last promotion--and when he asked for a raise two years ago and was denied with the same matter-of-factness with which he himself has turned down people dealing with diabetes and heart disease and various other chronic problems that would have required financial outlays sure to eradicate Chris's holiday bonus.

Chris smoothes his slacks. “I read the newsletter. Glad to hear about the revenue forecast,” he says.

Mr. Bleek ignores Chris's comment and launches into a speech about making the world a better place through health insurance. It's the same speech he gives at staff meetings and the yearly company picnic that always runs out of wine too soon.

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Bleek?" Chris says.

"I want you to better the world, Chris. I can tell, when you approved the Steiner claim for \$20,000 that's what you were trying to do," he says. He uncrosses his legs and leans closer to Chris. Only the metal desk separates them, but unlike the counter at McDonald's between Chris and the fry girl, this is not a moat he wants to cross.

"They need the test to find out where the tumor is," Chris says. He sits back into the egg chair.

"Kid's going to die anyway," Mr. Bleek says. "And it's not our fault his parents have crappy insurance."

"You don't know he's going to die," Chris says. "We could save him."

"Look, I'm not sure what's suddenly prompted your heart to bleed, but you need to suture that up. We can't afford this. Everyone dies. And if we waste money on sick people then I have to fire healthy people. Shall I begin with you?"

Chris rubs his forehead. His 401K was depleted by Wall Street shenanigans. Employment is scarce and low paying, particularly for people with his gray. At his age, losing a job would be akin to being tossed out of a car onto a desert dune in his underwear. He can't do that to Elsa. Her consulting service has slowed significantly in

the last few years. Men these days prefer matchmaking advice from the Internet she says. She would be stranded naked on that desert dune with him rather than strolling through European castles and little chocolate shops selling handmade truffles. He promised her European castles. The fry girl is just a fry girl. Elsa is his Elsa, even when he hates her.

“I hope you’re on your way downstairs to fix this,” Mr. Bleek says. Chris hatches on cue from the egg chair. The choices available to him are anvils in his pockets that’ll drag him down into one abyss or another. He looks out the window affording a panoramic view of Lone Mountain. A bird smashes into the glass, drops to the ground like a stone. The thud reverberates through Chris’s chest.

“Happens all the time. Would you tell my assistant to call the cleaning people?” Mr. Bleek says.

Chris backs out of the office and takes the elevator downstairs, forgetting his promise to get fit for the fry girl. He tells Cheryl he got the raise. She jumps up and hugs him, demands he buy her lunch on Friday. Then she sniffs her Windex again. His office is underneath Mr. Bleek’s. Outside his window, he sees no sign of the bird’s body.

“No fries,” Cheryl says.

“No fries,” he says. He slumps in his chair. He doesn’t want to do the devil’s bidding anymore. He’s at Robert Frost’s proverbial fork in the road, knowing full well the road less traveled, the one where he doesn’t play well with corporate policy, will lead to his firing, which will lead to his divorce because Elsa won’t want to be married to an

out-of-work loser, which will lead to sex in a budget motel with someone completely inappropriate, like the fry girl. He's sure this is not what Mr. Frost intended as the less traveled path, or maybe it was. Maybe Mrs. Frost was a bitch.

Chris scoops up the stack of blue folders in his inbox. Cheryl leaves to beg a new tampon. He preps his "Approved" stamp with red ink. He preps his "Denied" stamp with blue ink. The company uses blue for denied because a study showed blue is less harsh on the clients and leads to fewer protests. He opens the first claim belonging to a recovered alcoholic who needs a liver transplant. He had hoped for something more clear cut, like a young mom with a failing kidney.

"Give me something," Chris says. He reads every detail in the report, the recommendation from the doctor, the plea from the man's AA sponsor. The letter addressed to Satan threatening a suit if the claim is denied. Chris learns the man has been sober for four years. Four years can pass in the flutter of a bird's wing. Four years can move at glacier pace. He finds the origami bird he made earlier and perches it on his finger. Elsa is not a bitch. She doesn't deserve what he's about to do. She also doesn't deserve that he fantasizes about a girl more than half her age who probably can't spell adultery. Yet he is a man, and men need to soar. He slams the Approved stamp down, admires the red letters, looks at the paper bird in his hand.

"Fly," he says.

He flings the paper bird into the air, watches it float in the breeze from Cheryl's mini fan. For a moment Chris is a cardinal, strong and masculine and not afraid to show the world his crimson feathers.

9.

The small box with the gold bow was too bulky for the pocket on Elton's new ecru oxford worn straight from the package. He considered hiding the box in the pocket of his pants, but feared the unsightly, if not obscene, bulge it would create while he sat in the narrow seat of a jumbo jet. He never did get used to people staring at his two-fingered hand, did not want to give others another reason to peek from the corners of their eyes. He should have been able to solve this puzzle and find a location on his person that would allow for the element of surprise, but his nerves were overpowering the circuits in his sixty-six-year-old brain. It was a lot to handle for an old man soaring to Vegas so he could propose to his hooker, the love of his life, hoping she would accept the ring inside the bulky box as final payment on a future of extended bliss and other activities in her repertoire. Elsa had always been his refuge. For the better part of two decades he'd seen her every three or four months, though it had been a while since their last tryst, maybe even two years. He'd been so busy at the firm defending his mental honor.

Yet daily she'd been on his mind. She was beautiful, his Elsa. Each trip to visit her in Vegas had revealed another layer to her enchantment. After strangling Ollie and been ousted from his firm for unconfirmed reports of dementia, he set off for an impromptu Vegas rendez vous determined to begin a new life in which pleasure rather than work steered the course of things. He and Elsa could retire to a ship that only docked to refresh its supplies of wine and cheese. Elsa was of a certain age. Men were less willing to pay for her unique talents. He thought because of this he might get a yes.

The seat belt light went dark. Elton undid the strap chaining him to a seat with a cushion that doubled as a floatation device. He didn't dislike flying, he was actually in awe of the technological feats it took to get a steel bus to soar with eagles, but the logistics of buying tickets and packing his bag and getting a cab to escort him to the airport was increasingly exhausting. If Elsa didn't wish to relocate to New Orleans, he would have to abandon his apartment of forty years and get used to a desert heat dry like frozen wedding cake, but traditions were traditions. Man and wife needed to share a bed, and such was the sacrifice Elton was willing to make to share his bed with Elsa.

He stood up and gave the front pockets of his brown slacks another go. The box was indeed too big. He was raised to be a southern gentleman, and southern gentlemen did not put items in their pockets that suggested ungentlemanly things.

"Honey, just take the ring out of the box. She's not going to care about the box," said the flight attendant who'd earlier poured him a careful cup of ginger ale. She placed a hand on his shoulder. It had the length and weight of a man's hand. This contrasted with the lyrical flow of her high soprano voice singing a familiar accent. She was from the bayou. He was sure of it.

"I have to open the box and show her the ring inside. That's how I've seen it done." He couldn't imagine just handing Elsa a ring like it fell out of a Cracker Jack box.

"Would you like to practice?" the flight attendant said. Elton nodded. He stepped into the aisle and lowered himself onto one knee, held up the box with a shaky hand,

opened it like it might have once belonged to Pandora and hope was still shyly waiting inside.

“Don’t forget to pop the question, sugar,” the attendant said. She helped Elton up from the floor. “I have a fanny pack that might do the trick. You could put the box in there.”

“You’re a problem solver. The brain of an engineer with the voice of a siren,” Elton said. It was a phrase his father had used once when a woman devised a means for fixing the pin of the violin he’d been tuning. The woman didn’t answer his father, just followed him into the restroom.

“What charm. Your future wife is very lucky,” she said. She squeezed his shoulder then gave her drink cart a little push.

Elton had been thinking he was the lucky one. Perhaps he and Elsa were both lucky to have found each other those twenty years ago. He was sipping a gin and tonic while factoring stress capacities on blueprints; she was sitting cross-legged on a stool, baring her thigh and searching for income at the Caesars lobby bar. What a work ethic they shared. It was exactly this trait that had kept them from formalizing their union earlier. He had spoken of marriage to her once while snuggled under satin covers in a dark Caesar suite. She declared matrimony would mean she would have to engage in sex for free. At the time, he couldn’t argue the point, especially since she slid down his body and proceeded to show him just how good she was at her job.

He opened the box and looked at the ring, a large square diamond set in platinum, which the salesgirl assured him was the latest fashion. He hoped Elsa liked it. He needed her to say yes. Tumbling down the backside of life, Elsa would be his Jill if he ever broke his crown. He needed a Jill. His partners at Savent had repeatedly assured Elton he was suffering from cracks in his head.

When the plane landed, Elton took the first cab he could secure directly to the Bellagio. The flight he'd chosen to save a few dollars he might spend with Elsa did not afford him the luxury of heading to his room and freshening up before their meeting. Elsa had experienced him in worse circumstances, covered in various sticky substances she would lick at his request. He was sure she would be too excited to note the travel fatigue on his face and the wrinkles on his clothes. The mole on his neck had grown a bit as well, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Unfortunately, the day and time (Friday at rush hour) meant it would be a few more minutes before he reached his Elsa. He looked out the cab's window as they passed the Excalibur with its white castles walls that never tarnish. Perhaps he should have asked Elsa to meet him there. He wiped a sweaty hand on the red velvet seat cover, then wished he hadn't. His hand was now sticky and sweaty.

"I'm getting married," Elton said. The cab driver was a skinny black fellow in a green cap with gray in his beard and no wedding ring on his finger. Elton wanted to tell him it wasn't too late.

"I know the best chapel," the cabbie said.

“I stand corrected,” Elton said. “I’m getting engaged to be married. Though I suppose she’ll want to have her wedding here.” Elton would want something intimate, though. With white roses and salmon mousse and perhaps a harp. They were not too old for a fairytale.

“Do you know a harp player?” Elton said.

“I know a guy who can whistle like a harp. A cello, too. Basically any instrument.”

“I don’t think that will do.”

The cabbie turned onto Las Vegas Boulevard and stopped at the light across from the Bellagio Fountain. The water arched and spiraled to *Clare de Lune*. Elsa was probably already inside, her radiant face lined by a black silk scarf. He felt for the ring in the flight attendant’s pink fanny pack, which he’d secured around his middle like a flamingo against his olive slacks.

“Hope she says yes,” the cab driver said.

“She will.”

“Sometimes they don’t. At least once a day around here.”

“I’ve known her for years.” Elton double-checked the zipper on the fanny pack still work.

The cab driver pulled through the Bellagio's porte cochere. Elton admired the grand provincial canopy with a green-tinted skylight. Full moon lamps, turned off at the moment, dangled like spiders from the ceiling. A valet opened the car door, already having procured Elton's bag from the trunk. Elton stepped out onto marble floors, unbothered by the hairline crack in the tile.

"Welcome to the Bellagio, sir," the valet said.

Elton didn't hear him. All his senses were trained on finding Elsa. He snatched the handle of his bag and hurried through the gold revolving doors. As expected, Elsa was standing under the Chihuly sculpture she loved for its vibrant glass flowers in blues and reds. Her fingers touched her uncolored lips. She was wearing a gold band Elton had never seen before but assumed, hoped, was a prop.

"It's been so long. We need to talk," she said. She hadn't removed her purple shawl to tease him with a low cut dress that revealed hints of lace. She looked like she'd been hastily wiping away smeared mascara. The handkerchief in her hand bore the monogram CS.

Elton dropped onto his knee. He fumbled with the zipper on the borrowed fanny pack, snapped open the box and offered it up to her.

"Oh Elton," Elsa said. "Please get up."

"Marry me, Elsa."

“I need you to understand.” She looked behind her, then past Elton to the bar where a man played *Moon River*. A couple with matching Lakers’ jerseys detoured around them. The man looked at Elton sympathetically.

“You are my love,” Elton said.

“And you were my client. My friend.” A pudgy man in khaki slacks and a navy polo approached.

“I am more than that.”

“Please be my friend. Put that away,” Elsa said. The pudgy man joined them, placed his hand on the small of Elsa’s back.

“I got here as soon as I could,” the man said. “Are you all right?”

“This is one of my clients,” Elsa said. Elton expected her to point at the man, but her hand gestured toward him. “He’s practicing,” she said. She placed her hand underneath Elton’s elbow and guided him to his feet. Elton noticed the man was wearing scuffed loafers with no socks. His own wingtips were neat and polished. He slipped the ring box into his pants pocket, forgetting to fret about the bulge. He hoped for an introduction to this stranger who was caressing his future, but knew Elsa was much too discreet to reveal identities.

“Elsa found you a match? Congratulations. She’s the best matchmaker in town,” the man said. He held out his hand for a shake. Elton thrust out his two fingers. “Uh. Sorry,” the man said.

“Not at all,” Elton said. “I gave them up for the grand U.S. of A.” He wondered if the man had ever given up anything for anyone, the way Elton was willing to leave everything behind for Elsa.

“Relationship Consultant,” Elsa said. “Matchmaker sounds so old-fashioned.” She searched through her purse and handed Elton a business card. He hadn’t realized professionals had gotten so professional. “But I’m retiring. Too much competition from the Internet these days. eHarmony and those types of sites. I can’t compete.” She looked directly at Elton. Her sadness played like a lone trumpet. Elton feared the sadness had nothing to do with him or the rise of matchmaking websites.

“She says matchmaking is for the young. I tell her she is young,” the man said.

Whoring is for the young, Elton thought. Over the years he’d seen her breasts melt, her skin loosen, her joints creak louder than the bed when she straddled him. He’d guessed she was forty, he’d never dared to insult her by asking, but her body had seen more mileage than most.

“Compared to me, she’s a mere babe,” Elton said. “It’s much too soon for you to retire. You have so many talents.”

Elsa blinked. Then she slipped her arm through the man’s, revealing the frayed underside of her shawl. The man took her hand in his.

“I’ll call you tomorrow and you can tell me how it went,” Elsa said.

“I fear it won’t go well,” Elton said.

“Nonsense. There’s nothing to it,” the man said. Elton wondered who he was exactly, who had replaced him in Elsa’s heart, why the charade. Maybe this man was her pimp. Maybe Elton needed to save her. She did appear to have been crying. If he was a pimp he must have a harem of girls. He could have left Elton’s alone.

“I’m sorry. We need to go,” Elsa said. She gave Elton’s hand a squeeze. “Good luck.” Elton nodded. She nudged the man past Elton toward the botanical gardens.

Elton didn’t call after them with a heartfelt goodbye. Instead he shadowed the couple, dodging behind overweight guests in Hawaiian shirts, minimizing the clacking of his luggage wheels. When Elsa and her man rounded a corner of progressive slot machines that had reached ten million, Elton heard her call him Chris. His enemy had a name.

He edged closer, but tourists erupted from the hall that led to self-parking preventing him from seeing or hearing more details. When the crowd passed he shoved through a group of kids licking ice creams cones. He found Elsa and her man holding each other in front of a miniature wooden bridge. The still water underneath was crafted from blue pansies. Elton ducked behind a red bird sculpted from roses.

“The bleeding started an hour ago,” she said. She looked at her empty hands. “I thought we had a chance this time.”

“Should we call the doctor?” Chris said.

“There’s no point.”

“This trying is killing you.”

“I need to try.”

“It’s killing us.” Chris wrapped Elsa’s shawl around her. “We can’t keep hoping. We’re going to break.”

“Then we’ll break,” she said. She leaned her head on his shoulder, her blondish hair twisted like roots in need of earth. The Chris man stroked her head, led her further into the garden toward a hot air balloon crafted from marigolds. Elton wondered why her head wasn’t on his shoulder. His were still strong. His could still bear her weight.

Elsa turned her head in Elton’s direction. Elton ducked behind a windmill like the ones Don Quixote chased.

“I’m just tired,” she said.

“Maybe you should retire then. I can work overtime,” Chris said. Elton glimpsed a matching gold band on his finger. He no longer believed hers to be a prop.

“It’s been hard to find clients,” she said.

“See? And we haven’t been that tight. We still eat.” Chris brushed hair from her face. Elsa rubbed her temples. Elton didn’t know what to do with this information.

A woman bumped into Elsa with her stroller. She apologized as she wheeled her cooing baby away. Elsa’s face turned stone.

“We can try again,” Chris said. He kissed Elton’s Elsa. Elton pushed a young man aside to get a better view, to pull them apart. The young man dropped his cell phone into a patch of ivy. He yelled something, but Elton didn’t hear.

Elsa stroked Chris’s hair. Chris gripped her shoulders.

“You’re a pervert,” the young man said. He pointed at the bulge in Elton’s pants.

“Get out of my way,” Elton said. Again, he pushed the young man aside. Elsa’s lips brushed across Chris’s mouth like butterflies in a breeze. Elton snatched an orchid from the windmill, then another, then another. He flung them under people’s feet. He crushed them in his hands. The young man screamed for security.

“You’re a whore! You’re a whore!” Elton said. Elsa and Chris spun on their heels.

Elton punched a hole in the windmill. He grabbed the handle of his suitcase. Elevator doors opened and tourists rushed out into the garden. Elton ran, pushing through the oncoming flood.

10.

Because of the hatchback's age, Malena's financial inability to follow the maintenance schedule, and the hordes of people who've decided to travel down Durango at this precise moment, Malena's car can only go so fast. She hopes the cop is still rolling around in the dirt with the naked tumbler and will soon be too busy booking him to recall little old Malena and her license plate number. She is surprised at herself. Fleeing from the police, carrying a dead armadillo probably stuffed with narcotics, spilling human remains: these acts go beyond the usual mishaps of a normal person. She wants to be normal. She wants to get to her mother's and meet up with a normal version of the woman who, for the last 30 years, has played her mother like she's been auditioning for the role of Sylvia Plath.

Malena steers with her left hand while she tries to light the cigarette she shoved in her mouth. Durango used to be less scarred. She doesn't remember ever passing so many empty business parks, stores with liquidation painted across the windows, halted construction projects that have left bare rebar sticking out of the ground like splinters no one can remove. After a dozen boom years her hometown has reverted to when it was a smaller place, but it will never again be the same city on the cusp. It will never regain its optimism. Malena is driving the same car on the same road, smoking the same cigarettes as ten years ago, and she is not the same either. She's a half empty glass holding onto every last drop of water.

Malena's phone starts playing "Losing My Religion." Michael Stipe sounds more depressed than usual. Because her phone rocketed into the windshield earlier when she slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the tow truck, it's now lying in two pieces with the black cover camouflaged into the dark floor mats and the rest lodged between the passenger seat and the passenger door. Malena knows if she tries to retrieve it she will swerve and hit something small and soft and probably human. Michael Stipe sings: "I'm choosing my confessions..." She fights the compulsion to find out of the two people who would call, which one is trying to reach her.

Up ahead she spots the McDonald's where she spent three years telling Jimmy watching the soft serve ooze from the ice cream machine was not a turn on. She knew if she took the most direct route to her mother's house she'd have to tiptoe past his den, but the sleeping lion she imagined seeing Jimmy would be looks sweet and declawed now that she's in town and a hundred feet away.

She detours into the parking lot, drives past the pumps of the attached gas station, barely avoids hitting a semi that's backing up without those annoying backing-up beeps, and slides the car into a spot across from a floor-to-ceiling window through which she can see the entire restaurant. From here she'll be able to watch Jimmy under his manager's cap flirting with the pretty fry girl who's much too young for him but he keeps trying to date, and telling the pimply boy to stop sneaking apple pies. This is how she's pictured him ever since she peeked at his Facebook page and read his status about winning employee of the month. There was a snapshot of him and the fry girl. He had his

arm around her shoulder. She had a grimace like she'd eaten a burrito but been kept from a toilet against her will. This was enough for Malena to assume they were not exchanging cutesy Valentines or having any kind of sex outside of Jimmy's own fantasies.

The fry girl steps into view. Her beauty is a black hole. Malena is sucked in by the girl's midnight hair like the daughter of Elvis if Elvis had married some chiquita from the barrio instead of prim and proper Priscilla. Bangs cut at a slant leave one eye hidden and one eye glaring at everyone for messing up her life. Even in the tiny picture Jimmy had posted, Malena could see her eyes are green sapphires against skin the color of golden pancakes. Malena's skin makes Plaster of Paris look like a Caribbean tan, and her own eyes are the brown of mass-produced loafers. The fry girls are getting prettier, or maybe Malena's getting uglier. Perhaps she was always ugly and merely under a delusion of attractiveness created by the hormone happy boys of her high school who knew she put out.

On his online homage to himself, Jimmy also posted a picture of a crowd of runners at Red Rock. He was in the front row holding up a racing bib with the number 2024 and standing next to a shorter black man with legs like boulders piled atop each other. Jimmy's legs were sticks like the fries he serves. Running has not developed his calves or quads or any other muscle that might suggest to others he exercises voluntarily.

The number on the bib pulls a book off the shelf of Malena's memory labeled: *Things to forget*. In addition to giving Jimmy an identity among the amateur athletes he's

befriended, the number also signifies the year in which Malena is fated to meet her soul mate, according to the psychic her mother hired for Malena's sixteenth birthday.

"I'll be barren by 2024," Malena had said to the psychic. She was a woman with the kind of hairdo that gives the ozone layer the bird.

"Motherhood doesn't suit you," Malena's mother said. "You're too much like me." Since it was Malena's birthday, she'd proceeded to prepare lunch from substances that for once didn't originate in a can.

"I'm not at all like you," Malena said.

The psychic pulled another card from her stack. "You shouldn't have children," the psychic said.

"Don't be selfish like I was," her mother said. "You and I, we don't have the strength to love others."

"So you don't love me?" Malena said.

"That's not what I said."

"Fuck you both," Malena said. She packed up a few CDs, her favorite jeans and two pairs of clean smelling panties she'd lifted from Victoria's Secret. The next three nights she spent curled up like a fetus with her hatchback as the womb. She didn't tell Jimmy. She always wondered if when he had leaned in to nibble her neck at school, he'd noticed she hadn't showered.

She spies Jimmy at the gray counter taking an order from two boys in sweatshirts despite temperatures to rival Mercury. The aquarium she and Jimmy used to toss fries into is entertaining a toddler in a high chair. The little boy points at the fish while his mother types into her phone, his mouth open wide waiting for anyone to toss something in. If Malena had stayed in town, she might still be with Jimmy. She might have been the wife of a McDonald's manager, sitting in their condo every afternoon dreaming up new recipes to go along with all the free fries. That's the future she ran away from. Now with the polishing of time's wisdom and the rose coloring of all things past, that future looks like a pretty good gem.

When the sweatshirt boys leave, Jimmy steps outside, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. He doesn't light it, just sucks on the end while limping around in a circle with his hands in his pockets. He didn't use to limp. He did use to smoke.

She glances in the rearview. This morning's lipstick is gone, but she's sure Jimmy can see her through the hatchback's museum-size windows and the last thing she wants is for Jimmy to watch her getting ready for him. She gets out of her car.

"Fries are hot," he says. He sucks on his unlit cigarette. He doesn't seem to recognize her. She's glad he doesn't, and she's annoyed he doesn't. Why hasn't he Googled her?

"Aren't they always? Isn't that the idea?" she says.

He smiles. "They're freshly hot. Sometimes they're just heat lamp hot."

“Oh.” She sticks her hands in her pockets.

“You look familiar. I know you,” he says.

“No you don’t.” On some level that statement is true. He knew the girl who dyed her long hair the color of screeching tires. Now her locks are short and more chunk wagon. It’s probably better if he thinks she’s someone else. She doesn’t want to contaminate his conjectures about how she turned out with the truth about how she turned out.

“You look like a girl I used to know,” he says.

“Someone special?” She stiffens, waits for worms to burst from cans.

“Hard to say. We were young.” He stares at her like he can see her underwear. He must know who she is. That was a hurtful thing to say.

“I’m looking for a job,” she says still trying to hide her identity in case he’s on the fence. It’s the first thing that blurts from her lips. It’s the first thing that blurted from her lips when they first met. She doesn’t remember this until the words are already banging on his eardrums.

“You running from something?” He sucks on the unlit cigarette again.

“I’m not running. Do I look like I’m running?” She thinks of the cop and how she is, technically, on the run.

“Last battered woman I hired her husband came after me with a knife.” He rolls up his sleeve and points at a jagged scar by his elbow she knows is from when they drank half a bottle of Jaeger and tried to pretend they were a knife throwing, brother and sister circus act from the Appalachian Mountains. She’d worn a pink corset she’d found in her mother’s “never open this” drawer and he’d used black sharpie to make his teeth look like they were missing.

“You fought him off,” she says.

“Barely,” he says.

She lets a gleam escape from her eyes.

“I know you,” he says.

“I have one of those faces everybody thinks they know.” She feels badly lying to him after all the bodily fluids they’ve shared, but not lying would lead to more lies about the current state of her crappy life. She was hoping to discover he was a loser, catch him making out with the fry girl, learn that those Internet pictures had been altered and he really weighs 300 pounds. Instead he has a job, a life and no appearance of a gut despite his devotion to death by Big Macs. She, however, has aged so ungracefully he barely recognizes her haggard face, and there’s little about her life she could file under bragging rights. Her only career high was a position as an assistant at a hot PR firm in LA. It had been tailor-made for her abilities to polish up dirty truths until they shone like vestal virgins in the sun. Unfortunately, the job only lasted four months; it fell victim to the

economy's black hole. But she likes to focus on this one high moment in her past when all was good and moving forward. She rarely gets to taste the sweetness of life, like somebody somewhere decided she was a diabetic.

"You've got some gray smudge on your face," Jimmy says. "May I?" He doesn't wait for her to answer, just rubs her cheek with his thumb, then licks his thumb and rubs again. She feels compelled by human decency to tell him the smudge is the former Mr. Norton, but she's too overcome by nausea.

"Are you sure I don't know you?" he says.

She nods, tries to swallow the substance that lurched up into her throat. She doesn't know how to react to Jimmy flirting with her while she's pretending to be someone else and he might be going along with that pretending like it's a normal way to interact with people.

"I'm Sandy," she says. "Know any Sandys?"

Jimmy nods to somebody in a monkey suit across the abandoned lot. The monkey person nods back.

"Check out that dude," Jimmy says.

"That sucks," they say together. She wants to punch his arm and say he owes her a beer, but that may be just the thing that breaks the lovely charade they have going. She's not ready to come clean, or try to win Jimmy back—which every part of her aches to do. When she left him standing at the Bellagio Fountains twelve years ago, she'd told

him he was keeping her down. He'd said: "But I love when you go down." She said: "Case in point." Turns out Jimmy might have been just the kite to hang onto and fly up, up and away with.

"Sandy, huh," Jimmy says. "Stop by tomorrow. I'll scrounge up an application." He drops the unlit cigarette and stomps it into some crab grass rising through the garden rocks flanking the sidewalk. Malena slips into her car. Through the window she watches Jimmy show the fry girl how to properly dump out the fries. His hand caresses the small of her back. If Malena comes back tomorrow maybe she can be the fry girl again. Maybe she can dig underneath her scars and find her old self curled up in the fetal position.

She remembers her phone, retrieves the pieces. The missed call is from Stephanie. Her message says the lawyer found an addendum to Mr. Norton's will. The ashes must be dumped at sunset, preferably during the playing of an Elton John song. Mr. Norton thought sunset would be poetic. The hooker used to call him my Elton - John. Malena phones Stephanie.

"That's going to cost extra," Malena says. Stephanie is silent. Malena doesn't understand why nobody gets her jokes. Only Jimmy's brain ever seemed tuned to her wavelength.

"Just kidding," Malena says. "So do I wait for Elton John or sunset?"

"Both," Stephanie says.

“Awesome.” Malena looks at Ollie lying on the passenger seat, claws scratching the sky, tail dangling off the edge. She could ask. She should probably not ask, but the shouldn’ts in her life are already piled up higher than the Red Rock Mountains out her window.

“Incidentally, is there anything inside the armadillo?” Malena says.

“What happened?” Stephanie says.

“Just curious.”

“Don’t anger the hooker.”

“Ollie is as good as new.”

“I won’t inherit anything. You won’t get paid.”

“Don’t worry. Hooker will be happy.” Malena pushes Ollie’s tail back onto the seat. “As happy as a hooker can be.” She hangs up the phone, tosses it next to Ollie. Tomorrow evening she’ll have to turn up at Mr. Norton’s funeral dressed like a grieving heiress hauling an urn full of someone’s or something’s remains, preferably someone’s but most likely—unless a homeless person spontaneously combusts at her feet—something’s. She’ll have to have a repaired Ollie tucked under her arm. Decisions will have to be made regarding Jimmy and her alter ego Sandy. She turns onto Durango, gets back on the road, follows the dividing lines like yellow bricks leading to the condo where she left her childhood. To get through the next 24 hours, she’s going to need wit, heart and courage.

11.

Big David flung open the door to his college dorm and deepened the hole the knob had already made in the wall. For once, Neil sat at his own desk, blonde locks tied with a pink rubber band he must have borrowed from the girl in the next dorm room whose thong always peeked out of her pants when she bent over. She bent over a lot. Neil's fingers were wrapped in flower Band-aids he must have also charmed from their neighbor. It looked like she'd written *I heart you* on them in black sharpie. This could only mean Neil hadn't slept with her yet.

Above Neil a poster of a giant yellow smiley face threatened to detach from the wall and bury Neil under its pleasantness. The poster had been perfectly fine when Big David left the room earlier, as had been his computer. Pieces of his PC were scattered across Neil's bed and across Neil's desk. A motherboard was neatly laid out along the windowsill. The window was open begging for it to fall and splinter. Their shared room: a tornado of used textbooks, tortilla chip crumbs and snuck-in beer cans was on the fourth floor of UNLV's shittiest housing complex. Shittier, they were juniors still living on campus unable to afford the deposit, rent and car even shitty off campus housing required.

Big David sat down on the edge of his unmade bed still reeling from a seminar on International Communications in a Post Modern, Post Colonial World. He plopped his backpack on the floor, grabbed the mug he'd borrowed from the cafeteria two months ago and slurped down the morning's unfinished coffee not expecting it to taste quite so

much like a post modern, post colonial toilet. Neil put on a pair of aviator sunglasses and fired up a soldering iron. Oh the many dorm rules they'd lobbed out that open window.

"I've got a paper due tomorrow. The draft was on that thing," Big David said.

Neil tossed him a floppy disk. "My brains and your hop-to-it attitude are going to get us far someday," Neil said.

"Your brains got you flunked out of MIT," Big David said.

"No, my non hop-to-it attitude did." Neil turned around to face Big David. "I feel the need, the need for speed." He flicked his aviator sunglasses.

"What are you doing, exactly, with my computer?" It wasn't the first of Big David's stuff Neil had dismantled. He usually put things back together. They usually still worked.

"I'm making it super," Neil said.

"Super destroyed?"

"Super able to hack other computers."

"You should use your powers for good. Like your paper."

"How about you write it and someday I promise to save your ass." Neil spun around in his chair and fired the remote at the twenty-inch TV with built-in VCR that had been an MIT acceptance present from his dad. Top Gun came on.

“That’ll be the day,” Big David said. He tossed the floppy disk into his backpack and the remaining coffee out the window. A girl below squealed. He leaned out and said sorry trying not to laugh at her coffeed hair.

“That will be the day, my friend,” Neil said. “We will have our day.”

“If you say so,” Big David said.

On the TV screen, Maverick and Goose buzzed the control tower. Maverick yelled: “Yee ha.”

The McDonald’s guy who’s been dangling cigarettes from his lips and exchanging glances with Big David is scurrying towards him, meandering around tumbleweeds and abandoned signs for “The Pinnacle: High Rise Living Is A High.” He’s carrying a white paper bag and large drink that Big David prays to the Big Guy is for him. It’s been a long morning of waving his smoothie sign to drivers who couldn’t care less. So far only one pony-tailed girl in a glittery blue compact was enticed enough by his monkey ass shaking to swing a right turn and buy fresh banana smoothies with wheat germ or some other life-extending, miracle supplement. Big David can’t imagine this woman purchased enough overpriced drinks to justify Big David’s pitiful salary.

When the McDonald’s guy gets within earshot, Big David says hello, but through the mask it comes out like ooh. He rips off the Velcro monkey face. A kid in a passing car shrieks. Big David can only hope the “what up” glances he gave this guy were read

correctly, and not that the McDonald's dude wants to engage him—an overweight, 38-year-old man—in furry sex.

The McDonald's guy holds out the bag. "Got some McMuffins been sitting under the heat lamp for a few hours. Can't sell them past ten am," he says. "And a coke." He's a tallish, skinnyish man whose blue oxford is too big in the shoulders. He's the perfect candidate to commit a heinous crime because there's nothing distinctive about him, but Big David is willing to excuse all his preconceptions about strangers with gifts. He is spellbound by the sweat beading down the paper cup. It makes him think of his own sweat rushing down his ass crack. He goes for the coke and takes a sip.

"There's rum in this," Big David says.

"I keep a flask hidden under the Happy Meal toys. The lunch rush is stressful." The guy pulls out two more cigarettes and sticks them between his lips. He doesn't light them. "People don't understand fast food takes time."

Big David nods. The guy holds out his hand and says his name is Jimmy. Big David holds up what should be a monkey hand, but is actually shaped like a cat's paw.

"Your job sucks worse than mine," Jimmy says.

A Ford Focus with a cracked headlight pulls up along side the road. Big David recognizes the asshole driving it despite the fake mustache.

"I'd thought you'd be alone," Neil says. He unfolds his six-foot frame from the car, brushes dirt from the knees of his jeans.

“On a stakeout in 1985?” Big David says. He points to the poor ferret that must have died and been reincarnated as hair on Neil’s upper lip. The chocolate brown ‘stache doesn’t even match Neil’s curly blonde, rock star wannabe hair. One day, Big David plans to snip those locks while Rapunzel sleeps off a bender and give them to a woman with cancer. Neil is getting too old for such a ridiculous mane, and Big David is getting too old to hang out with someone who still tosses his hair and winks at girls like he’s got a six string in his hand and a tour bus parked out back.

Neil grins and rips off the mustache. “Nooner,” he says. He introduces himself to Jimmy, then caresses the fake fur across Big David’s chest, tweaking the monkey nipple. Big David shoves his hand away.

“I just want to hear the plan. I’m not necessarily engaging in the plan,” Big David says.

“Are you trustworthy?” Neil looks at Jimmy.

“I just met him. He gave me rum,” Big David says.

“You’re a good man,” Neil says. He tosses Jimmy his car keys. “You mind hanging out in my car for a sec?” Jimmy catches the keys. He shrugs his shoulders and lets himself into Neil’s car. He takes the white bag with him, unwraps a Sausage McMuffin.

“I calibrated the box to rig MegaBucks slot machines. I’m thinking we hit the one at Binion’s Casino. They have minimal security,” Neil says.

“They have maximum security,” Big David says.

“But you’ve got a disguise. You can distract.”

“No one’s letting a guy dressed like a monkey into a casino.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Jimmy says from inside the car. “Not much soundproofing in this baby.”

“Fuck. Fine. Get out.” Neil says. “Say anything to anyone and I’ll kill you.”

Jimmy gets out of the car. He looks at Big David.

“He’s never killed anything,” Big David says.

“Don’t worry. I’m cool,” Jimmy says. “Maybe you need a gun. I was thinking of getting one. A McDonald’s manager was shot last year by some mom because he ran out of chicken mcnugget Happy Meals.”

“No one needs a gun,” Big David says. He turns to Neil. “We don’t know this guy.” He turns to Jimmy. “No offense.”

“No problem. I get that all the time,” Jimmy says.

“And isn’t Binion’s owned by the mob?” Big David says.

“Yeah, but the Italian one,” Neil says. “They’re a bunch of pussies now. Eating too many cannolis and shit. It’s the Russians and Koreans you’ve gotta watch out for.”

“And the Samoans,” Jimmy says.

“This is serious stuff, Neil,” Big David says. He closes his eyes. Neil’s box was their way out, but it was always a pipe dream, a joke between them, something they dreamed up back in college to keep them going, something to laugh about when they were old men scratching their balls without shame. It was never meant to be reality. Neil was never actually supposed to succeed at inventing it. “I’ve got a lot at stake here,” Big David says.

“I’m trying to help you,” Neil says. “Let me wear that monkey thing for a while. You look awful.”

“You do look deathlike, man,” Jimmy says.

Big David’s cell phone rings and he’s happy to answer it, relieved at not being forced to make a decision about committing a felony with Neil and one-man peanut gallery Jimmy, until he realizes the phone screen says Oak Tree Elementary. It’s Little David’s principal. Little David fell off the monkey bars. The principal thinks he needs stitches.

“It’s David. He cut his head.” Big David says to Neil. “Call my job.” He hurdles an orange cone and sprints to his car.

“Hope the little dude’s okay,” Neil says. “And jackpot’s over fourteen million. You can buy Little David a whole new head.”

“Did you Google that, too?” Big David yells over his shoulder. He should have never given Neil hope. He should have never let himself hope Neil might save his ass.

Big David swerves into the traffic on Durango. He lays on the horn. No one moves out of his way. The other drivers just look at him like he's an asshole, because these days everyone's presumed an asshole until proven innocent. He considers getting out of the car and running, but he is fat and nearing forty and harboring a heart that can't take any added pressure. He is not a good dad. A good dad stays in shape so he's ready when it's time to be superman, when it's time to race faster than a speeding bullet.

Big David pounds the gas. Fortunately the school is only three blocks away. He gets to Oak Tree in less than five minutes. Little David is in the principal's office with more blood on his shirt than could possibly ever have been flowing through his veins. The principal is pressing an Oak Hill Spirit t-shirt against David's head. His son's head looks so small. When she pulls the shirt away, the gash is the Grand Canyon. Big David feels like a trampled sneaker at the bottom of the gorge.

"Are you okay, Mr. Peloski?" the principal says. He senses her hand on his shoulder. At first touch he thinks it's his wife, the one who cleaned wounds and bandaged knees and kissed tears as they dropped from lashes. He tries to say hello, but the lump in his throat makes it come out like ooh.

"You should take him to the ER," the principal says.

"Ooh ooh Ah Ah," Little David says. "I was being a monkey. Like you." The "like you" pounds Big David in the gut. He wants to tell his son he doesn't have to be like him. He should grow up to be something better, someone better. Find a wife who'll let him die first.

“I can accompany you, if you like,” the principal says. Her hand is still on his shoulder. Through the fur he can’t tell if it’s warm or cold, but she is petite with eyes like a baby deer and wearing perfume reminiscent of a field of lilacs in which he would love to lie and stare at puffy clouds. He thinks it might be nice to have her there at the hospital, a pretend wife for him and a pretend mom for Little David. He imagines the sick old men and middle-aged nurses and young moms with feverish children all smiling at their happy threesome of a family, grimacing slightly at Little David’s gaping bloody wound and making jokes about boys and their antics. They’d call Little David “tough guy” rather than “poor kid”. “Poor kid” has become Little David’s shadow. People think he doesn’t hear them whisper about his dead mother, but Little David hears. Little David hears paint being spread on a plastic, man-sized diaper in the middle of the night.

The principal looks at his monkey costume. “Were you at a party?” she says.

He should have taken the costume off in the car.

“My dad’s a monkey. That’s his job,” Little David says.

“Oh,” the principal says. “I think I saw you this morning.” She lifts the shirt from Little David’s head. The bleeding has slowed, but the chasm across Little David’s forehead might just reach down to his skull. “He definitely needs stitches. Do you have insurance?” she says.

Big David's not sure how to answer the insurance question. He's late on the premium. This could mean it's been cancelled or this could mean his benefits are trapped in limbo until Big David gets through economic purgatory.

"My dad can take me to the hospital, Ms. Steward," Little David says. He takes the t-shirt from her and holds it against his head. Big David fumbles the keys in his paw. The principal lifts her hand from his shoulder.

"Thank you," Big David says. He follows Little David to the car. His monkey tail drags behind him across the linoleum floor.

12.

About a month ago Chris awoke bathed in white light. He might have believed he had died, except the buttered toast he'd stuffed in his mouth that morning while his wife was starting the car shot up his esophagus with the force of a firecracker and burst orange glop onto clean hospital sheets. He assumed people didn't puke in heaven. He assumed hell would be more fiery. The vomiting brought momentary relief that he was still alive, but it also meant there was no way to hide his digression now. With its white walls and white bedding and white fluorescent lights beaming down from energy-saving bulbs, the hospital room he was in appeared to have been specifically designed to highlight the projection of bodily fluids. Elsa and a nurse with one inch nails had been standing next to his bed in total perfect view of his vomiting discussing some new nail polish that cost \$25 a tiny bottle. No way to blame the orange glop on the snoring patient behind the curtain on his left.

"You weren't supposed to eat, sweetie," Elsa said.

"You weren't supposed to eat," the nurse said. In her tone danced the word fuck.

Despite the bold instructions not to eat or drink prior to his colon surgery, instructions delivered both verbally and through the multiple papers he'd signed, Chris had thought one measly slice of toast could not possibly make him sick. In college, and he recognized that his free-swinging university days were thirty years in the past, he'd swallowed all sorts of things live and not live--and chased them with tequila.

“Is the cancer gone?” Chris said. His hospital stay had one purpose: to excise a portion of his colon so the rest of him might go on living—a good enough deal. Yet, the promptness with which the doctor had scheduled Chris’s surgery when the offending cells were first found had given Chris an all-too-new and thoroughly shocking sense of impending death. So far, though he’d only been awake a few moments, the surgery had done little to diminish his panic. He stifled another bottle rocket working its way up his throat.

“The doctor will be in momentarily,” the nurse said. She was waiting next to his bed with a bedpan in her hand.

“That sounds bad,” Chris said. The bottle rocket overcame Chris’s efforts. He lurched into the bedpan. Vomit splashed onto the nurse’s blue scrubs. She sneered at him.

“The doctor gave me a thumb’s up,” Elsa said. “You’re going to be fine.”

“I’ll be cancer free,” Chris said. “Fine is still up for debate.” He wiped his face with the towel the nurse thrust in his face. “I’m done.” The nurse yanked the sheets off the dirty bed and rolled them into a ball. She darted through the door. Chris and his hospital gown were left exposed. He felt it necessary to cup his hands over his crotch.

“It’s not like you to ignore rules,” Elsa said. She handed him a glass of water. Tiny bubbles in the water suggested she’d poured it a while ago. He wondered how long she’d waited for him to rouse from his anesthesia coma. Did she wait out of love or because she, too, had signed papers.

“Been following rules all my life. Hasn’t really gotten me anywhere,” Chris said.

“You should rest. You’ve been through a lot.”

“Have I?” It didn’t seem like he had survived anything major, let alone prevailed over anything major, let alone accomplished anything major. All he had done was let a doctor from Harvard cut out part of his colon so he wouldn’t keel over and die before what others referred to as his time. Maybe it was his time. For what purpose did he need to go on living? So he could stamp papers and take out the garbage?

“I leave no legacy,” he said.

“What’s this about?” She sat on the edge of the bed. Sometimes her blue eyes were Caribbean waters. Sometimes they were Arctic storms. He wasn’t sure at this moment if they were headed south or north.

“It’s about everything,” he said.

She blinked. “It’s about me.” She put her hand on his. They were both now cupping his crotch. He hoped no one walked by.

“No, it’s about everything.”

“You’re fine. Everything’s fine. We have a fine life.”

“That’s what I’ve always wanted. A fine life.” He pulled his hands away from hers. She curled up her fingers and tucked in her arms. He reached for the water, took a

sip. The doctor poked his head in the door and held up his thumb. Chris was fine. The water was fine. His life, it was all just fine.

Chris is thinking about his supposedly fine life when he leaves the office after an afternoon of playing Robin Hood to folks awaiting claim approvals. He'd been reckless with his stamp, yelling out yes and yes and yes in his mind so Cheryl wouldn't hear, but she knew what he was doing. He approved the alcoholic's liver transplant, okayed a pricey experimental AIDS drug, and told a family their insurance would indeed cover a new-age therapist for their autistic son. Cheryl kept shaking her head and Windexing her desk. He breathed in her ammonia knowing it meant he was a rebel, and a rebel's kind of life was looking mighty fine.

He starts the car not knowing where to go. The thought of heading home where Elsa and their tea cup poodle and their miniscule ancient TV that's likely to explode at the mere mention of high definition is enough to suck out all his helium. He's not a gambler and, since Mr. Bleek is probably hearing about Chris's day right now and planning to roast him on a spit, he can't afford to donate the last of his salary to a casino's profit margin. The only thing that's brought him any happiness in the last few weeks is the fry girl. Maybe, being that he's already feeling high and mighty, he should fly that happiness back to her.

He swings into the McDonald's parking lot. The old tires on the sedan screech. He can only hope the fry girl's shift hasn't ended, that she's glistening with a slight hint of body odor. She is to be his reward for his good deeds of the day.

He emerges from his stifling car sweaty not dewy, smelly not aromatic. Yet the planets have aligned in support of a middle-aged man of no consequence to the universe. When he rushes through the glass door nearly tripping over a toddler chewing on a plastic toy, he sees the fry girl is still making fries, and she is indeed glistening from the glow of the heat lamp. Chris detects a lovely hint of body odor, though the smell could be coming from the overweight cashier with stained armpits.

"Hello," he says.

She's still humming along to a tune in her head and doesn't hear him and his voice sounding like an old door hinge.

"Miss?"

She turns around, drops some fries on the rubber floor. He's not sure what else to say. This was a bad plan because he had no plan. He waits a minute. She still doesn't notice him.

"Are the fries hot?" he says. Idiocy always seems to be his default setting.

"You want something hot?" She sticks out her pierced tongue. Chris looks around, not sure if he heard her or his own imagination. "Jimmy, I'm taking a break," she

says. She disappears then emerges again through the employee door. “I figured you’d be back. Should we go somewhere?”

He knows the answer to this question will affect the rest of his life. The moment will stay with him, and he’ll spend ridiculous amounts of his future life contemplating different answers with different scenarios because no matter what he says or does at this moment, he will have regrets.

“How about my car?” he says.

“That’s a start,” she says.

He leads her to the sedan. He’s tingling with wrongness, convincing himself this decision is dipped in rightness. They climb into the backseat. She flashes him like he’s rocking a microphone, except they’re rocking the burgundy backseat of his sedan. Yet he feels like a rock star, and he likes the feeling.

She flashes him again. Underneath her McDonald’s shirt with its hard working buttons, she’s wearing a purple tank top with no bra. Chris had expected something black that would be difficult to remove, something like what Elsa wears because she thinks bras are dirty little secrets one shares. When he asks the fry girl about her lack of undergarments, she explains she finds bras constructive. He figures she means constrictive. He also figures a girl like her has no use for secrets, and this does not bode well for her future. Or his.

“You want more?” she says. He nods, admitting his obsession with her.

“How much more you wanna see?” she says.

“How much more will you show?” he says. She flips up both her tops. His hands reach for her breasts. She pulls the shirts down. He’s barely able to pinch a nipple.

She turns away from him to rummage through her black leather bag, large enough to hide a baby, or Chris’s head after his wife finds them and severs it. He scans for passersby out the back window. A woman in a leopard tank stares at them. She looks like the kind of woman who would carry mace. Though he’s pretty certain she can’t see inside the car, he smiles and waves to assure her he’s not going to slit the fry girl’s throat and sew clothes from her skin. He wishes the fry girl would hurry and find whatever she apparently seems to need at this moment. Condom? Mace? He has no idea what the fry girl is thinking, but he’s due home to his Elsa’s chicken piccata in less than an hour. He can’t upset his wife by being late. Everybody loves Elsa with her graceful aging like she’s got the fountain of youth as a main ingredient in her eye cream. She also has more brains and charm than he does, both of which she once lent to men who paid her for love advice. She taught them how to dress, how to ask a woman on a date, how not to screw up the date. Eventually she found the matchmaking/date consulting business was sucking the helium out of her. She retired ten years ago, now sells Avon to wrinkled ladies living in the lovely senior community of Sun City Anthem.

“There’s so much crap in here,” the fry girl says still excavating her purse. She tosses out a keychain with a Hello Kitty head. He needs to adjust himself, but fears the vinyl seat will squeak when he moves and alert the fry girl that he has a hard on. He

freezes in place, watches her pull out crimson lip gloss. She smooths it on her lips with a little wand. Due to the staining powers of the color red, some item of his clothing is sure to become exhibit A in his divorce case.

She puts the lip gloss back, pulls out a little round plastic case and pops a tiny blue pill.

“Sometimes I forget. Oops,” she says. “My mom makes me take them.”

Oops wouldn't even begin to cover it.

“This is probably not a good idea,” he says. He leans away from her, trying to create as large a moat as possible in a small backseat.

“Yeah, we should go somewhere. It's kind of cramped back here. But I'm flexible.”

Chris wants to explain he meant they, the two of them together, is not a good idea, but he's hung up on her unintentional double entendre. How flexible is she?

“No can do today,” he says. “My wife's making chicken piccata.”

“Okay,” she says. She whips her hair around. The whipping is wonderful. She takes off her uniform shirt and swings it over the front seat. The shirt catches on the rearview mirror.

“2 points,” she says. She sits with shoulders back. A strand of hair sticks to her lip gloss. He spots a bit of stubble under her arms, a tiny scar underneath her thick bangs, the smudged edges of her mascara. Her loveliness is a lone star in his night.

“Why are you here with me?” Chris says. Her loveliness is too lovely. She is young and he is old with a crappy car. He wonders if she wants him to pay her. Perhaps hooking is an additional source of income and she has a sick mom and three sick sisters and they can’t afford the prescriptions that would cure them all with one handy dandy pill. Or maybe she’s looking for a daddy figure because hers committed suicide in some fantastic way, like hanging himself from her canopy bed. Or maybe Chris is just a pathetic slob and she needs a funny story she can tell her girlfriends.

“Older men know how to please a woman,” she says.

He’s sure she read this in a magazine, but it’s still too much pressure. He doesn’t know how to please anyone. He sucks at masturbation. It can’t be true either. A girl her age isn’t so worldly as to know the difference between an amateur and Casanova. He hopes.

“Don’t believe everything you read in magazines,” Chris says.

“I don’t believe anything,” she says.

“Then why are you here?”

“You like me, right?”

He does like her, but can't figure out what part of him isn't making her vomit. When he wore a rogue charm like musky cologne, he attracted the kinds of girls who flittered about swinging their cheerleader skirts and pearl necklaces. And even though his nose is a little too thin and his hand size suggests Christina rather than Christopher, he held his own when he was younger. He more than held his own. Twelve years ago he seduced his once beautiful wife with her strawberry blonde hair like sunrise signaling the dawn of his life. He shouldn't say once. Her figure still exudes a va va vooomness. Her crow's feet pleasantly highlight the olive shape of her brown eyes. It's his looks and his charm that have withered, weeds of too much back hair and too much cynicism sprouting in their places. He twists the gold band on his finger. Husbands shouldn't stop being attracted to their wives. He shouldn't be panting after this fry girl.

“Why are you here?” he says.

“We can talk, but I thought you had to be home or something.” The fry girl moves in closer. Her lips glisten like morning dew. The application of lip gloss is secret code for kiss me. This much he recalls through the beer haze hanging over his bachelor days. He decides why the fry girl entered his world through the back door of his car is not so important. Neither is the leopard tank woman who still stares. He puckers. She rushes her tongue between the gap of his lips. It tastes salty and feels cold. She must have eaten fries dipped in milk shake.

She slides her arms underneath his Polo shirt, lets her fingers flow through the grooves created by the folds of his skin. He's sure she's never felt that much body hair on a human.

He fumbles her breasts. Her tongue lunges down his throat for his stomach. He gags. Her tongue lacks the technical precision with which his wife's tickles and teases. He thinks this lacking is wonderful.

"You sure you don't want to go somewhere?" she says.

He wants to tell her he does, that at least once a day he dreams of places with beaches and Tiki huts and drinks with little pink umbrellas where he can fall asleep in the sand and not care if he wakes up a ripe tomato because there's an island goddess waiting to lather him with coconut milk.

"My wife made chicken piccata," he says. He's never made chicken piccata, and he's sure Elsa never once ended up in the backseat of a car with a man half her age and twice Chris's musculature. He doesn't deserve her, especially since a part of him wants to call her up anonymously and ask for tips on seducing a young woman who's a white bikini away from being a Bond girl. "I have to be home for that."

"Must be damn good chicken," she says. She takes off her tank top. Pink capped mountains bounce. "I don't mind that everyone can see. But I thought you might." She picks up his hand and sucks on his wedding ring finger. He grabs her breast, gives it a squeeze.

“Windows are tinted. We can see out. They can’t really see in.”

“Kinky.” She nibbles on the end of his finger. “I’m hungry.” She walks her fingers down his chest. He doesn’t know if she wants some food or if she’s being coy so he lunges on top of her. They dry hump. The vinyl seat squeaks. The car bounces. It’s been at least 30 years since he’s dry humped anything. He hopes the parking brake holds, suspects he’ll have to replace the shocks.

She screams in a good way for sex, in a bad way for sex in public.

“They can’t see us, but they can hear us,” he says.

“Can’t help it. You’re such a stud.”

He knows now she will go home and call her friends. They will laugh as she describes the forest of hair growing across his back and belly.

“You’re a bad girl,” he says. He thrusts against her.

“Really? What gave it away?” She sticks out her pierced tongue.

A rap on the window behind his head jolts his eyes open. He pushes off of her, throws her tank top at her breasts. She has enough sense to put it on. He tries to see who has knocked. His eyes are level with a belt buckle. It’s not his wife or the leopard tank woman. Could be the fry girl’s father pointing a shotgun.

“You have a dad?” he says.

“Everybody does,” she says.

He presses the open button, holds his breath while the window lowers. The whirring sound is a drum roll for his impending doom. He looks over at the fry girl. Her tank top is mostly on, mostly covering her nipples, which are also standing at attention.

The window is open. He can tell now the knocker is none other than the McDonald's manager standing with a soft drink in his hand and unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. Chris is not sure whether the situation is headed north or south.

"Can I help you?" Chris says.

"Dude, she's sixteen. And there's a cop that comes around right about now for her daily Filet-o-Fish," the manager says.

"I didn't know. I didn't know." Chris says. He should have asked. He should have asked. He buttons his pants. He pats down his hair.

"Jimmy you're an asshole," the fry girl says.

"Us unsuspecting men need to stick together," the manager says. He opens the car door. "Break's over."

The fry girl scrambles out dragging her purse. She sticks her tongue out at the manager, the same tongue that just moments ago was lathering spit bubbles over Chris's tonsils.

"You realize, with the piercing, that's more of an invitation than an insult," the manager says.

She gives him the finger.

“If I were really an asshole, I would fire you,” the manager says.

“No you wouldn’t. You hate paperwork,” the fry girl says.

“You hurt me right here,” the manager says. He looks at the fry girl and points to his heart. She slams the employee door behind her.

“How’d you know?” Chris says.

“If the van’s rocking, don’t come knocking,” he says. “You were jiggling the bejesus out that thing. A woman in a leopard tank snitched. Sorry, had to knock.”

“You know, I’m not feeling so well,” Chris says. He exits the backseat of his car, pulls his polo down to hide the bulge in his pants. Much like the light from the Luxor, he imagines it’s visible from space.

“This will help,” the manager says. He hands Chris the soft drink. “That girl’s going to land someone a life sentence one day.”

“I’m not the first?”

“Not the last either.”

“You hurt me right here,” Chris says. He points to his heart. He doesn’t know why he expected to be any more special than every other schmuck trying to score with a girl half his age, except he’s not a schmuck. He really loves the fry girl. Or maybe he just loves who he is when her black hair brushes across his face and wipes away the last

twenty years of his life so he can look forward to what will be. He's tired of staring back at what has been.

Chris chugs the drink. It's more rum than Coke. He coughs, hands the cup back to the manager.

"Good call," Chris says. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand.

A cop in a tight black ponytail pulls into the drive-thru. She waves at the McDonald's manager.

"I'll get that sandwich for ya," the manager says to her. "Duty calls," he says to Chris. He scurries through the employee door. Chris slumps into the driver's seat of his car. The motion doesn't mix well with the rum. He leans forward, vomits onto the asphalt. The retching hurts his stitches. It's been almost six weeks since the surgery. He's supposed to be fine. He leans back into the seat, lets sweat bubble on his forehead. The fry girl left her uniform shirt dangling from the rearview. He grabs it, brings it to his nose. It smells of fries and Tiki huts and drinks with pink umbrellas.

13.

In the article about the boy who lost his legs, delivered to Elton's New Orleans apartment in the morning edition of the *Times-Picayune* on April 17, 1990, the newspaperman had quoted the surgeon: "The boy survived... is expected to lead a normal life with the use of prosthetics." Elton read the article as he sipped his café au lait, more milk than coffee with froth he'd whipped by hand, and wondered what the surgeon had said within those dots. A vast range of living existed between survived and normal. Thankfully, Elton's own loss of his fingers had left him close to the normal end of the spectrum. Over the years he'd suffered quick retreats of an offered hand, gaped-mouth children clinging to their mother's skirts, the polite decline of his caresses (women, in general, preferred not to be tickled by nubs) but he'd also been given seats on busses and free beignets with his coffee. The last forty-some years of his life, though he had no means of comparison, appeared to have been led in typical fashion. He imagined the boy with missing legs would henceforward live and breathe closer to the survived end of the spectrum. The boy would have to navigate his days with two metal sticks for legs, two rubber replicas for feet.

Elton found the scissors in the drawer by the refrigerator and carefully cut out the article. He opened his scrapbook for Highway 61, which he'd overseen the widening of during the eighties. He popped off the cap of a glue stick with his teeth and pasted the article onto a clean page next to a story of a three-car pile-up. That catastrophe had involved a grandma with her grandson, a father headed home with the flu, and twin

brothers out for a drive: none survived the mangling of metal. The newspaperman had called it a freak accident. Hail was blamed. Elton thought the reporter negligent. He didn't believe in freak accidents. All things come from something; all things have their purpose. After that collision, Elton went over and over his calculations: the recommendations he'd made regarding lane widths and concrete medians, his projections about speed limits. He didn't want all those deaths to have originated with the recommendations he'd made county officials. Several formulas later, he finally deduced it wasn't humanly possible to have accounted for all the devilish variables that had colluded to destroy life on that stormy Bayou morning.

The boy though, had been the only one injured when a semi flew down Swept Road and slid a right directly into the lane where his parents' SUV was comfortable running along at 70mph. The article said the family was headed to see the boy's grandmother out in Norco with a fresh peach pie that splattered across the highway and attracted a boar to the scene. The article blamed the semi's driver. Elton realized he could have prevented the tragedy by designing a merge lane to accommodate for human error. He should have built in contingencies for man's stupidity. If his scrapbooks had taught Elton anything, he'd collected all the accidents on every highway and bridge he'd ever studied, was that man was more stupid than smart. Elton should have anticipated the semi's driver was going to ignore the signs to slow down, not bother to check his rear view for merging traffic. The boy might still be whole. Elton would have had one less diminished life leaving smudges like newspaper ink across the life line on his palms.

He wrote the boy's name on a scrap of paper he folded into the pocket of his sports coat. He took the stairs down to Saint Ann Street walking slightly sideways and leading as always with his left foot. The morning's rain had awakened the smells of bourbon and whiskey slumbering in the sidewalk. The sky matched the gray of his suit. The yellow two-story across the street was the only sun. A man lay passed out on its wrought iron balcony like an Icarus who'd gotten too close while soaring.

Elton tapped his umbrella against the cracked sidewalk as he clipped his way towards Decatur, saluting the brick façade of the Place du Armes hotel with its international flags fluttering in the breeze. When he reached the Café du Monde, he raised his umbrella high. Artists were already across the way in Jackson Square seated at portable wooden easels, dabbing paint on canvases that might earn them a steak dinner. Tourists were already jostling for a table at the café and pleading for strong coffee. With his success at the firm, Elton could have afforded to live in a place where the underbelly of the world didn't hang out over its pants, but he liked the realness, the humility of the French Quarter, a place where pretense fell away and people's insides came out. No one stared at his hand here, only his soul. That felt more fair.

A cab pulled up alongside Elton. Elton opened the door and poked in his head.

"Children's hospital," he said. He tossed his umbrella in the cab and crumpled onto the seat. "Do you have this morning's *Times*?" He'd been too hasty with the article. He should have brought it with him. Details were already slipping his brain. He'd never

visited one of the victims of his calculations before. This accounted for his jittery memory.

The cab driver handed him the paper. "Ain't done yet," he said.

"I shall return it," Elton said.

The driver pushed his rattling cab towards the river smelling of gutted fish. Elton had climbed toward manhood not far from here with his Creole mother sewing feathers on Mardi Gras costumes and his musician father playing every girl who walked into his shop. Elton planned to die here, too, as alone in the end as he'd felt in the beginning. If not meaning, his life would at least have poetry.

He thumbed to the article about the boy in the cabbie's paper and reviewed the sequence of events. The driver of the truck had miscalculated the weight of his cargo. He'd slammed on the brakes too late to successfully merge onto the highway behind the SUV with the unlucky boy reading a detective story inside. It was a simple formula. Force equals mass times acceleration. One needn't be Newton to understand the brakes would fail to stop the heavy vehicle in time. Elton should have anticipated this, increased the variable for acceleration in his road calculations and recommended more safety precautions. Those truckers only care about getting to their destinations, speed limits be damned.

The cabbie swung into the hospital's entry, rolling past a bronze sculpture depicting boys and girls stomping through a marsh on stilts. A plaque read *Rise Above*. It

was a sweet metaphor. Elton would have liked to snuggle with it as an injured child, but this hospital didn't open until 1955, nine years too late to treat Elton's blown up hand. When he lost his fingers, he'd spent two nights in a ward with WWII veterans also recouping from blasted limbs. They screamed at night, sometimes in English, sometimes in French. In English they said: "Don't kill us. Don't kill us." He imagined they said the same in French. Some thirty years later, Elton was finally in a position to make a sizable donation to the hospital. Night screams shouldn't pierce children's ears. Somewhere within the labyrinth of the hospital's halls hung a plaque with Elton's name etched in script.

He folded the newspaper and handed it back to the cab driver, paid the meter adding a twenty percent tip. Daylight was making mirrors of the hospital's windows. He tried to peer inside, wondered which window hid the boy.

In the lobby, men rubbed their temples, mothers kept children from strewing neatly stacked magazines across plastic chairs. Elton tapped his umbrella up to the information desk and greeted the nurse with pinned back blonde hair. A soft pink line delineating her lips reminded him of Elsa. He was overdue for another rendez vous with her in their favorite Bellagio suite overlooking the dancing lake and the fake Eiffel Tower they pretended was really Paris by exchanging bonjours and pledges of love in broken French. He'd promised to take her there someday. She'd promised to go.

The pink line of the nurse's lips matched the nurse's nails. She was using them to separate files on her desk. Women who painted their nails made his toes wiggle.

“I’d like to visit the boy from the accident,” Elton said.

“Only family can see him,” the nurse said.

“I’m his grandfather,” he said. He saved fibbing for the rare occasions when lies would do more good than harm. This seemed like one. He needed to do right by that boy.

“Sign in.” She handed him a pen and pointed to the clipboard. Elton took the pen with his left hand.

“You have an awfully large responsibility with that boy,” she said. She gestured toward the missing fingers on his right.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Ma’am.”

“Experience tells me you look at tragedy two ways. The sunny way and the dark way. You’ve got to show him the light. You don’t want that boy down on himself. You ain’t down on yourself?”

Elton covered his disfigured hand. “If I’m down, it has nothing to do with my former injury. I lost those fingers for my country. I am proud.”

“You give that boy some of your pride then cause he’s going to be fighting his own war.” She examined Elton’s signature. “Norton. Mother’s or father’s side?”

“Mother’s naturally.”

“Room 422. Elevator is round the corner.” She pointed. Elton nodded, tapped his umbrella on the floor and followed the nurse’s finger.

The boy lay under clean white sheets tucked tight. There were no flowers to break up gray walls with purples and pinks. Balloons didn't sway in the breeze from the ceiling fan. Get Well cards didn't staircase atop the nightstand. The boy appeared unloved.

Elton grabbed the doorway's molding, locked his loosened legs. The bottom half of the tucked sheet laid flat as a valley at the base of a sheer canyon. His insides twisted. He wanted to lift the sheet, to see the actual stumps rather than imagine what might be lurking in place of knees. He fought the compulsion as if it were vomit in his throat.

He's not sure why he came. He never visited a victim before, though he felt particularly responsible for this one, a boy of only ten who would never be a whole man. Had the doctor measured for his new legs yet? Better to wake to fake legs than no legs at all.

He ran his fingerless hand along the metal rail on the side of the bed.

"I'm sorry, son," he said. His own legs grew weak again. He allowed himself to sit in the plastic chair by the bed, had to pull up his slacks at the knees to do so. One of his sock garters came loose. He bent over and tightened it, pushed it up underneath his pants.

"I'd give you my legs but I'm afraid you'd be disappointed," Elton said. The boy did not respond. Elton realized his sleep was chemically induced. This gave Elton courage.

He stood up again, reached for the covers. Just one peek would suffice. He looked at the boy, not a typical-looking boy like he'd read about in Mark Twain playing practical jokes and sailing rafts on the Mississippi. This boy wore the face of an old man facing a firing squad, his playfulness amputated along with his legs. Elton could do nothing about that either.

He lifted the covers quick like he was ten and touching his mama's hot gumbo pot. This was before he'd lost his fingers, when she used to threaten to cut them off if he stuck them in the soup. She never mentioned, after his accident, if she'd regretted those statements. He never reminded her of her promises.

The boy didn't wake at the yanking of his covers. Elton stared at two twiggy thighs with ends wrapped in white gauze. No blood, no pus, no smell to make eyes water and stomachs churn. He had expected at least some sort of scent. He remembered when his fingers had been blown to bits. He recalled the spraying blood, the jagged bone, the odor of burnt bacon he would still smell months later on rainy nights. The boy's trauma was all very pleasant to the senses.

"Doctor?" a man said.

Elton dropped the sheet and turned around. "You tending to my son, too?" The man's shirt was splotted with blood. Stubble burst from his neck and chin. He smelled of vinegar. "I'd like to," Elton said.

"When will he wake up?"

“Soon?” Elton needed to leave. The man blocked the door.

“I’m not sure I want him to.” The man put his hands in his pockets. “That’s awful for a father to say.” He pulled his hands out. “Isn’t it?”

“He’s alive,” Elton said.

“He has no legs.” The father looked away from his boy’s wrapped stumps.

“They have these robotic replicas. Very innovative. Even better than real legs.”

“They’re expensive. We’ll have to keep getting new legs every time he grows.”

“I suppose that would be necessary,” Elton said. This was not a dilemma his family had faced. Doctors can replace feet and hands and legs and arms. Nobody makes fake fingers.

“What kind of doctor are you?” The man was still standing in the doorway. He didn’t seem to want to come in. Elton couldn’t wait to get out.

“I may not be a doctor,” Elton said. He showed the man his hand in all its fingerless glory. “I’m more of an interested party.”

“You shouldn’t be in here.” The man stepped forward now. “They can’t just let people in here. This isn’t a freak show.”

“We are not freaks,” Elton said.

“Oh yeah?” The man stood within a breath of Elton.

“Don’t kill us. Don’t kill us,” Elton said.

“Get out of here before I call the cops.”

“I can help. Let’s be gentlemen.”

“You’re no doctor. You wanna save the day? Or do you want to gloat over someone else worse off than you?” The man grabbed Elton’s crippled hand and shoved it in his face.

“I can’t buy fingers,” Elton said.

The man pushed Elton through the doorway. “Get out you freak.”

Elton stumbled into the hall. He fell on his knees. The man stood in the doorway again, his shadow over Elton’s face. Elton lifted himself from the ground. His hands were fists. The whites of the man’s eyes were scribbled with red pen. His insides spilled from his pores smelling of vinegar. Elton realized the man was rotten with the fear of having a legless son he might not be able to love. Elton relaxed his hands. He knew that fear. His father had smelled of vinegar, too.

“I can buy legs,” Elton said. He thought of the bronze sculpture out front, of the boys and girl on stilts.

“Yeah? How many you going to buy?”

“All of them.” Elton held out his fingerless hand. For more than forty years, he’d gone against custom and used his left one to shake. “I’ll buy all of them. Let me give him

legs.” It was the least he could. It was the most honorable burden he might undertake to pay back the world for all his stupidities. All things have their purpose. Maybe this was Elton’s purpose. “Please let me buy them.” He ached to do this. Giving the boy legs might be only thing he could do to regain his wings.