Paralysis: A Collection of Short Stories

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Paralysis: A Collection of Short Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Sarah Elizabeth English

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

The stories in Paralysis each depict individuals trapped, in one way or another, by their situations. Whether they are confined by a long car ride or an unhappy home, by guilt or grief, by the relationships in their lives, by the choices they have made in the past, or by their own flaws, each character searches for a way out of their predicaments.

Beginning with the story for which the collection gets its name, “Paralysis” follows a college-aged girl through her grief and confusion after the attempted suicide of a mentally ill friend. In the next story, “Killing Nancy,” a little girl takes out the frustration and anger of living with a neglectful, pill-addicted mother on her mother’s beloved dog, Nancy. In “SleepEasy,” freedom and responsibility have suddenly fallen on the oppressed wife of a Christian minister after severe insomnia and resulting depression have put him out of commission. But after starting an experimental drug called SleepEasy, he is promising a speedy recovery that will challenge her new-found independence.

In the story “Perfectly Fine,” a man too confident in his moral superiority invites a homeless man into the car with his disapproving wife and thirteen-year-old daughter, and their short trip takes an unexpected turn. In “Survivor,” Gregory, an uptight and painfully awkward grad student, is looking to break out of his shell and spice up his boring life on a research trip to Arkansas with Susan, Gregory’s research partner and extroverted opposite. Finally, “Joe” considers the life of an Iraqi soldier returning for two weeks to his grandparents’ home in a small West Virginian town. Although he is able to pour out his life story to a stranger on the plane, Joe finds it impossible to connect with his own family or feel at home in the house he grew up in.

When I began writing, my main goal was a character-driven analysis of human relationships and the healthy and unhealthy psychological effects of those relationships. Over
the course of a year, with the guidance of Professor Pinson, I read authors whose works were concerned with psychology and especially abnormal psychology. Together we studied novels by Sylvia Plath and William Faulkner, as well as influential American short story writers, including Raymond Carver, John Cheever and Flannery O’Connor. We also read up-and-coming short story writers, such as Karen Bender and Lorrie Moore, to investigate the latest trends in short fiction.

We read John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction* to gain more insight on the craft of writing. With these writers as guides, I began to better understand where I wanted to take my stories. I also realized the importance of the process of revision, which not only helped me to focus my ideas, but also allowed me to add new layers which enriched my stories.

The feeling of being trapped, of being unable to change, is an extremely frustrating and psychologically trying situation to be in. These stories take a look at how individuals attempt to deal with that, and how some are able to find shreds of liberation even within their own entrapment.
Margaret’s phone vibrated the cup holder, jolting her from her fixation on the grey weeds that raced along the roadside. Call from Ben L. She had ignored his call yesterday and Tuesday. She held the phone in her hand a moment, deciding whether she should answer.

“Hey Ben!” she said too brightly, startling herself.

“Hey. Where have you been? I tried to call you.”

“Really? When? I think I need to get a new phone. It keeps dropping my calls.”

“Oh.”

This was the point where Margaret knew she should ask him how he was doing, if things were going ok, if he felt any better. Pause. “So what’s up?”

“Nothing, really. I just haven’t seen you around much lately. Do you want to get dinner tonight?”

“I’ve got a lot of work. I’m in the middle of this paper, and I can’t concentrate. I think I’ll just make Ramen or something.” This was the point where she knew she should offer to meet him for lunch tomorrow. “But I’m sure I’ll see you around soon.”

“Oh. All right.” Long pause.

“Ok. So do you need anything, or…”

“Nah. I guess I’ll just see you around.”

“Ok. Bye, Ben!”

She gently placed the phone back in the cup holder. The hum of the engine, the unidentifiable beat of a static radio pop tune, the stale air. She coughed, more to make a noise than to clear her lungs.
Margaret had been in college for three months. Her parents didn’t help her move in to school. They had to work. It took her three hours to haul, inch by inch, every overstuffed trash bag, box of books, and piece of furniture up the steep driveway and into her new house a few miles off campus. She didn’t know her two housemates—they’d found one another on Craigslist. Only one was home, and she sat in her room while Margaret moved in.

Margaret smiled a lot when she was nervous. She peeked in the door at her housemate. “Hi,” she said, smiling. “I’m Margaret.”

Her housemate nodded. “Allison,” she said.

Margaret smiled and nodded, then went to her room and shut the door. For the first few days, she sat in her room listening to Allison and her other housemate Becky talk and laugh together. Sometimes they would lower their voices and muffle their giggles, and she wondered if they were talking about her. When she went into the kitchen to join them, they would get quiet and polite, so she’d pretend like she was just getting a granola bar from the cabinet. One of the first nights in the house they had a few people over. Margaret wondered how they had already made friends. She didn’t come out of her room.

She met Ben at orientation. He was laughing violently with a girl in a pink sweater about something she had said, when he turned to Margaret and said out of the corner of his mouth, “This girl’s a dumbass.” He then turned back to pink sweater and continued laughing. Margaret was startled. She was sure she had misunderstood. The entire day, while she stood in the background, Ben had chatted easily with everyone in the group. She was the one person he hadn’t talked to, and she was sure he had mistaken her for someone else. But a few minutes later, as they were walking through campus as a group, Ben caught up to her.

“Ok, like really, who are these people?”
Margaret looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, where did these people come from? I really hope this group isn’t representative of the student body because Jesus H. Christ they’re boring!”

Margaret looked straight ahead of her. She was sure other people could hear him, and she didn’t want anyone thinking she felt the same way.

“You’re smart though, staying quiet. I feel like you’re standing back here observing, thinking the same things I’m thinking, with enough sense not to encourage them. I’m Ben, by the way.”

Margaret smiled. She actually thought some of the stuff pink sweater said was kind of funny. And the boy from the group with a Cardinals baseball cap on held the door for her earlier. She liked him too.

She was smiling like an idiot at Ben though. “Hi, I’m Margaret,” she said.

The last day of orientation, she found him on her front doorstep at nine in the morning.

“Hey jackass,” he said. He was holding a neon green foam noodle and a huge wicker pool bag, wearing hot pink mini swimming trunks, hairless chest and skinny thighs glaring bright white. “You wanna go swimming?”

“Ben, we’re going to be late to orientation.”

“Fuck orientation. Let’s go swimming! We can sneak into the neighborhood pool. Oh, and I got these for you,” he said, pulling out an expensive pair of bright purple Ray-Ban sunglasses from his pool bag and tossing them to her.

“Jesus, Ben!” she said, examining them. “How much did these cost?”
“Don’t worry about it. Your eye health is my priority. I noticed you squinting all during orientation, and with those pale blue eyes you’re at much higher risk for developing eye melanoma. You can never be too careful. You like them, don’t you?”

“Yeah, they’re awesome, but—”

“Plus I thought they’d coerce you into coming to the pool with me,” he said, flashing his cheesiest smile.”

She looked at the sunglasses. She had seen the same pair online for over $100. “Ben, that’s really nice, but we should really go to orientation.”

“Why? Today’s Alcohol Education Day. Do you need me to tell you what they’re going to say? Ok here’s a summary—unless you’re like most people in our orientation group, you’re probably going to have fun in college, and that’s probably, no definitely, going to involve alcohol, maybe even a little softcore drug use. Just try not to get caught or lose your underwear in the process. Got it? Now let’s go swimming.” She stared at him a moment, then smiled and darted inside to get her swimsuit.

In the heavy heat of late summer, before the stress of school was really underway, she and Ben would drive out to the shore and lay side by side on the hood of her car.

“So how’d you end up at this shitty school?” he asked her one afternoon.

“I couldn’t afford to go out of state. I don’t know, I don’t think it’s going to be that bad. It’s too big, maybe, but that means there are more resources. And more people to meet. More stuff to do on the weekends.”

“Always looking on the bright side, aren’t you?”

“Well what’s wrong with that?”

“The people here are all tools.”
“I’m sure with forty-thousand students…”

“I never wanted to end up at a place like this. But I nearly failed out of high school. I thought if I got a high enough score on the SAT they’d let me in, and I got a 1590, but I guess it didn’t matter. This is the only place that would take me.”

“Wait, you got a 1590 on your SAT? That’s incredible! Why in the world would you almost fail out of high school if you’re that smart?”

“You think I gave a shit about high school? You know all this doesn’t matter, right? I can laugh in the faces of all of those kids who sweated over every stupid exam and paper. They’re all going to get to a certain point in their lives when they realize that they’ve been wasting their time and energy on grades. Grades—imaginary letters in a big, imaginary grade book. Believing in grades, it’s like a religion—it makes people feel like their lives have meaning, and better yet, quantifiable meaning, but the secret is that it’s all make-believe! I feel like my 1.3 GPA shows my competence—I was the only one who was able to see through all the bullshit that people like you are so happy to buy into.” He reached for the tanning lotion, squirted some in his hands and reapplied it to his shoulders, then reclined back against the hood of the car and shut his eyes.

Margaret realized she was miles from her house, on a little country road she’d only been on once before. How long had she been driving? Everything seemed to blend in with everything else. Grey countryside. Grey houses, cars, trees. It seemed like it had been the same grey, chilly February weather for three weeks.

Then a large golden shape emerged into the street ahead of her. A dog. She slowed down, thinking it would get out of the way when she got close. It didn’t. Dumb dog. She
stopped for a few seconds, then honked. Startled, it ran off the road, then turned and looked at Margaret directly with frightened brown eyes. She watched it for a moment, then began to drive off. She could see it following her in the rearview mirror. She stopped, and he trotted over to the passenger door, questioning her with his eyes, tail wagging warily. His coat was matted, and there were clods of mud stuck in the fur on his stick legs. A pickup with a noisy carburetor shot by on the other side of the street, making her car tremble. The dog jumped and watched the truck thunder off into the distance. She noticed it was shivering.

She looked at the backseat of her 1981 Chevrolet Chevette. Empty water bottles, granola bar wrappers, papers and notebooks from last semester covered the seats. And God knows why, but an odd smell of burnt hair and newspaper continually lingered in that piece of junk car. She probably had nothing to lose by letting a dirty mutt in. She stretched across the car and opened the backdoor. The dog cowered back a few feet and sniffed the air, still shaking. Then, suddenly, impulsively it seemed, the dog leapt inside.

She drove aimlessly with the dog sitting perfectly erect and silent in the backseat. She observed him through the rearview mirror. It was a he, she could see now for sure. No tags. Golden lab mix, maybe? Sweet face. He was still shivering, and his eyes darted around nervously. Whenever she turned the corner or slowed down, even with the greatest possible care, he would fall off the seat or smash his head into the window. Maybe he’d never been in a car before.

“Where do you belong? Where’s your home?” He didn’t answer. “Well, what am I going to do with you now? Maybe I could find you a family. Maybe I could just keep you for a little while, while I looked for a home for you. No, my housemates wouldn’t like that.” He was still shaking.
“I don’t have time for this. I don’t know why I do things like this. I’ve got to catch up on all the work that I’ve been putting off. I have to write a five-page paper for Arthurian Literature tonight. You know,” she said, looking at the dog through the rearview mirror, “this is really all I’ve been doing since—for the past few weeks. Driving. Driving around aimlessly and sleeping. That’s all I’ve been doing.

“You know, it’s like, now that I’ve got my own life back, I don’t even know what to do with it. It’s time for me to get my shit together now. It’s time for me to focus on me. Except that I’ve got a paper to write, and an exam to study for, and a bedroom to clean, and a fucking dog in my backseat, and I don’t even know where to start anymore.” There were tears welling up in Margaret’s eyes, but she started to laugh. “A fucking dog in the backseat. I should be cleaning my car, I should be trying to get rid of that disgusting smell in here, but no, instead I find a filthy stinking mutt on the side of the road and of course decide to throw that in here too.” Margaret looked back at the dog. He rested his head on his paws. “No offense,” she said.

She stared out ahead at the road blankly for a while. “But you know what the real thing is? The real reason I can’t think straight or get anything done? It’s not that he took everything out of me, that’s not really what’s going on. It’s that I could have done more.” Her voice was trembling. “And I could be doing more now, right now. I could be at dinner with him right now, talking to him, being a friend to him when I bet he could really use a friend. But I’m here, in my car, not doing any of those things. I’m here driving around with a fucking dog in the backseat.”

For those first three months of school, she and Ben had spent all their time together. Ben could talk to anyone, make anyone laugh. He had been their ticket to house parties and anything that was happening on campus. One weekend, at a frat party, he and Margaret went outside to
smoke on the porch. “Did I ever tell you about that time I accidentally hot-boxed my car with my grandma?” He spoke loud, so that the people around him heard.

“Whoa, bro,” said a guy sitting beside him. “How do you *accidentally* hot-box a car with your grandma?”

Ben threw a look at Margaret, and she had to laugh, knowing he was making fun of the guy’s “frat bro” lingo.

“Yeah bro, it was wild,” Ben mimicked back, but the “bro” was too drunk to notice. “I told her I was going to the grocery store, but I was just going to drive around and smoke.” A small crowd circled around them. “So I sat in the driveway for a few minutes smoking it up, and then I hear this horrible noise. ‘Benny! Benny! I need me some ‘Ginia Slims. Now open this door, I’m coming to the store with you.’” He screeched this part in horrible old woman imitation, and the crowd died laughing. “So obviously I put the joint out, but the car was already filled with smoke. She asked what the smell was, and I told her the carburetor was leaking. Luckily she doesn’t know anything about cars. By the end of that car ride, she was blazed.”

“Dude that’s awesome!” some drunk kid shouted.

“I’m pretty sure my mom used to be a hardcore stoner.” Margaret was a little tipsy, but she still surprised herself to hear her own voice break through the crowd. A few of the guys turned toward her. “I was in her closet once, and I think I found a roach clip in—”

“You all should have seen her when we got to the store, though,” Ben cut in. Everyone turned back toward him. “My grandma, first of all, she could barely unbuckle her seatbelt. And then she like rolled out of the car like this.” Ben acted it out, slowly leaning forward with a blank look in his eyes, then beginning to fall but catching himself at the last minute. Margaret faded into the background.
After the party though, on their walk home, Ben was hers again. “Sometimes I’m not sure I can do this.” There was a boozy wobble to his step.

“Do what, Ben?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Partying, drinking, talking to stupid people. College in general. It all feels so fucking artificial. I just get tired of all of this, sometimes.” He almost tripped, but caught himself. “I’m really glad we’re friends, Margaret. I think you’re really great.”

Margaret beamed. “I think you’re really great too, Ben.”

“Aw, shucks,” he said, smiling a little. “This is corny as hell.” He draped his arm around her shoulders, and she walked him slowly home.

“Your friend’s really funny,” her housemate Becky said to her one morning. “He always has the weirdest stories. He’s just really animated, you know?”

“Yeah,” said Margaret.

“You guys seem like unlikely friends. You know what I mean? You’re just, you know, quiet and really nice. He’s like really loud and off-the-wall.”

Margaret was eating a bowl of cereal. She chewed faster.

“He’s weird sometimes too,” she said. “Sometimes he like doesn’t even say hi to me, and then sometimes he’s so friendly. It’s just funny, you know?”

Margaret rinsed her bowl and was walking toward the door.

“He’s doing all right though, right? I saw him the other day, and he seemed, I don’t know, he just seemed weird. He came in, and he didn’t really say hi to me or anything. He had this weird glazed over look in his eyes. Is he doing ok?”
“Yeah, he’s fine. I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’ve got to get to class.”

Margaret walked out the door.

But she did know. Sometimes she wouldn’t hear from him for days, and she would go looking for him. A few times she found him balled up in bed in his dorm room.

“What’s wrong, Ben,” she asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he mumbled, and he would ask her to leave.

Then last week, he called to tell her he had a surprise for her. He picked her up at her house and drove for an hour and a half hours to an expensive seafood restaurant on the beach, talking incessantly the entire time.

“Ben, you really didn’t have to do this,” she said as they walked in.

“I remember you telling me you loved tilapia, and they’re supposed to have the best fish in the state.” Ben chatted too much with the waiter until he seemed annoyed, and then ordered three entrees, only taking a few bites from each. On the drive home, he turned up the music so loud that Margaret had to cover her ears, and he danced in his seat as he drove. He took a sharp corner too fast, and his wheels hit the gravel in the shoulder of the road. Margaret shut her eyes and held on. When the car stopped moving, they were facing the wrong way on the highway, radio still blasting, the smell of burnt rubber rising to fill the air. Margaret was shaking. Ben burst out laughing.

“Ben, let me drive,” she said.

“What?” he said, still laughing. “That was, that was wild. That was, oh man, Margaret, I’m sorry about that.” There were no cars coming, and Ben started to turn the car around.

“Pull off the road, Ben. I’m driving.” Her voice was firm.
“Jesus, Margaret you’re so goddamn tense,” he screamed. He looked over at her. She was nearly in tears. “Fine, fine, just calm down.” He pulled into the shoulder of the road and unbuckled his seatbelt. She drove in silence the entire way home.

When they got home that night, Ben broke down. He told her how he had struggled in the past, how he had wanted to hurt himself before. He used to take medication, but he had gotten better and stopped. She was the person he had chosen to trust with that information, and now that he was getting bad again, she was going to make him better. If he wasn’t with her at any moment of the day, she made sure she knew where he was. She had him sleep on the couch in her living room every night. She was the one who called the doctor and took him to his appointments. She was the one who stood alone in the corner of your room on that Sunday morning three weeks ago, holding the knife in her hand, handle still warm and damp from his sweaty clenched fist while he sat in the bathroom, waiting for her to do something. She was the one who lay beside him in his hospital bed that night holding his hand, his head on her shoulder, careful not to touch his left wrist, straining a smile, hoping his parents would get there sooner so that she could get away.

Then he was home, out of school for two weeks. She called him every day at first, telling him how much she missed him. But was it missing, or something else? He was safe anyway, and away from immediate danger. He wasn’t sleeping on her couch or barricaded in her bathroom. She had time again. Time to drive.

She suddenly had her life back, but it wasn’t her life anymore. Everything was so quiet. Her mind, even, seemed quiet. Ben had been her only friend for those first few months at college. There was really no one else. She couldn’t remember what she used to do or think about. She couldn’t remember how she used to get all of her homework finished.
Now that he was gone, things were so flat, still, grey. But she didn’t really miss him. And why didn’t she? What kind of person just dropped a friend like that? And at a time like this?

She was spent.

She had to keep her eyes to the road. The dog stared at her through the rearview mirror as she pulled the car into the shoulder of the small country road. On either side of her, there were grey woods and grey countryside. She saw a farm in the distance. She shut the engine off and allowed her limbs to go limp behind the wheel of the car. What if she never moved again? What if she allowed the thick stale air to suffocate her? For a moment she wasn’t sure if her muscles and joints still worked. Maybe she would never have to move again. Then her hand was unlocking the doors, she was stepping out of the car, she was opening the back door. He jumped out and followed her, tail between his legs. There were no cars around. Everything was still and quiet. The dog was still trembling. He wouldn’t look up at Margaret.

“Go on,” Margaret said, and the dog didn’t move. “Go on, get out of here,” she said, shooing him away with her arms. The dog jumped at this and cowered backwards a few steps. Margaret stared at him. She looked into the dead grey woods, then back at the road. What would happen to you out here, she wondered?

“You’re going to be ok,” she told him. “You’re going to be ok, just go on, go somewhere. Just one step at a time.”

Margaret turned her back on him. Her vision was blurred and her cheeks were wet. She got in the car, turned the key in the ignition, and hit the gas. The tires spun in the gravel.
Killing Nancy

The big hand was on the six when Claudia realized how she was going to kill Nancy. Miss Shelby from next door had locked herself in the TV room.

“Don’t bother me until the big hand is on the twelve,” she said, her long red fingernail pointing to the clock on the wall. She was bent down so that Claudia could see down her lime green v-neck sweater, even though Claudia didn’t really want to. “My stories are on, and Candace just told Burt she was having a baby, but he doesn’t know it’s not his, and she doesn’t know he’s been sleeping with Roxanne.” When Claudia didn’t say anything, Miss Shelby from next door made a humph noise, marched into the TV room and shut the door.

Claudia sat in the kitchen. The clock was big and gold with black numbers. The long hand was almost on the six. The skinny hand ticked slowly around and around. 11:27 in the morning. Miss Shelby didn’t know Claudia could tell time. Claudia sat on a cold metal chair in front of the kitchen table for a long, long time, but the big hand hardly moved. Then she heard a click click click on the linoleum floor behind her. The clicking stopped, but Claudia refused to turn around. She sat in silence again, staring at the black hands of the clock, listening to it tick. The click click click started again. It was growing closer. Claudia ignored it until she felt a warm wet sensation on her hand. She ripped her eyes away from the clock to find Nancy, cowering beside her chair, large eyes bulging from her skinny grey head.

“What do you want?” she asked. Nancy stared at her, right in the eyes. She reached up to Claudia’s forearm and pawed at her, as though she was trying to tell her something. “Ow! Nancy you scratched me,” Claudia screeched. Claudia stared at the raised red lines that surfaced
on her skin. Nancy bowed her head, but managed to keep her eyes locked with Claudia’s. Claudia was sure then. She knew what she had to do. She had to kill Nancy.

Claudia had spent last night at Miss Shelby’s apartment. It smelled like fried onions, and the scratchy pink pillow on the guest bed made Claudia’s nose itch. In the morning, Miss Shelby had cooked her runny scrambled eggs with chunks of ham in them. Miss Shelby stared at her from across the table as Claudia picked at them. Claudia wished Miss Shelby had Fruit Loops. At 10:14, Aunt Jan called. “Oh, hi Jan,” said Miss Shelby and took the portable phone with her into her bedroom and shut the door.

“We’re going to your place,” Miss Shelby told Claudia when she reappeared. Claudia’s apartment felt strange. It was too quiet. The bright morning sun was pouring in through the windows, but it still felt dark and unfamiliar. Nancy was in the kitchen, wagging her tail timidly from behind the leg of a chair.

Nancy had been in the same place the day before when Claudia came home from school. Claudia glared at her. She went upstairs to her room and shut the door. She watched TV in her room and waited for her mother to come home, but it grew dark, and no one came. Her mother was always home before dark. Then the door opened. “Marlene,” Aunt Jan called, “you left your newspaper in the driveway, and it’s supposed to rain tonight. I grabbed it for you.” Aunt Jan came over with takeout for dinner three nights a week, and she always let herself in. “Marlene?” Aunt Jan called again. After a minute, Claudia heard shuffling. Aunt Jan was in her room. “Let’s go see Miss Shelby from next door, ok?” she was saying. Her face was white like a ghost, but she was smiling sweetly in a way Claudia hadn’t seen Aunt Jan smile.
Nancy was still waiting silently behind the chair leg in the kitchen when Aunt Jan steered Claudia toward the front door. Claudia sat down to tie her shoes, and Aunt Jan smiled at her. Claudia noticed her eyes kept darting to the kitchen door, then back at Claudia. Claudia stood up slowly, then bolted for the kitchen. Aunt Jan grabbed her, but not before Claudia caught a glimpse of a red high-heeled foot lying flat on the tile kitchen floor. “She’s ok, sweetheart,” Aunt Jan said. “Your mom just needs to see a doctor.” A minute later, Claudia was sitting on the floor by the couch in Miss Shelby’s smelly living room, listening to Miss Shelby laugh too loudly at a sitcom. Claudia ran to the window when the ambulance drove by, but Miss Shelby snapped the curtains shut. Claudia could still hear the sirens.

Claudia had never really deliberately killed anything before. There was one time last summer when she dropped a grape lollipop in the dirt right outside her apartment. When she came outside the next day, there was a trail of ants leading to the lollipop. On the bus, Claudia once heard Kayla say that ants burst into flames if you pointed a magnifying glass on them. Kayla was in the fourth grade, a year older than Claudia, and she sometimes wore pink clip-on braids in her hair. Kayla had an older brother who told her what sex was. Everyone listened to Kayla. Claudia rummaged through her kitchen and finally found a magnifying glass at the bottom of a drawer of screw drivers and spare light bulbs. She spent all afternoon burning little ants one by one with a pinpoint of concentrated sunlight.

Claudia looked at Nancy. Nancy was still staring at her. Claudia grabbed the magnifying glass and put Nancy on her leash. Nancy walked solemnly a few feet behind her. Claudia could feel those bulgy rat eyes digging into her back as she led Nancy outside. She laid Nancy on the brick path in front of her apartment, just where she had found the trail of ants, and tried to burn a
hole through her. Nancy watched her intently as Claudia manipulated the circle of sunlight into a tiny point on her belly. For a second, she thought she smelled burning fur, but Nancy squirmed too much, and Claudia gave up.

Back in the kitchen, Claudia sat down again in the hard metal chair. In a moment, Nancy was at her feet staring up at her. Claudia tried to remember what it had been like before Nancy. She tried to remember being able to sit downstairs without the fear that she was being watched by those beady little eyes. When Claudia’s mother first mentioned that her manicurist was trying to get rid of a litter of puppies, Claudia had actually begged her mom to take one. Her mom said no, she said that a dog would be too much of a responsibility, that she didn’t need another creature to take care of. “You’re enough work on your own,” her mother had said.

Claudia sometimes watched the kids in her apartment complex play in the playground from her window. Kayla would always be the loudest, ordering the boys around and explaining what games they were going to play. One day, Claudia watched out her window for two hours as Kayla and the other kids played capture the flag. Claudia had played it once at summer camp and loved it. She got up the courage to walk outside. She sat on her front steps, watching, hoping someone would notice her. No one did. If she had a dog, she could take her on a leash and walk her through the playground. She imagined Kayla coming up to her, asking her dog’s name, asking to pet it. The other kids would crowd around her, and then ask if she wanted to play.

Sometimes Claudia would stand near the street, when no other kids were around, and sing. She would add a hula hoop to the performance, expertly swiveling her hips while keeping a tune. She imagined that if she had a dog, Claudia would teach the dog tricks, and they could perform together. She was sure that one day a car would stop, and someone would recognize her
talent. A man with a briefcase would shake her hand and give her his business card. She imagined him knocking on her front door, informing her mother that they needed to take her to Hollywood immediately. Her mother would try to stop them, she would faint or maybe she would cry, but they would take Claudia and her dog anyway.

Claudia begged her mother for a dog, but she refused. Then one day, a week later, she came home from work cradling a tiny rodent-looking creature in her arms. “She was going to turn it over to the pound,” her mother said. “Plus it was free.”

Nancy hadn’t been at all what Claudia was expecting. As a puppy, she crept around the apartment warily. She would screech if Claudia tried to pick her up. She would cower behind Claudia’s mother’s ankles and only eat from her mother’s hand. Whenever Claudia would turn around, she would be able to spot Nancy’s beady eyes looking right at her. Claudia waited for her to grow up into the kind of dog she saw on TV, the type of dog that would fetch and run around and wag her tail wildly whenever Claudia came near. But Nancy continued to cower and creep and stare.

“I’m going to take Nancy for a walk,” her mother began to call to Claudia from downstairs twice a day. From her bedroom window, Claudia would watch her mother in her favorite bright red high heels walk out the front door, past the playground with Nancy on a leash. Afterwards, Claudia’s mother would cuddle up with Nancy on the couch and watch TV. Nancy would lay her head in her mother’s lap, and Claudia’s mother would stroke her behind the ears.

Claudia realized then how she was going to kill Nancy. She would throw her out her bedroom window. She grabbed a dog treat from the cabinet. “Here, Nancy,” she called. Nancy looked at the treat and stepped forward, wagging her short tail slowly, skeptically.
“Here, Nancy,” Claudia called, taking a few steps up the stairs. Nancy followed to the top.

“Here, Nancy,” Claudia said, backing into her room at the top of the stairs. Nancy stepped into Claudia’s room cautiously. She had never been in before. Claudia had never let her.

“Here, Nancy,” Claudia said, setting the dog treat on the window sill. Nancy stood watching as Claudia unlocked and opened the window. She had forgotten about the screen. Claudia tried to shake the metal frame from the window, then she punched the middle of it, but her fist just bounced off the screen wire, scraping her knuckles. She turned around to find Nancy waiting patiently. “Never mind,” said Claudia, and she threw the treat into her little pink trashcan. Nancy looked at the trashcan, and then back at Claudia. Claudia went downstairs, and after a minute Claudia heard her clicking down the stairs after her.

The long hand of the big gold clock was now on the eight. 11:40. Claudia again sat in the cold metal chair. She tapped her foot on the tile kitchen floor. Nancy was sitting in front of her, her bulgy eyes locked on Claudia’s face. Nancy had sparse grey and black fur, so sparse that her pink skin showed through in patches all over her body. Her ears were pointy, and when she was excited they stood up on the top of her head like a rat’s ears. But she was rarely excited. They mostly laid flat on her head so that, along with her thin, limp fur and skinny stick legs, she always looked like someone had just thrown a big bucket of water over her. She hardly ever barked, and she never demanded anything. She simply sat and waited for what was next. “Look how patient Nancy is, Claudia,” her mother said to her once. “She doesn’t nag me to entertain her, to take her here and there all the time. Good girl, Nancy.”
When Claudia came home from school, Nancy would wag her tail warily from the other room. She would sit at the door and whimper and howl as soon as she heard her mother’s car in the driveway after work each night. She would screech and claw at her mother with her ears back like a baby vulture, and Claudia’s mother would pat her on the head and say, “Good girl, Nancy. It’s nice to see you too.” Nancy wanted to be wherever Claudia’s mother was, and she followed her around wherever she went. Nancy would even sit outside the bathroom and wait quietly for her mother to come out. And sometimes her mother would stay in there for hours. Claudia always wondered what she was doing in there. She would see her mother walk in from the cracked door of her bedroom. Her mom would shut the bathroom door and lock it.

One time, Claudia got up the courage to knock. She had to use the bathroom, and her mother had been in there for a long, long time. She shoved Nancy out of the way with her foot and tapped on the door. Nothing. She knocked again. “Go to your room, Claudia.” The words came out slow and scratchy. The voice sounded far away. It didn’t sound like her mother. Claudia stood at the door for a moment, wondering if her mother had been kidnapped out the window, wondering if the kidnapper was now hiding in the bathroom, answering for her mother in a poor imitation of her mother’s voice. Was he going to kidnap Claudia? Maybe she could get him to kidnap Nancy. Then there was a loud crash and breaking glass. Claudia ran to her room, slammed the door and locked it. She turned her TV up loud, and after a very long time, she fell asleep. The next day, her mother was in a bad mood. She didn’t say anything about the bandage on her chin.

Later that evening, Aunt Jan came over. She asked Claudia’s mother about the bandage, but her mother brushed her off. “That stuff’s poison, Marlene,” Claudia could hear Aunt Jan say from downstairs after Claudia had been sent to bed. Aunt Jan wasn’t talking quietly. “And
you’ve got a little girl to look after. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” After that, the door slammed and Aunt Jan was gone.

Claudia had an idea. A good idea. Claudia leapt from the cold metal chair, startling Nancy, and ran upstairs. Claudia swung open the medicine cabinet behind the mirror and found just what she was looking for. The little orange bottle with the white cap was staring her straight in the face. Poison. She had seen the bottle a thousand times. She knew she had the right one. Claudia grabbed it and ran downstairs.

Claudia wondered what Nancy would like to eat the most. When Aunt Jan brought over barbeque sandwiches last week, Nancy ate all the scraps in her bowl and even licked it clean. Barbeque was probably her favorite food. Claudia dug through the fridge. She didn’t know exactly what barbeque sandwiches were made out of, but she found barbeque sauce and bologna, and she thought that was probably good enough.

Claudia stared at the pill bottle. She had seen her mother open it a million times. She would set it on the counter, press down on it and turn the little white cap with her palm. Claudia tried it, and after a minute of squeezing and twisting, the bottle popped open and white pills exploded on to the table. Claudia counted them out. Fifteen. She put five aside and dropped the rest back into the bottle. Claudia once watched her mother crush Tylenol tablets with a spoon to put in Claudia’s applesauce when she had a fever, so Claudia knew how to do it. One by one, she crushed the five pills with a soup spoon on her stainless steel countertop. Claudia laid out a circle of bologna, squirted out some barbeque sauce and sprinkled the white powder on top. She then rolled the slice into a tube with the barbeque sauce and powder concoction in the middle.

“Here, Nancy,” Claudia called. She leaned down with the bologna roll in her hand. Nancy stayed where she was, looking straight at Claudia with her head slightly bowed. She was
sitting underneath the table with a dark shadow cast across her eyes. When Aunt Jan came over for dinner, she would always scold Nancy for sitting under the table. “Nancy, stop looking at me. Marlene you’ve got to do something about that dog. It gives me the creeps. I feel like its plotting something.” Claudia’s mother would always brush her off.

“She’s absorbing the world around her. She’s a very smart little dog, you know,” her mother said. Her mother bent down to pet Nancy. “You’re a smart little girl, aren’t you?” she cooed. Aunt Jan rolled her eyes and made a silly gagging face at Claudia.

“Here, Nancy,” Claudia said, creeping closer to the dog with the meat outstretched in her hand. Nancy didn’t move. She leaned back when Claudia got too close, but she sniffed the food and then licked it. Claudia dropped it on the floor, and the meat unrolled. The piece of bologna laid flat on the ground, the barbeque sauce concoction face up.

Claudia went into the hall. Miss Shelby from next door was still locked in the TV room. “Candace, how could you?” she heard a man’s voice yell from the television. Claudia laid in Miss Shelby’s smelly spare bedroom listening to the sound of Miss Shelby’s TV through the thin walls. It took her a long time to fall asleep, but when she finally did, her dreams were colorfully vivid.

She and her mother were on a roller coaster that took them all around the city. They rode up over buildings and down huge hills that made her stomach flip. Then the tracks disappeared in front of them, and the two soared together through town, barely dodging cars and trees and houses. Claudia tried to control the direction of the car by leaning. She tried to slow it down, or to call for help. She was terrified, but her mother was laughing wildly. Then it was night and all Claudia could see were lights rushing past them. The lights were brightly colored and beautiful. All she could hear was her mother’s laughter, and she was no longer scared. She laughed too.
And then the ride stopped. She and her mother strode hand and hand through a carnival. Claudia looked around at the other parents walking with their children and laughing. Her heart swelled. She held tightly to her mother’s hand and smiled. It was dawn, and just a hint of pale orange light began to flood the carnival. The carnival had emptied out, but she still held securely to her mother’s hand, watching her red high heels walk through a path of empty popcorn bags and ticket stubs. A few old carnies lurked in her peripherals, slowly picking up bits of trash. A toothless old carnival worker began to approach them, and she was going to tug her mother’s arm to warn her when she realized that her mother had evaporated. Claudia was wearing the red high heels. The old man was getting closer, but she could barely walk in the oversized shoes. She tripped and fell and awoke with a jolt. Her neck and shoulders were stiff, and her sheets were damp from sweat.

Claudia grabbed the pill bottle and ran back upstairs to replace it, then she returned to the kitchen. Nancy had licked the barbeque sauce clean from the slab of bologna. She scuttled over to her treat and began to gnaw on the remaining meat. The long hand of the big gold clock was now resting on the eleven. Claudia wondered what the pills would do to Nancy. She wondered who would tell her mother and Aunt Jan that Nancy was dead. She wondered if she would get in trouble. Claudia felt an exciting surge of energy in her chest that made her fingertips tingle. She sat down on the floor and stared at Nancy with bulging eyes, waiting patiently to see what would happen next.
“I love the sound of rain tip-tap tapping on the roof at night,” says Deborah aloud as she gazes out the window at the countryside from her seat alone in the kitchen. She holds in her hand a plate of leftover tiramisu she made the night before. Outside, through an unrelenting show of lightning, Deborah is able to see the silhouettes of the flimsy, unsuspecting evergreens against a dull purple sky. Deborah nibbles at her dessert, reflecting on the magnitude of God’s power.

A great cracking noise erupts above the shrieking wind and bellowing thunder, followed by a deafening crash. Deborah watches as a large pine tree, only feet from her house, snaps under the merciless force of the wind, bringing a tangle of power lines with it as it plummets to the ground. Deborah’s small red and white checked kitchen instantly falls black.

Violent storms are not uncommon occurrences in early May in the small mountain town of Grizzly, Colorado. Deborah expertly feels her way through the dark and in a matter of seconds finds a candle and a lighter. She places the small light source on the worn oak table and returns to her seat to gaze out the window at the raging storm.

“Debbie? Debbie, what’s going on? Will you come here?” Her husband’s voice is barely audible over the noise of the storm. She doesn’t go at first. “Debbie?” he calls again. She doesn’t move. “Debbie?” he yells, with a hint of desperation.

She gets up, grabs the candle and hurries up the stairs.

“I’m here. What is it, dear?”

“What was that noise? What’s going on? Why is it so loud in here?” His voice trembles.
“It’s just a thunderstorm, honey. A tree fell and the power went out. Everything is ok. Were you able to sleep a little?”

“Yeah… uh. Yeah. But why is it so loud? Tell those kids to quiet down so I can sleep!”

“The kids don’t live here anymore, Denny, remember? Pete’s in college, and Michael lives in Chicago. You’re just having one of your spells. You woke up because of the rain and thunder and wind outside. It’ll quiet down soon.”

“Why is it so dark?”

“The power went out—because of the storm. Now just go back to sleep, okay dear?”

“Okay. Yeah, all right.”

Deborah tucks the sheets around him up to his chin and kisses him on the forehead, like she used to do for the kids when they were little. “Good night, honey,” she says.

Deborah walks into the bathroom next door and rummages through the pill bottles in the medicine cabinet, struggling to read the labels by the light of the candle. She finally finds the one she was searching for and draws it from the cabinet to take a closer look.

Denny has been on new medication for a week now, and Deborah has already noticed a significant change in his sleeping habits. The first night, Denny was able to get a full night of rest for the first time in nearly two years. But the side effects frighten Deborah, and although she has spoken about it several times with the doctor, she rereads the label on the medicine bottle to assure herself that that she has nothing to worry about.

SleepEasy® Prescription sleep aid—proven to help you fall asleep fast and stay asleep for 8 to 12 hours without causing dependency. Children under the age of 18: Ask a doctor before using this product. Many have reported repeated states of confusion, forgetfulness, or hallucination persisting up to 10 minutes at a time during the first two weeks of use. Will cause drowsiness—do not drive a motor vehicle or operate machinery.
Satisfied, Deborah replaces the bottle of pills and closes the medicine cabinet, but lingers a moment before the mirror. She usually makes a point to avoid looking in the mirror, but Deborah wants to take advantage of the dim candlelight, which conceals some of the smaller wrinkles and creases in her fifty-four year old skin. Although she is careful to keep her bright blond hairstyle up to date, and although she wears a fairly heavy layer of makeup each day, Deborah still sees an old woman when she looks at her reflection. She stares at her body and scrutinizes every detail, from her round waistline, to her slumped posture, to the way her clothes fit a little too tight these days around her hips and thighs. With a sigh, she saunters back downstairs.

It is ten o’clock at night, close to her normal bedtime, but she knows that she cannot go to sleep with her concerns about her husband weighing on her mind. Instead, she begins dusting old photographs in the living room—a picture of Denny fishing with his buddies, pictures of the boys, Pete and Michael, at high school graduation and prom. She holds Pete’s senior prom picture up to the candlelight. Michael’s the handsome one, always very athletic with a big bright smile and lots of girlfriends. Pete is two years younger, a bit gangly and awkward-looking. Even as an adult, he keeps to himself a lot, but he has a good sense of humor. His prom date senior year didn’t seem to quite understand the hair and makeup yet, and her dress was baggy and too tight in all the wrong places. For Pete’s sophomore homecoming dance, Pete decided to dress up silly and go with a few of his friends rather than take a date. He came downstairs in his mother’s leopard print blouse, short lime green athletic shorts, gold spandex tights and hot pink tube socks. He struck a pose in the kitchen doorway, and Deborah had to laugh. “You look great, sweetheart. I love it.” Denny didn’t look up from his newspaper.
“What do you think, dad?” Pete said, smiling.

Denny stared at him for a long time. “I think it’s embarrassing, is what I think.”

“Oh, come on Denny.”

“It’s just a joke, Dad.”

“What do you want people to think? You’re not taking a date, and you’re dressed up like a faggot.” Denny got up from the table and went to his room. Pete stood there in the doorway of the kitchen staring straight ahead of him. He looked at his mother.

“Sweetheart,” she tried to say, “your father’s from a different time. He doesn’t understand that kind of humor.”

“Yeah,” said Pete, taking off the tube socks, “I don’t think I really feel like going out anymore.” Pete turned and went back upstairs.

Deborah continues looking through the photographs. She comes across a picture of Denny preaching before his congregation on Easter Sunday, and then an old picture of her and Denny on their first official date as boyfriend and girlfriend. Deborah sits down to look at her younger self—twenty-seven years ago, before wrinkles and grey hairs, when shoulder pads and feathered bangs were still in. She smiles thinking about how silly she looked. Deborah remembers the exact meal that she cooked for Denny that night—garlic-roasted chicken, cider-glazed carrots, and fresh baked sour dough bread, topped off with a bottle of white wine. Denny helped her with the dishes, and the two ended up dancing on the linoleum kitchen floor, dish towels in hand. Denny was a terrible dancer, but he didn’t mind making a fool of himself if it meant having a good time—that was one of the things Deborah loved most about him. The food, the atmosphere, the dancing, the conversation—everything was exactly perfect that night. It was the night Deborah fell in love with her husband.
Whenever she and Denny fight, Deborah recalls this date to remind herself how wonderful their life together could be if she would stop defying her husband, if she wasn’t so confrontational. Then she’s able to drop whatever they’re fighting about, kiss her husband on the cheek and apologize.

Since Denny has been sick, he has become withdrawn, subdued and moody, as opposed to his normal loud and outspoken self. He hasn’t had the energy to argue with anyone in months. But the medication has changed all that. Still, Denny has begun to come back to himself. The other day at breakfast, Deborah was talking to him about the new health care bill that she read about in the newspaper.

“I’m not sure it sounds like such a bad thing after all,” she was saying.

“Deborah don’t talk about things you don’t know anything about,” he said. “I’m finished with breakfast.” He left his plate on the table and went upstairs. At first Deborah was taken aback by his tone, but as she was taking his dishes to the sink, she realized it was a good sign. This was the old Denny, the opinionated Denny who was passionate about things. And he was right; Deborah really didn’t know what she was talking about. She’d only read one article. He was the one who had spent countless sleepless nights on the couch watching 24-hour news stations. He knew more about it than she did. This was a good sign.

The storm continues to rage outside the window. Deborah moves to the kitchen to begin weeding out old food from the cupboard. She has to make room for tomorrow. Tomorrow is Saturday, and she and Denny will go to the grocery store together, just as they had every Saturday before he stopped sleeping.

When Denny’s insomnia got out of hand, he became depressed and stopped going out. Deborah was left in charge of the groceries, as well as all the other household responsibilities
that he had previously supervised. She began bookkeeping, overseeing Sunday school, leading youth group, and managing other church operations that he had always taken care. She had even inadvertently become a kind of counselor, as church members started coming to her more frequently with personal issues. However taking care of her husband was her primary responsibility, and as his insomnia progressed, he was forced to rely on his wife to perform everyday tasks. But in the seven short days that Denny has been on SleepEasy, he has nearly made a complete recovery, aside from the confused spell every now and then.

Tomorrow is the first time in two years that Denny will come with her to the grocery store. He will help her choose the best products and prevent her from buying foods too high in fat or sodium. He always has her health and growing waistline in mind. Although she’s going to have to say goodbye to Double-Stuffed Oreos and, her favorite, Blue Bunny’s Fudge Tracks Ice Cream, she is grateful that her husband cares so much for her. Denny will slowly take back control over the rest of the household and church responsibilities. “It just looks bad, Deborah,” Denny said to her yesterday when she wanted to drop by the church office to finish off some filing. “A man shouldn’t let his wife do his work for him. And I think it will be a relief for you to have everything back to the way it was before, the way it should be.” And Deborah nodded. Of course he’s right.

One item at a time, Deborah carefully removes all stale, rotten, and expired foods from the refrigerator. She has to laugh to herself as she draws a loaf of moldy Wonder Bread, hidden behind cartons of orange juice and milk, from the back corner of one shelf. Many years ago, when her younger son Pete was a little boy, he used to persuade her to buy loaves of the low-nutrient white Wonder Bread every time he went with her to the store because he thought it made his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches taste better. At first, she only accommodated his requests
so that he would not make a scene at the grocery store, but she soon fell into the habit of buying Wonder Bread every week. Deborah remembers how Denny often admonished her for buying such nutritionally-lacking food for their growing boys, and how she would always secretly buy a loaf anyway, hiding it in the back corner of the cart on their Saturday grocery store trips and shoving it to the very back of the fridge once they returned home.

Deborah remembers the afternoon Denny came home early from work, just as the boys were sitting down to eat their Wonder Bread peanut butter and jelly sandwiches after school.

“Debbie we’ve talked about them eating like this. It has to stop.”

“I know, Denny. I just thought that if they only ate like this once and a while…”

“Boys, do you want to be fat?” interjected Denny.

The boys shook their heads.

“Well your mama clearly wants you boys to be fat because she keeps feeding you all like little piggies.” He turns to face Deborah and says, “Do you boys want to be fat like your mama?” playfully grabbing a chunk of flesh from her midsection.

Deborah reddens and goes into the kitchen.

“Aw Deb I was just kiddin,” he calls after her.

Deborah pauses at the memory, but throws it out with the bread in the trash with a hollow thump and finishes the rest of the task quickly.

The fridge cleared, Deborah decides to sit down on the couch to relax. When the boys were little and wild, when she rarely had a minute to herself, when she was constantly exhausted, Deborah remembers being afraid of moments like this. She remembers fearing the time when the boys would go to school, go to a neighbor’s, fall asleep. Times when the laundry was done, the dishes were clean, the floors were spotless, and everything was quiet. This was when
Deborah would sit down, look around at her silent, pristine house, and see, actually see, her life in front of her for what it was. She would sit, and with the heavy weight of her small existence in her chest, she would cry. But Deborah learned to distract herself. In fact, it has been years since she felt that heaviness in her chest. As the storm calms outside, she begins to feel the quiet and darkness of her home close in on her. She remembers that feeling, and she lies down on the couch and cries.

Deborah glances over at the clock. 8:00am! She must have fallen asleep. It is Sunday—Denny needs to leave by 8:20 to prepare for 9 o’clock services. She’s overslept! She jumps out of bed and creeps past the kids’ rooms, not wanting to wake them before she has to, and into the kitchen to begin Denny’s breakfast. Deborah grabs the eggs from the fridge and glances at the digital oven clock—8:04. She grabs a pan from the cabinet and places it on the burner—8:06. She clicks on the gas stove and puts a glob of butter in the center of the pan—8:11. Deborah stares at the clock as she waits for the butter to sizzle—8:12, 8:13, 8:14, 8:15, 8:16—the butter hasn’t even begun to melt.

“Good morning, Deb,” calls Denny from the stairs.

“Coffee! I even forgot coffee!” Deborah thinks to herself. “Oh, good morning sweetheart,” Deborah calls back cheerily.

Denny rounds the corner into the kitchen and stops. “Debbie, where’s my breakfast?” he demands. “I have to be at the church right now!”

“I’m making breakfast if you could just wait one more min...”

“I have to go to work, Debbie. Just give me my coffee.”

“I... I haven’t had a chance yet...”
Denny exhales loudly, then turns and walks out the door, slamming it behind him.

Deborah’s hands are shaking. Why is it so hard to just give her husband what he wants? He works so hard to help so many people at the church each day, and Deborah, his wife, cannot satisfy his simplest needs. She sits down in the frying pan and curls up next to the glob of butter. It is beginning to melt now, and Deborah lies quietly as the sizzling liquid saturates her hair and clothes.

The lights are on when she wakes up. The furnace has also clicked back on, and Deborah is drenched in sweat. The storm seems to have stopped. The clock flashes 12:00, but Deborah knows it is much later than that. When she sits up, her head is throbbing. A quiet hum fills the house. She hears movement upstairs, and she goes up to see if Denny is awake.

“Hey sweetheart. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

Denny’s eyes are wide and he has a bewildered look on his face. “Someone was just in our room. Where have you been?”

“I was asleep downstairs on the couch. What do you mean someone was in our room?”

“I was just lying in bed when a man walked in and sat down next to me.”

This frightens Deborah, but she calmly explains, “I would have woken up if anyone had come in through the front door. There’s no one in the house except you and me. I think it’s the medication, Denny. Why don’t you lie down?”

“Listen to me!” he yells harshly. “I’m not crazy! There’s someone here—in this house!”

“Honey, just lie down. Please, just lie down,” Deborah begs, and grabs her husband’s arm. Denny draws it back and walks out of the room. Deborah follows him to the stairs and watches from the balcony as Denny storms through the house, madly swinging open doors and
moving furniture in search of the intruder. After minutes of searching, Denny comes back upstairs. They sit down together on the bed, and Denny rubs his eyes.

“I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“It’s just the medication. It’ll be over by next week. Why don’t you go to sleep, dear? It’s late—I’ll go to bed too. I don’t feel so great anyway.”

Deborah’s headache has worsened, and her husband’s antics have frightened her so much that she now feels sick to her stomach.

Her husband crawls under the covers as Deborah quickly changes to her nightgown. In a moment, she’s in bed beside him. Just as Deborah is beginning to drift off to sleep, she hears footsteps in the hall. She sits straight up in bed.

“What was that?” she whispers, but Denny is fast asleep. Deborah decides that she does not want to get Denny worked up again, so she simply sits, staring at the open door. A shadow sweeps past the door, and Deborah is on her feet in a second. She creeps to the door.

“Who’s there?” she whispers, still not wanting to wake Denny. There is no answer. She sneaks around the corner. The hall is empty. She goes to the bathroom and splashes water on her face. She walks back to her room to see a little blue rabbit sitting on the edge of her bed. Deborah gasps.

“Do you remember me?” the rabbit asks politely. He has a clear and pleasant voice with a British accent. No, not British. Deborah cannot quite put her finger on the accent. His paws are clasped in his lap, and his legs are crossed.

“I’m sorry—no. Who are you?” asks Deborah, her voice trembling.

“Really? You dealt with my product only a few hours ago. Remember? Freezer-burned Bunny Tracks?”
“Oh! You’re Blue Bunny! I’m sorry, I guess I didn’t know you were real.”

“I know, I know—not many do. But I know you are a big fan.”

“I am. Your Fudge Tracks are my favorite.”

“Why thank you. But I did not come here to talk about ice cream—I am here on strictly business.”

“What business is that, Mr. Blue Bunny?”

“A very grave business, in fact. I’ve come to tell you and your husband that you are both being poisoned.”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about?”

“Ask your husband about the power.”

“What? The power? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I’m sorry, Deborah. I can’t tell you any more than you already know.” With that, the bunny springs from the bed and disappears through a wall. Deborah jumps up and shakes her husband violently. “Denny! Denny, what is he talking about?”

Denny lets out a groan.

“Denny, what was that all about? What happened with the power?”

“What? It went out during the storm. Oh Lord, I feel awful.”

“When did the power come back on?”

“I don’t remember….”

“Try to remember. Did you wake up when the power went on?”

“I turned the electricity back on. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“You did what?” But Denny is sick, and he is already diving for the bathroom. Deborah rushes downstairs. The garage is located directly beneath the master bedroom. Deborah can
hear a humming coming from the door of the garage. She opens the door and is hit with a wave of exhaust fumes. Deborah stares at the red metal contraption in front of her. Their gas-powered generator. It stands out like a red flag against the black background of their Chevy Tahoe SUV. Both garage doors are down. Deborah coughs and sputters, but remains standing in the fume-filled garage, realizing slowly that while she was asleep on the couch, Denny must have dragged the generator from the shed and turned it on. In his medication-induced confusion, he forgot to ventilate the exhaust, forcing the poisonous carbon monoxide to leak into the house.

Deborah rushes back inside and slams the door. She stands in the middle of the kitchen, sure that she was about to do something, but what? She looks out into the dark hallway. She remembers the way her son looked standing in that doorway in her leopard shirt, with his skinny gold-spandexed legs jutting out like toothpicks from those bright green shorts. Deborah hears vomiting coming from upstairs. She goes up to see what’s going on. Denny is bent over the toilet. She looks at him and smiles.

Denny looks up at her. “What?”

Deborah frowns sympathetically when her eyes meet her husband’s. “Aw, sweetheart what’s wrong?”

“I—I don’t know. I just feel really sick all of a sudden.”

“It’s probably just the medication. Would you like me to go get you some Pepto Bismol?”

“Uh, yeah I guess. I just feel so terrible…”

“Oh, you poor dear. I’ll be right back, ok?”

Denny doesn’t answer—he is again bent over the toilet. Deborah isn’t feeling much better herself. Her throbbing head has made her dizzy, and she clings to the banister as she
walks down the stairs. Deborah picks up her keys from the table and goes to the garage. She bypasses the red contraption humming on the floor, opens the heavy SUV door and climbs in. Maybe she’ll go to the grocery store tonight, instead of in the morning. She doesn’t have her list, but she can probably remember if she goes slowly through each aisle. She’s not in any rush. She puts the keys in the ignition and presses the garage door opener, humming a tune to herself as she waits for the door to go up. She pulls out into the street then and clicks the button again, watching the garage door close through the rearview mirror as she drives off.
“It’s freezing out there, Christine. I’m going to pull over.”

“Mike, Jamie’s in the backseat!”

“Well then this can be a lesson about loving your neighbor. Besides, he looks harmless.”

“It’s dangerous, Mike. Remember Elizabeth Smart? Her father didn’t think anything was wrong with inviting a complete stranger into their home, and you know too well what…”

Dad opens the door and a howl of wind drowns her out. “Can I give you a lift, sir?” he yells at the man shuffling down the shoulder of the freeway. The first time we drove past him, Dad remarked that he didn’t have a coat. We had just left downtown, and then, all of a sudden, he was pulling off on an exit, turning the car around to go pick him up. Mom complains, but he doesn’t listen to her. He never listens.

The man looks like he’s in his late twenties. He’s wearing a red cardigan with a white undershirt and jeans, carrying a couple of large grocery bags. Under some scruffy facial hair, his face looks clean enough. He’s certainly not dressed in rags. He’s probably not even homeless. I want to scream this at my dad, to tell him he’s always doing stupid embarrassing things like this, and the guy probably doesn’t even need a ride. But he’s standing right beside the car now, staring at us.

“I said you need a lift? It’s pretty cold out there.”

The guy looks at my father, and then turns to look at me. I look at my lap. When I glance back, he’s still staring at me.

“Sure,” he says. “I mean, yes, thank you.”

“Where you headed?”
“Uh, Raytown.”

“Great! That’s right on the way.”

Without looking at him again, I unbuckle my seatbelt and scoot to the other side of the car so he can get in.

“Should I put these bags in the trunk?” he asks.

“Yeah I’ll pop it for you. You got all that or can I help you?”

“I’ve got it. But thank you very much, sir.”

He closes the door and the man goes around back to put away the bags.

“I have a bad feeling about him. I don’t want him in my car with my child.” Her voice is tight and quiet, the way I sounded last summer when I got strep throat.

“A bad feeling? I think he’s got better manners than Jamie,” he teases. She doesn’t smile. “Ah, come on, Christine. We’re already pulled over. Do you want me to drive off without him? I think this is a good lesson for Jamie. Maybe for all of us. Just because someone doesn’t have money doesn’t mean that they’re less of a person.”

“Dad, stop it. He can probably hear you!”

“Well I hope he can. He’s doing a good thing tonight too. He’s teaching my family a lesson about pride. I hope he knows it.”

“You think you’re being a Good Samaritan, Mike, but you’re being…” her voice catches, but she clears her throat. “You’re being irresponsible.”

The trunk slams shut. I scrunch down in my seat. I’m the one that’s going to have to sit next to him the whole ride.

“Thanks again for giving me a ride,” he says quietly as he gets into the car. “That’s really kind of you folks.”
“It’s no problem, no problem at all. So what’s so important in Raytown that you were going to walk twenty miles in the freezing cold?”

“I’m trying to get to my aunt’s house.”

“Oh all right. Well where does she live?”

“Uh, Cross Street? You can drop me off at the town square. It’s only a few blocks from there. If, if that’s convenient for you.”

“Sure is. We live in Lee’s Summit. It’s on the way. My name’s Mike Turner, by the way. This is my wife Christine and our daughter Jamie.” Through the passenger-side mirror I could see my mom’s eyes narrow. If we were at the dinner table, she’d kick him.

The man nodded. “I’m Phil.”

“We were downtown for the day doing some last minute Christmas shopping.” He drones on about Christmas plans, the family, shopping, something he probably thought was really profound to say to a homeless guy about the “disgusting materialistic culture we live in.” Every time he drops a personal detail about our lives, my mom closes her eyes or leans her head back a bit. She doesn’t say a word.

He says he’s going all the way to Raytown. That means twenty minutes in this car, when thirty seconds has already been too much. What business he’s got out there, I couldn’t even guess. Says he’s going to his aunt’s house. I’ll bet. And I bet those bags he stuffed in our trunk are full of presents for his sweet old aunt too.
“We live in Lee’s Summit,” Mike tells him. “It’s on the way. My name’s Mike Turner, by the way. This is my wife Christine and our daughter Jamie.” Great. Why don’t you write down your bank account number and social for him while you’re at it?

But I get it. I get what Mike wants to do here. It’s cold out, yes. And it’s Christmas time. And he wants to show Jamie how to do a nice thing. So let’s go volunteer in a soup kitchen, where we can sort out cans, or serve the homeless people food from behind a wall of metal trays of food and Plexiglas sneeze guards. Somewhere where there are other people around, supervising. Somewhere that’s not the backseat of our car.

But Mike doesn’t realize that I’m looking out for my family when I don’t want to invite a homeless person into the car. When I say I don’t want a stranger sitting next to my daughter, Mike hears that I don’t care about people. This is where Mike gets this idea that I don’t have enough compassion.

Mike thinks that I don’t feel enough.

“I think that’s the deal breaker, Christine,” he told me one night. The “deal breaker,” like we were on a game show or something. We had made plans, we were going to get married, we were going to buy a house together, I couldn’t conceive of my life without him anymore.

“I don’t get you sometimes.” He was yelling this part. “Why don’t you get angry? Why don’t you ever cry? Why do you keep yourself so locked up? What’s the matter with you, Christine?”

And when I got up to walk away—“See what I mean? You’re going to go shut yourself in your room, close out the world so you don’t have to deal with all of this. Sometimes I think you’re heartless, Christine.” I could hear him yelling through the closed door.
He gets mad. He’s not abusive of course, he never hits me, of course. No, nothing like that. But the things he says to me sometimes when he’s mad, really mad, they are pretty bad. And they stay with me.

The homeless guy hardly talks. Dad is dominating conversation, as usual. From the corner of my eye, I can see he’s looking out the window, replying on occasion with an “uh-huh” to the glass. One limp hand rests on the seat between us. I don’t dare look at his face, but glance from time to time as his runaway hand. His nails are dirty. His fingers are bony, and I can see his knuckles poking out of his pale yellowed skin. His skin is like wax paper, like the skin on my grandpa’s hands. It’s trembling too, like grandpa’s do.

I take a deep breath and glance to the side. His clothes, which looked nice enough from a distance, are stained and worn out up close. His red sweater is missing two buttons, and the hem has come undone, leaving loose threads dangling. The sole of his left shoe is ripped almost completely off, and there are holes in the toes.

Dad’s words become background noise along with the sound of the wind against the car, the tires against the road, the roar of the engine. He likes to hear himself talk. No one else cares what he has to say. He’s even boring the homeless guy.

Where did this guy come from? He seems too young to have already ruined his life. He must have had some pretty terrible parents. Maybe his mom drank too much, and his dad abandoned him. This girl Jessie from my class told me one day that her mom would come home drunk at night sometimes. My parents don’t get drunk. Who would this guy be if he’d been given my parents? I wish I’d gotten a better look at his face. Maybe he’s even handsome.
I turn to look at him directly. His forehead is pressed against the window now. Maybe he’s even asleep. It’s nighttime. He’s probably been walking all day. We pass a streetlamp on my side of the road, and its light floods the car for a moment. Phil’s reflection flashes briefly across the dark window. I think his eyes are open. We pass another light, and I realize that he’s watching me through the reflection in the window. I quickly turn to look out my own window.

Why does he keep staring at me? My dad always has the best ideas; picking up a pervert to put in the backseat of his car with his thirteen-year-old daughter. I can’t wait until they drop him off so I can tell my parents how he sat there and watched me the entire time he was in the car. Maybe my dad would think next time before letting creeps off the street get in the car with his family.

I bet he’s still watching me. I wonder what he’s thinking about.

I wonder if he thinks I’m pretty.

“Isn’t that right, honey?” I realize Mike’s talking to me.

“What?” It’s dark now, and we’re no longer downtown. We’re somewhere I don’t immediately recognize, somewhere along the long, dark interstate.

“Phil’s going over to his aunt’s house for the holidays. I was telling him how we had such a nice time last year visiting my Aunt Carol on New Year’s Day last year.”

“Oh. Yes, that was nice.”

Mike and I always seem to remember things differently. What I remember from New Year’s Day is Jamie shutting herself in the bathroom for an hour and a half. Her cousin had said something to her, I don’t know what. She wouldn’t tell me. She wouldn’t talk to anyone. It
caused all sorts of commotion, her aunt and uncle both tried to talk to her, to coax her out. She missed dessert and when she finally came out, she wanted to leave right away. At home, I tried to ask her about it, and she just shrugged her shoulders. “It’s fine, mom. It was nothing.” And she went to bed.

Of course, all of that, that’s not what Mike remembers of our New Year’s Day at Aunt Carol’s. He remembers eating honey-glazed ham and mashed potatoes for dinner and watching the game with his brother Jimmy. To him, that was “a nice time.”

I look at Jamie through the side mirror. It’s dark so it’s hard to see past my own reflection in the window, but from time to time my reflection grows transparent enough for me to see her in the mirror. She doesn’t realize that I was thirteen years old too once, and she can’t see that I understand where she’s coming from so much of the time. She thinks I’m old and out of touch. But I know what it’s like to hide like she does. I know what it’s like to keep quiet.

Ahead of us, the bright yellow lines on the dark highway rush into view under the beam of the headlights. Mike is still talking. “And then,” he says, “Me and Boomer, the kid from across the street, remember? We went down to the pond with firecrackers…” I’ve heard that story fifty times. What Mike does though, is he sees what he wants to see. His audience is half asleep. I’ve barely heard a word from anyone else since we stopped to pick this man up. But Mike wouldn’t notice. He carries on like we’re all hanging to every word he’s saying.

Once Jamie told me she thinks I let her father walk all over me. She doesn’t know anything about marriage, of course. She doesn’t know how hard it is. At thirteen years old, she doesn’t know what it means to be diplomatic. I’ve got to choose my battles. Otherwise, it would be constant bickering. I have learned how to keep my mouth shut in order to spare us from another useless fight. Mike hasn’t learned that. And maybe I’ve learned too well, maybe I’ve
overcompensated for him. I know she watches me when I keep quiet. When I keep quiet even though maybe I shouldn’t. And then should I be so shocked by her silent episodes?

And today, when Mike wanted to pull over, I didn’t keep quiet. I told him I didn’t want that man in my car. Yet here he is. It’s not that I think it’s fair that we have this nice SUV with heat to take us around town comfortably, while others should have to walk in the cold. It’s not like I think that’s ok. But we don’t know who this guy is. We’re letting him into our car, with our child inside, and we have no idea who he is or what his intentions are. To just allow him to sit in the back with my little girl seems, I don’t know, it just seems dangerous. It’s not that I don’t care, but that I care too much about my child to leave her back there with some man I don’t know. And I made an attempt to tell Mike, I did. But there’s still a stranger in our backseat.

And there is my daughter back there too. And she watched me, and she saw me allow Mike to ignore my wishes. She watched me let it all happen. This is a battle that I choose to fight. This is not an issue that I want dropped, even once it’s over. Once this man is out of my car, I will pursue this.

I look at my own reflection in the dark window. In the dim light, my hair is like a picture frame around my pale face, hanging dark and straight. I like when a piece of it falls in front of my eyes. I think it looks mysterious, but it drives my mom crazy. She’s constantly brushing it back, telling me I shouldn’t hide my beautiful brown eyes. Maybe he thinks I have pretty eyes.

I look at Phil out of the corner of my eye. He’s skinny, very skinny, but he has broad shoulders. He’s probably very strong, even though he’s so skinny. What if Phil’s dad hadn’t abandoned him and his mom wasn’t an alcoholic? What would I think then, if I knew that he
thought I was pretty? What if he lived in my neighborhood, and I caught him staring at me? Would I still think he was a pervert?

Phil is probably the quiet, smart type. He’s down on his luck. That’s what dad was always saying about people. He never says that people are poor, but that they’re “down on their luck.” Phil wasn’t really given any chance to do better since his home life was so bad. Maybe he just needs someone nice to get him back on his feet so that he can do something great.

He probably thinks I’m pretty, and he’s fallen in love with me. The two of us could fall in love. We’d fall in love, and my family could give him a chance to be something. They could pay for his education. He could go to college and study English. He could write a book about his life, about living on the streets. And he would love me because he thinks I’m beautiful and because I turned his life around.

I turn to look at him. This time I don’t try to pretend like I’m not. We shouldn’t have to pretend like we’re not looking at each other. It’s too dark though. I can’t see him at all. Suddenly we pass a light, and I know this time that he’s looking right at me through the glass. And he knows I’m looking back. The window goes back to black as we continue down the road. Every time we pass a light, his eyes lock with mine for a moment before the window again goes black.

Phil leans back in his seat, taking his eyes from the window. He puts his head back against the headrest and stares at the roof of the car. Why did he look away? For a moment, I study the silhouette of his profile. He has a crook in his nose and a sharp Adam’s apple. It’s dark, but I can tell he’s handsome.
We’re no longer on the interstate. We’re in Raytown. Raytown’s not an area I would drive through at this time of day, if I had a choice. We pull up to a stoplight. Young men are lingering outside a 7-11. There was an armed robbery there a few weeks ago. I heard it on the news. An old raggedy-looking man hobbles toward our car. My finger automatically jumps to the door lock switch and presses it out of habit, even though I already locked them. The old man crosses the street in front of our car. The light turns green, and a block later, we come to a stop at a stop sign.

“Well Phil, we’re in town square. Does this look like a good place to drop you?”

“This is fine,” responds a quiet voice from the backseat.

“If you want to direct us to your aunt’s house, it would be no problem.” I don’t imagine any sweet old aunts live around here.

“This is fine.”

“Are you sure, because…”

“He said he’s fine, Mike,” I interject, with a more severe tone than I intended.

“All right, honey. I’m just trying to be helpful. It’s awful cold out there.”

I watch through the mirror as he gets his bags from the trunk, closes it, and then heads off. He walks right past my window with his shoulders slumped and his eyes to the ground. He’s young, much younger than I realized. Probably in his early twenties, maybe even younger. And he’s very thin.

“Can you believe that?” Mike is saying in the background. “That nice young man was going to walk all the way home in this weather.” I keep watching as he trudges off into a neighborhood that I wouldn’t choose to drive through during the day. The sole of his left shoe is
falling off, and he trips over it, almost dropping his bags. He regains his balance and continues on his way.

“And you and me and Jamie are perfectly fine.” I don’t say anything. “Perfectly fine.”

I watch until we turn the corner, and I can’t see him anymore. Mike is still talking.

I turn and stare out the window. We’re no longer downtown, but we’re nowhere close to where I live. Normally, we wouldn’t drive home this way. Mom would definitely never drive around here at night. Dad is still talking. We stop at a stoplight, in front of a convenience store. There are a few men sitting on the curb talking loudly. An old man shuffles slowly across the street in front of our car. I can see Mom’s eyes darting around through the side mirror. The doors are locked, but she presses the lock button again, just to make sure. Dad stops at the next stop sign.

“Well Phil, we’re in town square,” he announces loudly. “Does this look like a good place to drop you?”

“This is fine.” His Adam’s apple moves up and down when he speaks.

“If you want to direct us to your aunt’s house, it would be no problem.”

“This is fine.”

“Are you sure, because…”

“He said he’s fine, Mike.”

“All right, honey. I’m just trying to be helpful. It’s awful cold out there.”

“That’s really kind of you, Mr. Turner. This’ll be fine.”
“All right, all right. Well it was good talking with you, Phil. Do you need some help with your bags?”

“I’ve got it. Thank you.” Phil pulls on the door handle, but it doesn’t open.

“The door must be stuck. Jamie, help Phil with the door handle. She knows the trick to that door.”

I look at Phil, and he looks at me. I lean across him and pull on the handle. It opens immediately.

Before I can move back to my side of the car, a quick whisper, so quiet I almost confuse it with the wind, slithers into my ear.

“I’ll think of you when I touch myself.”

I slide back to my side of the car and stare out the window.

“Aw, see! Jamie knows what she’s doing,” Dad says.

Phil gets out, grabs his bag from the trunk, and then he’s gone.

“Can you believe that? That nice young man was going to walk all the way home in this weather. He would have frozen to death. I think we all learned a valuable lesson today about human beings. Just because someone doesn’t have what we have doesn’t mean that he is less of a human being. And we came to no harm, Christine. You and me and Jamie are perfectly fine. Perfectly fine.”
Gregory steps into the car in a white button-down shirt, a forest green tie and dress slacks. As usual, Susan has not dressed up for the interview. She wears a short-sleeve pullover sweater and faded jeans from a few decades ago. They’re the kind that taper at the ankles, but they come up high and puff out in the hips. Gregory can see a ripple of her doughy midsection hanging over the tight waistline.

“Hello Susan!” he says with his normal enthusiasm, straightening and tightening his tie.

“Good morning,” she responds, raising her eyebrows. “You seem very awake for six forty-five in the morning.”

“I am. I’m ready to face the world.”

“Good. That makes one of us. I need caffeine to help me with that.” Susan takes a sip from her coffee and rolls down the windows.

They drive in silence. It’s a clear, bright day. The morning glows with a yellow light, and the pastures are so pure green that it’s almost blinding. Two weeks ago, when they first arrived in rural Arkansas, Gregory found the country air a refreshing antidote to the metal and pavement of their usual D.C. landscape. But now the picturesque beauty seems artificial, even nauseating.

The fresh morning wind whips at Gregory’s hair and shirt collar as Susan speeds down the windy country road. He squints into the wind and guards his hair with his left hand. After a moment, he rolls the window back up.

Susan glances over at him. “How’s Lydia? Did you get a chance to talk with her last night?”

Gregory tugs at his tie. “She’s good. I think she had a sinus infection a few days ago.”
The last time Gregory had talked to his wife on the phone, he got distracted while she was
telling him about a red mark on her stomach that she thought could be hives. When the voice on
the other end suddenly stopped, Gregory didn’t know what to say so he ended the conversation
quickly, saying that he had a lot of work to do. That was four nights ago. In their two years of
marriage, they had never spent even a night apart. He was surprised how easy it had been to not
talk to her.

“Are you going to call her tonight?”

“I don’t know,” he says, hoping Susan will stop asking him questions.

“Hey, speaking of tonight, the Welch’s from our interview on Monday invited me to dinner.
I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you tagged along.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if he tagged along.” Gregory hates the way she worded it.

“We’ll see. I may be busy, you know, going through notes and doing work.” When Susan
doesn’t say anything, he adds, “Thank you for inviting me, though.”

Susan nods.

Gregory has typed out the revised interview questions, printed them out, and put them in his
briefcase.

“How far away is Mr. Babcock’s house?”

“It’s just down the road a few minutes. Maybe another ten.”

“Oh. And all the recording equipment is still in the trunk from yesterday?”

“Right.”

They make the rest of the drive in silence.
“Hello, Mr. Babcock?” Susan yells through the door. No response.

Gregory and Susan stand on an unfinished and unstable wooden porch attached to a two-story white house. The lawn looks as if it’s never seen a lawnmower. Gregory stares at a strip of peeling paint blowing in the wind on the side of the house.

They’ve already rung the doorbell and knocked twice with no response. Susan twists the knob. It’s unlocked.

“Susan, what are you doing? This isn’t our property. You can’t just walk in!”

“What are we supposed to do? Head home tomorrow without the interview? I’m just going to see if he’s here. Mr. Babcock?” she yells through the open door.

“Susan, I really don’t think—”

“—What? What is it?” A large man in his underwear appears at the top of the stairs.

“I am so sorry, sir. Susan, close the door!”

“Hello, are you Mr. Babcock?”

“Sure am. Who are you?” He remains at the top of the stairs.

“My name’s Susan Dawson, and this is Gregory Michaels. The university sent us here. I believe we scheduled an interview with you today for 7:00,” she says. “And it’s 7:02,” she adds with a smile.

“An interview? I guess I do remember somethin about that. That’s today then? Well alrighty…” He begins to come down the stairs, and then seems to think better of it. “How about I go put on some pants first? You all come in, make yourselves at home.”
“Thank you very much, Mr. Babcock, sir. That’s very kind of you. I’m sorry to barge in on you like this,” Gregory calls back. He trips over the welcome mat, but catches himself on the doorknob and follows Susan inside.

“Go ahead and take a seat in the kitchen,” he calls from upstairs. “I’ll put some coffee on, and we can do the interview in there.”

“Thank you, Mr. Babcock,” Gregory calls back. The floor is dirty, tiled with mustard yellow and lime green linoleum from right out of the 1960’s. There are dishes piled in the sink and a few fat house flies buzzing around. Gregory sets the recording equipment on the small card table in the center of the kitchen. It’s covered in a sticky film of either syrup or jam. There is only one fold-up metal chair at the table.

Gregory busies himself, plugging in the recorder and organizing the interview questions. He notices Susan lingering in the living room.

“Susan,” he says in a loud whisper, “he said we are to do the interview in the kitchen.”

“I’m just looking around,” she says in a normal talking voice.

“It’s rude to go snooping in someone’s house.” Gregory is leaning into the doorway now.

Susan doesn’t respond and continues looking at the framed photographs on the mantelpiece.

Gregory hears Mr. Babcock coming down the stairs. “Susan, he’s coming! Come in here now!” he whispers.

“What’re ya doin in here?” he demands, stepping into the living room. Gregory retreats to the kitchen table.

“Just admiring your pictures. Is this you as a child?” Susan asks.
“Uh huh, and that’s my mama. Kindest woman I ever knew. Never was a looker, though,” he says, taking the picture and squinting at it up close, then bursting out into a loud cackle from the back of his throat, reminiscent, Gregory thinks, of an alley cat fight.

The two make their way into the kitchen where Gregory is standing over the table reviewing his notes.

“So tell me a little bit more about what you both are doin,” he says, pulling up two more chairs from the living room.

“Well, sir, we are graduate students at George Washington University. We are studying linguistic anthropology. We are researching linguistic diversity among Southern dialects. Essentially, we just want to record the way that you talk so that we can compare it to the way other Southerners talk.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” says Mr. Babcock. “I think I remember hearin about all of this. Why don’t ya take a seat?” He walks toward the messy countertop and starts preparing the coffee. Susan and Gregory sit down.

“And actually,” says Susan, “if you don’t mind, we’d like to go ahead and start recording the conversation now. Anything that passes in conversation might be useful in our research.”

“Don’t mind a bit.”

Gregory hits the play and record buttons simultaneously, and the tapes begin to roll. Mr. Babcock sits down at the table with them.

“So how long you been living out here in the boonies?” Susan asks with a smile.

Mr. Babcock laughs. “The boonies, sweetheart? You must be from the city then, cuz this ain’t nowhere near the boonies. We got a Wal-Mart within a half hour’s drive. That makes us something of a metropolis out here.”
“We should start by having you state your name,” Gregory interjects. “If you don’t mind, of course, please,” he adds.

“My name? Didn’t they tell you that already, son? My name is Jefferson Lloyd Daniel Babcock. Feel as though, if you come to a man’s house, you should already know that.”

“We just like to have it on record, sir. And could I get your age?”

“Seventy-eight. And enough with the ‘sir’s,’ you’re makin me feel old. Call me Lloyd.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” says Gregory, pulling at his tie. “Are you married?”

“Does it look like any woman lives here?” he says, motioning at the stark white walls and water-stained ceiling. “No, son. Never been married. You married?”

“Well,” says Gregory, laughing uncomfortably and feeling blood rush to his face, “we’re not here to interview me. This is…”

“It’s just somethin I was wonderin. And I think it’s only fair that if you ask me questions, I get to ask you a few back.”

“All right, sir, I mean, Lloyd,” he says, straightening his tie. “Yes, yes I am married.”

“You sure are, ain’t you?” he says, letting out another cackle. “I knew there had to be a woman behind you cause of the way you pull at the tie all the time, like it reminds you of that leash she got around your neck tied too tight. Isn’t that right?”

“No, not exactly. It’s not like that very much at all, in fact,” Gregory mutters, trailing off at the end. His face is burning. He flips through his notes, looking for the next question to ask.

“You know you remind me of my Uncle Amos,” Susan interjects, smiling. “He was a firecracker. Never knew when to shut up either.”

Lloyd howls. “I see where you get it, then!”
Gregory sits back in his chair and allows himself fade into the background. He just met this old man, and there he goes already making assumptions. People are always trying to sum Gregory up. And they do it like they think it’s easy. Gregory hates it. Of course, what would Lloyd know anyway? Gregory likes very much spending time with his wife. They like to watch movies together. They have weekly television shows that they always keep up with. Every Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday night, in fact. He’s just been busy recently, that’s all.

Gregory met Lydia in a geology lab class that they had to take as a required elective. They were lab partners. Their conversation would never digress from the lab manual instructions. Gregory thought the class was very easy, but he and Lydia would always be the last two to finish the project, usually because Lydia had so many questions, and they always had to wait for the professor to make her way around to them and answer the question before they could move to the next step. Gregory was sometimes annoyed by the slow way that she worked, poring over every word in the instructions. Sometimes he would catch himself staring at her profile as her eyes followed her slow-moving finger through the text. She had thin, grey-brown hair that was always pulled into a low, loose ponytail. Her wrists were like knobby toothpicks, pale with a sprinkling of black hair. She was barely five feet tall and very thin, and when she was hunched over reading, she sometimes reminded him of a little bat, curled up sound asleep. On the last day of class, she surprised him by asking him to a movie. Gregory told her that he would have to check his schedule of course, but if she gave him her number, he would call her. Gregory’s hand shook as he picked up the receiver later that night to tell her that he was free on Friday around 6.

Gregory worried all week what he would do, what he would say, what questions he would ask her, how he should act. He was relieved when Lydia talked the entire time. She told him all about her mother and her sister. She told him that she wanted to be a librarian, and the kinds of
classes she had to take in school to prepare for her career. She made comments on anything she saw around them. In the midst of a story about her childhood dog, Goliath, Lydia noticed a girl crossing the street in front of them. “Hey, I have that sweater! I was actually wearing that sweater in lab the other day. Do you remember it? That lab was so hard, don’t you think? I got a B in the class, though, so I guess it turned out ok. And Professor Carmines is super nice.”

Gregory was happy to sit back and listen. She didn’t seem to notice that his hands were shaking as he clenched the steering wheel, and she just kept talking when he spilled part of his Coke on the concession counter. Five months later, they were engaged.

Gregory watches the conversation that continues between Susan and Lloyd. Susan begins telling one of her ridiculous animated stories, flailing her arms around, standing up to act out the dialogue in character. She’s not a small woman either. At one point in the story, she throws her arms in the air, and her green pullover reveals part of her belly. Gregory stares at the white roll of fat that hangs over the tight waistband of her jeans. He notes the stretch marks that cut through her flesh. He watches her flab ripple when she laughs. She sees him looking and whips her shirt over her exposed skin, yet manages to continue her story without missing a beat.

The first day he met Susan, she was running late to a meeting with Gregory and Professor Bradley, the linguistics professor that they were working with. Susan wasn’t wearing makeup, as usual, and she had on a t-shirt and those awful jeans. She came rushing in, apologizing profusely to Professor Bradley, and she dropped a notepad right in front of Gregory. How close her huge backside came to touching his knee when she bent over to pick it up!

But there was something about Susan that Gregory didn’t understand. She had a way of drawing people to her. Within a week, she’d somehow met just about everyone in the
department. Every day, Susan would eat lunch with someone new. Sometimes she invited Gregory, but he never wanted to intrude.

“I’ve got some work to catch up on,” he’d say. “But thank you.” He’d wait until she left to pull out his microwavable pasta and can of Coke. He’d eat in the office while playing online Tetris until he saw her coming back through the half-opened blinds. He’d quickly throw away his food and maximize an academic journal article on the computer screen before she walked in.

One night a few weeks ago, when Gregory and Lydia were watching the season finale of his favorite show *The Amazing Race*, he was having trouble paying attention. He kept looking out the window, wondering what Susan was doing. She was probably out at a bar with a crowd of friends. She was probably meeting new people, people that she would say hi to as she walked through campus the next day, people that she would get lunch with next week. Gregory looked at his wife next to him on the sofa, curled up in a blanket. He tapped his foot on the floor.

“I’m going to go for a walk,” Gregory said suddenly. His heart was beating hard.

“Now? There’s twenty minutes left in the show.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” Gregory stepped into the cool evening and took a deep breath. A surge of energy rushed through him. He took a brisk walk around the block and was again standing at his own front door. He was breathing heavily, and he felt very much in control as he took in fresh air to fill his chest, and then released it. Then he went inside and sat back down in the same place on the couch to watch the final few minutes of the show with his wife. It was then that he decided he would apply to do field research in Arkansas for Professor Bradley.

“I think we’ve got everything we need then,” Susan is saying. “Can you think of anything else we need to go over?”

Gregory realizes she’s talking to him. “I think you’ve about covered it.”
“It was really nice talking with you, Lloyd,” Susan says, gathering up the equipment.

“Thank you for inviting us into your home.”

“It was my pleasure. I’m glad I could be of some help to you. Better keep on eye on this one, son,” he says to Gregory. “She’s a real live wire,” Lloyd howls.

* * *

Gregory and Susan spend the remainder of the day in a diner, going over notes and writing evaluations of their trip. Their waitress is awkward and boyish. Her light pink uniform dress is stretched tight across her broad shoulders and rides up high on her gangly legs.

Gregory and Susan compare notes over coffee and scrambled eggs. They write evaluations in silence. Susan transcribes about an hour of the day’s interview onto her laptop, and then she begins to pack up.

“I’ve got to get to dinner at the Welch’s. Are you going to join me?”

“I think I should keep working. Someone’s got to get the rest of this stuff done.” He didn’t look up for his work.

“We have time on the plane, and all weekend to finish this up. Come on, Gregory. I think it will be good for you.”

“Good for me?”

“Yeah, I mean I just think you’d be a happier person if you made some effort to branch out and get to know some people.”

Gregory puts down his pencil. “Excuse me, when did I ever say I was an unhappy person?”
“I mean, I don’t know Gregory, all you do is work. It just seems like you could be getting more out of life. But I’m not trying to force you into anything. Don’t come if you don’t want to.”

“And if I did come to the Welch’s, you think I’d be able to get a word in with you there? You think because you dominate conversation and laugh the loudest that you’re ‘getting more out of life?’ he says using exaggerated air quotations. “I think that you should know that you come off as desperate. And obnoxious.”

There’s a moment of silence. Gregory has shocked himself. She looks straight at him with her jaw slightly dropped before saying anything. Then she leans forward. “The only reason I talk so much,” pointing to herself, “is because you are incapable of holding a conversation with another human being.” She jabs a finger at Gregory when she says the word “you,” and Gregory watches the flab of her underarm jiggle. “I’m always smoothing things over after you because you’re so uncomfortable with yourself that you make everyone around you feel awkward.”

Gregory has never seen Susan like this before. Her cheeks are red and splotchy, and Gregory watches spit fly from her lips every few sentences. “God forbid I wanted you to have a little practice, to see that it’s not so difficult to talk to another human being after all. But for some reason you make it impossible for anyone to get to know you. You want more out of life than what you’re getting in your unhappy little existence, that much is obvious, but for some reason you’re too scared or just unwilling to make any changes. It’s kind of pathetic, actually, for a grown man.” Susan bends over the table and gathers up the rest of her papers. He can hear her breathing heavily. “I’m taking the rental car. You can get a cab.”

Gregory watches her stomp loudly through the restaurant, her free left arm flailing madly with each step. Then, with the chime of the diner door bell, she’s gone. The restaurant is silent.
He tightens his tie and clears his throat. He stares at the notes in front of him, but he can’t focus.

The only other customers in the restaurant, a young family of four seated a few booths away from him, have stopped talking and set their utensils down. He can feel the waitresses staring at him from behind the counter. He picks up his pen and tries to look busy.

“Can I get you anything else?” The waitress startles Gregory.

“No, just a check. Oh, great, well I guess it looks like I’ll be paying for her meal too.”

“She skipped out on you?” The waitress looks amused.

“Guess so,” says Gregory, putting the papers back in their folder.

“Girlfriends will do that to you,” she says with a little chuckle.

Gregory looked up at her. “Susan? Oh, she’s not my girlfriend. Thank God!”

The waitress laughs, and Gregory smiles back at her.

“I’ll go get the check,” she says. Gregory watches her walk to the back of the restaurant.

She tries to pull down her short uniform as she walks, but it just rides back up on to her hips.

Gregory puts his notes and laptop in his bag. He sees her coming back in the mirror, and he slips his wedding ring in his pocket.

“Here you are, sir.”

“Ok, hold on one second.” The bill comes to eleven dollars. Gregory pulls a twenty from his wallet. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you sir,” she says.

“You can just call me Gregory.”

“Well, thank you, Gregory.”

“You’re welcome. What’s your name?”

She points to the nametag on her chest. “Gloria,” she says.
“Oh, well it’s nice to meet you, Gloria.”

“You too.” Gloria smiles and takes his plates from him. “Have a good day,” she says, and walks off.

Gregory gathers his things, calls a cab, and sits outside to wait. He hears a door slam on the side of the restaurant. He gets up, creeps to the edge of the building, and peeks around the corner. Gloria is sitting on the curb with a cigarette in her right hand, texting with her left.

“Oh, hey there Gloria!”

She looks up, waves, and goes back to texting. Gregory stands where he is for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then he walks over. “Are you on break?”

“We don’t really get breaks. I don’t have any tables right now, so they let me smoke.” She keeps texting.

“Oh.” Gregory notices that Gloria is young, perhaps only nineteen or twenty. Her hand holding the cigarette is shaking. He stands over her for a minute while she continues to text. He clears his throat, but she doesn’t look up. “I’m just waiting for a cab to come pick me up. That woman from earlier, she was my ride, and she just left.”

Gloria nods, then snaps her phone shut. “Well, sit down, if you like. I don’t have to go back in until someone comes into the restaurant, and not many people come in for scrambled eggs at four in the afternoon.”

Gregory sits down. He is almost touching her. He wonders if he is sitting too close. She takes a drag from her cigarette.

“Do you know your hand is shaking?”

“Yeah. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Paula’s managing today, and she never lets us eat anything without paying. Plus the nicotine.” She takes another drag. “It makes me jittery.”
“That’s awful. I think that’s just terrible. And no breaks either? That should be against the law.” Gloria just shrugs. She looks straight ahead and doesn’t say anything. She has a large, crooked nose and bad teeth, but flawless skin. She looks too young to be such an expert smoker, holding the cigarette so comfortably between her fingers, casually drawing it to her mouth, inhaling and exhaling at just the right time. Not like that practiced, fumbling way that kids do it. She takes another drag from her cigarette, then puts it out. Gregory grabs her hand, then. She turns to him with a startled look on her face.

“Your hand is still shaking,” he says. Gregory doesn’t know what to do. He holds her hand with one of his and pets it with the other. She watches as he does it. Gregory sees a taxi turn into the parking lot. He turns to Gloria, yanks her to him by the hand and kisses her, hard, on the mouth. Gloria jumps up.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? I don’t even know you! What’s your problem?”

A large male cook comes out. “What’s going on out here?” He’s glaring at Gregory.

“I’m—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… I’m sorry. I’m leaving. I’m sorry.”

Gregory stands up, waves at the taxi, and grabs his bag. He trips over the curb and falls against the door of the cab before getting in.

* * *

Gregory’s hotel room has a damp, mildewy smell. He shivers and turns down the A/C. He leaves off all of the lights, save for a small lamp beside his bed. Light cast by the streetlamp filters through the blinds to create a lined pattern. Gregory sits in a sofa chair by the window,
trapping him in the pattern of shadows. Turning his hands around and wiggling his fingers, he watches the horizontal shadows from the blinds dance across his skin.

He has spent many nights in this room going over interview notes, revising questions for the following day, and listening to Italian opera. Why does tonight feel different?

A car rushes by on the country highway outside his window. The headlights cause the shadows to expand and race across the wall.

He picks up the hotel telephone and dials his home phone number.

“Hello?” Lydia’s voice sounds surprised on the other end.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey. I was just thinking about you. I haven’t heard from you in three days.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ve been busy with work.”

“Too busy to make a thirty second phone call?”

“I’m sorry. I guess I just got caught up with things.” Lydia doesn’t respond. “So how are you?”

“I’m ok I guess. I’ve still got that sinus infection. Mom came by the other day to drop off some medication for that. Now I’ve got this cough that won’t go away. It’s keeping me up at night. I’ve been trying to lay low for most of the week. Don’t want to spread my germs.”

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling well.”

“Yeah, it’s ok. I think it might have been Paula at the library who gave it to me. She came in sick the other day because she needs the hours, and I think she might have given it to me. She never covers her mouth when she coughs. And we share the same computer too when we need to look up call numbers, so she probably got her germs all over the keyboard. And I think I even had a fever yesterday. It hasn’t been a fun week. Plus I think that spot on my stomach has
gotten bigger. I don’t think it’s hives, but Mom said that maybe I should talk to the dermatologist to see for sure…”

“I miss you,” Gregory says, cutting her off.

There’s a pause on the other end. “I miss you too,” she says. “I watched *The Amazing Race* last night.”

“Oh really? I didn’t get a chance to see it.”

“Jim and Alex got cut. It was a good show. I recorded it for you.”

Gregory smiles. “That was nice of you. Hey,” he says, looking at the clock. “It’s eight o’clock right now, nine your time. *Survivor* is coming on.”

“I know I was about to turn it on.”

Gregory hears her click on the living room television. He reaches for the hotel TV remote and flips it on. Gregory pulls his tie loose, then decides to take it off altogether. He leans back in his chair. He stays on the phone with Lydia for the whole episode. Aside from Lydia’s side comments about the show, neither of them say much.

“It was good talking to you, Lydia” Gregory says when it’s over. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Ok, goodnight,” says Lydia.

“Goodnight.” Gregory hangs up the phone. He lies down on the bed above the covers in his shirtsleeves and tie. He stares at the ceiling and watches the movement of the shadows. He thinks of Lloyd looking at him and laughing. He can hear Susan’s voice; “awkward,” he hears her saying, “unhappy,” she says, “pathetic.” He thinks about her, over at the Welch’s, drinking, talking, laughing too loud. He wonders what Susan would think of Gloria, of what happened
between him and Gloria. He thinks about Gloria’s mouth, the way her young lips were parted naturally, invitingly right before he kissed them.

He thinks about Lydia. She misses him. He can see her now, curled up in a small ball on the couch like a little baby bat, wrapped in a blanket with only a tuft of fuzzy grey-brown hair poking out. Sometimes when she falls asleep like that, Gregory will wake her up for bed, and she will ask him to carry her. He will lift her, still wrapped in the blanket, and carry her up the stairs slowly. She weighs almost nothing, and he can feel her vertebrae and ribs through the blanket. He sets her down on her side, still wrapped and curled up, and she falls instantly into a light and uneasy sleep. Sometimes he lies next to her, listening to her gurgles and growls, until he falls asleep. A car drives by outside and the shadows race across the ceiling. Gregory can almost feel Lydia beside him as he dozes off.
Joe

When Joe sat down, a smell like stale coffee and urine seemed to rise out of the maroon cushions. The two-engine turboprop to West Virginia was the fourth plane he’d been on since leaving Baghdad fifty-eight hours before. He had long, bony legs, and he hated having to cram them into tight spaces. Plus he had the window seat. What if he had to go to the bathroom? What if the person who sat down next to him fell asleep? What would he do? He hated window seats. He hated flying.

He was working on wedging his bag in the tiny space beneath the seat in front of him when a slender girl, maybe eighteen, sat down next to him. She smiled when he looked up at her.

“Hi,” she said.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Hey.”

He took out his iPod and fumbled with the earphones. He didn’t put them to his ears, not just yet. He wondered if she would say anything else to him. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She glanced back at him.

“How come?”

“I’ve just been flying for about two and a half days now, trying to get home.”

“Two and a half days? Are you coming from Iraq?” she asked, eyeing his uniform.

“Mm-hmm. Yep, been over there eighteen months now without a break. Three years, all together. Signed up in 2001, just before 9/11, just before I knew what I was getting into.”

“That’s a long time,” she said, digging through her bag.
“Sure is. And now they just send me off home, back to my family. Don’t even ask me how I feel about it. It’s rough going home.”

The girl shoved her purse under the seat in front of her and positioned herself to face him. “Why is that?”

“I don’t know, it’s just like everyone is wanting to touch you when you get home. They wanna touch you and talk to you and have you talk back. And all you wanna do is go to your room and sit. Just sit in the quiet.” The safety instructions came over the loudspeakers then, and Joe pretended to watch as the flight attendant demonstrated how to buckle a seatbelt. The girl watched too.

“In case of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device.” Joe almost laughed out loud. To live through three years in Iraq and then die in a plane to West Virginia. The irony would be too much.

When it was finished, the two sat in silence. The girl picked up her book and began reading.

“The worst part is all of the hugging,” he said, and she turned to him again. “They’re all going to wanna hug me when I get in. It’s not like I don’t want to see them. I just can’t stand them all touching me like that. I want to be like, ‘Will you guys just leave me alone and stop touching me?’”

The girl watched him. “Who are you going to see in West Virginia? Do your parents live out there?”

“Nah, I don’t see my parents anymore. Well my dad, he’s never been around, and I haven’t seen my mom in years. My grandparents live out there. It’s not like I don’t wanna see
my grandparents, I just don’t want them hugging on me and touching me. My grandpa, though. It’ll be good to see my grandpa.”

“Yeah, I bet you miss them a lot out there. What are you going to do while you’re back?”

“Probably go out a lot. Some of the guys from my unit are going to be in town, so I think I’ll hang out with them. Maybe go to a few bars. They told me I couldn’t drink, or that I shouldn’t drink. They said that at least the first few days that I’m back, I shouldn’t drink. ‘Don’t worry, guys,’ I told them, ‘I’ll come back in two weeks. Don’t worry about what I do when I’m there.’ But I was thinking, ‘Don’t drink? Yeah, right.’”

“Wait, who told you you couldn’t drink?”

“The psychiatrist. He thinks I’m going to poison myself. I think it’s none of his business what I do when I’m home. But he said no drinking the first two days, and I said, ‘Ok, sure thing, doc.’”

“How long will you spend at home?”

“Two weeks. It’s sorta like a joke, you know? They put me in this tin can and take three whole days to fly me out here and three whole days to fly me back, just to be here for two weeks. And I hate flying. Might as well not even come home at all. I get here, and I think, ‘Who are these people?’ and ‘What am I doing here?’ Life’s gone by without me, people have changed, nothing’s like it was when I left. I don’t know these people anymore. And then, right when I’m starting to get used to things, I’m in the tin can again, flying back.”

The girl didn’t say anything.

“I haven’t slept in a while. That’s maybe why I’m talking so much. It’s been three whole days since I’ve slept, ‘cause of all this travel. I’m sorry if I’m talking too much.”
“You’re fine. Don’t worry about it.” The girl smiled at him.

Neither one said anything, and the girl picked up her book again.

He really was tired. He had one of those dull fuzzy headaches burning behind his eyes, and he was a little dizzy. He felt like he had a brick in his stomach. The plane’s engines were revving up. This was his least favorite part. He heard on a movie once that the most dangerous part of flying is taking off and that they should be safe after the first five minutes. They were speeding down the runway now. He shut the window shade and pulled out the *Sky Mall* magazine from the seat pocket. He began flipping through the pages.

“You really read those things?” the girl asked, looking over at him.

“Of course. What else you supposed to do on airplanes?”

She laughed and went back to her book.

“Look here,” he said, pointing to one of the advertisements. “A color-changing, lighted showerhead. It makes the water look like it’s changing colors. You can shower in six different colors for just $69.99.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, looking amazed.

“Hey, don’t knock it. I was thinking of buying me one of those. I think it would make showering more fun.”

“Are you serious?”

“Hundred percent serious. I have a rule that I have to make at least one expensive and totally useless purchase a year. Last year it was a disco ball,” he said, turning to page 90 and pointing it out. “I haven’t used it once.”

The girl laughed. “Wait, you spent $60 on that?”
“Hey, look at this one,” he said once she had gone back to reading. “It’s a bookshelf for just DVDs. It can hold 750. This is something only a person in the army could possibly have any use for, since we’re the only people on earth bored enough to own that many movies. I could use one of these.”

“You own 750 DVDs?”

“I don’t know. Probably something like that. It’s all you can do out there. You don’t get internet or cable, and watching bootlegged movies is about the only thing you can do. I have boxes and boxes of them.”

“You could read,” she said, holding up her book.

“Not into that. I don’t have enough concentration for that. I need something that I can just watch and that will just happen, whether I’m paying attention or not.”

“Seen any good ones lately?”

“Not really. Saw a real weird one the other day about a man who can’t remember who he is, so he has to tattoo his name and all the important information he needs to know all over his body, or else he forgets again. Goes backwards, though, starts from the end so you don’t know what’s happening the whole time.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen that. What’s the movie called?”

“I can’t remember.”

“It’s a good movie, though.”

“It was a little artsy for my taste. I just want to get a story that I don’t have to figure out myself. Something simple that I can just watch. No, I didn’t like it too much.”

He continued talking with her, pointing out funny items, until she fell asleep. It was quiet then. The main lights in the cabin were out so that people could sleep. No one around him was
talking. He stared at the *SkyMall* magazine under the dull reading light. He wished there was an in-flight movie like there was on the Boeing 747 from London. He hated the quiet. He hated when there was nothing to do. He hated letting his mind wander.

She woke up as the plane jolted, and the tires screeched against the runway. She stretched and began packing up her things.

“So your grandparents are meeting you here?” she asked sleepily as they waited for people to slowly gather their bags and exit the plane.

“That’s the plan.”

“Cool, well it was nice talking with you. I hope you have a good couple weeks off.”

“Yeah, it was nice meeting you too. Hey, you live around here right? I’m going to be going out this weekend I’m sure. Maybe I’ll see you?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she said. It was her turn then to wedge her way out of her seat and shuffle into line in the center aisle. An elderly woman, and then her husband stepped into line before Joe could, and when he finally made it to the terminal, she was nowhere in sight.

“Joey! Joey!” His grandmother was screaming and trotting clumsily toward him with outstretched arms as he emerged from the security check point. She leapt, with more force than Joe knew she still had in her, and he caught her as best he could.

“Joey! Joey we’ve missed you, Joey!” There were tears running down her face. Joe tried to squeeze her, tried to give the impression of a hug. He let go before she did, and he just stood there limply, with his arms to his sides, while she continued to squeeze him. He wished she wasn’t crying. It made him uncomfortable. In the background he could see his grandpa,
leaning against the wall, slightly hunched in his red flannel shirt, hands in pockets, grinning his usual grin. He was the same as he’d left him, the same as he was when Joey was six, the same as he’d always been.

“How was your flight? Everything went ok, right? I know how you hate flying, Joey. But now you’re safe at home for a while, right baby? We’re going to take care of you, yes we are. I’ve got all the food you like, baby. It’s all at home. I know it’s late for dinner, but I got you some steak and string beans and mashed potatoes, just like you like. I can warm it all up for you soon as we get home. Joey, it’s so good to see you!”

They approached his grandpa. From a distance, it was hard to tell that he was rounder around the middle, where he had always been so sturdy. His old flannel shirt was stretched tight around his waist. And his face, too, his face wasn’t the same. When he got up close, he could see the lines around his eyes that hadn’t been there before. And there were bags beneath them. He had the same tight mouth and jaw line, but his eyes looked swollen and tired.

“Hi son,” his grandpa said. His voice was still strong and deep, but it was scratchy like he had a cold. “How you been?”

Joe’s grandpa reached out to give him a handshake. His grip was strong. Joey noticed hands were dotted by age, and his skin was thin. Joe didn’t remember being able to see his veins and the outlines of knuckles and tendons before.

“I’ve been all right. How are you?”

“Just fine. It’s good to see you, Joey. We’ve missed you.”

“It’s good to be back,” he said, looking out the window.

Outside the heated airport, the late November air hit Joe like a wall. Iraq was hot and dry, and the damp, cold air chilled him to his core. Joe shivered and shoved his hands in his
pockets, walking just behind his grandparents as his grandmother talked rapidly about the news in the family (his cousin Sabrina was taking classes at the local community college), the church (Linda from the choir had fallen and broken her hip), and the neighborhood (the Pierce’s had a break-in only three nights back, got their TV stolen.) He’d grown up with Sabrina, and Linda used to babysit him when he was little, and the Pierce’s used to have big neighborhood barbeques that Joe always loved going to. He remembered all these things, but the memories of the people had sat in the recesses of his mind for so long that he could no longer picture any of them.

His grandmother went on, talking about the repairs grandpa was working on in the house and proudly showing him the interior and exterior of their newly purchased, only slightly worn 1989 Buick. On the ride home, he noticed that the brakes squealed every time the car stopped. He wondered if he’d have time to fix them while he was home. He shivered in the backseat. His grandma kept talking. He looked out the window.

“Joey, baby, what’s wrong?” Joe sat staring at his plate, the heavy brick still sitting in his stomach. “I made this steak just for you. Come on, I know they don’t feed you right out there. I see your arms and legs getting so thin and all. I just wanna see you eat something good. Eat the good food your grandma made for you, Joey.”

“I’m not that hungry, is all.”

“But look at you. I thought you’d come back here with some meat on your bones, but you’re looking scrawnier than ever. Now eat up, boy. Do it for your old grandma.”
“I said I’m not hungry.” His voice was loud and final, and he kept his eyes on his plate. His grandmother stopped drying. His grandpa lowered his newspaper and looked at him. Joe’s eyes met his, and Joe was surprised to receive no admonishment.

“All right, then,” she said and shuffled over to take his plate out of the way.

“You doin ok, son?” his grandpa asked when his grandmother disappeared to the kitchen.

“Just fine,” said Joe. He wished he was alone.

“Because you don’t seem just fine to me. And it’s ok if you’re not fine. I can’t imagine the things you’ve seen out there…”

“I’m fine. And if I wasn’t fine, I wouldn’t talk about it with you.”

“Who do you talk to then, Joe? Do you have people to talk to?”

Joe thought about the psychiatrist on site, whom he loathed. They sent Joe to him twice a week after they found him passed out drunk, barely breathing, face first in the dirt outside his room. He thought about his buddies, who got together to drink until they couldn’t stand, much less talk. “I have people.”

“Well I hope you do.” The low-hanging overhead lamp above the kitchen table accentuated the heavy etching around and beneath his grandpa’s eyes. There was an unfamiliar look on his face. It was similar to the stern look that used to scare Joe and also make him feel secure. But Joe didn’t feel secure now.

“I’m going to bed,” Joe said, standing up abruptly and allowing his chair to scrape loudly across the floor.

His bedroom hadn’t changed. The walls were beige, and he had a navy blue quilt on the bed that his great grandmother had made for him. He sat on the bed. The dresser and the desk were still in the same place. There was the same green magic marker sketch of a boy standing
beneath a smiling sun that he had drawn on the unfinished wood of the dresser when he was little.

He thought it smelled different. Wasn’t smell supposed to be the most memorable of the senses? He thought he’d heard that in a movie before. It didn’t smell like home here. It smelled like grease from fried food and mothballs. It smelled like old people, like decay. It wasn’t how he remembered it at all.

His room was cold. He took off his boots and got under the covers of his bed in full uniform. He could feel the springs against his back, and the covers didn’t seem to quite cover him anymore. The bed creaked beneath him when he moved, and the starched cotton sheets were about as comfortable as the paper gowns in a doctor’s office. He shivered.

The house was silent except for the hum of the television. His favorite part of the week had always been Friday night. That was the night that his mom would drop him off at his grandparent’s house, and he knew he had the whole weekend to spend with them. His grandpa would let him watch one movie with him in the living room on Friday night. He remembered sitting on the floor wrapped in a blanket at his grandpa’s feet. His grandmother would make him hot chocolate, and he would drink it slowly, feeling the warmth of the cocoa ease down his throat, then hit his stomach and radiate out to his bones. At ten o’clock sharp, his grandfather would send him to bed. Joe would always complain that there was no bedtime at his house and that his mom let him stay up past midnight if he wanted. But grandpa never listened. Joe would get in his warm bed, and sometimes his grandma would rub his back until he fell asleep. In the morning, he and his grandpa and sometimes a few of his cousins would go fishing. He remembered the disappointment of Sunday, when his stomach would hurt from thinking about going back home.
When Joe was six, he once ran and hid in his grandma’s room when he saw his mother’s Oldsmobile pull into his grandparents’ driveway. His grandma found him crying underneath the bed. She tried to calm him down and coax him out, but when his mother came in the room, he just cried harder. His mother was in a hurry. She bent down and looked at him. “Joseph, stop being a baby. Come out of there right this minute! We have to go!” she said, grabbing his arm and jerking it hard to try to pull him out. She dislocated his shoulder, and they had to go to the hospital to have it put back in place.

She was seventeen when she had Joe. Joe was always embarrassed that his mom was so much younger than all the other moms in his elementary school classes. Joe’s first grade teacher once mistook her for his big sister. And sometimes Joe felt like she acted like a sister more than a mom. They fought constantly. He held a job all through high school when she wasn’t able to keep one for more than a few months at a time. He remember coming home from work late at night, exhausted, to find her sitting on the couch watching television.

An army recruiter came to his high school and told him they’d put him through college if he enlisted. The army recruiter reminded him of his grandpa. He knew if he joined the army he’d be told when to go to bed at night and get up in the morning, he’d be told what to do and where to go. He didn’t have any other plans. He was shipped out to Iraq three years ago. He left his mother sitting on the couch in her bathrobe. He hadn’t seen her since.

Joe lay alone in his bed and stared at the ceiling, the brick still sitting in his empty stomach. When he was younger, he hadn’t noticed the long crack running along the wall. Or maybe he just forgot. And he must have also forgotten the yellow-brown water stain creeping across the ceiling. He couldn’t stop shivering, and he tugged the short quilt closer to his chin.
Joe hated doing nothing. He remembered his phone in his bag, still turned off from the plane. He flipped it open and waited for it to turn on. It vibrated in his hand. “1 New Text Message,” the screen read.

“Hey you ready to get fucked up?”

It was from Mitch, one of the guys from his unit.

“ya im done wit this family shit. where u guys at?” Joe texted back.

He lay motionless in his bed for two or three minutes with his phone in his hand, waiting for a response. When it went off, he jumped.

“Come to 2nd st bar,” it said.

Joe ripped the sheets off of him and let them fall on the floor in a tangled wad. He stripped out of his uniform and put on street clothes; a button down black shirt, jeans and Timberland boots. He was sixteen when he bought those boots. He had been working for over a year washing dishes at a Chinese buffet. He came home from school one day to find his mother sitting on the couch with the boots, still in the box, in her lap, receipt in hand.

“I can’t believe this, Joey,” she said, waving the receipt at him. He walked over to her, grabbed the box from her lap, and walked into the kitchen. She followed him.

“Excuse me?” she called after him. “One hundred and sixty-three dollars on shoes, Joseph?”

“It’s my money. I’ll spend it how I want.” He grabbed a banana and headed for his room.

“Joseph you stop and you listen to me. You don’t have any respect for me. You’re being wasteful and you don’t have any respect.”
Joe slammed the door and locked it. She screamed at him through the closed door, but Joe turned on his TV. There was an old movie playing on the public access channel. Joe adjusted the antennae just right and turned the volume up loud.

He tied up his boots and walked out into the living room.

“Joey! You gonna watch television with us? What were you doin in there? I’m glad you put on your regular clothes, now come sit down with us. We were about to watch America’s Funniest Home Videos.”

“I’m going out.” Joe didn’t make eye contact with his grandmother.

“Where you going, baby?”

“I’m just going out.”

“You’re not gonna stay here and hang out with your old grandma?”

“No.”

“Well when will you be back, baby?”

“I don’t know. Later.”

“Baby, come back soon, ok? I’m going to be sittin here worrying about you and on your first night home too. Don’t you know what time you’re going to be back?”

“Goddamnit, I said I don’t know!”

His grandmother jumped, and she caught her breath, making a strange squeaking noise.

He had never cursed at her before, and she looked frightened. He stared back, thinking he might feel something. He wondered how he would have felt before Iraq, looking his grandma in the eye like that. He felt like he wanted a drink.

His grandpa had been sitting back in his recliner reading the paper. He folded his newspaper slowly and stood up. “You go out, son, and you cool off before you come in this
house again, you hear?” His grandpa had used the same tone when he got in trouble as a little boy. Joe walked out and slammed the door behind him.

It was nine o’clock when Joe found his buddies at a crumby table in the back corner of Second Street Bar. Mitch and Brett, the other two guys on leave from his unit, were waiting for him with a couple pitchers of beer.

“Joe!” Mitch yelled when he came through the front door. “Back here!”

Joe sat down in front of an etching of a penis with the message “Jason S. sucks dick” and poured himself a beer.

“Go ahead and help yourself to our beer, buddy,” Brett joked.

Joe smiled.

“Don’t worry, he’s buying the next round,” Mitch said, and they laughed.

“I don’t remember the last time Joe bought anyone a drink,” Brett said.

“You just don’t know the trick,” Mitch said. “In about an hour, he’ll be so smashed that he’ll be paying for everything.”

They both laughed. Joe smiled.

“Let’s get a round of shots, start off the night right,” Brett said. “Whiskey?”

“Sure,” Joe said. They flagged down the waitress.

“Actually, let’s make it a couple rounds,” Joe said. “I’ll pay for the second.”

“That means we’ve gotta have a third,” said Brett. “You know, to make things even.”

They both looked at Mitch.

“Fine,” Mitch said to the waitress, “Three rounds.”
When she reappeared, they downed the three shots fast and started on the pitchers.

“Look at that one,” Mitch said, pointing to a tall brunette playing pool. “These are the kind of girls you miss over there. The down-home, West Virginia girls.”

“I second that,” Brett said. “Her friend’s not too bad either.”

Joe drained his pint and poured himself another. “Why don’t you two go talk to ‘em? Go work your charm. Maybe you’ll get lucky tonight,” Joe said, nudging Brett.

“Lindsay wouldn’t be too happy about that,” Brett said.

Joe smiled. “Never stopped you before. Remember that girl, what was her name? Cathy? Casey?”

“Casey!” said Mitch, laughing. “Oh I remember Casey. Yeah, she was that new recruit. She was ugly as hell, dude. And she was nasty!”

“Hey,” Brett said, smiling, “it’s a different game over there. Gotta take what you can get. And at least I got to her first. Jay took sloppy seconds.”

“And then Mikey got thirds, and I think Pat got fourths,” said Joe.

“Pretty sure what’s his name,” Mitch said, “uh, that fat dude from the cafeteria—”

“Oh shit,” said Joe, “that greasy guy? Franklin?”

“Yeah yeah yeah!” Mitch said. “I think Franklin even got in there.” Joe and Mitch burst out laughing. Mitch cleared his throat and put on a straight face. “But yeah, dude, at least you got to her first. You should get a prize or something.”

They all laughed. Joe poured the last of the pitcher into his glass and waved down the waitress. “Another round of shots,” he said. “And a pitcher. Put it on my tab.”

“What did I tell you?” Mitch said. “He’s stingy at first, but his wallet loosens up after a few drinks.”
“You all just don’t know how to ask politely,” Joe joked. “You can’t expect me to just put out like that. Gotta have some nice talkin to first, some good conversation at least. I don’t think a nice dinner would be too much to ask.”

“Joe what’re you gonna do with your two weeks off?” Brett asked. “You got some lady friend or something to keep you company?”

“Nah,” said Joe, “just gonna spend time with the family, I suppose.”

“What, like your mama?” said Brett.

“Grandparents.”

“Sounds like a real fun break,” said Mitch.

“Yeah, I can already tell it’s not gonna be,” said Joe.

The waitress came by with whiskey shots and the pitcher. They each grabbed a shot, clinked glasses, and drained them.

“I don’t know,” Joe said when she was gone. Mitch and Brett looked at him. “It’s just weird coming home to this. Things feel so different. I feel like I don’t know this town anymore. Like I want to see my grandpa and everything, I want to talk to him, but I don’t know him anymore. You know what I mean?”

Mitch looked down at his glass.

Brett shrugged his shoulders. “Lindsay and I are getting along fine.”

Joe poured himself a beer and took a long drink.

The bartender had called a cab for Mitch and Brett. Joe sat down hard on a bar stool.

“Hi,” he said to a girl with pretty blonde hair and a big nose. “What’s your name?”
The girl didn’t seem to hear him. He leaned in front of her.

“Hi,” he said, louder.

She nodded a hello.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“I guess so,” she said.

He ordered them each a rum and coke. “You’re from here, then?”

“What?”

“Are you from around here?”

“Yeah, moved here a couple of years ago.”

“Ah, that’s why I never seen you around. I left here a few years ago. Seems like I’d remember a girl like you.”

“Why are you back?”

“Ouch, don’t be hateful or nothing,” he tried to joke, but she didn’t laugh. “I’m overseas, in Iraq. In the war. Just home for a couple weeks.”

She didn’t look surprised. “How do you like it over there?”

“I hate it. It’s like hell. It’s like being in prison.” The girl was staring at her drink.

“And they only give me two weeks at home. Spend three days in a tin can flying here and three days flying back, just to be here for two weeks. And I hate flying. Might as well not even come home at all.” The girl looked up at him, but said nothing. “You know, they told me not to drink. They said the first few days I’m back, I shouldn’t at least. The psychiatrist, he thinks I’m going to poison myself. I said, ‘Don’t worry about what I do when I’m there,’ I said. ‘I’ll be back soon enough.’ But I thought, ‘Don’t drink? Yeah right.’”

“Well you signed up, didn’t you?”
“Huh?”

“I mean, it sounds like you don’t like it too much over there, but you signed up. You weren’t drafted. You signed yourself to go over there, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. He drained the remainder of his drink. “You have a good night.” He hadn’t noticed before that the old wood floors were so slanted and uneven. He tripped twice on his way out.

He was only a few blocks from his grandparent’s house. He turned right out of the bar and began walking back. It wasn’t too late yet, he thought. But he hadn’t remembered how similar the streets were. The sidewalks were all lined with the same number of evenly spaced streetlamps. He walked through the bright light of the streetlamp and into the blinding darkness outside the ring of light. A few steps later, and he was flooded with light again. He paid attention to the adjusting and readjusting of his eyes.

To his left and right were houses he had never seen before. He read the street signs. Bellemont Avenue and Chestnut Street. He had never been here before. How long had he been walking without paying attention to where he was going? Was this the town his grandparents had always lived in, where he had spent every weekend and summer of his childhood? He remembered a movie about a bald guy who loses his memory and has to tattoo his own name on his arm so he can remember. He realized then that he didn’t remember where he was going, or where he had been just a minute ago.

He walked until he was at the crest of a hill. He looked down on the neighborhood in front of him and found nothing he had ever seen before. He couldn’t remember how he got there. What was he doing in this strange town? Where were the people he knew? Could he
think of people that he knew? He tried to think of one person that he knew, but the only picture in his head was of a bald guy from this movie with tattoos up and down his arms and legs.

He began to walk faster. He walked down the hill and turned down a side street. The sidewalks were playing games with his feet. They jumped around beneath his step, trying to trick him. He walked past a fence, and a big dog, hidden in the dark, barked loudly at him. Joe nearly screamed. He felt dizzy, and his hands were shaking. His heart was pounding in his chest. He began to jog. The houses were spinning past him. He knew then that he wasn’t who he’d always thought he was. He was just a character in a movie. And his character was being chased. He couldn’t remember who was chasing the character, but he had to keep running. He ran faster. The camera shot panned to the left, to the tall dark houses flying past, then panned to the right, to the empty street and a few parked cars. It panned down to the character’s feet. The sidewalk was still moving around. How did they get it to do that? He was on an obstacle course. Then the sidewalk leapt out beneath him completely, and the character’s foot landed sideways on the curb. There was a popping noise, and his ankle gave out. He fell onto the sidewalk.

It was quiet then. No dogs barked. No cars passed. The lights were out in the house across the street. He had fallen hard on his bony hip, and he didn’t want to get up. He was shivering, and he could hear his teeth chattering. He thought his heart might explode it was beating so hard. He focused on trying to catch his breath. The camera panned up to the blue-black sky. There were a few clouds around the crescent moon, giving it a hazy glow. It was a beautiful shot, really.

A car with whining brakes came to a slow stop at the stop sign a block ahead of him. It moved slowly toward him, it seemed to inch toward him in fact, until the lights were up close, taking over the whole shot.
“Joey,” a voice called from behind the lights. “Joey, get in the car.” The lights turned off, and an old man with troubled eyes was leaning out the driver’s side window, staring at him.

“Joey, get in the car,” the old man said.

But who’s Joey? he wondered. This must be part of the script. Was his character supposed to run?

“Joey, come here,” the man was saying.

Still shivering violently, he raised his crumpled body from the pavement, but just as he was about to run off, his left ankle gave out. He fell into a heap on the sidewalk.

He heard the car door opening, the man stepping out, picking him up. The old man was picking him up. What strength, he thought, for a tired-looking old man.

Then he was six years old again. His shoulder hurt, and he was screaming. His mother was carrying him to the car, and she looked so scared. “Joey, I’m so sorry Joey,” she was saying. “I didn’t mean to, Joey. I didn’t know what I was doing. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.” She looked scared and very young.

He sat in the backseat of the car, shivering. The car moved slowly, carefully through the strange streets as if the old driver already knew the dangers ahead of them. “It’s cold out there,” he told the old man.

“I know,” the old man said, “I know.”