May 3rd, 9:00 AM - 10:15 AM

Wilderness

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Description
The collection of short stories I have written focuses on how people process (or do not process) tragedy, especially as related to themes of grief, memory, and faith. Most of the stories I have written are dysfunctional narratives in that they do not necessarily provide solid conclusions or solutions for the characters or readers, reflecting current trends in literature to move away from the didactic and moralistic in favor of the ambiguous and unstable, the hopeless and sorrowful. In "Wilderness", one of the pieces I wrote for my collection, Robert struggles with the death of his wife when he realizes that there were aspects of her life about which she never told him, leading him to fear that she never really loved him. I chose to title the collection after this story because in each story, the characters are unable to see the purposes in their sufferings, feel abandoned or alone, and are frustrated by the wildernesses of questions, doubts, and loss in their lives.

Location
Breidenbaugh Hall 311

Disciplines
Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Fiction | Pain Management | Psychology | Religion | Social Psychology | Social Psychology and Interaction

Comments
English Honors Thesis

First Place - 2014 Stephen Crane Fiction Prize

Wilderness

Fiction Honors Thesis

Kathryn Bucolo

March 28, 2014

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Abstract

The collection of short stories I have written focuses on how people process (or do not process) tragedy, especially as related to themes of grief, memory, and faith. Most of the stories I have written are dysfunctional narratives in that they do not necessarily provide solid conclusions or solutions for the characters or readers, reflecting current trends in literature to move away from the didactic and moralistic in favor of the ambiguous and unstable, the hopeless and sorrowful. The first story, *Still*, is the piece that inspired me to write about the intersections of loss, memory, and God in the rest of the collection. Following a young couple's heartbreak after a miscarriage, the story is done in a set of vignettes from both the wife's and husband's perspectives, the broken sections mirroring the fragmented emotional intensity of the couple's unexpected moments of grief. In *Wilderness*, Robert struggles with the death of his wife when he realizes that there were aspects of her life about which she never told him, leading him to fear that she never really loved him. *Nena* is the story of a young woman who loses her mother, causing her doubt in God and the Church to deepen and her questions of identity and purpose to resurface. Dissimilar from the other stories, *Americana* is written almost entirely in dialogue, and shows the final dissolution and deterioration of a family. Finally, *Laugh* is a story about a bitter woman named Leah struggling with her father's impending death, but more so with her family history. I chose to title the collection after the story *Wilderness* because in each story, the characters are unable to see the purposes in their sufferings, feel abandoned or alone, and are frustrated by the wildernesses of questions, doubts, and loss in their lives.

Nena

Her mother died when the Catholic liturgy changed.

She had been going over the bridge on the bay, picking brown quarters out of the cup holder for the dollar-fifty toll when the phone rang. He was in her phone as “Nick”: a first-name basis. The bridge had no shoulders so she put on her flashers; she thought about answering it. One car jetted past. On the radio NPR hosts talked in cranking voices about the Church’s lack of propensity for change. They said things like, “I don’t know—I think there’s a difference between ‘and also with you’ and ‘with your spirit.’” She turned the radio up and let her phone ring eight more times. Driving over the bay she thought about the vibrations of her wheels shaking down the legs of the bridge, down into the silt floor and the three-eyed fish probably swimming there. The waste plant was a few miles west. Her wheels drummed the tan road of the bridge in a steady, humming dirge and she could see the sea green Laundromat over to the left on the shore.

Her phone rang for the twenty-second time. When the cement road of the bridge arched down to the black road of the ground, she chucked the quarters into the toll bucket and picked it up.

"Hello, Nick."

"Hello, Nena. Where are you? You on your way?"

"Yeah, I'm just getting off the bridge."

"You're late."

"I know." She waited, the vibrations of her wheels throbbing into the road. "Too late?"

He paused. "Yeah. A few minutes ago."

Her flashers clicked and clicked seven times, eight times, thirty times, all the way past the Laundromat, down into town, up to St. Anne's on the north side to light a candle at the feet of St. Mary, and back east to the apartment. Nick was holding a sad bouquet of violet flowers over the kitchen sink, unwrapping their raw green feet from the white paper, cutting them fresh and sticking them in a vase.

"You're here," he said.

"Is she in there?"

"Yeah."

She looked at the awkward purple flowers. Their heads were shutting closed. "Did you get those before or after you called me?"

"Before. I bought them this morning."

"Alright," she said.

"Take as much time as you need," he said, forced.

"We're not in a hospital. You don't have to say that."

"I know. It's just, I—"

"I know." She put her keys on the table. "Thanks for the flowers."

"You want me to call? It's already been a couple hours."

"No. I'll call them later," she said, swishing the keys across the wood.

"Alright."

"I can do it."

"I know." He put the white paper in the trash. "I'll come by later."

The apartment door clicked closed behind him and Nena turned to her mother's white washed door, looking in at an angle, seeing the slightly tilted feet pointing up under the comforter. She stood there five minutes, waiting, wondering—thinking about how she used to look out at the waste plant lit up at night and call it a castle, and how her mother had never corrected her.

A tea kettle bleated in the background. In the kitchen next to the flowers she found her orange mug with a Darjeeling tea bag propped inside. She turned the burner off, poured the water, and watched the teabag hang, suspended, like a brown manatee in her mug.

She would call later. She turned on NPR and listened to them conjecture, complain, and speculate about the Church and its new liturgy instead. They were talking: 'We believe' to 'I believe,' 'We acknowledge' to 'I confess.' She listened to her own lips sipping at the tea.

The flowers fell into the sink around 5 p.m. She didn't touch them. Nick picked them up later before he called the hospital, made Nena another cup of tea, and closed the white-washed door completely. She drank it and filled the mug with vodka; she drank it with a piece of bread.

Mary, draped in blue, red beneath, standing behind an oak altar with small cream candles, stepped into her mind. *Ave Maria* humming, rubbing against her mind's eye, the white marble feet tip-toeing out from the deep folds of her robe, she watched her candle grow and die, swell and die. Mary's gown cracked open from the bottom and took it in one step. *Dos veces vi el alma, dos.* She thought of five many-eyed fish and said hailmaryfullofgrace-hailmaryfullofgrace-hailmaryfullofgrace.

* * *

"Well, there are a few ways we could go here," the woman said, the darts in her jacket smooth and dark where they pivoted. A poorly framed water color of a mallard duck in between a few stalks of bulrush sat over her. There was a glare thrown over the duck's face by the last working light bulb in the ceiling fan; the other black sockets rested empty. As the fan whirled, the pull string spun, clacking against the lone light bulb, competing only with the hollow click of the woman's cheap pen in Nena's ear. "When were you thinking of having the services?"

"I wasn't going to have any services."

"Oh," said the woman, her cheeks flattening. "I mean, I'm sure you've thought about it. But I'm just not—are you sure it's what she would've wanted? Your mother, I mean?" She paused, but Nena's face was unchanging and hard. "It's just that you said she was pretty devout and, I don't know, most times people like that have services—even just little ones."

"Well, I'm not very devout."

"Neither am I, really." The woman's slight double chin touched the collar of her shirt and her pen clicked slowly, like seconds. Nena could see what might have been grief or regret or both swell and roll across her face. "But, when my dad passed two years back," she started, "my brother convinced me to have a service. My dad was a pretty staunch Episcopalian." A light smile brimmed and then fell from the corners of her lips. "It wasn't anything fancy, really, but it was nice. Some flowers, some music, a few photos, and a priest. It was really very nice. And it's not very expensive if you do it like that." She waited for Nena's face to move. It didn't. "And in the end, I was glad we did it with the service and everything. Really, it's made all the difference."

Nena's phone interrupted. It was Nick. "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to take this," she said to the woman who was now staring at her cuticles. "Could you just give me the paperwork for the urn and crematorium now?"

The woman reached into the off-green file cabinet below her desk and handed the papers to Nena. The fan cord clicked, like seconds.

"Thanks," said Nena, "I'll get these back to you."

"Well, we don't normally let people—"

"I'm sorry. I've really got to take this call." She closed the door behind her and walked out to Nick in the parking lot. His car sat idling with the windows rolled down and a slightly flat front tire. He was reading *The Republic*.

"That was quick," he said, closing the book lightly on his thumb. "How did it go?"

"She was a prick." Nena tossed the papers in the back seat and put her feet up on the dash. "Why did you call me?"

"I didn't call you."

She showed him the missed call on her phone. "Three minutes ago."

"Must've been a mistake."

"Well, at least it got me out of there," she said.

"So, you saw I was calling and you didn't pick up?"

"No. Do I ever?"

"Amazing."

She lowered her seat and looked out at the wiry saplings planted around the parking lot. There was no shade and some were tipping over in their loosely packed mulch. A plane flew low overhead.

"Funny that a funeral parlor would have such little baby trees around," she said.

"Yeah. It's a shame the little trees look so bad," he said. His right knee rocked slowly side to side and his glasses slid down his nose. The old cigarette stains on his hands seemed brighter for a second.

"Sorry, Nick."

"You going to put your seatbelt on?" he asked.

"No." She tuned the radio to NPR and rolled her window up. Nick tossed his book in the backseat by the forms.

"So what did she say about it? Did she give you a day?" he asked, putting the car in reverse.

She could see the forms in the rearview mirror. Sixteen papers. She had counted them walking down the blue wallpapered hallway from the woman's office, licking her fingers as she pulled back each corner. Sixteen. They had words like 'irreversible process' and 'for sanitary reasons, ease of placement, and dignity.' The paper was thick and expensive.

"Did she say anything about Wednesday?" Nick started up again. "Because then I could come with you since I'm just on call."

"No. She just talked about herself." Nena said, twisting the skin on her elbow. "You know, you don't need to come with me. It's fine."

"Of course I'm coming with you." He gave a shallow smile. "I've done this kind of thing a lot, Nena. I'm pretty good at it by now."

"Well, she said there's nothing to do, really. Somebody brings the body, somebody puts it in the chamber, and then a few hours later the family comes. And then you get the urn." Nick clicked on the turn signal. Another car pulled into the lot; its people looked upset and pale. "It takes two hours in the crematorium. But then it takes a few more hours because they have to wait for everything to cool."

Smells of old Ash Wednesdays crashed into her mind, sitting there in the oak

pews braiding pink ribbons from hymnals and bibles, walking up to the front

where he put gray ashes on her forehead. *Pues polvo sos, y al polvo serás tornado.* Cool fingers dipping into the gold cup of dirty, dirty ashes. Forehead after forehead, he marked, he blessed, he dipped, he marked. No escape. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trapped in eighteen hundred degrees, trapped in eighteen thousand degrees, trapped where angels were. Angels walking in fire, walking on embers and touching yellow coals, cool feet on hot metal floors. He touched her forehead with cool, cool fingers. *Que mi hijo bendiga*.

"Stop the car," Nena said as they pulled out of the parking lot. The car lurched; she opened the door, leaned her head out, and threw up. Nick unbuckled his seatbelt. "Don't move, Nick. I'm fine. I'm fine!" she screamed, yellow vomit on her teeth and tongue.

* * *

On Wednesday, Nick drove her to pick up the urn. She sat with it in her lap, imagining it burning her thighs pink with blisters. There had been more cars parked in the lot and someone had watered and straightened the trees since the last time they had been there. A high school boy

from across the bridge had committed suicide that Sunday, so the "place had been busy" according to the woman with the pen.

Maybe he went in after her mother, after they had brushed and shoveled her.

Maybe they didn't clean it. Self-clean. All the same dust, all the same ashes.

'…direct exposure to the flames.' Some dust from some patch of the holy ugly earth, blown together like hot glass from the nostrils of God. In death, de-crystalized. Eighteen hundred degrees. Back to sand, back to ashes. Maybe they'd burn him with the rope in his hair or the casings in his hands or the pills in his pockets. Maybe she should've burned her with the insulin shots. Maybe she should've burned her with the rosary beads and icons. A sacrifice pleasing to God. Burning flesh, burning blood, burning hair, blackening jaw—a sweet

offering to the Lord of hosts. A lone white altar candle under stiff marble robes,

swelling, dying, out—*and also with you*—

She locked the apartment door behind her. They had called Nick in, and she was alone. She stared at the map of Argentina on the kitchen wall next to the fridge and thought about how far south it was: thousands of miles she couldn't conceptualize. She sat below it on the terracotta floor tiles, her shoulder blades pressed against the matt white body of the fridge. She picked at the grout and her skin.

She just wanted to be around dead things. Around still things, broken things, things that still were. Like dictionaries. Like carpets. She sat with the silver metal urn in her hands.

"Descartes era incorrecto, nena," her mother had once said. "*Se rompen nuestros corazones, luego existimos."*

* * *

"You know, we live in a world of dead things," she had once said to Nick. "We're surrounded by dead things. They're everywhere. They're microwaves and dishtowels, cut flowers and rain boots," she'd said, pointing around the room.

"But none of those things have ever been alive, Nena." He paused. "Well, except the flowers. But the other things—the microwaves and boots—those can't be dead because they've never been alive. To be dead, you have to have been alive."

"So, you're saying they're opposites. That you can only be one or the other?"

"Well, yeah."

"You don't have to be condescending." She stirred her tea.

"I'm not. I'm not trying to be. It's just that something is either alive, or it's dead—not both. Either animate or inanimate."

"You don't see any overlap there?"

"No," he'd said, rubbing his knee with his thumb. "I don't think so. I mean, look. A cup isn't dead—it's just a cup. That cup you have? It's inanimate—but it's not dead. It's never lived, so it's never died."

"But what if my cup breaks?

"Then it's a broken cup."

"But wouldn't that make it dead?" she had said, twisting her toes in the carpet and resituating her fingers on the hot body of the mug. "Wouldn't that kill it?"

"No, it would just make it an unusable cup."

"What if I pour the tea out?"

"Then it's just an empty cup."

"*Pero*… But in breaking it, in making it unusable or unused," she said, "isn't its purpose is lost?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Well, unless you turn the pieces into something. You could make a mobile. Or a mosaic." He looked at the scuffed feet of the coffee table. "You could always recycle them."

"So its initial purpose—its true purpose—is gone then."

"Yes."

"So it's dead."

"No. Nena. It never lived."

"Isn't purposelessness death?" The calendar by the door fell from the wall.

"Maybe a kind of death—a poetic, hypothetical kind—but it's not real death." He looked down at the fraying black end of his shoelace.

"If the pieces are never used, if the cup is never filled, isn't that the death of the inanimate?"

"'Death' without having been alive," he said aloud.

"Could you start out dead?" She sipped her tea. "Maybe some things do."

He shifted his weight in the chair. "Nena, what are we talking about?"

"We're talking about cups, Nick," she said, looking at the potted cactus on the air conditioning unit. "We're talking about cups."

* * *

Nick walked in her door at 12:36 a.m. and found her huddled by the fridge, an ash cross on her forehead.

"Nena."

"Stop," she said, lifting her head. There was a pink groove on her face from the floor tiles. "I'm receiving the Eucharist."

"Nena, I'm—"

"¡Déjame!" Her mug held vodka and her hands were gray with ashes.

"You're drunk."

"Good."

"No. Not good."

"Good," she said, fiddling with the mug handle like rosary beads. "When I'm drunk, I pray to God more."

"You're praying?"

"To God."

"Okay," he whispered, eyes wide.

"Noah was a drunk, you know."

"Your brother or the guy with the ark?" He meant it as a joke.

"Both." She paused, fixing the neckline of her shirt.

"It's good you're on your side," he said, bending down and untying her shoes. He unlooped the laces and slid the first thin boot off over her ankle gently, almost surgically, as if he were observing her through a tiny camera on a thin black wire.

"Don't touch my shoes!"

"Why not?" he said, resting her heel on his knee. Her foot was cold and damp.

"It means I can't do it."

"Just let me do it this once." He picked her other foot up and slid off the shoe.

"What is this, Nick?" she asked

"What's what?" he said, peeling off a sock.

"This. What you're doing." She propped herself on an elbow and sighed. "Why are you always around? You're always around when I don't need you." The light above her seemed bright and heavy and very fat. "I can't feel my face."

"I know, Nena."

"Prick."

"Here's a glass of water."

"I don't need it." She looked at her ash cross in the bright silver urn. "I'm not taking it off."

"No. It's to drink. You should drink something."

"I have a drink," she said, her sarcasm mounting.

"I mean water."

Her head swirled in tiny circles. "Were you baptized?" she asked.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?" She waited, running her ashy fingers over the peeling plastic baseboard of the wall. "I was baptized in Argentina. It was a big deal. First granddaughter and all."

"Do you remember it?"

"No. I was too little."

"Do you remember much from Argentina?" he said, rinsing out her orange mug under the blasting kitchen faucet.

"Some. A little. I remember a little. A lot of what I remember I don't know for myself." She pried back the corner of the pink plastic baseboard. There was dry wood and old yellow glue underneath. "Does it ever happen to you where you think you know something, think you remember it, but all you see—all you can see in your memory—are the colors of it, or just really vague, bright pictures of it? I mean, with some of your earliest memories? And then you can't be sure if the things you're remembering in your mind are actually things you should be remembering, or if they're just pictures your mind has overtaken, overgrown, stolen from hearing somebody else talk about it?"

"I think so."

"Well, that's how I remember most of Argentina," she said, patting the plastic back into place along the chipped doorframe. "I don't."

"Did you ever talk about it with your mom?"

She kicked him.

"I'm sorry."

Nena knocked the glass of water away from her face. She kicked him again. She grabbed the sullied handle of the urn and, slowly standing up, slowly walking out of the door-less kitchen, left smudged constellations of handprints along the walls. She opened the white-washed door, closed it, put about thirty test strip packages in the trash, and sat with her urn on the floor. She could still hear him washing dishes in the kitchen. He didn't leave until 2:06 a.m.

* * *

A cold urn frozen to her thighs. Broken, hollow cells—once tan, once pink, now gone—evaporated. Melted eyes. Her mother had said, "Nena, throw me to the clouds, throw me to the sky." She'd said in Argentina, in orange and yellow-gold Argentina, "See those clouds? Those are the kind that Christ will come back on someday." She smelled like *dulce de leche*. She had thick blue veins and angled

collar bones. “How do you know? How do you know it at all?” she’d asked. Her mother turned to her in the earthy, low grass and said, “Having faith is like shucking corn, *nena*. You shuck the corn, rotten or yellow.” She imagined her mother’s burnt, crumbled bones reforming in the ashes on her head, restructuring, re-crystalizing. A monster out of Daniel. Re-blown. Heaven touching earth. In sackcloth and ashes the people screamed: ‘Is God good? Is god good?’ All the corn shucked rotten. All the corn not corn. All the corn boiling in the bright, melting urn—*y también contigo… y también ‘con tu espíritu.’*

* * *

“It’s been two weeks, Nena,” said Nick.

“I know.”

“Have you told anybody?”

“There’s no one to tell.”

“Have you told your brother?”

"No."

"When are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know."

"Well, don't you think we need to make an effort here?"

"We?"

"You."

"No."

"Come on, Nena. Don't you think he'd want to know?"

"I wouldn't know where to find him, Nick. I don't want to find him."

"Okay." He waited, looking at his phone. "I guess…did you want to do it today, then? I'm just on call." She dipped her shoulder away from his hand and slipped on her shoes.

"You drive," she said.

* * *

The bridge had no shoulders, so they parked just past the automatic ticket booths and walked up along the bridge's catwalk. The blue-green bars of the bridge were thick and hollow, rusting and tired. Nena thought of the main beams crushing down into the bay bottom, finding the solid rock below the murky, shifting water. She imagined the massive rivets dropping out of their sockets and the bridge wobbling in the wind. A small metal boat bobbed out on the bay with three young fishermen and a child holding a net. She imagined the bridge swaying over them, breaking, pinning them to the soft floor of the bay.

"Do you think she's in heaven, Nena?" They stopped and stood at the center of the bridge. The brightness of the water was deafening.

"How old are we, Nick?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't think you ever stop asking." His fingers tapped against the wide blue hand railing. "At least, I haven't stopped asking."

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe she is. Maybe. Do you think yours is?"

"I don't know. I know she sang in the church choir when I was a kid." He kicked the bridge. "But somewhere along the way I heard that wasn't enough to get you in."

Nena nodded. She thought about the bridge and the fishers on the bright, bright water. The news report would say, 'The bridge's arms were tired. Thirty years standing. It had to let go. Tolls will be raised to two dollars next week.'

She opened the lid of the urn and peaked in over the lip. She could see teeth. She closed it.

"Where is she, Nick? Where is she?"

"Let me help." He reached for the urn.

"Leave it alone—don't touch it!"

"Okay."

She lifted the lid and touched her fingers to the pale gray soot—once a muscle, once an ear, once a bone—almost white. It was soft.

"You're reading *The Republic*, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think about the Forms?"

"The Forms?"

"Yeah." She pressed her thumb in the ashes. "What do you think about them?"

"I don't know. It's an interesting idea, I guess." A piece of blue-green paint chipped off and stuck in his nail. "Don't really know what to make of it. Don't know if it's really useful."

"Oh, I like it," she said. "I think it's true."

> All the things in the world forged and stitched somewhere, somewhere in the mind, somewhere in heaven, somewhere in earth. Somewhere behind the throne of God where the angels slipped in the dark. Where were the molds of all the things?—deep below within the earth, within the crust, deep in the reservoirs of dirt and water. All the things inverted, all the things concave. Empty. Perfect. A convex-less world. That's why they burry you underground—so they can put you back in everlasting; put you back where the forms and molds are, from whence you were stitched in the womb of earth. You were now in everlasting. Buried there, reforming in memory, in colors, in grief; in insulin shots and shiny-faced

bays; in where the dead things are buried, in where the dead things are born;

reforming into purpose.

She clutched a bit of ashes, held them out over the ledge, past the strong, tired arms of the bridge, and slowly let them go; ashes drifting down to the bottom, down into the cold, down into the core, into everlasting. 'Throw me to the sky, *nena.*' Thrown to the sky and falling, the ashes sat atop the surface of the water, disappearing in the blue, sifting down to the silt floor with the rusted cans and many fishes, maybe to the solid rock still further down.

Wilderness

The day after she had died Robert Moses dreamed a Siberian permafrost forest had grown up from under his ribs. He dreamed of root systems crusting in his stomach, of mosses tumbling out of the pink, creased fat of his gut; of frost-bitten holly leaves pricking at his lungs. He became earth. She drifted up—was pulled up—in his dream. She flew until she hung against the sun, a tiny human eclipse; she flew until she broke her neck and gently spun to earth. She fell between pinecones and bright snow that smelled like incense, drifted above running red foxes like broken stained glass on the ground. Her sun-warmed skin touched the frozen earth—glazed permafrost—and she melted in, blanketed by the watery ice she warmed, drowning into the earth, drowning into him, her broken neck at his ankles, sunken—rooted.

He woke facing the red rock mountains out his window, dark gray before the dawn, thinking of Achilles and Icarus and funerals and phone calls. His head felt heavy and limp and his eyes could not focus on the undecorated walls of their room, a few brown shipping boxes

stacked to the right, her suitcase next to the closet, still partially zipped. Alice had only unpacked the toiletries from her bag before collapsing in the kitchen and Robert had to rush her to the hospital in Tucson. His suitcase was emptied and under the bed. He had unpacked his bag slowly and methodically one night the last week of October after Dr. Morrison had told Robert to go home, to leave the hospital for a few hours. He almost never drove back from the hospital in Tucson. He hated driving by himself, especially in the desert, especially in the open dark without streetlights or white-painted shoulders. He had not wanted to drive back without Alice because somehow he feared, in some cosmic sense, that it meant death, surrender. But unpacking his suitcase that night had given Robert the slightest sense of control, of order. There was closure in getting down on his hands and knees and sliding his empty suitcase under the bed. That first night he had come back from Tucson without Alice, he kept the lights on until 4 a.m. and slept with the phone next to his head, believing she would come home. He had slept facing away from the closet.

As the December sun crowned in the reddening mountains, the reality of planning a funeral slammed into his mind—flowers and sandwiches and bulletins and an organist—and he tried to remember if Alice had had a favorite hymn. He remembered her falling in his dream and looked down at his feet under the sheets, scared to move them. He thought about her empty body, thought about them dancing, thought about what he thought about souls. It had only been fourteen hours since she had died and already she was a mosaic in his mind—a concept he could not quite grasp or materialize or remember. He panicked. He could see her eyes in his mind, could imagine her shallow knuckles and the pale mole at the top of her thigh, but he could not see her face. She was blurry, fragmented. He had known his memory of her would fade, that he would begin to forget, but he thought it would take years — whole decades. It had only been

fourteen hours since he had stared at her sitting among silent machines in a stiff paper gown with wires on her chest and a dry-lipped smile on her face, since he had driven out of Tucson on a thin, straight highway through the pink and red desert, wondering if the desert was alive or dead or inert.

When the sunlight reached him in his bed he stood and took a shower. He scrubbed the fat of his arms and stomach and checked behind his knees for bulbs. Her shampoo and blue razor stared at him from the beige shower shelf. His elbow banged against the temperature knob when he saw some of her wet hair in the drain, moving under the pounding water like a mass of thin wet roots.

He remembered she had said strange things about God that week. Things like: 'I know there is a God, Rob. But I don't *believe* it. There's a difference, you know.' On Saturday, she had insisted that God was not old, but young since time was relative. Last Tuesday she had pulled him close and said 'The woman who checks the charts is an angel. I saw a feather fall from her shoulder yesterday.'

He had smirked. 'Really?'

'Yes,' she had said. 'I caught it when it fell.' She had brought her hand out from under the sheet, opened it and stared, her eyes frantic with joy. Robert had frozen, then nodded his head and told her it was beautiful. Her palm was empty and dry. There was a tube through her wrist.

'It is beautiful, isn't it?' she had said, staring at her hands. 'Look how it kind of glows.'

The text on the blue body of the razor was worn off. The walls of the oblong bottle of shampoo curved in toward themselves, tense and warped, still sucked in from the last time she

had washed her hair. She would have said something about there having been a vacuum inside the bottle, a relaxed, contorted, silent pond of air trapped inside. She would have said something about the text on the razor having been in Swedish, something about how she had never learned to braid.

He still didn't know why she had said those things about God, about angels in the hospital in Tucson. Dr. Morrison had told Robert while holding the flimsy black-and-gray brain scans against a square light in his office that Alice would say things, would see things. He said he shouldn't be worried. Everything was normal, part of the process. Robert had stared at the crisp outline of her skull against the light, the cloudy field inside curved and studded with bright white dots, and had felt a quiet yellow anger latch onto him. Dr. Morrison had said something about pressure, nothing about surgery. He had pointed to the dots on the screen, circled some of them. He had brought up Alice's mentioning of God.

'I know. The hallucinations,' Robert said, still fixed on the image against the light, his anger calcifying into desperation.

'Right,' Dr. Morrison had said. 'She's slipping.'

The sensation of solitude had been paralyzing as Robert became more unsure of the difference between a mind and a soul in that maroon office chair looking at Alice's brain or mind or self or soul bleeding, dying in single frames—slow motion—on the scans.

'But why God?' Robert asked. 'She never talks about God. I don't think she ever has. Not in four years of marriage. Not when we were in Notre Dame, not at our wedding. Not once.' His dry throat clenched and tightened. 'I mean, the other day she said her nurse was an angel.'

'You can't trust what she says right now, Robert. She doesn't even know what she's saying. She's losing reality.' He looked up at the scans and put a hand in his pocket. 'I don't know why she's talking so much about God. I don't know. But she thinks he's real.'

'But her brain is, her mind is—'

'Right.'

Robert had asked to hold the scans and Dr. Morrison clicked off the light. The filmy image had suddenly seemed to Robert more like a tiny universe of unheard, unnamed constellations than any mass of tissues or nerves. He wondered about the god that governed that contained sky of negative, positive stars inside of Alice—time, fate, providence, chance.

'It would take a miracle,' he had said.

'I don't believe in miracles,' Robert said, running his finger along the edge of the image.

'Neither do I.'

'Maybe Alice does.'

'Maybe she does.' He touched Robert's shoulder. 'But she's not really Alice right now.'

'Not really Alice.'

'What she's thinking and seeing is all in her mind—it's her brain under pressure, the nerves firing and stopping.'

'I just don't know,' Robert had said, almost ripping the scans. His anger had kindled into a hopeless jealousy of Alice's ability to somehow feel and sense God in the midst of her lunacy, maybe because of her loss of reality. He hadn't felt the pull, the tingling nudge in the back of his mind about whether there really was a God—or anything—since his Latin teacher from high school took his class to Catholic masses on field trips to hear Latin spoken and sung. Robert had loved sitting in the deep, high-backed pews listening and, when the choirs sang as the candles

were lit and the quiet altar boys shuffled up the main aisle along the thin red carpet, feeling like he was part of something grand, expansive, something communal and transcendent. The cut glass, the smooth marble, the gold crucifixes—he was transported into a beautiful, flurrying state of mind where, when he closed his eyes, he could almost feel the glory, feel the majesty, feel the mercy of God. Almost. He went to mass at three different churches three times a week, saying he was going to hear the Latin, but actually trying to reach those highs, absorb that radiance, feel the existence of that Something beyond the stones and glass and altar that loved music and velvet and gold so much. But he could not believe It loved him. He could not because he would not. The beauty was all he wanted. He did not want to take the risk of showing this Ghost or man the fragile chrysalis of his heart, of making this God real, because of his fear that, upon seeing into his soul, the God would frown and turn himself away, disappointed and despondent at the unfixable nothing, the absolute hollowness he was scared the God would find. So Robert resolved to admire the God, to watch for the God, to wait next to the people who sang to him in church, but to never really love him, to never really want him. It was better that way.

But in Dr. Morrison's office he almost prayed for tumors to grow in his brain, to bloom and pressure and fire until he saw angels—though whether that was so that he could die with Alice or come to feel God, he wasn't sure. But Alice was finding God somewhere in the tiny broken universe inside her skull, and Robert wanted to be a part of it. They had known everything about each other. They had loved each other. Robert had wanted to find God if she did.

'Do you believe in God, Dr. Morrison?"

He reached for the brain scans resting on Robert's knees. 'No. I don't. Not really.'

'Me either,' Robert said, handing him the translucent sheets. 'Not really.'

‘But there is a chapel room on the sixth floor if you wanted to try in there.’

‘No, that’s okay. Thanks.’ Robert stood. ‘I’ll just go down with Alice. Maybe she and I can talk about things.’

* * *

He drove back to the hospital Monday afternoon. The highway in the desert felt different, purposeless. The angel-winged nurse sat like the Copenhagen mermaid on the waiting room couch across from him, a paper cup of coffee propped on her bent knee. Her nails were purple, her ankles thin, and her roots had started to show; they were the color of her clipboard.

She was the one who had found Robert outside the visitors’ entrance that Sunday afternoon. He had been watching a dry leaf rock reluctantly on its crisped points until the wind slid it into the street. Dr. Morrison had put a hand on his shoulder, sat him down on a stainless steel bench, and said something about electricity and blood. A paper to sign, a ticking, melting clock of cells and tests.

‘Her brain is bleeding’ is what he had said.

He had said it without looking up—called it something else first, something longer and with a Latin root. But then he had just said ‘bleeding.’ It was the only word he had seemed to say until he said ‘spread’ and ‘chance’ and ‘no.’ Robert had tried to speak but couldn’t. He had wanted to ask if she was conscious, if they would operate. He had wanted her to live and wanted her to die. He asked to see the brain scans again.

He had not been in to see Alice in three hours. Alice, in tears, had begged him to believe what she had told him about the lice and maggots coming out of her widow’s peak, sliding down her face and into her mouth, becoming her teeth. She tried to show him. He yelled and panicked

in the delirious, hopeless rage of the desperate and tired. He screamed “You don’t have a widow’s peak—I cut your hair” and almost hit her; he ran and cursed the name of every god he could think of down the white hospital hallways, violently pumping the silver push bars of every door.

‘She’s not herself’ is all the angel nurse had said after he and Dr. Morrison had come back inside. ‘But there will be good days, too. There always are.’ She had touched his shoulder. He remembered that everyone had been touching his shoulders. ‘I think you should go back in to see her. She’s calmed down, just resting.’ She paused. ‘You’ll want to have spent time with her.’

The angel nurse took a light sip of coffee and held out the clipboard to him. It wavered in the air. He took it but couldn’t read it.

“Here. Here’s a pen,” she said.

Robert signed, watching the ink leave the pen and sink into the paper, black and shaky on the line. He imagined himself screaming into a vacuum, his body shrinking, running away behind him. He filled in the boxes and lines with clumsy, distracted letters and names and dates, words that told him nothing, that said nothing, that were irrelevant.

Two days later he would reach down to the drain and check for lice.

* * *

Robert called Alice’s parents long distance from Tucson that afternoon.

He had never spoken to them, never met them. He and Alice had been married in 1997 after a year of reciting translated Arabic poetry in outdoor cafes and buying one-way tickets on discount airlines, never telling anyone where they were. They each had had spouses and had left them, had taken off their wedding bands and rubbed the skin where the rings had left smooth,

steady indents. They had traveled and run and talked only about themselves for four years, living on their other spouses' alimony checks. He remembered Alice had whispered one day along the Seine that she knew everything there was to know about him. Robert had said he loved her, too. Knowing and loving, the same. He remembered holding her hand through Notre Dame. He remembered her slipping away to stare at stained glass, standing in the tempered light with motes like mist swirling against her face. All his memories seemed to lie under a weightless patina of dust and light making it harder to see her, making it harder to know where she was. Maybe she was in heaven. Maybe she was in hell. Maybe she was nowhere at all. He thought things he shouldn't have thought. He started to wonder if she had ever existed. He reminded himself of her hair in the drain. She had been real. They had shared bank accounts and beds. He was sure he could find the receipts somewhere to prove it. He remembered her sitting on the bathroom counter between their double sinks in Arizona, her lips quivering and eyes darting, trying not to cry as she asked him to shave the back of her head where she couldn't reach. Soapy water dripped down her back, uneven wads of hair heaped in the drain. He remembered the hopelessness of her voice in late October when, standing over the rim of the Grand Canyon, she had frowned and said, "Susan Sontag was right." He remembered she had stared at the open, gray sky for the rest of the day. He had forgotten to ask about that. He had forgotten a lot of things. It had only been twenty hours and already he couldn't remember which one of her eyes had had the freckle, brown like a sunspot.

Alice's mother answered the phone in a thin, watery voice. She gasped for air when Robert Moses said his name. She groped at her pearls with thick fake nails when he said her daughter had died in Tucson the day before. Alice's parents knew she had married someone named Robert, but only because of a postcard they had received from Spain in 1999. The frantic

clicking of her pearls was like raspy static over the phone as Robert told her Alice had been diagnosed in Detroit two months before, had wanted to move to Arizona, and had died yesterday afternoon in Tucson. He said nothing about the glowing feather or the lice or the tubes or how he couldn't remember her face.

"My God," she said, her voice slippery and uneven. "I wasn't home yesterday afternoon. I wasn't even home for her." Her pearls hushed. "Did she call yesterday?"

"No. I don't think so."

They were silent for almost a minute.

"How did you get our number?"

"I found it with her passport."

"Then she knew we still lived in Saline?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Why didn't she ever call if she had our number?"

"I don't know." He seemed to know and remember nothing.

"George wanted to change our number five years ago. But I couldn't. I couldn't." She emptied her lungs of all their air in one long sigh. "My God, it's good we didn't." He imagined her sinking and collapsing in on herself, her back arching as if in prayer, her pearls puddled in her lap. Her voice was almost inaudible. "You're still in Tucson?"

"Yes. I'm at our house." His voice sounded louder to him than it really was. He was standing in his small kitchen looking at the enormous red rocks along the horizon exhaled from the earth thousands of years before, bright slivers of yellow running through them like fat. A massive cloud waded through the paneled blue sky. He thought about how treeless and empty and lifeless the desert really was. He didn't know what Susan Sontag would say. "I was just

calling to let you know where we were. Or, where I am. I don't know. I wanted to ask you about the funeral."

"Why are you calling now?"

"To talk to you. To talk to you about coming down for the—"

"No. Why are you calling now—now that she's died?" Her voice strengthened. "You should've called two months ago when you were both in Detroit. My God, you were both in Detroit! We could have seen her, could have apologized. We could have known where you were two months ago. You had the number!"

"I didn't have it. She did."

"Why did you move her to Arizona?" her voice pierced through the receiver. "You don't just drive a dying woman the whole way down the country for nothing. That is completely irresponsible. You were in Detroit. She could have come home."

"It was not irresponsible."

"Of course it was. You took her out of a hospital where she could have had treatment and therapy and they could've done surgery."

"They couldn't have done surgery."

"Of course they could have."

"No. No they couldn't. Her brain was bleeding." For a second he couldn't remember if he was in his kitchen outside of Tucson or on a metal bench outside the visitor's center. "I asked them. They said they couldn't do anything. It had spread."

"But why would she want to go to Arizona?" her voice cracked. "Why not home?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I—"

The line went dead or Alice's mother hung up or maybe he did.

Robert and Alice had been driving down a highway out of Detroit when Alice had said, fists dashing tears across her temples, ‘Well, we’ve never been to the American southwest.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Well, we could. We could go there.’

‘When?’

‘Now.’

‘For what?’

‘Because we can.’

‘I’m not sure if that’s a good enough reason to go.’

‘How about Arizona? We could go to Arizona.’ Her voice choked.

‘Well, do they have good hospitals down there?’ he asked

‘I don’t know,’ she whispered, tapping her feet against the dash. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course it matters!’

She had rubbed her knees together and traced her collarbones with her fingertips. For a split second, Robert had thought to swerve the car across the lanes and kill them both.

‘But maybe, I mean,’ he paused, ‘Why Arizona? Why there specifically?’ He tried to sound diplomatic.

‘No reason.’

‘But—’

‘I feel like I’ve been everywhere except there,’ she had said. She played with the hem of her shirt and looked at him. ‘I’ve never been to the desert—to any desert—before. Red, rugged,

barbaric,' she twisted her split ends between teary fingers, 'beautiful. It could be really beautiful, Rob."

'But it's a desert,' he said. 'There's nothing there.'

'We'd be there.'

'But there are no—'

'No war monuments and catholic churches and bronze statues?' She twisted toward him in her seat. 'It wouldn't be Europe, Rob. It would be the desert—it could be better than cathedrals and glass and cobblestones. It could be red rocks and sand. Nature. Divine nature. Absolute.' She paused and glared out at the highway. 'I mean, we can make our own cathedrals if you're gonna miss them so much.'

He didn't laugh. The slim bones on the backs of his hands stood as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He stared at the shoulder and then the guardrail and then the median.

'I wasn't going to say streets or churches, Alice." His eyes shifted in anger toward her tear-swollen face. She had never said anything about not liking Europe. They had lived there for four years and she had loved him and she had known him and they had bought wine along the Seine together. They had considered changing citizenship—running forever.

'I was going to say "good hospitals,"' he started again. 'Name me one good hospital in Arizona.'

'That's not the point.'

'Of course that's the point. I thought the whole point of even coming to Detroit was so that you could go see your parents after seeing Dr. Keaton.'

'No.'

'"No," that wasn't the plan?'

'Just stop.'

'No, Alice. Going to Saline was what you and I had both said. We'd agreed on that. That's why we came. That's what we're doing. I don't even know anything about your parents, Alice. And you know, I'd actually like to meet them. I'd actually like to meet my wife's parents!'

'Take me to Arizona.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'We can't just move there. We don't know anyone there—don't have a place to go.'

'That hasn't stopped us before. My God, Robert. We've been travelling together for four years. I'm pretty sure we could handle Arizona.'

He thought about swerving the car again, about meeting the oncoming traffic.

'But you're sick,' he had said in a slow, solemn timbre. 'You really are sick, you know.'

'Sick people always go to Arizona,' she had said, rubbing her kneecaps, her voice darkening.

'No they don't.'

'Listen. They always send sick people to the southwest. If I had tuberculosis they'd be sending me out there.' She had waited for him to speak or scowl. 'The dry air is good for them—clears out the lungs, the head, the heart. The sun is brighter and the rocks are redder and they say God is bigger because of how wide the sky is.' That had been the first time she had said something strange about God. 'But hey, you never know. Maybe Arizona is one of those states with medical marijuana. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.' She winked with a puffy eye—maybe the freckled one.

A few weeks later he would watch her from the kitchen window, standing outside in their neighbor-less patch of desert. She would stare up at the smooth white moon, her freshly washed and shaved head tilted back, her arms lifted up like a crucifix. Her elbows would bend in the cold. He would think about her outstretched, wingless arms; about clipping the wings and feathers of angels—of hope itself—and watching them fall to worship the moon. She seemed to be waiting as she stood there in the cool red desert, though he didn't know what for. He would forget to ask. Instead, he would look up at the wide navy sky and say something in Latin, hear nothing, and go sip his scotch.

Two hours later he called back and spoke with Alice's father, who said he and his wife would bury Alice in Saline outside of Ann Arbor. The services would take place at St. Andrew's, a brick-brown, steeple-topped church, where her father was the priest. Robert went back to the hospital and filled out more papers, then drove north for three days, watching how the landscape changed from treeless lands to leafless trees, a different kind of solitude.

* * *

Late Thursday night in a small blue bed in a hotel outside of Saline, Robert dreamed of plants—hundreds of plants—growing in and around his heart. Their roots dried out his lungs and liver and their leaves pushed through his veins. They left his bones. He became monstrous, galvanized by chlorophyll, and began to swallow clouds. He hated the sun, sprouted arms like a god, and had brown branches rupturing his neck. He was a poplar tree with bones inside his bark, standing in a blurry orange desert and she wasn't there. It was only ever fall or winter. She wasn't there. His leaves fell like punched, stomped parasols in fall, eroded into the earth in winter, and then broke through the stone-studded ground in the fall, siphoning up to his branches

again. Repeat. Again they fell, again they rose. Three days. She wasn't there. Five days. He ate the sun. He went blind. His leaves didn't come back from the ground. They became the stones. He waited there. His bones became wood and he no longer was.

Again, Robert took a shower. The hot water carving new parts in his hair, he pulled out Alice's razor from his plastic toiletries bag, newly tinged with fine rust. He thought about how she probably would have said something about the beauty of nature—about how rust had found its way to civil war tubas, abandoned carburetors, the sunken green Titanic, and now her razor. She would have been amazed, he would have kissed her. She would've said she loved him. He would have believed her.

When Robert walked through their door Friday morning, Alice's parents watched him with uneasy faces. Claire, wearing a long single strand of pearls, wanted to see the slip of paper Alice had kept with her passport with their phone number on it. She held it like a pool of water in her manicured hands and mouthed the chain of numbers to herself. She walked toward the stairs, saying that she would be down soon. George told Robert that when she was ready, she would want to know everything, but that "soon" was relative and she might not be down until tomorrow.

"Me, on the other hand," George said, "I don't need to know. I actually don't want to know—the details, I mean. Some things are better if you just don't know. Well, maybe not 'better,' but 'easier.' Some things you might not ever get over if you know too much about them."

Robert nodded his head. George sat down on a pale green armchair, looking over his shoulder to see if Claire had gone. He had the same-shaped eyes as Alice.

"I only want to know one thing," George said in a hushed, honest voice.

"Sure," Robert said.

"Did she ever find God?"

"What?"

"Did she ever find Him?" George asked again in a slow lilt, almost closing his eyes as he said it.

"I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure." He thought about Alice staring at the angel nurse, thought about her standing in the cold desert with the moon. "We didn't really talk about it."

"She never talked about it?" He paused, waiting for Robert to say something, to recant. "I'm not sure I believe that." He creased the collar of his shirt. "Do you believe in God?"

Robert waved his hands. "Oh, I'm not very religious."

"But do you believe in God?" George asked.

"No. Like I said, I'm not very religious."

George smiled. "They're different things, you know. That's why you have to ask." He sat back a little farther in his chair. "It's always good to be sure."

"Nope," Robert said, "not religious. Don't really believe in a god." He looked down at his hands.

"That's fine, Robert. Just fine."

"I do like Catholic mass, though. I like the music and the candles. I've always liked the smell."

"The smell?"

"Of old churches. Old churches have a certain smell. Like incense and books mixed with wood."

"There certainly is a mystery to it all."

"And the Latin. Just adds to it."

The wrinkles on George's face curved and deepened as he smiled. "Oh, I would absolutely have to agree with you. The Latin. Very beautiful, ethereal." He folded his hands and exhaled, his breath like a light hum. "It's funny, too, I think, speaking a dead language to a living God."

"You're pretty religious," Robert said, tensing. George and Alice had the same ears.

"Oh, I try not to be. I avoid it whenever I can," said George. "But as a priest, it can be tricky sometimes."

"It's been a while since I've sat across from an actual priest." Robert fiddled with a dry cuticle point. "Wait," he said. "Should I be calling you Father?"

"Oh, no," George said, waving a hand, smiling. "Absolutely not."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, Alice never called me Father," he said. "She just called me Dad." He winked. "You can call me whatever you like. Let's start with George and go from there."

Robert cleared his throat. "How long have you been a priest?"

George nodded his head toward the metal crucifix on the kitchen door. "Have been since I married Claire forty years ago. Got ordained on a Wednesday. That cross was the ordination present she gave me." He rubbed his cheek with his thumb and smiled. "Of course I was an episcopal then. That's how I could marry Claire and we could have Alice. But now we're Roman Catholic, so it's good all that happened beforehand." He winked at Robert. "Got re-ordained on a Wednesday, too. I think Alice must've been about twelve."

"So then, what do you mean when you say you're not religious? Seems kind of important for a priest."

"Not as important as you'd think," George said. "It's not really about religion as much as it is about faith. It's really all about finding God everywhere, I think. You love God and you love people? You're in a good place."

"Sounds pretty religious."

"Just because you have God doesn't mean you have religion. God's a lot bigger than that." George rested his hands on his lap and looked up at the ceiling as if God were hidden in the stucco. "Did Alice ever talk to you about God?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"It never came up?"

"No."

"Not in four years of marriage?"

Robert thought about the feather in her hands and her widened arms under the cold moon and her yelling in the car on the way to Arizona. He thought about the time she had dreamed about stigmata and, once she had calmed down, was upset it hadn't been real. But all of that had happened while she was sick, while she wasn't herself. She—the Alice he had loved, who he had known, who had known him—had already disappeared into the tiny universe of her scans. She had been saying crazy things about God while she was sick, not while she lived. She couldn't have found a legitimate God in Tucson, if there even was one, because she had been out of her mind. The God she had found, the one she had talked about, couldn't have been real, Robert reasoned. Her brain had been bleeding. She had been dying. She was barely real herself. Robert still couldn't picture her face.

"No," he said. "Not very much I don't think. We never really did talk about god."

"Oh," George said, still looking up at the ceiling. "Because she used to. She really, really did. At least, she used to when she was a kid." George relaxed. Robert could almost see him remembering Alice. He was sure George could see her face. He could feel himself becoming jealous.

"One year," George said, "she asked for a chemistry set for Christmas and then used it to see whether or not the Eucharist really transformed into blood and flesh when you ate it." He smiled and looked at Robert. "She said she was going to test her own stool and urine samples for extra protein." Her father laughed and looked toward the door. "She was absolutely intent on finding Him—on finding God, you know—and somehow it didn't matter to her whether or not she had to sacrifice milk and chicken for a week to test it."

Robert was flustered. "Did it work—the experiment?"

"She said the results were 'inconclusive,'" George said, smiling. "But I don't think she ever really stopped looking. I mean, does anybody ever completely stop looking for God?"

"I guess not."

"Everybody has questions. Just part of being human."

Robert tried to remember if he and Alice had ever really talked about it before her mind had begun to wane. Before the tubes and pills and feather. He tried to imagine her smiling in a church and couldn't. Not in Notre Dame, not in Bath Abbey, not in the Sistine Chapel. She had always seemed to frown at the pews and the archways and the epitaphs engraved on the walls. She had disliked gold-plated things, had seemed to distrust even the music and the candles.

"But I don't think she was ever happy in church," Robert said. "We visited a lot of churches when we were in Europe. I loved them—loved the architecture and the romance—but Alice never did." He paused. "She told me two months ago that she actually hated cathedrals."

"Doesn't surprise me, Robert. Not at all. She always hated church when she was a kid." George rubbed his cheek again, a loose fist under his chin. "Because she was a wanderer through and through. Always asking questions—big questions. Me and Claire? We were fine right here in Saline. Pews and hymnals don't bother us. Neither do gold-plated things. I'm like you—I like the cathedrals and glass. I like mass. I like the mystery of it. So does Claire. And Claire and I know who we are and what we are and enough about the Almighty to make us okay with religion. But Alice didn't think that way. Alice didn't know enough—couldn't feel it enough—to know if God was real. She always hated church. Episcopal or Catholic, she always just hated it."

Robert thought George used the past tense all too frequently and easily. He talked about Alice's soul and religion and hatred, and found the space to laugh. It made him uncomfortable.

"That's why I think she traveled—why you both traveled around so much," said George. "That's why I think she wanted to go to Arizona. It was a last ditch effort to find God." George rubbed his hands on his knees, crossing his feet at his ankles. "That's why she needed to go."

Robert became furious. George had not even known Alice—had not seen her—for the last four years of her life and somehow, inherently, knew her thoughts, her fears, her motives. He knew she had been searching for God. He said he knew why Alice had wanted to go to Arizona. He said he knew about how much she hated cathedrals. She had never told Robert those things, had never trusted him with the questions of her soul in all their time in Spain and France and Britain. He wouldn't have been surprised if George had known about Alice's hands against the moon or the feather in her hand, too. Robert could still barely remember what she looked like, let

alone think about what holes might have been in her soul. She had lied to him. She had lied to him that day along the Seine. Or maybe he had lied to her. Maybe he didn't really know her, hadn't ever loved her. Maybe that was why her face was pixelated in his mind, like a mirage of small actions and little details, never whole. Because she was never whole. He knew nothing—couldn't remember her. Maybe they had never loved. He was jealous of her father and thought maybe Alice had been, too. They both had lied along the Seine. He had never seen her soul.

* * *

George conducted the funeral ceremonies that Saturday afternoon at St. Andrews, standing outside in the winnowing cold of a Michigan December. He read from obscure passages of scripture—sections of Ezekiel and the proclamations of John the Baptist—instead of anything from Genesis or 1 Corinthians, which was fine for Robert because he didn't want to think about love.

He thought that those verses could have been favorites of Alice's growing up. Maybe she had had long conversations about them with George, even longer conversations about the Eucharist and the trinity. Either way, he wouldn't ask; Alice hadn't wanted to share those things with him, so Robert saw no point in asking now. He hadn't known her. She hadn't loved him. He had no answer he wanted to give to George.

Standing over the lowered brown coffin as George spoke quickly in Latin, his breathy words turning white in the air, Robert saw a worm inch out from one of the frost-choked walls of earth and fall onto the side of the casket. He gasped. No one else seemed to see it. He watched its ends squirm and stick against the lacquered wood, trying to decide if it was an omen of life, or death, or life after death.

George said in Latin, "Are you looking at the worm?"

Robert looked up. He nodded, mouth open.

"So am I. It's good, I think. Speaks to life."

"But it's dying," Robert said in Latin. Everyone looked up at him, holding their black hats and scarves to their faces. "It's dying right there in the cold. It can't move. Look at it." He pointed and everyone stared except Claire whose eyes had been closed the entire time.

"Soon we will bury it, too. It will be safe soon."

"I don't want to bury it."

"You want it to die?"

"I don't want it to be there with Alice."

"It's not going to hurt her. The wood's too thick." He cupped his hands and shuffled his long sleeves over them. "She's not there anymore anyway. Alice is not in that box, Robert."

"Then where is she?" he yelled in Latin, his tongue sticking to his teeth. "Where is she?"

"Maybe with God."

"Maybe with God." Robert's face stung as he scoffed. "And maybe not. Where is this God, George? Where is he? What if he's not there? What if there is nothing there?" He imagined the worm beating its dull pink head against the coffin for a thousand years, never getting in. Then he imagined it inside, eating, leaving only her teeth.

"Those were always Alice's questions."

"Then why didn't she ever tell me, George? Because I had—*I have*—the same questions. We were married for four years and I don't even know who she was. I don't know anything about her. George," he said, the skin over his knuckles cracking, fists clenching in his pockets, "who am I burying?"

George walked around the side of the plot through the tiny crowd and put his hand on Robert's shoulder. He spoke in hushed English. "You are burying your wife, Robert. I am burying my daughter. We are burying Alice together, right now. But Alice—the real Alice, the Alice we knew—"

"—*you* knew—"

"—*we* knew isn't in that box, Robert. Her soul's not there. Her essence isn't there. She left you in Arizona; she left me four years ago here in Saline. Wanderers are leavers, Robert. They find themselves in all kinds of places with all kinds of people and all kinds of mistakes and questions. I couldn't help her. You couldn't help her. She had to try and make her way, to find her answers. Not in churches or love or people, in you or me or Claire—but in the world, in cities, in the desert." Robert couldn't tell if his tears were so cold they were freezing or so hot they were searing. He looked up at George who had switched back to Latin. "I don't think she would've left us like this, Robert, unless she'd found Him. I think she must have found Him."

"But how can you—"

"I have faith, Robert. It's just faith."

"Is that good enough?"

"You have to let it in."

"You have to be religious, then."

"No," George said. "You just have to be willing to feel it."

"Could Alice feel it?"

"I don't know. I don't know how she was at the end." He looked up into the sky full of clouds like tiny braille. It seemed almost as if he were trying to read it. "But you do. You were

there with her at the end, you know. You were there." He spoke in English, "What do you think, Robert? Could she feel Him? Did she find Him?"

"I don't know," he said, looking at the clouds seeing nothing but white on gray. "I don't know."

George walked back to the head of the plot and bowed his head in apology to the crowd. He crossed himself and gave a final blessing, tossed a bit of dirt onto the casket as he said "I hope you know now. And I hope you know I love you." Robert tossed in a handful of frozen soil. He said nothing. He stared at the brown wood trying to summon Alice's face, trying to remember what she had looked like with hair, with full cheeks, with soft hands, with earrings in, with lipstick on, without all the tubes. He imagined her in Notre Dame. He saw her under the moon. He pictured her standing there, skin tingling in the nighttime breeze, maybe saying nothing, maybe singing, maybe whispering. Maybe praying. He wished he would have asked her. He wished he would've asked her about Susan Sontag. He wished he would have tried to pick up the angel feather from her hand.

* * *

Robert started back to Tucson Sunday evening and arrived late Wednesday morning. George and Claire had offered to let him stay in Saline for Christmas, but Robert said he needed to leave, to think. George told him to maybe stop thinking for a while.

For the first few days Robert slept with his phone by his head, half expecting a frantic call from Claire about how Alice had gotten up and come inside. He took a small handful of sleeping pills early Saturday afternoon and didn't wake up until Sunday before the dawn. He couldn't remember where he was when he first woke up. It had been two weeks. He walked outside and sat in the dust under the moon, in the silence. For a minute he thought to look for

Alice's footprints in the dirt, to sit where she had stood—to build an altar there. But instead he walked out further, across the empty black road, and climbed a flat red boulder to be closer to the sky. He whispered, lifted his hands, and prayed in Latin. He stared up at the moon and squinted to see its craters, feeling sprouts breaking loose between his toes, the bulbs behind his knees throwing rich green leaves from his skin, and yellow fruits hanging from his fingertips, ripening, taut. He dreamed he grew to a heaven. He dreamed of Alice eclipsing the sun and met her there. He saw her face. She reached for his hands and touched them to her neck—her light pulse kissed his fingers and the fruits of his hands fell. She picked them up and smiled and ate them and closed her eyes and sang a hymn and had blossoms on her shoulders. She moved his hand through her hair and said 'yes.' He fell back to earth, gently spinning, believing. He fell back to earth at the dawn.

Still

The tomatoes were black on the vine. They hadn't ripened until the beginning of September and now they hung, rotten, bloated, still. The cold summer had turned into a disparaging autumn and the tomatoes had never ripened past a sallow, caramelized yellow. The brass weathervane on the garden shed still stood crooked and the back patio hadn't been properly swept since May. The trees were naked and the grass was tan, but the chrysanthemum bushes Heather had planted were budding orange and red.

She was washing dishes in the kitchen. Bits of lettuce and dirty onion skins lay wedged in the slots of the drain guard from the night before, and the wet rims of her cheap plastic dish gloves made her forearms sore. She plucked the lettuce and skins from the sink but lost a piece of cucumber in the drain. The oven beeped. She turned and opened the fridge to check on her slowly defrosting pie crust.

Heather pulled the beige, limp dough out, unrolled it on the counter, and gently lowered it into the pie tin, making sure to pull the dough together where it had torn and leave enough crust

at the lip to pinch and crimp the edges. The oven beeped again. She opened the oven door and slid it in. The phone rang upstairs. It was probably her friend Eve. She let it ring. Eve knew that she and Christopher never answered the phone before 8 a.m. Most of the eleven unheard messages on the answering machine were from Eve and soon there would be twelve. So she set the oven timer for twelve minutes and got the strawberries out of the fridge. She grabbed a clean knife from the drying rack, still wet, and started slicing the strawberries.

They had been out of season for months, but they had been on sale at the store and their little red bodies looked so shiny and fresh in the flimsy green containers that she decided to make strawberry instead of oatmeal pie for Eve's baby shower. She had picked out three quarts and put them in the tray at the top of her cart, making sure to place them so they wouldn't slide out the baby leg holes and crash to the floor. The lady at the checkout had said 'How lovely the strawberries were' and Heather had agreed. The lady had said 'It's so strange to see ones so big this time of year' and Heather agreed again. She then pushed her sputter-wheeled cart out into the parking lot and placed the strawberries in the front seat with her, stacking all three quarts and gently cinching the safety belt across.

The oven beeped again, the crust came out, but Heather's bowl of sliced strawberries was still nearly empty. The berries, she realized, were pinker than they had seemed in the store. They were firm, but immature, and some of them still had whitish rims at the crowns. Their bright pink skins were so taut and glossy that the seeds didn't sit nestled in the little studded nooks like on regular berries, but seemed to lay flat across the tops. They looked too artificial. She cut them slowly. The blushed skin separated and the green tops fell in the trash. They had cold pink insides with thick white centers and they weren't growing anymore. They were dead. She paused as she looked at them sitting on her cutting board. They had been alive. It scared her.

She continued for several minutes to quickly cut the mid-autumn strawberries and put them in the plain white bowl. She poured in sugar that leeched their juices and made them wilt onto one another and poured them into the pie crust and turned the oven up. The oven puffed and dragged as it heated up. She went into the hallway bathroom, opened the cabinet, took her pills, and then sat down at the kitchen table. Christopher would be up soon.

* * *

There it was.

The towel lay on the bedroom floor. She was kneeling next to it when she saw it. It was very small and very still but Christopher had found it in the mess and picked it out with a spoon. She should've been the one to find it. She wouldn't have touched it with a spoon. But he didn't like it. He thought it was ugly.

Two hours later she touched it for the first time. It was soft and cold and its eyes looked like flat black calluses. She tried to pick it up but it had dried to the towel and so she used the spoon to pry it off. It looked like it hurt and she almost cried but she said "hush, hush" and slid it onto a clean part of the towel and pulled the frayed corner over its little legs. She gently pulled the wispy ends up more and tucked them under its chin. She thought it might be warmer now but she touched it and it was still cold.

She stared at it all night. Christopher didn't come back into the room.

* * *

Christopher grimaced and folded the towel like a flag, holding his breath the whole time. They had decided to just bury it in the towel. When they picked it up from their bedroom floor,

the dried blood in the carpet was almost black. The towel was so stiff. Then they took it outside to the small square hole he'd dug by the back garden shed. He stood there, remembering how his brother Mark had told him when they were kids to hold his breath in cemeteries because of ghosts or curses. But he was fairly sure one plot by the back garden shed didn't make a cemetery. So he exhaled but paused slightly before breathing in again.

His feet were clammy in his shoes as he stood there over the tiny hole in the black dirt.

He caught himself holding his breath. He quickly breathed in and Heather looked up at him, the wideness of her eyes scanning his in hope that he had something to say. But he had nothing. He was worried because when he had dug the little hole in the garden by the back shed, he hadn't found a single worm. Not one. Death poems always talked about worms. And he wondered why there were no worms in his yard. They should have been there.

He walked around the back of the shed, found a large white rock in the stone heap he still hadn't moved, and put it near the fresh-faced grave. They walked back inside, and stared at it from the kitchen window.

* * *

Heather half-expected to wake up in the morning with it back inside her body. But she woke up at 3 a.m. cold. She pushed back the duvet cover and ran her fingers under the loose hem of her shirt, feeling around her empty stomach, pressing and kneading and touching the rim of her belly button. It was sore and empty. She couldn't sleep. She thought about praying and then didn't. That never worked.

She got out of bed and walked across the hall and sat in its room, fingering through the toys, pillows, tiny clothes, and dozens of swatches of blue and pink paints. She had left the door

open and could hear Christopher rustling in the sheets across the hall, awake. But he wouldn't come in and sit with her. He wouldn't cry with her. He had touched it with a spoon. She remembered her empty stomach and curled up on the carpet next to a Raggedy Ann doll and woke up when she heard Christopher walking down the stairs. He probably hadn't even seen her.

* * *

He looked up 'worm' on Wikipedia. Also 'Hamlet.' Also 'death.'

He reheated his mug of instant coffee four times. He remembered that Dante had said dead babies went to hell. He couldn't remember which ring. It didn't matter. Or maybe it was just unborn children who went to hell? But his child had been born. Hadn't it? Wasn't that born? He looked up 'divine comedy dead children hell.'

* * *

"At least, you know, it didn't really have a face or anything yet, right?" Eve sat across from Heather on the bed, alternating between rubbing the rough skin of her elbows and tracing the quilted stitches of the duvet cover with her fingers as she spoke. "So, at least there's that."

Heather nodded. "Yeah."

"I mean, could you tell? Did it look like either one of you yet?"

"No. Not really." Heather ran her fingers over her eyebrows.

"That's good."

"Yeah."

"Maybe in a few more weeks it would have," Eve said, tracing a line of stitches by her knee.

"Yeah. Maybe it would've."

"And I guess," Eve looked over at the book shelf and then up at the ceiling fan. "I guess if it didn't have a face, then it didn't have any other, you know, 'features,'" she cocked her head to the side. "And so, you probably didn't know…I mean, did you know—"

"No. We didn't know." She paused and massaged her wrist with her thumb. "At least, we couldn't tell. I couldn't tell."

"Well, that's good then."

"Yeah."

"Because then I guess you don't really have to use up any of those names you'd picked out, right?"

Heather looked up and stared at Eve. "I was thinking I'd call it Sam."

"'Sam?'" Eve stiffened. "What do you mean, 'Sam'? You're naming it? Heather, I don't know if that's—"

"I've been calling it Sam for weeks."

"But don't you think—"

"No. It's the perfect name. It's good for boys *and* girls and—"

"But listen, Heather—"

"No! Its name is—" Heather stopped. She'd done it again. "Its name *was* Sam."

"You can't name it if it didn't have a face."

"It did have a face!" she screamed. "It was my baby, Eve. Mine. I saw it and you didn't, and I can name it whatever I want—anything. I could name it anything. And its name was Sam. I know it—I know its name was Sam." She grabbed her sides and leaned forward. Her face felt

warm and her foot had fallen asleep and her nose had just started to run. “Sam is a beautiful name. And my baby’s name was Sam.”

And it did have a face. She had seen it.

* * *

Christopher didn’t know, but that night he hadn’t come back to the room, she had taken pictures of it. Fourteen. She kept them hidden in her bottom dresser drawer. They were in a wicker box.

Whenever she looked through the pictures, she always wished she’d taken more. More close-up ones. More of the eyes. She was convinced they would’ve been brown like hers. She could tell.

She once read an article in the newspaper about a woman who had kept her baby’s skeleton in a brown suitcase under her bed for fifty-seven years. They only found it when she’d died. Heather had thought about it, of course. Sometimes she sat and spent a whole pot of coffee thinking about how lucky that mother was to have slept so close to her child every day. Right under her heart. She wondered if the woman ever opened the latches and touched it.

* * *

Two months after, they started cleaning out its room. Heather put the baby things in trash bags and boxes and plastic shopping bags for Eve who had just told her on Sunday she was pregnant. Heather had told Christopher that she hoped Eve would lose it. He lugged the crib parts back upstairs to the attic and thought about whether two plots made a cemetery. They packed silently.

When Heather had left to take the first load over to Eve's house, Christopher found a pair of baby shoes by the radiator and slipped them into his pocket. They had blue ducks on them. He thought about lost generations and unworn shoes as he fiddled with the price tag in his pocket.

* * *

"No, no, no, it's okay," Heather said hurriedly in a choked voice. "Keep the flower." The whole thing had caught her by surprise. She shook her head and put her hands in the air. "Keep the flower."

"But it's Mother's—"

"Yeah, I know it is and—"

"So you should take the flower." The old lady smiled and held the carnation out further to Heather. It was small and ruffled and pink. Very pretty. The lady had a bunch of twenty or thirty more lying in the crook of her arm. The church's foyer had swollen with people and Heather stood waiting for Christopher by the exit, hoping she'd go unseen by all the ushers with the flowers.

"No, really. It's okay. I don't want one." Heather stared at the carnations.

The woman looked down at the rest of the flowers, paused, and, after another moment, knowingly peeked back up at Heather. "Would you like a different color?"

"No, no. The color's fine. But I don't need a flower. I—"

"Take a carnation. It's Mother's Day and—"

"But I—"

"Oh, don't worry!" she said loudly. "'Mothers-to-be' count too, you know." Heather let a tear collect in her eye. She could feel it gathering in her lashes. It was heavy. The old lady hadn't noticed.

"But I'm not," she could hardly speak, "a mother. I'm, um…not going to be one anymore." Her voice was hushed and dry. She felt sick.

"But weren't you—"

"Yes," she clenched her eyes. "I was."

"But I thought…" her eyes widened. She put the carnation back in the pile, patted the bundled stems, and then reached out for Heather's shoulder.

"It's okay," Heather said, leaning into the hug. The carnations were next to her face. They all smelled beautiful.

"No," the old woman looked up from under her drooping eyelids, "it's never okay. Never, never okay."

* * *

Sometimes he needed to get away from Bethlehem. He needed to get away from the people who looked at him with sad faces in the grocery store, away from the hollow conversations, away from the reeking pity. He needed time alone. So he would drive the car to the Poconos, park it at the end of Algum Road and walk four miles up a footpath to the pale, worn cedar cabin hidden in the woods so he could think, throw rocks, and yell at God.

He told Heather he was leaving on business and that he'd only be gone for a day or two and she looked down at the kitchen floor because she knew she'd be alone in their house. He put his hand awkwardly on her shoulder and kissed her cheek and then went to put on his grey suit

with the red tie, put an empty briefcase in the backseat, and start the car. He wondered if she knew about the cabin.

It was a three hour drive away in the south of the Poconos and his father used to take him and Mark there on trips when they were younger. There were six cemeteries on the way there, he knew, because Mark had always reached across the backseat to cup his hand over Christopher's nose and mouth so he didn't breathe. Christopher still held his breath as he drove past the little cemeteries almost twenty years later. He thought about Mark and he thought about his wormless backyard and he thought about things slouching *away* from Bethlehem, not waiting to be born.

* * *

In the throes of summer, a bony gray dog came into their yard and started sniffing around the back garden shed. It had found Sam. She knew it. Heather ran to the pantry and grabbed a can of corn, cocked her arm and lobbed it at the dog. She missed. She screamed. She ran back and got another can. Baked beans. But when she got back to the patio door, it was gone. Clutching the can, she ran out to the shed. She screamed and stared at the upturned ground where it was buried.

It would be safer under her bed.

* * *

Christopher came downstairs and sat with Heather at the table. He kissed her forehead and she touched his thigh under the table.

The oven beeped. Christopher let go of her hand and watched her walk over to the oven. She put on the oven mitts, pulled out the pie tin, and clicked off the oven with her elbow. The

strawberries' pink insides had deepened to a rich, full red in cooking, and the juices hadn't settled or stiffened yet. Several pockets between the mushy strawberries continued bubbling. She was going to bring it over to Christopher to smell when she tripped and fell over the garbage can by the sink.

The pie fell.

Strawberries lay strewn all over the white linoleum floor, the boiling sugary sap seeping into and staining the grout between the tiles, and the crust broken into a dozen soggy pieces. Heather stared at the red floor and cried.

Christopher came and sat across from her. He soon just turned his head and looked out through the sliding glass door to the garden.

The bright chrysanthemum buds faced the kitchen window. They were budding too soon—just a bit too soon. He saw the concrete birdbath filled with matted algae and the wheelbarrow still holding a half load of mulch and the garden hose still angrily heaped on the patio and the thin green lichen growing on the trees. He saw the black tomatoes.

Heather couldn't stop crying. She stared at the smashed pie between her knees and the juice leaking into Christopher's socks. There was a fat slice of hot strawberry on her ankle and it burned, but she didn't pick it off because she didn't want to and she didn't care and now the strawberry was dead. She would wait until the mums had died to get up off the floor.

Americana

"They didn't have Swiss. Just Clover Farms."

"But I told you to get Swiss."

"They didn't have Swiss," Roger said.

"But they always have it." Marlene swung her weight to the other hip. "What kind did you get?

"Two percent."

She sighed. "We drink one percent."

"Oh."

"It's okay."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I said."

"I thought we drank two percent."

"No. One percent." She sighed. "Always one percent."

"They had that there."

"In Swiss?"

"No. Clover Farms."

"It's fine. I don't drink milk," she said, tapping her fingers against the faux-granite countertop.

"I used to drink milk," Roger said. Marlene didn't react. "I used to drink milk."

Bud walked into the kitchen. "What happened?"

"We have two percent milk." Marlene pointed at the blue cap on the plastic container. "Blue cap."

"I drink two percent at school."

"Then at least you'll be happy," said Roger.

"Sometimes I drink whole."

Marlene squinched her nose. "I hate whole."

"I used to drink whole," Roger said.

"Milk?" Bud asked.

"Yeah. Milk." They looked at the blue-capped jug like it was a small alien.

"You know, in some places they drink milk out of a bag," said Marlene.

"Seems wrong," Bud said. "Individual bags?"

"No. One big bag in the fridge. They pour it into cups to drink."

"Weird."

"I know. Can't imagine."

"Where do they do that?"

"In Canada, I think."

"I used to drink whole milk when I played football in college," Roger said.

"And in England they don't put their eggs in the fridge."

"Really?" asked Bud.

"Yup. They have special egg plates for the counter," Marlene said. Bud nodded. "It was a clue in my crossword puzzle yesterday."

"Seems excessive. Special plates for eggs."

"I was actually pretty good in college. The eighties were a great time for football."

Marlene sighed.

"Why did you sigh?" Robert asked, slamming his car keys to the counter.

"Nothing."

Roger tossed his hands in the air. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I don't want anything from you."

"Then why did you sigh?"

"No reason."

"You sighed. There's a reason."

"Maybe she didn't have a reason," Bud said. "Mom's always sighing."

"I am not."

"You are to," Bud said.

"I'm offended you'd even say that." The cavities in Marlene's collar bones deepened as she crossed her arms. "Really, I'm very offended."

"You've sighed eleven times since I got home."

"I have not!"

"Have to. I've been counting."

"Who taught that child to count?"

"Not me," Roger said.

Bud picked up the milk jug by the handle and opened the fridge.

"What are you doing?" Marlene asked.

Bud closed the fridge door. "Putting the milk away."

"But we haven't decided what we're going to do with it yet," said Marlene.

"Aren't we going to drink it?" Roger asked.

"Roger, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"I don't know if that's smart."

"What do you mean you 'don't know if that's smart'?"

"I'll drink it, mom."

"No, you won't. When we're at home, I want you to drink one percent."

"But he drinks two percent at school," Roger said. "And sometimes whole, right? Sometimes whole?"

"Yeah," said Bud.

"I know," Marlene said. "That's why I said 'when we're at home.'"

Roger flung his hands in the air. "Fine. Whatever."

Bud put the milk back on the island. "The handle's cold."

Marlene sighed and slouched so that her elbows rested on the counter. Roger thought he hated her.

"What to do with the milk." Marlene's voice trailed off. "Maybe we could give it away," she said.

"To whom?"

"It's 'to *who*,' Bud."

"To *who*?"

"I don't know." She looked up at Roger. "Any ideas?"

"My idea was that we would drink it. You know, because it's milk. And we paid for it. And I drove out to get it."

"But it's two percent."

"I'm well aware it's two percent."

"And it's Clover Farms."

"I know."

"So we'll just have to get rid of it." Marlene sighed.

"Like that. That sigh. What was that for?" Roger pointed

"Can't you make soup with milk?" asked Bud, scrolling his finger along the ridges of the cap.

"Only with whole," said Marlene.

"What about cake?"

"Cake mix needs water. And oil and eggs. No milk," she said, looking at Roger.

"Don't look at me like that."

"We could make one from scratch," said Bud.

"People don't make cakes from scratch."

"My mother used to," said Roger. "Before you could buy cake in a box."

"But your mother was a terrible cook."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm just saying. She tried to make cheese sauce by putting cheddar in cold water."

"Well, her cakes were fine." Roger hung his trench coat on the hooks by the garage door. "Just because you don't know how to make a cake—"

"I know how to make a cake."

"From a box." Roger scoffed. "Hardly a real cake."

"You make cheese sauce with milk, right?" asked Bud.

"Yeah. Hot milk," Marlene said, looking back at Roger.

"Could we do that, then, and make some pasta?"

"Except for pasta comes in a box and I don't know if your dad would go for that since, you know, things from boxes apparently aren't real."

"Don't be asinine, Marlene," said Roger, gripping the thick counter. "Just make him some pasta."

Marlene looked down at Bud from across the island. "But it has to be hot *whole* milk for the cheese sauce to be good."

"No, it doesn't!" Robert kicked his shoes off against the wicker shoe basket in the corner. "It can be any kind of milk. It's all the same. It all does the same thing."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's true."

"Scientifically, Bud, the milk has to be whole. If you want to make good cheese sauce, it has to be whole. It has more vitamins in it."

"What do the vitamins do to the sauce?" Bud asked.

"They make the milk thicker."

"But what does it do to the cheese?"

"It doesn't do anything," said Robert. "They're just vitamins."

Marlene sighed looking at milk. "If only it were a pink cap."

"Then it would be whole?" Bud asked.

"Then it would be one percent," she said. "Milk is not all the same."

"Marlene. Marlene." She didn't look up at him. "Why are you doing this?"

Little baubles of water started forming on the outside of the container.

"I'm going to put it in the fridge," said Bud.

"No. Don't do that yet," said Marlene.

"Why not?"

"I don't want it taking up all that extra space."

"It's just a half gallon," said Roger.

"But it's tall."

"But it's thin."

"If it stays out," said Bud, "won't it go bad?"

"Well, then we'll know what to do with it." Marlene laughed. Roger and Bud looked at each other. "Fine. Just put it in the fridge."

Bud picked it up by the handle.

"Use two hands."

"I'm just turning around to the fridge."

"I said 'use two hands.'"

"How am I supposed to open the fridge, then?"

"Here. I'll open it for you," said Roger.

Bud lifted the milk above his head to put it on the top shelf, but Robert grabbed his shoulder.

"Wait," he said. "Sadie's cactus is in there."

"Her cactus?"

Sadie's tiny round cactus bulb sat planted in the center of a terracotta-colored plastic pot between the ketchup bottle and cream cheese.

"Oh no," Bud said. "The milk." The plastic container lay fractured between his sneakers, a thin drizzle of two percent dribbling out of the split side. No one had heard the thud.

"Sadie!" Marlene yelled. "Come get your petting cactus out of the fridge!"

"What?" she called from somewhere upstairs.

"Get your cactus out of the fridge!"

"Pudge?"

"Yes—Pudge!"

"Be down in a few."

"Come get it now!"

"In a few!"

"Now!" Marlene gave a forceful sigh. "Bud," she said, "this is why we use *two* hands."

"I was using *two* hands."

"Obviously you weren't."

"Obviously you don't know what you're talking about."

"Just go get some towels," said Roger. Bud moved his feet and the carton fell another half inch, spurting more milk.

"Augh. This whole left side is slit."

"It's okay, Bud. Get the towels."

Sadie walked into the kitchen. "Where's Pudge?"

"In the fridge," Marlene said pointing. "Sadie, why on God's green earth is the cactus in the fridge?"

"It's not 'the cactus.' He's Pudge."

"Oh good God," said Marlene, sighing. "Fourteen years old and her plant has a name."

"He's a cactus—a living thing. He deserves a name."

"And dogs deserve free speech."

"It might be living, but it's sure not a 'he,'" Robert mumbled from the floor.

"Fine," Marlene said. "Why did you put *Pudge* in the fridge?"

"You do know cacti live in the desert, right?" said Bud coming out of the laundry room with a new roll of paper towels.

"Duh," said Sadie.

"Sadie," Marlene almost growled. "Why was it in the fridge?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be that way."

"Well, I don't know!"

"Oh, come on. Who puts a petting cactus in the fridge? For goodness' sake—it's a cactus."

"But Pudge's type of cactus probably never came from the desert," said Bud. "He's been genetically modified. He's a petting cactus. He's not even real."

"Of course he's real."

"But not really real."

"I do actually think he originally came in a box," Roger mumbled, inaudible.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Sadie huffed.

"Do to. He's like a seedless apple or a seedless grape or a boneless chicken. They grow them in labs." He grinned. "You have a lab cactus."

"Kind of like a box cake," Roger muttered.

"Shut-up!" said Sadie.

"Lab cactus, lab cactus. Wherefore art thou, lab cactus!"

Sadie jumped over the milk spill and ground her knuckles into Bud's skull.

"Get off me, idiot!"

"Leave Pudge alone, idiot!"

"Kids, can you take that to another room? I'm getting a headache." Marlene rubbed her neck.

"Stop pulling my hair!"

"Stop choking me!"

"Kids! Take it to the family room!"

"Bud, where are those towels?" asked Robert.

"Here." Bud launched the paper towel roll from under Sadie's fists. It arced and landed in the puddle.

"Nice catch, Roger," Marlene said. She sighed. The kids moved out of the kitchen.

"Why do you always do that?"

The milk soaked through to the cardboard tube inside the roll. Big wads of pulpy white towel dropped as Roger walked the jug and soggy towels to the sink.

"Do what?"

"You know."

"Obviously I don't know."

"Well, obviously you should!" Roger pumped the flimsy plastic body of the jug. It spurted milk like a pricked artery into the silver sink drain. "Why do you say things like that?"

Marlene pretended not to hear him. She watched Bud and Sadie tangled and punching in the family room.

"They're so funny."

"Looks like Sadie's pummeling him pretty good."

She sighed. "Pretty *well*, you mean."

Roger picked up his car keys.

"No. Pretty *good*."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"You're still wrong."

Roger grabbed his trench coat off the brass hooks and swung the keys in his hands. Sadie screamed "Pudge is dead! Pudge is dead!" from the family room and ran upstairs. Bud chased after her laughing.

"You don't even like milk," he said.

"I know."

He inched the garage door open. "I just don't know why you always have to—"

"Roger," she said.

"Yeah?" He turned around, half closing the door.

"Could you put the jug in the recycling when you go?"

He gripped the knob harder. “Is there anything left?”

“No,” she sighed. “It’s empty.”

Laugh

A thin swill of coffee, thick with flecks of broken brown beans, tilted back and forth in Leah Rosegrave's hospital mug. She was considering changing her name. She had always hated it and was still jealous that her younger sister was named Sarah, even though she was forty-five and Leah had just turned fifty-two. Sarah was a gorgeous name, classic and regal, breathy and hot—Leah always thought it would sound good whispered between the bed sheets of an Italian lover. (She thought about this now in the hospital cafeteria and writhed over the leg separator in her plastic seat a little bit.) Leah's mother had named her sister after the Sarah from the Bible—the one who laughed and saw an angel and had a miracle child 'born unto her' in her nineties. Leah was the ugly sister in Genesis no one wanted to sleep with.

Leah had complained to her mother only once about her name, crying at the kitchen table as her mother had combed and braided her hair, begging her to let her change her name for her fourteenth birthday.

"But Leah, your name is beautiful." Her mother had crouched down in front of Leah's chair, wet pieces of thin brown hair matted to Leah's face. "I picked your name because I loved it, Leah. I named you that because I knew you'd be beautiful before I even saw you."

"But the Leah in the Bible was ugly, mom." She had wiped her eye with the inside of her wrist. "Really ugly."

"No, she wasn't. God doesn't make ugly things."

"Of course she was ugly. No one wanted her."

"God wanted her. God always wanted her."

"But that's not the same, mom. You know it's not."

"The same as what?"

"You know."

Her mother had leaned back and smiled, stroking Leah's tear-moistened hands. "You'll make a man very happy someday," she said, looking at her young chest.

Leah scoffed and turned her face.

Her mother rose from her knees and sat across from her at the table. "Do you know," she said, "why I picked the names Leah and Sarah out of all the names in the Bible?"

"No," said Leah.

"Because of the 'ah' at the ends of them." Her mother had reached for Leah's hands again across the table. Leah didn't reach for hers. "The 'ah' is like the written breath of God, Leah. It's the vowel that breathes—it's the vowel God breathed when He made life in and out of

nothing, hovering over the waters. It's the sound His nostrils made when He made man out of dust." Her mother had looked widely around the room from ceiling to floor to counter, captivated by her own words, searching for more. "It's the first and last thing any of us says on this earth." She had tapped the backs of her fingers on the wooden table, waiting for Leah's to join her. Her fingers were calloused.

"No," she said.

Her mother's hands had collapsed in on themselves, fingers retracting. She sat with them flat in her lap. It was the first time Leah had realized she was able to hurt her mother. It was also the first time she consciously decided to say nothing to her mother about how she no longer believed in her God.

Leah crimped the lip of her styrofoam cup with her fingernails, flipping pages in the magazine she was reading about thousands of pounds of tomatoes being dumped in the Nevada sun to rot since they couldn't be sold with dings or bruises on them. The article was written by a woman named Leah and she hated the name all the more. She wondered if this other Leah hated her name as much as she did, or if her mother had told her that she would make a man happy someday, too.

She laughed. Of course not.

Leah had never made a man happy. She had lived her hypothetical, theoretical, now highly improbable wedding day (and night) fifty-two times (fifty-three depending on the validity of uterine life), whatever day it might have been had someone thought she would make him happy. Never had she had a reason to break beautiful plates over someone, to sneak into his

apartment to delete phone messages, or to handcuff him to a bed in an hourly motel. She had never received a bouquet of pink roses, never a honk in the driveway twenty minutes before dinner, never used the couple of condoms sliding back and forth in the bottom of her purse that she had grabbed from a bowl in 2004. Apparently, she was a real Leah.

Breaking off a chunk of the cup, she thought about the name Mary.

When she was a little girl, she used to pray and pray that God would make her Mary—the new Mary—Mary, the next mother of the soon-coming King. She prayed behind the white door of her bedroom, on the sunlit spot of carpet near her dresser, for sinless perfection—she thanked God that she had never sinned so far (that she could think of) and prayed that he would preserve her purity and innocence and whiteness so that she could be the mother of Jesus coming again. She prayed that she would never need to be forgiven. She prayed she would be good enough.

One day when she was seven, she prayed these things for twenty minutes straight and the next day a small sparrow lay dead in the gutter outside her window. She wondered about where the eyes of God had been. Where were the eyes of God? They had not watched the bird. They had not seen her prayers. She was angry at God and yelled and yelled and yelled (but into her pillows and hands so her mother wouldn't hear). She knew it was a sin to scream at her God, but she could not help herself; she could not stop.

So the next day she prayed for God to make her a sinner since she didn't deserve to be Jesus' new mother anymore. And God made good on his promise, though he seemed to forget about the virgin part.

However, she decided when she was twenty-seven to stop telling people she was a virgin because she knew she wasn't one in her mind. Her mind was bad and her hands were bad and every time she saw an orange car she tightened her thighs because Chad Montgomery had driven an orange Rabbit in high school and, every time she saw an orange car, she had a flashback to her first wet dream about him.

Definitely not Mary material. Definitely still a Leah.

Somewhere above her head, through the beige stucco ceiling tiles and the winding hallways of bad watercolors, was her father's hospital room. He had been in a vegetative state since July when he tried to kill himself by drinking a bottle of NyQuil and drowning himself in the bathtub. Leah had told him many times sitting in his nearly silent, machine-heavy hospital room, that it wasn't his suicide attempt itself that had bothered her, it was the fact that he had tried to do a two-in-one overdose and drowning that really annoyed her.

"It's just too much, dad," she would say. "You only get one out. And you don't get to choose."

She liked to think that he was laughing. She *knew* he was laughing whenever the doctors came in during her visits to remind her that pulling the plug was now completely legal and even advisable in her father's condition and that, don't worry, it wouldn't be considered assisted suicide.

Sitting with her empty, broken coffee cup and anthropological article about decaying tomatoes written by a female journalist named Leah Andrews who, judging by the little picture of her at the side—and by the fact that she was a journalist who probably travelled a lot—had probably slept around and left dozens of broken hearts in her trail of passport stickers and stamps, Leah Rosegrave couldn't help but view the hospital cafeteria as some kind of hilarious white purgatory. She felt like she was paying some sort of horrible penance for her life, just sitting in the cafeteria, her father somewhere above her, her mother somewhere below, her sister somewhere outside, all practice for heaven or hell. The whole place smelled like burned coffee. For whatever reason, she was reminded of that Argentinian poet who walked into the sea to die.

She tried to sit there thinking about her father (there's a certain sense of obligation in hospitals to think about the people there. Purgatory, too, she thought), but she couldn't stop thinking about changing her own name. She still liked the idea of renaming herself Sarah because of the fact that the biblical Sarah saw an angel. So had her sister. Unlike Leah, her sister Sarah still believed in the God they heard about in the dark brick church their mother used to take them to, and was even a pastor's wife now. Six kids. No birth control.

Sarah had seen angels. That's how she knew that God was real.

One time when Sarah was seventeen, she was standing in the back of the fourth floor of the library with the giant stacks of books so old they smelled like cloves (probably waiting there to make-out with Luke Mitchell) when she looked up and saw thirty angels in the red-metal rafters of the ceiling. She talked about it for weeks. She stood in front of the whole church congregation in her starched yellow dress proclaiming the miracle of the gospel, the reality of the spiritual world, and the existence of guardian angels. She called it a "spiritual experience." Then

she started calling it a “spiritual awakening.” She broke it off with Luke that Tuesday, much to their mother’s joy, and their father only drank half a handle the whole week.

Sarah had stopped talking to Leah about practicing French kissing on the shower wall and which teachers were sleeping together. She stopped talking about what it felt like when Luke licked her neck and the poetry he had written her. She claimed she no longer wanted to talk about it because it no longer mattered—she started spelling the “he” and “him” for God with a capital H. She started spelling “love” always with a capital L. She always volunteered to say grace at Christmas dinner.

Leah hadn’t spoken to Sarah since July when she and her husband Tim had shown up at the hospital to see their father. They hadn’t spoken about anything interesting the whole time they had been visiting in their father’s dim room—just their kids and their meetings and the new copies of the ESV they had gotten each other for their birthdays. Apparently the new editions were lovely—more archaeological study notes and maps.

Their father had sat quietly, probably not laughing. Leah remembered suddenly thinking about whether or not her father had ever been in love. She had thought about her mother, about the women he stared at whenever they went out to dinner, and the possibility of him having had a first love as a teenager, or even a little boy. Sitting across from Sarah and Tim on the other side of her father’s bed, Leah had decided that her father had probably been in love with many women—had probably fallen in love many times—but had maybe never loved. She wondered if, had she and her father talked more before he drank the NyQuil, or maybe just before she had left the house when she was nineteen, they would have been drinking buddies, her father drowning

all the women he had loved but never loved, and Leah drowning all the men in her mind who had touched her and kissed her, but who had never actually existed or cared because she was a Leah. She would mourn the fact that she had never had a wedding, and he would mourn in his loneliness. Leah imagined lying on her parents' blue living room floor with her father, rocking and reeling with tears that tasted like bourbon, crying on his shoulder, and him saying "I know, I know." She was overwhelmed by how lovely that seemed to her. She was overwhelmed that she could still remember her father's voice. But it was his drunken voice that whispering sympathetically, knowingly in her mind. It was his drunken voice that whispered, almost hissed her name. But it was a loving hiss. A very dry, breathy "ah."

As Tim and Sarah had talked about needing to order more boxes of communion crackers and packets of cheap plastic wine cups, Leah had almost started crying for her father's lost voice, his lost loves, his lost and pitiful family. Instead, she laughed and tried to make a joke with Tim and Sarah about buying God's body in a box, but it came out too much like a coffin joke. And maybe a little sacrilegious.

They left a few minutes later in a forced hurry, deciding to forgo trying to save Leah's soul in the windowless hospital room on the fifth floor this time (though, from the joke she had made, it was obvious that she needed their God's salvation). Leah had leaned down to her father's sagging forehead, the folds of his old skin sinking in arches around his eyes, and whispered, "Hey, as soon as you get out of here, I'll take you down to the Blue Note. Then we can both drink until we're in here again. We'll get out together, like Hitler and Eva. But with gin instead of pistols. And I'll get the paperwork set up ahead of time—they'll keep us alive in here for a little bit so Sarah and Time can pray for us and talk over us and feel guilty about how they didn't even try to save us—didn't even really want to—and they can pretend to try to speak to

us, pretend to care whether or not we can hear them, and then ten days later—I'll make it clear in the paperwork—they'll pull the plugs on us both. We'll get out at the same time. It'll be great. We can go up and spit on their God together."

Leah thought she had heard a chuckle, but then realized it was just a loose wheel on a nurse's lunch cart outside.

She realized, walking back up to the coffee counter, that she believed she was cursed by a God she didn't believe in. She had prayed to that God, had sung to that God, had disowned him and yelled at him and hated him for not making her Mary, for not making her pretty, for allowing her mother to name her Leah. If her name really was written in some heavenly Book of Life, she decided, she would turn around and stomp right out of heaven, straight down to hell where she could probably pick her own name. God might cry, but Leah decided that that might be nice for him, for a change. Then she realized that he wouldn't cry—not for her. If he didn't cry at hurricanes and plagues and despots and dead children—if he actually willed those things—then there was no way he'd cry for Leah the virgin-non-virgin to come back from her lake of ugly fire.

When Leah was thirty-four, her sister had told her she was going to hell. The next day she had had a dream about having sex with a pot-bellied Jesus, and knew that her sister had been right. Jesus had frowned the whole time. Leah had broken perfume at his feet and washed him with her hair, had kissed up his legs, had told him she loved him. But he hated her. He laughed at her. The one her mother said had "wanted her" didn't want her at all in her ugliness and sin, her doubt.

She had actually thought that maybe this was the dream (promises always came in dreams in the Bible) where the angel would come with his promise of a miraculous son—The Son—and her prayer in the sunlit room with the white door would be answered. The whole idea of the Immaculate Conception started making sense to her now—if the angel had come in a dream like that, no wonder Mary got pregnant. But she wasn't a Mary. Not even a Mary Magdalene. She couldn't even make the Holy Spirit happy, couldn't even make him smile.

Leah clenched her thighs, picked up two fresh cups of gritty coffee, and went up to her father's room. She always brought two cups even though, of course, she knew he could never drink his. (She couldn't avoid the sneaking suspicion, however, that if she had spiked the nasty stuff with some of his mother's Amaretto, her father might have found a way to come out of it and drink it.) There was something nice in thinking that somehow the smell of the coffee would trick her father's brain out of its stupor, just like it used to the mornings he was hung-over before going to his shift at the power plant. There was always an impossibly thick sludge of bean flakes at the base of her father's mug since her mother made the coffee as black as it would go. Coffee and scotch, coffee and scotch, he went back and forth between them like the flicking of a switch.

Walking into his muted grey room filled with yellow- and green-lighted machines, Leah's stomach suddenly felt like a sack of wet sand. Three doctors stood around her father, looking down, feeling his wrists, staring at the machines and the lights.

"He's almost gone, Miss Rosegrave," the tallest doctor said.

"But I thought the machines—"

"His pulse is unstable. His heart is about to stop."

Her father looked like a wan, Goya Christ, but un-nailed and wrapped in a florescent light tomb. Her throat felt as if it were full of burs.

"It might actually be less painful for him if we turn off the machines now, Miss Rosegrave."

"Okay," she said. She crouched down at his bedside. "Let's get you out, dad."

There was a light clicking and a lowing hum as the herd of beige machines silenced themselves. Leah saw her father's chest raise and she put her ear to his lips. His chest sunk down, but she didn't hear a sound. The only sober sound she ever would have heard come out of his mouth never happened. He went out without a gasp, without even a whisper.

She laughed. Her mother had been wrong about dying, had been wrong about the breath. She knew her father would have laughed. He probably would have agreed with her, too, about her name. He probably would have said, in a foggy oat breath that smelled like their basement, "There is no breath, kid. You know. Just make it Sara—without the H."