

The Sonochromatic Pain Scale

Ericksa Suhl

THE SONOCHROMATIC PAIN SCALE

By

Ericka Suhl

CREATIVE NON-FICTION THESIS:
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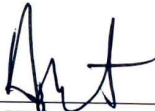
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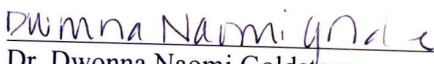
We are submitting a collection of creative nonfiction essays written by Ericka Suhl entitled "The Sonochromatic Pain Scale." We have examined the final copy of this creative work for form and content. We recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



Dr. Amy Wright

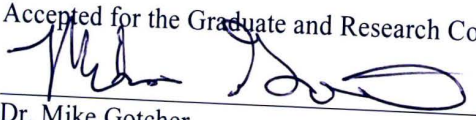


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Ericka Suhl

12/11/2015

PRELUDE

“I don’t want to get stuffed in a locker. I’m very small.”

“You won’t be as small when you get to middle school, and I don’t think kids even think to stuff people in lockers anymore. You’ll be too busy writing papers and dissecting animals.”

My son’s face curled and twisted into a deeply horrified expression.

I said, “Oh no, it’s fun! It’s amazing to see how strangely all those pink parts connect, and you get to hold something like a small, hardened little liver and marvel at what a sophisticated machine it once was.”

“That is disgusting. This conversation is going to haunt me.”

It was a tough sell. I remembered the sharp smells and the buzz of florescent lighting in the windowless room where I studied the innards of frogs, worms, squid and sharks. Their bodies were strings and colors that made no sense at a glance, but if you pulled a wet tendon taut, the body’s muscles would remember what to do. My son asked, “Will I have to cut it?”

“I think they do it for you.”

I want some kind of “them” to do it for him, because I know what he’s afraid of. Despite the poor frog being long past feeling, my son will feel the cut he makes into it. That sensation is just one property of pain; the lines blur between feeling it and causing it.

Picking through my memories, tugging at what lines still vibrate, I find what moves me. Let me do the cutting, the pinning and the presentation of the evidence. It is no easy work, and the smells are overwhelming when there are no windows to open. I go in, finding moments that don’t make sense at first. I can’t open them without hearing and seeing the pain they once

caused. Then the colors emerge, the music begins, and I can see how different the pain of death is from the pain of loss. The pain of loneliness has its own key, but shares the same hue as the pain of lost faith. In "The Eagle Men" the pain of love and betrayal is so frightening and true that I can only approach it as a work of fiction.

If I cut the pain out and show you what a fantastic machine it is, maybe it will be more bearable for the both of us. I take back my answer to my son, telling him now what I can only hope will be the truth: "It will be okay. I am sure they will cut it for you."

For the boy

KEYS AND COLORS

- A. Exhalations Violet/1
- B. Not That It's Any Of My Business Blue/7
- C. My Evil Twin Cyan/10
- D. The Firebird Suite Green/25
- E. Plait Noir Yellow/42
- F. Take To The Bed Orange/48
- G. The Eagle Men: A Tale. Red/60

EXHALATIONS

The McGill-Melzak Pain Questionnaire of 1972 gave brightness, dullness, incisive pressure, fear and punishment as just some of the categories used to capture the music of pain. Unlike the row of round faces that show a progression of smiles to tears that you can point to in an emergency room, this chart asked for the right words. The words they learned from the patients would sometimes fall into tight clusters when many conditions shared the same sensations of stabbing. Other words stood alone on the grid, like the emotional description of missing-limb pain: Cruel. It was an aggressive effort to throw a grid of meaning over chaotic, raw despair. The tone of cancer is: heavy, burning, gnawing, sharp, shooting, exhausting, unbearable (Melzak 57-65). As I looked at my father, his still breath, clenched fists, and closed eyes told me that the music was getting very loud. He had drifted way beyond waves he could manage. To navigate these new sensations we needed narcotics, which needed a doctor's note, which needed permission from my father, which required phone calls, which challenged his shallow, measured breathing. I went looking for my mother.

It is so cold. On the nights that are dangerous, the ice fog obscures the sky anyway, so it's not worth feeling your lungs freeze. Clearer nights are more tolerable, with the stillness of the ground, insulated with snow, absorbing the sting of the air. The piercing stars we all recognize still look like white, sharp pinholes in the canopy, but there is no vacant patch of sky. Look deeply into it, and the blackness loses its crispness and is a mess of glittering sand. I first saw a single beam, like a searchlight at a movie house, and wondered what could be so exciting in Moose Creek that someone would set up a light like that. I followed the pale, white beam with my eyes, and the shock of what I was seeing came to me when it didn't fade straight into the night sky. It arched like a rainbow over the northern horizon and anchored itself in the west. Then the beam split in two. There was no moment that I recognized that it did so. The light moved on the very edge of perception.

She was off-balance. She had just started curling her hair, with four or five stiff rows retreating from her brow. Her plan for the day was already plotted along a safe path. The blasts of experience have left scary shadows of real people, now dead, burned into the tender walls of her mind. She only walks on paths where shadows move as shadows should. In three hours, she will look at her watch and be ready to leave the house, at noon, when the shadows are smallest. Three hours, and then she will chat with the nurses and the doctor and spend more time talking with the pharmacist, all of them knowing better than most, but asking anyway. The temporal descriptions for pain are: flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, beating, pounding (57-65). Each second struck out a painful rhythm, concentrated into a rumble that I could hear from my father's chair in the front room. When I pushed her off-balance, I wasn't angry. It was just that

his pain was so loud. I took something from her that she was leaning on. I was getting his medicine.

Once that initial sensation of a ghostly presence ran its course, I wasn't interested in the lights anymore. Remember that it is so cold. My mind had plenty of new tricks of the heavens to take in that first year. The sun skirted the southern horizon for two purple hours on a December day. In August, the northern horizon beat back the night with a gleaming twilight. Imagine it. Take a moment during the winter to look at the dark of the northern horizon and, with your mind, paint it brilliant, spin, and put the deep black and blue behind you. If all of your sensory fibers are running smartly, you should begin feeling extremely weird. Next to that, the auroras really weren't all that impressive. I felt like I was looking at a photograph of an aurora. My sense of place in proximity to the lights didn't move me. The lights themselves move without moving. I couldn't, especially when straining to sharpen my concentration to a point, even see it happen. I could look and look and slowly realize that the swirling pattern had straightened. All the while, so cold.

Picking up the prescription and getting it filled was like struggling through a play with no script. Try Kabuki, with those exaggerated tones, peeling high enough to bore holes through the top of the actor's head. The nurse at the doctor's office joked loudly, "You tell him he needs to come in here himself." The word *stinging* could describe her performance. At the pharmacy, a woman with long black hair helped me remember my father's birth year so I could take the pills home. It was the last hurdle, and I remembered that he was twenty when I was born, and I could pull together enough sense to figure it out while her face urged me compassionately. It is not fair

to do this to her, but someone has to play this role. She was so kind to me. I can tolerate the words formed with her voice better than my own. Let's kill the house lights. Put a spot on her. She will whisper-step up to me, her face a white, cruel mask with lacerating black and red lines. Her voice rings out hellishly, "I know your father, and I've never seen you. He's going to die and you'll sit at his funeral surrounded by strangers. And now you're the hero because you know how to drive a car and pick up medicine. Is that the extremely important thing you had to leave your home and your people to learn? It's proven so useful. Thank God for you."

Kristian Birkeland is credited with the first view of the aurora that pushed aside the haunting, dancing ancestors to make way for electrons blasted across space from the hot heart of the sun. He built a tiny world called the *terrella* and fired electrons at its magnetic field. In his little box, his little world did just as he'd hoped, but his was a fringe theory. In the world-sized world, his research went unrecognized in scientific communities (Bortollotti 77-78). While other discoveries brought him success, the auroral ancestors retained their legends of skies that bleed, lights that fall like curtains, their impossible ringing sounds. Birkeland used a sleep aid called Veronal, and a double-dose killed him in Tokyo at the age of 49 (Jago 259-60). It was also the insomnia, the paranoia, the strange lights and shadows in his mind that didn't appear to move properly. His last sensations would have been crushing, suffocating, terrifying, killing. During his northern expeditions, his guide, Clement Isaakson Haetta, arrived after a lethal storm that killed his colleagues. Haetta took the accident and the deaths as bad omens, urging Birkeland to leave the vengeful lights alone. He handed over a telegram from Birkeland's brother that read, "Father died this morning...please return" (58-59).

Mother was amazing. She had all the answers to their questions and she never cried while doing things like picking out the casket. You're supposed to have a driver to the gravesite, but she drove all of us, careening over the face of the earth, spiraling through old roads that pulled her along. My sister and I left locks of our hair on his chest. She left coins for the ferryman. She said "ferryman" like he was someone she knew. She does not tiptoe around the shadows now. She wraps them around her, traveling straight into them. They are him. Thus veiled, she wandered through the crowds of mourners, leaving me alone with my motionless, cold father. When I placed my hands long enough on his folded hands, they felt warm. His freckles, now so much like mine, couldn't be concealed by the make-up, and I noticed for the first time in my life that he had the same widow's peak in his hair as I had in mine. A couple of stubborn strands curled down on his forehead and I said, "I have that too." Correcting his hair, I had never touched him in such a way when he was alive. It seemed at any moment he would draw a breath, and I was frightened that he might. The fear that he could come back made him feel more gone. He loved the movie *You Can't Take It With You*. The truth is you take everything with you. I stared at him for a long time, but I didn't see him move at all. The shadow of him is punishing, grueling, cruel.

The kids were at a car party at the lake, not far from my house. I could hear their music, and I stepped out on the back deck, facing north. The aurora was brilliant, twinkling, deeply green. It was the strongest I'd seen. I could hear the kids chattering and joking around on the far side of the taiga. The ice on the lake made the occasional deep, groaning crackle. The lights moved in their usual, freakish way, and I could see my breath hovering around my face. I stared

long enough to convince myself I was satisfied, that I had a good enough picture in my head. I turned to go back, and my body flinched and cowered. Something was falling, and I shook violently to get away, but it was too much falling everywhere. Light, pouring down upon me like a waterfall. As I slowly rose, the light was swept into a hurricane that glowed red, like a great breath had stirred it. I could see it all happening, moving rapidly, light hovering, rolling, falling, and the shimmering sound, like a whispered ringing. It was terrifying and more beautiful than I'll ever have the power to describe. I stopped breathing. From a black spot erupting into a flare of intense power, this light appeared, overwhelming, powerful, alive, creating no shadows.

NOT THAT IT'S ANY OF MY BUSINESS

The way you put the fork on the counter could mean anything. It is flat, barely shiny, and of a size that I don't know if it is for salads or steak. I didn't even know they sold single forks here. Wait. How *did* you put that fork down? Did you set it down carefully with a ringing, assertive little snap as it came firmly out of your fingers, or did it slide just a half-inch, scratching to a stop? Did you place it with hesitancy, as if presenting a question?

As I catch you out of the corner of my eye, you seem to say something with the fork that the cashier already knows. There is some kind of understanding between you. Are you in there every week, buying one piece of a set at a time? Of course not. But, are you? Did you have a fork that caught in the garbage disposal? Do you work in an office with a break room where the forks keep disappearing? Did you pack a special lunch today, and you'll be damned to eat it with plastic?

It is mid-morning and you are wearing nice clothes and hair spray, with your make-up already greying into an afternoon of more coffee. This is my time to roam. Roughly 9 to 10 a.m. I like to look like I just left a yoga class and happen to be picking something up on the way to

coffee with the girls. People like you haven't taken their first break, if they get one, because people like you forget to eat, they're so busy. I belong in this bath and kitchen store because it looks and feels like something to do. It's either that or sit in my car in empty parking lots watching people talk in coffee shops in foreign movie scenes on my phone. I can smell toner, canned air and manila all over you. What the hell are you doing here so early and late?

It isn't that interesting a fork. There is no design, and it looks flimsy. It's going to stay that shiny through maybe two or three rounds in the dishwasher and then it'll look like my Oneida forks with the braided little chokers of metal around the neck. They look dull now, riddled with tiny scratches. I'm missing three of the big ones. But they still have the cute braid of metal around the neck. They still feel balanced, with a substantial weight to them as I stab my meals.

If you watched the same movies I do, you'd know how dangerous forks are when rage reaches the table. Betty uses a fork to even a score with a bitchy restaurant customer in *Betty Blue*. I can't remember whether she stabs her in the face or the hand. In *The Cook The Thief His Wife and Her Lover* it was definitely the face. In *Dangerous Liaisons*, Glenn Close smoothes out the vengeful intent of her self-invention like a napkin in her lap. Softly, delicately, she speaks of playing the role of the quiet woman at table while stabbing a fork into her own hand under it. So, here you are, with a single fork. You have reached a threshold, there was a kitchen store handy, and now that you have your fork, someone is about to get some payback in the face. Or the hand. Or maybe you'll use it to pin your own hand into your lap, controlling your public face constructed as meticulously as a cutlery set bought one single piece at a time.

Should I wait outside the door and move in behind you after you leave the store, emerging from the shadows (if we are in a noir film instead of this gay mid-morning) to say,

“Whatchyou got planned for the fork?” We can have coffee together, while I talk you down from that ledge. With a shaking hand you’ll give me the fork, and walk right out of my life. But I’ll know that I made a difference. Wait, what kind of difference? Why should I disarm you when you clearly have something worth stabbing in your life? Why is that the right thing to do? What am I doing here in the first place?

I am buying a hand-held mixer because I’m not going to be sucked into buying one of those industrial mixers that will take up space on my counter and never get used. I’m not going to let myself want one of those shiny, red things that I can imagine morphing into my post-war designed robot friend. I will not yearn for it to respond to everything I ask with, “Whatever you say, Sugar!” I am replacing the hand-held mixer that I burned out while making cookies with my son. We smelled the little engine burn and laughed and said, “Last cookies for a while!” An industrial mixer could have handled the load. But I was using the small, cheap mixer I bought twenty years ago and stuffed under my bed, keeping it in the box, until the day I moved into my first apartment.

I gathered many of my pieces that way, one at a time, and kept them under my bed, dreaming over them. I started with a set of flatware with a hokey design that looked just like the one my mother would have picked. It wasn’t until much later that I grabbed two boxes of the Oneida set as if I were getting away with something, forgetting I had the money now to buy two more sets if I wished. I think about filling out my wedding china to serve eight. I don’t think I have eight friends, but eight sounds like the right number. I could buy a plate at a time, right beside you and your lone fork and never confront why this slow built dream of place setting is so important to me. What are we completing? Why can’t I ask you about the fork? Why am I so embarrassed? How can your kingdom be in such ruin?

MY EVIL TWIN

"If you're an American, you're a racist. We're brought up from the beginning to think in generalizations. We never look at the individual. We rarely look at the individual. I'm a racist. I know I'm a racist. You know how I know? Because the other day I caught myself being racist against myself." — Dave Chapelle HBO Comedy Half Hour

I was back in Wichita visiting my parents when I had an urge to see my grandfather. My dad drove me to a diner where we found him alone at breakfast, and we joined him to get caught up. I ordered waffles and made a mental note to pray before I ate them. My grandmother had been dead for a few years by then, and the leash she kept around my grandfather's tongue was long gone. The waffles came along with some burned coffee that I doctored with a lot of cream and sugar. By then, Grandpa was in a flow of the past, telling stories I never would have heard if Grandma had been there to give him the only look in the world that could shut him up. Grandpa was sitting alone because he managed in the previous months to meet, get to know, then anger everyone at the diner. He was glad to have our company, and his loud, boisterous voice filled the long, narrow restaurant: "He was out on the road, on the way to Mount Vernon, and his uncle died in the truck. He didn't call anybody or nothin'. He just kept driving where he was going. The police got him. Asked what he was doing with his dead uncle. You can't just drive around with a dead body. He kept saying he was going to Mount Vernon." Grandpa laughed his

booming laugh. “Yep. He wasn’t right though, on account of his mother being his sister.” My dad called for the check.

Grandpa’s stories weren’t just things to grimace or laugh at; they were true. Grandpa said that the man-child of incestuous birth was from a certain family with a last name I recognized as being tied up with my family. I questioned him, and Grandpa said there were four families that all ran together almost as one. He named the man-child, one other name, then “Ruby,” my grandmother’s maiden name. “Nuzum” is my maiden name, and it was the last name on Grandpa’s list of hardscrabble families.

We were Joads and Snopes. My grandmother was born during her family’s trek to California as they fled from the Dust Bowl. I reflected back on reunions at the pig farm, where the adults had lashed the rusted spring innards of a mattress between two trees for the children to play on. I winced at the memory of our faces, all so strongly similar. The name itself, Nuzum, sounds like something made up at the last minute at Ellis Island to cover a sketchy past. The only time it ever sounded cool was when my in-laws mistakenly thought it might be Lebanese. They live close to New York City, and run with an intellectual set of former hippies who never end their stories, “...because his mother was his sister.” I’ve tried to distance myself in every possible way from my family’s background, but it runs alongside me, stride for stride and colors my perceptions to this day.

After graduating from high school, I spent a year in a TJ Maxx cash office, dodging cockroaches as they fell from the ceiling onto my balance sheets. I bought a damaged suit from the racks on my employee discount and applied to every bank in town, because on the bank deposit runs, I noticed how clean the tellers were and how nice the air conditioning felt while I

waited for them to count up the store's money. Three months later, First National Bank picked me up and I worked at the downtown office, known as the teller who "doesn't brush her hair." I was eighteen years old. After six months, I was ready to transfer as soon as possible because I had, of course without thinking about it first, flipped-off a client who had been laughing at me for zoning out and drooling in my window. Catching the bird, he laughed even harder and left a "How Was Your Service" card that he wouldn't let me see in the suggestion box. My days were numbered, and I had learned to love air conditioning.

There was a full-time spot open at an office near the university with a teller manager who had a reputation for shaping people. Whispers had it she was the best to work for because she would teach her people everything she knew. I brushed my hair for my interview, marched in with my chin up, and oh my god, she was black. I heard my whole family in a chorus sing out, "Wow, a descendent of Ham! She's probably the hard-working type that will one day un-damn her accursed race. Ask her where we can get good barbeque. Is that her real hair? Does she date white guys?" They were all right there, in my head, with the pigs and the mattress springs and the smells of alcohol and horseshit.

Her name was Kim, and she hired me. She had long acrylic nails with glittery designs. Her clothes were sharp and brightly colored. Her hair was smoothed over an insert that shaped it into a French twist. I saw all of these things as black things, and stammered through my first few weeks working for her. I was terrified that anything I said might be construed as, "I'm so sorry you're black, Kim." Somehow I thought I was the only white person in her world who could ruin her day with a thoughtless comment, forgetting I had been raised by many people fluent in racism. I wondered if she heard the voices in my head as loudly as I did. I'll never really know. I felt walled-off from her, partly for the sake of professionalism, but mostly out of fear. I like to

imagine we both felt safe at that distance, but there's no telling what understanding we might have shared had I gone hat in hand into her office and said, "I'm a racist and it's freaking me out."

As private as she was with her personal life, she had no trouble sharing information about running a banking office. Watching Kim work with the clients, I noticed her customer service skills were beyond anything I had ever seen. Our office stood alone in a wheat field, built in anticipation of a new beltway. The highway would eventually divide the black community from the high-income, gated communities further north. Kim could approach anyone coming through our doors, regardless of color or class, with the same open, friendliness that was both respectful and familiar. The survival of our office depended on the few clients who came in being treated like family. The branch became a place to hang out and talk. "Hey HEY, Mr. Williams," she would shout to the owner of the Ace Hardware store. He drove past two branches to do business with Kim. Running counter to her friendliness was a reserve of dignity that I can only describe by breaking down her casual, "Hey HEY!." The sounds of her voice were musical and fun, but she rarely looked clients in the eye. Her eyes and hands would dart over her station or desk, touching on everything she might need to have handy in order to deal with that person. The greeting said *friend*, but her gestures said *customer*. Her "Hey HEY" began to sound more like a tonal barrier that disarmed others and defended her: "Hey. HEY! This is my space."

I only knew her as, at most, an assistant manager. Title aside, everyone knew who really ran our office. Our manager, Debbie, would skip out the back door and drive away if a difficult customer arrived for help. A client caught Debbie running away once and then faced Kim's greeting, her hidden eyes gathering what was needed, and realized he was dealing with the right person in the first place. I could see the gentleman take in a deep breath of respect for Kim and

then settle into solving his problem with her. Kim led by example, and many years after working for her, I still used her knowledge of departments and backroom processing to get things done within a financial framework that remained largely hidden to most operations staff. The man who had come looking for Debbie didn't see a black woman take her place, running interference while she slipped out the back, or at least not for long. Kim distracted anyone trying to figure her out with a vast knowledge of how things really worked at the bank. His missing money was sitting in an exceptions account and would be transferred immediately. All fees would be refunded after a few phone calls and a "Hey HEY." The man was a tall, good old boy, and before he left, he shook Kim's hand.

Kim took me on at her office because I was a good balancer. I didn't lose money, especially if it wasn't mine, and that always looked good for the whole office. I never thought she had any other plans for me because of the cold, safe distance between us. Then, with one comment, she revealed she had thought me over when she hired me more than I realized. She handed me a card from the CEO's office that had come through the interdepartmental routing and said, "I knew I was right picking you." I had been awarded fifty dollars for my extraordinary service thanks to one of my downtown clients. It was the guy I had flipped off. He had written on the card, "Most honest teller."

After a year at Kim's office, I started going to college and I moved to the north side, on the very edge of the white and black communities. I went by a different name as a student. People started calling me Jess, and it stuck. I loved the way the new name made me feel like someone else. I started seeing African American bank clients out in the community, and they provided for me another kind of education. I learned from the stoic older black man who ran the

Albertson's fish market that you "don't do black on black" when it came to reporting crime. That was not how the community operated. Charles, who ran the gas station on 21st and Hillside, in the heart of the community, told me what a "Hoopdie" was, and what it meant to have "five toes" in a good meal. He talked proudly about his daughter learning Spanish at Wichita State. I told him I was taking French there. "What you going to do with French? Nobody speaks French."

"They do in Africa."

"Africa? You going to get kidnapped is what you going to do in Africa. Step off the plane with that hair, they be trading a couple oil wells for you."

There were three large black women who would come into the bank almost daily. They were leaders of the church and sweetly called me "Miss Ericka" even when everyone by then knew me as Jess. I thought of them as the high-priestesses of Wichita. They were always kind, but their use of "Miss" bothered me. If Kim learned how to establish guarded distance from anyone, these three ladies were true masters. When they "Miss-ed" me, I took it as two not-so-great things. Either they took me for one that could strike up with a "fiddle-dee-dee" at any moment, or it was dismissive, as if there were whole worlds I did not understand and might never even know of. The ring of it sounded like, "Hi there, White Girl!"

I learned to dislike the assignment of color to the word *girl* by listening to Dee, a friend of Kim's who would work temporarily at our office, usually when things were tough for her. She said she hated nothing worse than being referred to as "that black girl." After hearing that, I was terrified to say the word *black*. I would stutter around it, or accidentally say it as if my mouth was full of chewed egg: Bluuuaack. Dee and Kim would talk for hours in low, soft tones, and then explode in laughter. Where Kim never talked about race, Dee spoke freely about what it

felt like to be black. Dee wanted to be a dental assistant, but she was told that no white people would want her black fingers in their mouths. The only time I heard Kim say anything remotely close to identifying with race was when she was about to leave the office to drive down to Oklahoma City where her nephew had been murdered and would be buried. She said, "We just don't have that many men." She meant her family, but it seemed to mean something much larger.

Dee would have known the whole story because she was the only person I saw Kim open up with, and even then, in a closed off, private way. I didn't know that Kim had a boyfriend except that Dee blurted it out to embarrass her when Kim said she was going to Kansas City for the weekend. Kim would grow quiet and angry with Dee for things like that, but never for long. One evening, on her day off, Dee ran into the office and yelled out, "You mad at me, Boo?" We all laughed cautiously at first until Kim burst into a loud, melodious laugh that brought tears to her eyes.

I'm happy to say, I made her laugh like that myself once, but purely by accident. While I was elbow deep in rank-smelling McDonalds money, I started imitating the women I encountered at the gym. They had been getting on my nerves. There was a cliquish, club atmosphere there, and I started a little one-act play of two white women saying, "Oh my God, your outfit is so cute, look at me, I'm so cute too." Laughing at white girls, at myself, was the most connected moment I had with her. At a time that I was between worlds, struggling with identity, Kim was the one who taught me how to hide in plain sight.

I used to love provoking my grandfather into telling his stories. I was satisfying my own sick sense of fun. My grandfather was an ex-Baptist minister at the time of our waffle breakfast, and he had spent his career building a home for himself in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

He loved it there. He once rescued a *momma* from the Hell's Angels. He met her at a shelter and convinced her to attend his sermon on Sunday. The Hell's Angels showed up at the little church on the slopes of Mt. Rainier and circled it with their bikes, threatening to burn down the church and everyone in it if they did not hand their *momma* back. My grandfather stood in the doorway and told the bikers to do it. The congregation would burn for Christ and this woman. No one in the congregation had made the same commitment that morning, as they were combing their hair and putting on a clean shirt for church. My dad remembers that everyone went completely berserk. He lay on the floor and prayed. The bikers eventually left after giving everyone a good scare, and my grandfather was asked to leave as well. He would go on to build another church, scare that congregation half to death under different circumstances, and then move on again. Then he retired and made people angry at breakfast diners.

This transient and uncertain life was a huge step up for my father's family from the drunk fruit pickers, loggers and dairy workers that made up the rest of the family. A minister had insulted my grandfather's crude behavior in town, so my grandfather showed up at the minister's church with a pack of cigarettes that he planned to light up in the middle of the sermon, except my grandfather was so moved by the sermon he turned his life over to the service of God that day. Up to then, my grandparents had been about hard and fast living, so this decision came as a shock to everyone inside and outside the family. My father's days of drinking leftover beer, smoking half-smoked cigarettes and curling up in quiet corners of honky tonks to sleep were over at the age of five. On the long treks across the country from church to church, my father would lie on the floorboard of the back seat of their car and fantasize a different life. He was good with machines, and years later, shortly after I was born, we moved to Wichita to try his luck at getting hired at Boeing. One day while he was in line for an interview, he met a German

man who said, "You call yourself a machinist? In Germany, that means a lot. You must know..." and the German went on to describe all that it took to be a true machinist. My dad took this dressing-down with ease, walked into the interview, and repeated everything the German had said as a skill he was familiar with. He got the job at age 20, and worked at the plant until a month before he died at 59.

My dad's racism is a strange thing to sort out, and troubles me. He was the one person in my family that I gave the most credibility, but I knew that his stories about the descendants of Ham did not sound very fair. He stated unflinchingly that I could not date anyone who was black if I expected to remain in his life. The only way I can make any sense of his perspective is to consider what he had clawed his way up from, and how he perceived the world worked. In his world, black people had a tough time getting work, and they lived in poorer neighborhoods. The thing that scared my father the most, to the point that it would break his heart, was the idea that my children, his grandchildren, would be of mixed race. The way my dad's world worked, they would never be able to hide in plain sight outside of their class like a white person can. Worse than that, there would be no community that would accept them fully. To him, they would live their lives always on the outside, without any resources of trickery, like he had used to get on at Boeing, to help them.

He wanted to reach as far as he could out of his dirt poor past, and from that point, push me away from it even further. There was a price involved in that process that he did not see coming. When he pushed me into another social sphere that he did not take the time to infiltrate himself, he lost me. My father did not trust the new name, or the north side where I lived. "Jess" was learning, growing, changing. He did not know what I was learning in college, what they were "filling my head with." It must have been frustrating for him to orchestrate my future in a

life that went beyond any ideas he might have had about how such a class transfer is really done. It was as if his imagination stopped at, "Make her marry a white man."

I went to see Dad right before his terminal cancer kicked in and took his mind from him. I was going to sleep on the sofa near the only place he could lie comfortably: his La-Z-Boy. He flipped stations on the TV and asked me what I wanted to watch. "We could watch a cowboy movie, or this n----- movie." He was looking at the movie *Bad Boys* with disgust. Of all the things that were difficult to face that day while he struggled with the pain of dying, that was a moment I had to turn away from. Something in me gave up, and I said to myself, "I guess that's going to die too." I chose the cowboy movie. Curled up on the sofa, listening to my father breathing, I saw Glenn Ford in a red shirt and tan leather vest walk into a cabin and remove his hat before my eyes shut. I listened in the space between consciousness and dreams: "Alright boys, they've got a day's ride on us, but with the Benson ponies, we should catch up with those darkies, redskins, ching-chongs and the lousy, stinkin' micks."

"But we're Irish!"

"That's right! And we're gonna hang ourselves when we get back to Jackson!"

I slipped into a sleep too exhausted for dreams.

I started having these perverse notions about my mailings to clients when I transferred out to the new accounts desk. Kim had trained me well enough that I was promoted, and after meeting with clients, I would send them a form letter saying how happy I was to have served them. After typing, signing and mailing the letters, I would feel a squeeze of anxiety in my chest that I might have dropped a racial slur in the letter. It was an absurd fear, but I tore open letters on their way out and had to type up new envelopes to make sure I had not said something

horrible to the nice Korean family. I could see in my head a line like, “It was a pleasure to serve chinks like you. Please call if you need anything.” I only told my boyfriend, Bryan, about my mania with the letters. “I don’t feel this way about them, but the WORD is there.” It felt like another version of me was jumping in and signing my letters, a bad version that would not die no matter how much Toni Morrison I read. I never sent out a letter with a racist slur in it, but the fear of doing so could awaken me at three in the morning.

No matter how well I tiptoed through situations that might reveal an ignorant, skewed perspective on race, there was still the issue of my family throwing my name around in public. I was guilty by association. At my college graduation my grandfather grew impatient and blurted out, “I don’t want to hear any more of these ching-chong names! Ching-Chong-Ding-Dong! I want to hear ER-I-CKA NUUUUUZUM!” At a Cracker Barrel a woman stopped my Aunt Yvonne and said she had seen me with a black boy. My aunt announced to the restaurant, “Well that will be a cold day in hell when ERICKA NUZUM goes out with a black boy.” I had an alter ego running around town saying racist things while I stayed home and read about Ashanti fertility rituals. My anxiety over this racist *other* fed off of feelings that I had no control over my thoughts, perceptions and ultimately even my actions when it came to racism. It was planted there by my forefathers, and done so with the best intentions to establish me in a life beyond moral and economic poverty.

While I played with these notions, and wrung my hands over my doppelganger appearing in racist letters and out of the mouths of my family members, there was a real *other* that was doing far more damage. This was my *other* that lived in statistics, numbers and research documents through the same 1990’s that I spent under Kim’s selfless training. While Kim’s group of black professionals improved their collective income over the most economically

successful decade she and I had seen in our lifetimes, white women simply made way more money (Dozier 286). Kim's career investment was tied up in First National Bank while I managed to keep my career going as I moved all over the country, ultimately managing a branch of my own. Our experiences mirrored the research: black women had to be promoted from within companies sure of their talent and loyalty to get ahead, and white women could increase their incomes without making those same limiting commitments (295).

Thinking about my father pulling into town and lying during his Boeing interview suggests a whole network of unspoken language transacting that he knew fluently. The idea of the "good old boy" club comes to mind. My grandfather accepted Christ and was that very day off to a life-long career that would feed his family within a supportive network. Kim had to work hard, build a reputation over a long period and remain faithful to less talented managers to maintain her standing at the bank, and this was someone who had her bachelors degree.

Because I was never brave enough to ask Kim myself, I had to rely on research to reveal that financial stress for black college-educated women largely originates from paying back student loans, caring for extended family in need, and relationships that end in divorce and single-parenthood (Chaney 81-83). Kim was single, keeping her boyfriend in Kansas City a mystery. When I think of all the black women I have worked with over the years, only one was married. Whatever reasons they all might have had, it is clear that problems like a divorce and single parenthood would have cut deeper into earnings that were already relatively low. When my father hoisted me up in his arms 40 years ago and went into Sears to buy tools for his new job at Boeing on credit, he knew the man would not be able to look at me, a toddler, and deny him. Does the same sympathy exist for the black woman trying to earn a wage for her family? Was my father ever accused of acting irresponsibly in marrying and having a family so young

before his career was set? I have never heard of a white man being accused of taking a terrible financial risk by getting married and having a family.

My grandfather turned to God and was rewarded with a large community of like-minded people who would come together to ease any financial burdens he, his wife, and his four young children would encounter, all for the greater good of hearing him share the Word. Black college-educated women turn to God as well, but as a way to deal with situations where only God can help them (78). A respondent to a study on how educated black women cope with financial stress claimed that she “prayed more, meditated more, read [her] Bible more” (85). The comfort consisted of three elements: “Maintenance of a close relationship with God; recognition that God had everything under control; and confidence in God’s plan for their lives” (84-85).

I was walking alongside Kim in a completely different world. My struggles and concerns with my economic class paled in comparison to the reality that she faced each day with the active assignment of race touching every part of her life. Kim could wear her hair in a French twist and dress sharp, but if she carried a large bag to the mall, would she be followed and watched? I could show up with brushed hair and sharp clothes and completely disappear unless met with a smiling sales person who works on commission. My father’s and my grandfather’s efforts worked for me, but at whose expense? I have been wandering around clueless in the data, gaining more advantages, and only because I am white. I have learned little compared to what I could know about this other version of me that is white, college-educated, married. What has she been up to, and who bears her footprints on their backs?

My father and my grandfather died within twelve hours of each other, and since then I have been making regular trips back to Wichita to visit my mother. I use the beltway that runs through the black neighborhood and the now booming shopping district further north. From there I can see my old banking office, and I think about stopping in to see Kim, but I'm afraid of what seeing her there might mean. No Kansas City? No family? Is she still covering for managers who take off out of the back door? When I pass by, knowing what I'm about to see at my mother's house, I can't stand the idea of seeing anymore people frozen in time.

My mother reverently tells everyone she hasn't touched a thing in my father's workshop, and it shows. He kept everything clean and organized when he was alive. Now, when I sit at his woodworking bench, there is a thick layer of dust over everything. There are pellets of mouse droppings on the projects he left unfinished, and the mice have disturbed his ashtray. They have dragged cigarette butts all over his lathe and files. He liked to make woodcuts of famous people using contrasting colors of wood, and he gave them away. I have woodcuts of Bruce Lee and Elvis, and for my sister, he made a beautiful portrait of Captain Jack Sparrow. His last project wasn't a Hollywood star, but a real one, probably for my son who was learning his shapes at the time.

My dad liked to set things out that had special meaning. I notice, propped up on a shelf next to a plastic severed hand he used to scare his coworkers, his collection of Maya Angelou's poetry. He made a woodcut of Martin Luther King for an African American friend at work. The guy loved it so much he asked my dad to make a second one, and without telling Dad, he sent it to Maya Angelou. Maya responded by sending Dad an autographed copy of her poems. I'm always puzzled by the book because it confuses the story to see two people communicate with one another who shouldn't intersect at all. But there it is on his shelf, one gift for another

between the poet and the machinist, and because I always have to check to make sure her signature is still inside, that book is the only thing in his room that is free of dust.

THE FIREBIRD SUITE

"May I behold in thee what I was once, My dear dear Sister!" –W. Wordsworth "Tintern Abbey"

It was nice to feel hot and sweaty after helping my sister stack her stuff in a storage locker all morning. The weather had been unnaturally warm west of the mountains for several weeks, long enough for the ferns to brown and die. When we left her musty, empty apartment I felt like we were back in the summer air of Kansas again. Perhaps that's why she changed from the woman she had become back into the little boy I grew up with. It was still relatively new to me that she was Angela now. She had only transitioned after she had moved out to the Northwest a few years prior. She was still Nathan when I drove her to the Oregon beaches to see the ocean, any ocean, for the first time. He said, "My God," as we passed along the first stretch of the Pacific Highway that squeezed between cliffs and beach. After playing in the waves on one of the sunniest days I had yet seen in Oregon, Nathan remarked on the power of the ocean and said, "We are so Nature's bitch."

The morning she left for Stehekin, we had packed up and cleaned a mixture of Angela's and Nathan's things. Nathan was logical, enjoyed maps, computers, and killed it at trivia. Angela did all those things too, but since the transition, the hormones made her more emotional.

less analytical and in some frightening ways, reckless. Nathan had sage-like wisdom, far beyond his years. I could pick him up, drag him far into North Seattle for pie and coffee at Shari's Restaurant and expect to get the best advice on any of the troubles that kept me from sleeping. Angela still possessed that wisdom with none of the caution. Her watchwords were, "Fuck it. I'm out." When I saw her in that empty apartment, one cognitive flashpoint held both the girl and the boy together in one persona, easily done in an empty room with hot, stagnant air.

While Angela paid the storage people for six months of rent in advance, I waited in the car, with the windows rolled down, playing Tetris on the Gameboy that I spotted sitting on the top of an open box. I wanted to borrow it, but she said I could have it. We did a lot of things that way. The stacking had gotten to me. Popping and clicking away at the Gameboy, I wanted to reach a zone of fast-paced stacking that goes on forever and perfectly. Taxes, done. Departmental audits, complete. Pap test, negative. Sneaking peeks in the side pane to see what kind of blocks were coming next put me just a step ahead of the game, and I could gamble on the wall of four that with one well-placed single rod can slam all that business into oblivion with flashes and bells. Car tags, replaced. Rental agreements, renewed. Accounts receivable, accounted. Angela fell into the car after signing her lease and I took her out for pancakes.

She had twenty dollars to cover gas and ferry tolls on the way to Stehekin, so I covered breakfast. We talked about the little bit that she knew about the place she was going for the summer to work as a lodge housekeeper. It was only accessible by boat, at the very northern tip of Lake Chelan, and it sat very close to the Pacific Northwest Trail. I wouldn't be able to call her, but she could reach me by satellite phone. She was going to stay the night at my place and then head east of the mountains in the very early morning. I asked her what she wanted to do next, and she said, "Let's go to a casino."

“Ha! Wait, are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“It’s kind of a sad place to people watch.”

“No. I’m going to put my last twenty on the roulette table.”

What I said next is anybody’s guess. Incredulity sounds right, or caution, as a matter of principle. But that’s more like me as I am now. The spirit of the action is lost to time, but here are the facts: I paid the check and drove her directly to the casino.

“People dress nice here.” We looked at each other, covered in sweat and dust. My dog had torn a hole in the knee of my pants before I left my place that morning.

Angela slammed the car door shut and fixed her eyes on the entrance across the parking lot.

“Come on, Peanut. Let’s go get remembered.”

The high hum of digital slot machines sounded like angels singing. That otherworldly choir, coupled with the haze of cigarette smoke, turned the walk down rows of blackjack and craps tables into a passage through a caustic, spiritual membrane. The guy running the roulette table was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and he transformed Angela’s twenty dollars into twenty plastic, pink chips. Angela’s focus was unshakeable. She moved the pile directly to the black seventeen and stepped away from the table. I doubt she could tell you the color of the chips. I gazed back at the Hawaiian shirt, my eyes slowly climbing up to his face, where I clearly saw how he had sized up two sisters and a last twenty. I was ready to give Angela twenty dollars when it was all over. He looked at us and said, “You guys are about to completely flip out. I’m going to make you scream.”

With that, he set the ball rolling. It was all happening too fast with no ceremony. Angela’s last dollars were worthless, pink coins, like toys, good for rolling down a vortex just to hear them

spin. The marble in the wheel sounded like a bowling ball. Nothing moved but the wheel in that moment, because maybe, just maybe. Against all reason, all chance, all probability, the ball fell indifferently in the black seventeen slot. I didn't look at Angela. I looked at the man in the Hawaiian shirt who suddenly seemed frightened of his own powers. Without actually saying it, he knew I was asking with my eyes, "How did you do that?" I was a believer, screaming out the name of God. My hands flew up to my head to keep it from flying off. My center of gravity levitated several feet up into the casino ceiling. I flipped out, just as he'd said I would, until Angela grabbed me, looking sickly.

"Shut up! They'll rob us in the parking lot."

I noticed the frightened look on the roulette dealer's face when four, large, grim-faced men appeared and watched him count out seven one-hundred dollar bills. I couldn't stop thanking him, and, like Angela, he desperately wanted me to shut up. Angela walked so quickly to the bathroom that I had to run to keep up with her. She cupped the money in her hands and held it close to her face in the same way she used to catch and watch fireflies. I said, "Are you really worried about getting robbed?"

"Yes."

It was mid-afternoon, and we were at the same casino that Rick Springfield had played at only a month before. Her fear seemed a little unreasonable.

I said, "Put it in your shoes."

She did. She felt better. We walked across the parking lot, drove to her bank, and with four sweaty Franklins, paid off her overdrafts. She let the rest remain cash. I drove her back to her empty apartment where her little red Mazda was parked, gave her a big hug, and watched her drive off toward Snoqualmie pass to go live east of the mountains for the summer. I wasn't

scared for her anymore. Angela's great and terrible magic would surely follow her.

It was a day of sunbreaks, producing soft rays of light through low, pillowy clouds. Seattle yawned and stumbled its way into Safeco field to wake up late to the Mariners. Angela and I decided to walk to the game from our apartments rather than jump on a bus. The skyline ahead shifted and slid as we worked our way from Eastlake into the southmost curve of Lake Union. The first job Angela got when she moved there was as a janitor in the Two Union building, the second largest building in the skyline. The creamy blueness of Two Union broke up the darkness of the much taller Bank of America building, dark enough to be the shadow it cast. Two Union came in a close second by topping off its cheerfulness with a tall, fat flagpole. Angela told me how she and the other janitors would have to clip into the turret to raise and lower the stars and stripes, because the winds could potentially grab the flag and the janitor trying to hang it, and blow both out over the city. She took me up in the turret once in secret through a winding path of dark hallways and ladders. I stood next to the pole, thicker than my body. I could see the San Juan Islands and Canada curling down around them. The sun was wintery low. The waters of Puget Sound were covered in golden light.

The morning we walked to the game, I looked up at Two Union. She never bothered looking at it herself. She started her job as Nathan, and now that she was Angela, every day at Two Union made her feel more like some kind of freakish spectacle. The normal dickishness displayed by lawyers and bankers (people regularly threw their trash on her while she was changing out garbage bags) had turned into focused ridicule. She was called to clean certain areas of the building just to be seen. Otherwise, her transformation was quiet. She was always more of a tomboy, really. She wore the same uniform while her upper body melted away into

long, lean arms. Her hair grew into the pert ponytail she wore. When we went to Shari's for pie and coffee at midnight, staying and talking until two in the morning, Angela and I were addressed as "ladies."

"You girls want a booth?"

"Well, here come the twins again."

We were delighted. She could take her gender without flinching, but I couldn't stop my face from beaming. Angela was the one who told me never to underestimate a motivated transsexual, but it was still amazing to me to see her womanhood become a truth. The relief I felt at each "hello ladies" made me feel a few inches taller. She was so much cooler about it. Angela glided into Shari's as a woman, sitting in her good feelings quietly while the pies and coffees were cut and spilled. Then, she would go to work the next day and deal with a transition that wasn't hers alone. Everyone around her changed more noticeably than she did, enough to make her miss the old indifference. So, I looked up at Two Union because I didn't see what was going on inside of it everyday. I asked her, "Did the flag get damaged again?" It wasn't there.

She looked up at the turret and said, "Oh shit."

All the Mariners fans walking with us, looking for the iconic flag, wondering through the reasons for it not being there, couldn't know that the answer was walking right next to me. It was Angela's turn to raise it, and she had left work forgetting to let it fly.

She called me from Stehekin using a satellite phone with an annoying delay as our words traveled through space. We couldn't joke as well because our laughter was too disconnected from our punchlines. I asked all kinds of questions about the people she was with and the friends she made, asking everything but the real question: had anyone found her out? Angela called it

“going stealth” and I was terrified for her. Stehekin Lodge and the people therein had no reason to believe that she was anything but a woman. I tried to play it cool on the phone, but she must have seen through me. She had to have known my fear of her falling through the cracks of gender into an abyss of the unknown. Her Pre-Op status was something that could be discovered. These were shapes I couldn’t stack neatly in my own mind. How could I have expected anyone else to manage it, even her? I asked if I could come and visit and she gave me the details.

Chelan ferry. 8 a.m. Four hour trip. Many fires in the area.

At 3 a.m. on a Saturday morning I started my trek across the mountains. The night gave me some close space to sort out what I’d have waiting for me at work on Monday. I could only see I-90 winding up and down until I was in the heart of the pass where the mountains were flat, black outlines against a dark purple sky, now dark blue, now slightly orange. Driving out of the pass into the valleys east of the mountains felt like a true passage from night into day. I was driving Angela’s old car just as she had driven mine out a month before. We swapped when I wanted a new car, and she wanted out of her car payments. Getting the loan to pay off Angela’s balance on her car was effortless. For Angela, I wrote on the bill of sale with the State of Washington that my paid-off, old, beat-up Mazda was a gift for “years of love” and something else I can’t remember now. Devotion. Support. Both would have been true. I felt great about giving her the car, and great about driving around the shiny Ford she had called “Black Elvis.” I never asked her if she liked the Mazda. I just figured she liked not having car payments. I know she liked the stereo I’d put in it. She told me she would pay me for it, but that never happened. It was really okay that she didn’t, and even more okay now than it was back then. Didn’t that Ford have value in it that I never gave to her? I parked Elvis at the ferry, bought a ticket, and grabbed some coffee.

The Chelan ferry was mostly empty, slowly following the curves of the long and narrow lake. Filling the chasm of an ancient mountain valley, Chelan is one of the deepest lakes in North America. There were maps all over the main cabin of the ferry, the borders of which were outlined in red. It reminded me of redlining, a practice at work, in banking, that is highly illegal. A bank can lose everything if it's caught drawing lines around communities to say, "This has no value, no future." A ranger's voice crackled into a microphone that the crevices in the landscape around us had piles of deadfall gathering up for a long time, and this year it was very dry. I knew this from my walks west of the mountains. Once moist ferns were yellowing and drawing into themselves, and the paths and rocks that would normally leave me soaked and muddy after a hike were all covered in a layer of dry dust. With each bend in the river, the surrounding mountains grew taller, and the slit of sky above turned translucent orange as sunlight filtered through thin layers of smoke. A helicopter hovered near the ferry, filling a giant basket with lake water before it disappeared into the wilderness.

"Bryan, Nathan wants to be a woman." Before meeting my boyfriend and his family at JCPenney, I read an email from Nathan, who was trying to tell me who he really was. I was too confused to imagine what he could mean, telling him only that I loved him "no matter what." Was it some kind of sex thing? A kink? Why would anyone want to be a woman on purpose? Bryan would tell me weeks later that he'd had a nightmare that Nathan came over wearing a skirt, then sat on our sofa with his legs splayed, letting his junk hang out. Such was the way with everyone. As soon as Nathan started talking about being transgendered, all of our minds went straight to his penis, treating it like public property, as if he never wore pants anywhere and we all had to live with it on our dinner plates, in our hair, left carelessly on the bathroom lavatory.

But at JCPenney, the initial shock of what I had said was just another annoying thing for Bryan that morning. His sister and mother were fighting over what kind of bed they would buy that day. Those two blood-locked ladies had their own “no matter what” to deal with, loving each other painfully and fighting constantly. They stood on either side of a white, puffy mattress arguing in a room filled with identical puffy, white mattresses. Their distant cawing mixed with Celine Dion as she cried out from the piped in music that the heart must go on. Bryan was whispering fire and hatred for both of them in my ear, letting a little spittle fall, running up the tab on my shattered patience until I yelled out, “You’re not listening to me! My brother wants to be Celine Dion!”

The older gentleman walking through the glass doors of Penneys stopped and looked at me. The cashier stopped ringing up the lady who was already looking at me. The cashier looked at me, then at her phone, and then back at me again. A floor rep stopped folding polo shirts and looked at me. This was more like it. Goddamn it, World, just stop for two seconds to look at me, understanding that what I’ve just said is crazy. Bryan looked at me. And then everyone went right back to what they were doing before. I was left with no idea what “no matter what” meant.

From the front of the ferry I could see Angela and her new friends, the Lodgies, on the dock waiting for me. Angela had already given me character sketches of everyone from our choppy talks on the satellite phone, so all I had to do was match personalities with faces. There was a tall, skinny young guy with her and I knew instantly that it was the boy she had been doing all the hiking with. I could also see that he liked her very much, and my heart grew full and hollow at the same time. She was wearing cut-offs and a tank top and the first thing she showed me was a terrible rash she had developed on the top of her foot.

“That looks pretty bad.”

“Do you really think it’s bad?”

I said, “Yes. You should pack your shit and come back home with me.”

“Ha! Wait, are you serious?”

Angela walked me through a short, shady path through the woods to the white farmhouse that she shared with the other women working for the lodge. She introduced me to her bunkmates, and showed me the sofa I would crash on that night. I noticed she had been paired up with a young girl named Mollie who had the same organizational style. Wet clothes lay scattered on both their bunks. Music, books and brightly-colored scarves all appeared in a state of simultaneous, continuous use. Mollie was passing the summer in Stehekin before returning to Colorado for the winter where she was an amazing snowboarder. Angela had the day off, so we stood out on the front porch with the rest of the Lodgies, drinking sodas and beer. All of the money that Angela had hoped to save was steadily burned up through such indulgences. Sodas and beers hauled into the remote ferry stop were pricey. Angela dropped her drink when an aggressive yellow jacket stung her hand.

She whispered, “Dammit,” and bemoaned the loss of her soda. A couple of the cooks who were having a smoke before the dinner shift said that Bree would know what to do. She was checking in with the park rangers at the moment, but would be back soon. Bree appeared a few seconds later, right on cue, the kind of registered nurse who looked like a nurse no matter what she wore. Angela had already told me many stories about Bree, and I could tell she had a deep respect for her. Bree took us back in the house and opened a linen closet in the hallway that was completely filled with little, blue, hand-marked vials. She grabbed a few and dabbed the slimy, creamy contents into the cup of her palm. After swirling the mixture with her finger, she dabbed

it on Angela's finger. A few breaths later, the pain was gone.

I felt wonder and jealousy while watching Bree work on my sister. I liked seeing her cared for so well, but felt like I should be the one doing it. It bothered me that it hadn't even occurred to me to help her out in some way. I was standing right next to Bree and Angela, but felt like I was watching Bree work from fifty yards away. As great and groovy as I had been about switching up my pronouns for a sister, forever, with no turning back, I still thought of Angela as a boy, expecting her to tough out the stings without crying. I didn't help her because I didn't think she needed any help. Bree looked down at Angela's foot and said, "You walked into something ugly. I'll make you a poultice of comfry and it should take the edge off that rash. Can't have you missing the party."

When Nathan was five years old and I was ten, our mother went to work cleaning hotel rooms, and I watched him during the summers. At that age, I didn't know how to take care of him, so I just played with him. He used his Dr. Suess books to build huge towers for his Star Wars figures to stage battles. On the empty shelf of his bookcase, near his nightlight, I set up a nightclub named "Leia's" where his Star Wars heroes could have the after-war celebration and subsequent bar room brawl. I always knew his war was over when the tower of books came tumbling down.

We were supposed to play inside the house, but we never followed that rule. There was a creek bed near our house, usually dried out, that we loved to explore. When it rained, little pools of water remained in the deeply soaked pits of mud that never seemed to fully crack and flake out in the sun. We played there, making mud pies and messes with the other neighborhood children, and the best spot was near the drainage tunnels that ran under the Kansas Turnpike.

Some of our school friends walked through those dark tunnels to get to and from school, and a desperate boy had been killed crossing the turnpike on a rare day that the tunnels had flooded. Everyone's parents had made it clear that the tunnels were off-limits. We all played there every chance we got.

On the day that a cop pulled off the Turnpike to see what we were doing down there, we all took off running as fast as we could. All the children split off into the high hay of the fields that boxed in our neighborhood. While I ran, I heard Nathan screaming, "I don't want to go to jail! I don't want to go to jail!" I turned around and ran back to him, picked him up and dove deep into the tall grass where we could spy on the cop at a safe distance. I told him to shut up. We were going to get busted. I peeked up to see the neighborhood weirdo standing with his potbelly facing the cop. They were having some kind of conversation, and the kid (we called him Bubbles) pointed out to the fields where we were all in various states of panic. The cop waved to all of us, said something to Bubbles, returned to his car and drove away.

"Did you rat us out, Bubbles?"

Bubbles said, "Cops are nice. You should talk to them."

I can't remember the moment when I stopped feeling uncomfortable, but suddenly I was okay with Mollie's gurgling bong sounds. My God, that little girl could put away some pot. She didn't want to play poker with me or the cooks, but she stayed beside us, looking at my cards. I never really saw much smoke, but a general haze of enormous well-being settled in all around us. I didn't know where Angela had gone, and I didn't care. I wasn't afraid anymore. Nor did I care that we were playing poker with a nudie deck of cards. In fact, I noticed that some of the cards focused the viewer's attention more on the girl's ass than her boobs, and I thought those were

few enough to be special. Asses should constitute a pair. The other players agreed.

Stacks of nickels appeared and disappeared from the pile in front of me, and my luck ran solidly down the middle: gaining nothing, losing nothing. Everything was in balance. Then I noticed, in the hand I was dealt, a girl with a bad boob-job. One large, too-taut nipple held its gaze low and left compared to the other one that stared straight forward. A wonky boob. What kind of stacking mistakes had she made to wind up with an errant nipple displayed in a deck of cards? I looked at her face. Maybe she had stacked the deck just right for herself, celebrating an offset pair earned at birth instead of through faulty surgery, but there was something about her confused gaze that said otherwise. She looked surprised, like someone off-camera had asked her a question she had no answer for. I held up the card and said she was special. The girl with the mis-aligned nipples was wild. She could be anything. The other players agreed.

In 2001, someone got the fantastic idea to release *2001: A Space Odyssey* in its original 70mm print at Cinerama in downtown Seattle. It must have been summer. Angela and I were so happy that day that she started drumming on a newspaper box while I danced at the bus stop. We took the bus because we planned to do tequila shots during the movie, but besides the two gulps we shared straight out of the bottle in the bathroom, we didn't touch the bottle again through the movie. By the time we flew through the stargate, I'd never been more sober in my life. The two shots took the edge off of my self-critical voices, telling me I was too stupid to understand any of it. I felt completely connected to the beastie little humans at the dawn of man, hiding all night in fear, holding each other tightly and quietly. And then we left the earth. No more gravity to hold everything together. We watched a man on a spaceship sleep so deeply, he didn't see his pen escape from his pocket.

At breakfast, I found out where Angela had been while I was playing poker. Several of the Lodgies had stormed the main dock and gone skinny dipping. One of the boats moored there sent in a complaint to the main lodge that spoke of “drunken, naked noisiness” all night. But Angela said that they quieted down when the night lit up with forest fire light from far down the lake. She said the light was so bright it looked like dawn. I said to Angela that it must have been beautiful, but Bree who was sitting nearby said, “It wasn’t beautiful at all. There’s a town down that way. I’ll bet we were watching all their homes burn.”

After sharing a muffin baked with local blackberries, Angela took me to a place only a few people knew about. We followed a meandering rivulet, starting from the only road that ran through Stehekin. The rivulet reminded me of the creek we had played in when we were little, except that it widened into a strong brook as we followed it until it disappeared behind a row of boulders. The source was hidden by a bluff system with a large crack from which the brook, now a stream, ran out. We forged on between two walls of rock, wading in icy cold, knee deep water. The rushing sound of water filled our ears so much that we couldn’t hear each other anymore. Our path through the stone opened up into a deep, round pool with a roaring waterfall on the far side. With everything parched around us, all this water seemed to appear from an unseen world. I could hear Angela’s voice again and it echoed throughout the chimney of rock that we were in a place called Emerald Falls. When the sun shines directly down into it, the water glows jade green.

Later, we followed a path to another waterfall. We found the other Lodgies swimming like otters in a pool surrounded by small bundles of leaves and wildflowers that drank from the spray of Rainbow Falls. One my poker buddies from the night before pulled up some leaves and

handed them to me. "It's sweet mint. It's growing all over the place here." Before boarding the ferry back down the river, Angela found a small boat to take me across the lake to some cliffs on the far side that I could barely see from the ferry dock. She motored us right up against the rock and I saw glyphs older than I can imagine of stick men with stick homes surrounded by deer and elk. I started to feel how old the falls, the flowers and the paintings must have been. It was as if the miniature worlds I imagined in the Kansas mud while playing with my little brother had grown into a giant, overwhelming world that had been mastered by my sister.

Angela stayed on the dock until she couldn't see the ferry anymore, because I watched and waved until I couldn't see her anymore either. I felt better about her being there, like she was the safest she had ever been. There were a few ferry stops on the way back to Chelan, and refugees from the fire the night before poured onto the boat with blankets and children. They sat on their rapidly packed luggage and raided the candy counter for meals. Bree was right about their houses. The closer we got to Chelan, the more the sky filled with smoke. The sun changed into a dull red ball in a grey sky. I could stare right into it with no harm to my eyes. It reflected itself weakly upon the water, like any other object. Without the sunlight, everything around me took on a color I had never seen before. I watched a helicopter dip its bucket into the lake and draw it up only a few yards from the coastline to put out a burning tree right by the water.

Once we entered the turns of the lake, I moved to the bow where I could get away from the crowds in the main cabin. I noticed white clouds directly south of us. It looked like a thunderhead, slowly growing, and I missed the storms Angela and I had grown up with back in Kansas that hardly ever formed west of the mountains. I watched the white cloud grow, and then, as if from a nightmare, the cloud grew tremendously fast, with great turbulence pushing it up into the sky ahead of us. A dark, ashen roiling force pushed the white top up over a pillar of rising

convection, and the thunderhead turned into a mushroom cloud. I wasn't watching a thunderstorm grow. It was a firestorm. When I returned to my car, Black Elvis was covered in a thin layer of ash.

It was a few months after Christmas that I heard from Angela. She was living with my parents again. From Stehekin, she tried to follow Mollie's lead into the ski resort seasons, but it didn't work out as well. Angela hated it, and my parents had wired her a bus ticket to get home in time for Christmas. They weren't as easy with the new pronouns as I was. She sounded down, but there was a chance she was going to go back to school. She needed her computer from the storage unit. After asking a lot of questions, I realized that after pulling the computer out of the unit, she was going to let it go into default and let the storage company claim what was inside. I started talking about options. I could pay the rent for a while, or I could try to take more out than just the few things she was sending me for. But they really weren't options. I couldn't do either one.

I stared at everything we had stacked together, she and I. The rails of her bed. Lamps. That awesome little retro table she found at the flea market where we drank a bottle of wine together for New Year's and then ran through her apartment doing interpretive dance. There were boxes of clothes of either gender mixed with old uniforms. I fished her birth certificate out of a box filled with pictures of a little boy. We thought all that time that she was just a boy. Every single one of us who watched her grow had her all wrong. She had said on the phone, "Those things belong to a past that isn't mine." It had stacked and piled and gone nowhere for decades and now it was time for it all to burn. But I loved who was in there so much. My little brother was loving and silly and we could never quite figure him out. I could take out a loan and

preserve him somehow and keep him for myself. Or I could do what she told me to do with a past that wasn't mine either. The sound of the garage door rolling to the ground was so loud that it echoed long in my head as I walked away.

PLAIT NOIR

As soon as we get off the bus we notice a shapely young woman with black hair done in a Fellini bouffant flirting with a pale and lanky gardener who is crazy about her. He's having a smoke with her before her shift begins, and I can tell, without knowing Polish, that she's making sharp, smart-assed jokes that are driving him wild. When she leaves him and walks closer to us, we figure out right away that she is going to be our tour guide. Let's straighten up our faces and get somber before she gets here. We have just read that when Steven Spielberg toured Auschwitz, he vomited. If we see the soil as he did, whitened by crushed bone, we may vomit too.

As she approaches, she can see by our screwed-up faces that her happy times of smoking and flirting are over. She says, "You look serious. Of course you do. This is a serious place." Really, though? Look at it. The courtyard, and the rows of red brick buildings can't stop themselves from looking positively charming this morning. It's the first sunny day we've seen in Poland since our arrival eight days before. Wet, Baltic storms in Gdansk chilled us to the bone, so we had to drink all the vodka. That ocean mist followed us down along the Vistula River

through Warsaw, Krakow, and now that the morning needs to look like a grainy, black and white documentary, everything is bursting with light and life. The birdsong is deafening, even though we can't see any birds anywhere. The enamored gardener just drove a little too close to our tour guide in his flatbed mini-truck. He's off to plant flowers.

Even though it is sunny outside, it's March, so it is very cold. The early morning sun throws long shadows and we do anything we can to avoid them. There is no warm place to stand in the horse stables where the prisoners slept huddled together. The slates of the barn walls are not fitted flush with one another, and thin, golden lines of sunlight throw a grid pattern all over the inside of the stables. We can see our own breath cloud up in front of our faces. We can't stand it any longer, so we leave the dark-haired Fellini guide and step back outside into the sun. This will give us some time to think about the way things are labeled throughout this crime scene. The murder victims are "prisoners." That pathetic excuse for shelter we were just in, not fit for man or beast, is called a "horse stable." The air outside is clean and cool. We can see trees growing along the fences. The spring grass is new and bright, and there is no bone dust anywhere to be seen.

You might want to know what the brick ovens look like, and the long, thin, metal trays that they used to slide bodies into the fire. The crematorium looks no different than any other building on the red-brick commons. It could pass for a bakery or a foundry, and probably was before it was used to dispose of bodies. It's hard to say, because we're spacing out, tuning out, no longer listening to the tour guide. We want to be somewhere else now. We follow her into the other buildings, into the basements where prisoners were housed early in the war. The windows are still barred. But that must be a fire hazard now. Are we imagining the bars? We

can't breathe down here, and the wet, cold air concentrates into a biting force that steals right up our pant legs and down our shirts.

It's much warmer in the white rooms of the upper floors where the former death bureau offices are now dry-walled into a museum. There are rare pictures of "Kanada" where prisoners traded items lifted from the sorting houses. As new prisoners arrived in camp, their luggage was ransacked by the prisoners who knew what would have value. A picture of a healthy, round, hard-faced woman standing at the open tent flaps of Kanada makes Auschwitz look like your average swap meet. Back in the hotel, in my suitcase, I have perfume, a nice dress and my light jacket that I forgot to bring this morning to stay warm. Would it have been worth a ration of food, in Kanada, to smell from a bottle of perfume? Would we consider that a reasonable trade?

We file into sterile rooms with piles of hair and suitcases behind glass, trying to understand what had value in Auschwitz, but the room is white, and the glass is clean. There are no plaques or pictures hanging nearby to indicate how we are supposed to feel about this massive pile of black hair. It looks musty, but we can't smell it. It is completely inert, covered in a thick layer of dust, whitening the hair into an old age that the owners of each strand never saw. Even the one, lank braid of blond hair, noticed because of its color, chopped from a young girl's nape, has grown old without her. The braid is the only thing that gives the remotest sense of character to this blob before us. In fact, don't you think the suitcases are more eerie than the hair? The suitcases have last names painted on them. The hair could belong to anyone.

Outside again, the shadows have shortened, the day is brighter and we find no bone dust, no bodies. Everything is alive with color and noise. The only thing we will take home with us is the realization that when the murders happened, the sun shined, the birds sang, and in the pools of blood and decay, fresh spring grass and mosses broke through with enough annual

determination to cover it up for all time. Acres of the dead are seamlessly rolled into an Arcadian dream. We will leave Auschwitz feeling better than when we arrived.

I'm afraid our perspective of Auschwitz is at the mercy of who I was when I went there so many years ago. What was I like back then? Oh, God, there I am. Look at her. She just stumbled out of the Experience Music Project in Seattle into the middle of Fifth Avenue with a rose in her teeth. A whole row of headlights are heading right for her, and she points her rose at them and says, "Gimme hugs." She has had so many martinis she can't feel her own body anymore. She just broke up with her boyfriend, moved into a new apartment, and she is only days away from flying to Poland because, why not? Her dentist is going, and doesn't he smell so attractive? He sounds like Dracula. Of course she says yes when he asks her to go.

She is our real tour guide, with short, red hair and green cargo pants, completely spacing out in the crematorium. Luckily, some semblance of the woman I would become managed to catch how thin the rusty trays were that pushed the bodies into the fire. Thin trays? Thin bodies. They burned the people who had fallen down for the last time. Their bodies were found in the long morning shadows. The Nazis needed no bullets for those prisoners. Just time. That is all I can stand. Understand that it is better that she went there instead of me. I had not met my husband, whose family makes our son just Jewish enough to be killed under a different set of rules, documents and solutions.

It's so much better to remember how warm the dentist's accent was, and how he pointed out the artists' hangouts off the Cloth Hall in the heart of Krakow. Through the dark of night, if I look just beyond the fire dancers, the stained glass in the door gives the place away where painters and poets argued over Poland's future before all of their work that survived the invasion

spread over the globe like refugees. We were there to escort some of those lost paintings home again. We were also there to steal away and throw ourselves at each other any chance we got. While we were staying in an art colony between Warsaw and Krakow, we spent the night in a medieval castle. I noted that the wooden floors of the refurbished bedroom we met in were pretty toasty under my feet. With a rolled r he said, "It's radiant heat."

"Nice."

In the throes, I nearly kicked a mirror off the wall, and to this day I'm grateful I didn't break it. Later, when the dentist and I were looking around for our clothes, that old version of me stopped in front of the mirror and took a good long look. I'm glad she did that. I can still see her and remember how pretty, confident, fun and alive she felt. I wish you could see her. I wish she had reached out to touch cold, glassy fingers with her reflection so I could remember and connect with her even more. She was a little skinny, wearing cheap underwear, and completely radiant. She didn't know it at the time, but she felt young.

The unbroken mirror wasn't the only place she would see herself on that trip. The moment shares a cognitive flash point with a long hall in Auschwitz, full of photographs. In the early days of the camp, they took pictures of the inmates to keep track of everyone. The tattooing came later when the prisoners had changed so much due to starvation and illness that they no longer looked anything like their original pictures. One of the hallways showed rows of such photographs taken of the earliest victims. When she saw them, they looked like criminals to her. Their faces were hard and mean. The tour guide with the Fellini hair told her that one side of the hall held pictures of men and the other side, women. It was difficult to tell which was which at first.

All of their heads were shorn close, hence the dusty, black pile. She looked into their faces, into their photographs, and they yielded nothing. She was too young to connect. An older man might see subtle emotion in older faces. Mothers might recognize other mothers who had lost their children. But to her, they gave nothing. To her, they had left everything on the floor where their hair was piled, and by the time they had their pictures taken, that frightened, hopeful, living part of them was already gone. Then, she saw the girl. There was one girl on the wall with wet eyes that darted away from the camera to something that would have been behind the camera, off to her left. Her cropped hair was rich and black. She was shrinking down in the frame, trying to disappear from the picture, and her lips were drawn tight. The picture of the girl flows through everyone I have ever been. I can tell you as I am now and as I was then that the girl had not left anything behind. She took her whole soul into that photograph, and she was terrified.

TAKE TO THE BED

Erica was eyeing the table filled with desserts and wanted to know if any of them were worth a shot of insulin. Grossly underweight, I took it upon myself to sample the table, and reported back that the chocolate cupcakes were really good. A woman rang the doorbell. She was late for the party. Her husband was also an Army helicopter pilot in Iraq. She had seen on the news that one of them had crashed. She said, "If they come to notify this house, I'll move all the children into one of the bedrooms." Erica looked stunned with a half-eaten cupcake in her hand. I resolved to hate that messenger for the rest of my life. Erica and I wound up drawing the children into the back playroom anyway. We stood together in the doorway not saying anything, but laughing occasionally as we watched the kids play.

It was Lauren's birthday, Erica's daughter, and she was playing with my son who was two years of age at the time. Erica had been diagnosed with diabetes during the first winter we spent in Fairbanks. Our husbands had gone through flight school together in Alabama, and for their first post as pilots, a troop of graduates was sent to Alaska. In the lower 48, Erica was only diabetic while she was pregnant. Now she had diabetes forever. Alaska's hardness made

anything that was a little wrong with us a lot wrong. My Crohns disease was getting worse, but I did not respect it. I had become used to the pain. I had a toddler, a career and a deployed husband. I didn't have time to be sick. Every second the doorbell didn't ring wore down our nerves and filled us with relief at the same time. Feeling my gut twinge, I thanked Erica for inviting us, packed up my son, and went home.

I took the fear of a ringing doorbell home with me and waited in bed to see if someone came to my door. It was a possibility, but a small one. I was sure he was alive. I kept saying to myself that he was alive. I got up and clutched my gut as I stumbled to the bathroom. I started vomiting, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. I knew I was worried, worked-up, and now my gut was going to let me have it. Then, something strange happened. I was lying on the floor and couldn't get back up. I had a metallic taste in my mouth and my head felt full. I said out loud that something was different. Something was really wrong this time. My dog ran between the front and back doors, barking deep, sharp reports. I rolled into the living room and lunged for my phone. My son was sitting up in his crib, screaming. I called 911.

When the EMT's came into the house, they wanted the dog put away. My son tried to lie on me, but they pulled him off and handed him to my friend Gracie, a close neighbor who was up anyway. She was worried about her husband too, waiting to see if she was the one to be notified. She took my son into the kitchen, telling him it was okay. He started crying. I could hear his arms and legs flailing to get away from her, pounding the kitchen floor. It was the worst sound I had heard, and wrapped in the pain as I was, I couldn't do anything about it. I let go of his screams and drifted away. The pain was hot and searing, like I was being cut from the inside. I should have been up off the couch in a second with my son screaming like that. I knew it too, and I wanted to hold him, but the pain drew a line beyond which surrender was the only option,

and I had no choice but to melt onto the gurney and let go.

I remember a series of awakenings. The first time I opened my eyes there was a football game on TV. My boss was sitting next to me. She said, "Hey, you didn't get a bag. You were really worried about that."

Oh. Right. That man with the cowboy mustache said he was going to have to perform some kind of surgery. My intestine had a hole in it. It wasn't going to heal by itself. I was worried about getting a colostomy bag. Then I was crying and then presto-chango, there was a football game on TV. I felt my belly and it was tight, swollen and full of pain. My boss showed me where my morphine button was and I pushed it right away.

I woke up to a pilot's wife quietly crying near my bed. She was one of many who were taking turns to visit me. Then I woke up to another wife, Lori, standing over me, and I asked her who had died in the helicopter crash. All I remember saying was, "I know him. I know her."

I don't remember how I reacted, but to this day, Lori cannot recall the moment without crying and saying, "I shouldn't have told you."

I knew them, and I liked them, but I wasn't close to the pilot who died, Chris, or his wife, Christina, so I can't really picture how I must have behaved. He had crashed in Mosul, far from where my husband was working at the time. The pilots had been given outdated information on tower height in the city, and they hit one while flying at night. It was just an accident, so Chris was not awarded a Purple Heart. It is believed that he died instantly. I asked Lori if she would hold my hand while I slept, and she did.

Later, my husband was there with my boy. He took off my son's cap to show that he'd taken him out for a haircut. The close cut made my boy's brown hair look blond and his eyes

appear bigger. I stroked his soft cheek with the back of my hand and held his chin in my palm. I fought sleep to stay with them, but the draw of the bed was very powerful. I kept waking up slowly, finding a place where I felt clear and strong, and then all memory would disappear. My parents came, but I only remember waking my mother, who was asleep in a chair, at three in the morning to water all the flowers in my room that had been there long enough to die.

I don't remember my father holding my hand and praying after the doctors punctured my lung, trying to drain one of several rapidly forming abscesses in my abdomen. The doctors told my father they would have to insert a valve in my lung and the procedure would be very painful. On his knees, at my bedside, my father prayed that God would heal me. When the doctors came to insert the valve, he asked them to take another X-ray, just to be sure of the damage. My lung had healed in the night, and the procedure was no longer necessary. Of that event, my father would later say, "And that's why I stop and tell any swinging dick that'll listen how the good Lord blessed me."

I barely remember the argument my husband had with the doctors shortly before they signed off on orders to move me out of Alaska and down to Seattle for continued care. They drugged me heavily for the trip, so I don't remember screaming that I had claustrophobia while pulling out tubes and drains from my body during the life-flight. I don't remember being tied to the bed in the ICU in Seattle, nor do I remember thinking all the doctors were trying to attack me. I don't remember inviting a nurse to come pick wildflowers with me. But, my sister who flew down to Seattle with me remembers looking into my drugged eyes and feeling the dread of no longer seeing the sister she knew behind them. She also endured a long night outside the ICU where a rattled nurse wandered out to tell her that when she tried to insert a catheter, I begged her to stop. The nurse told my sister, "She thought she was being raped."

I woke up in Seattle not knowing where I was, and that is where I started to come back to life and learn about what being in bed all that time had done to me. In the ICU, they cleaned me up and washed my hair, taking care to remove the gauze bandages they had used to tie down my arms and legs before I woke up. My new nurse told me what he knew of gut surgery: “When the gut gets cut, it’s all like,” and then he raised both his fists, then his middle fingers. He also said, “You have to get out of this bed as soon as you can. This bed is not your friend.”

He was right. Waking up was breaking through the surface of water, gasping every time, coughing until I threw up all the clear, slick gunk from my lungs. I wasn’t allowed food or water, I had a special IV tube than ran straight toward my heart, and an NG tube that ran up my nose and down into my stomach to keep it empty. My lips and nose grew greenish, cracked and swollen. Every other day they sent me down to the basement to get a few more abdominal drains to relieve my swelling abscesses. Poking around in an already highly inflamed gut was excruciating. I hated the room. One of the technicians asked me what kind of music I was into while he made target marks on my body. I vowed then to do everything in my power to get out of that hospital.

This cycle of drains and drugs was wearing my husband thin. He wasn’t sleeping or eating, and at night I would awake to my bed shaking. He didn’t realize he was doing it, but he had a habit of grabbing the railing of my hospital bed and trembling violently late at night. When his emergency leave ran out, we both agreed he should just go back to Iraq instead of asking for another extension. Some people still cringe that we would make that choice, but in Iraq he got sleep and regular meals. They made him take care of himself. I wanted him to go away. My bed was so powerful it was taking him too. So, with him in Iraq and my parents back in Alaska

watching my son, my sister remained by my side.

The doctors came through every morning, and there was one I had fixed upon. Dr. Garth. He had big teeth, a strange bald spot on the back of his head, and dark green eyes. Dr. Garth could tell I was in my body, even while I peeled thin, putrid sheets of skin from it, like a living corpse. I would tell him jokes, disarm him, make him feel that I was still able to get outside of my morphine-soaked head long enough to like him and make him feel liked. He stopped by in the evening once, and talked to me a while. We talked about our kids and vacations and Christmas that was only a few days away. I never took my eyes off him, where the truth of my intentions swam drugged and desperate: save me, Goddamn you. Save me.

I woke up one morning, happy because my son was there at the bedside, and I could touch his face again. Little face. That's what I called him. He was smiling and I tickled his cheeks and held my palm to the side of his head, against his ear, looking into his eyes. Then he vanished. It was the morphine, a hallucination, and I watched my hand continue to caress where his face had been in the empty air before I let my arm drop. The bed was a malicious hell that knew exactly how to break me and where.

"There is something you need to understand. We do something called 'take to the bed' when we die. You go home, to your own room, your bed, and you die there." A nurse with tears in her eyes said this to me two years before the surgery and the drains. I had traveled forty miles to a town with a real hospital so they could weigh my newborn son before and after I nursed him to make sure he was getting enough to eat. I sat near a plastic tub where I was ready to weigh my baby when the nurse walked in crying. She tried to give the same introduction she gave all nursing mothers; a general greeting and an appreciation for what I was doing for my son. He and

I were on the near-bursting edge of discomfort. He was two weeks old and hungry and my breasts were very full, but we understood that we had to stop everything, hold on a little bit longer, and learn why the nurse was crying. Was a baby from the nursery in trouble? Was it us? Was there something I didn't know?

It didn't take much prodding to get her to talk to me. She said her aunt was dying, and it was sad, but it wasn't why she was crying. She could tell by my accent I wasn't from there. Her aunt wanted to take to the bed, and the family was ready to give her that honor. The dying aunt's daughter was not ready to let go, and she had the final word on what kind of treatment her mother received. The nurse was deeply hurt that her aunt could not die as she chose. Her aunt was tired. She wanted to go home, but because of her daughter, she was dying in a hospital instead.

As the nurse spoke, I imagined a small room with the windows open. I saw doilies decorating a little bookstand and maybe a vanity. The room had a musty smell of medicine mixed with the odors of a souring body still full of salt, sweat and shit. With the window open, it was either oppressively hot or biting cold. Against those intrusions, her aunt would have her own things around her that were warm, familiar, hand-sewn and smelling of laundry softener. She could watch the sun travel through the room as she had when she was healthy, paying more notice to it now that she was giving herself to her bed, letting the covers crush out her breath.

The nurse was telling me all of this as an act of trust with an outsider, and I was grateful for being let in. I could only muster an alien's understanding, jotting the actions down on a clipboard in my head as interesting and strange. I had too much life wiggling around in my hands to allow myself a deeper contemplation of what it meant. My son, sensing the story was over, grew impatient to be weighed and fed. As he lay inside the clear plastic scale, it was an

uncomfortable little bed that he immediately fought against. He was still hungry and reaching and wanting up in my arms. Everything checked out okay, and we followed the rest of the day's patterns as we had the day before, taking special care to keep extra pillows and stuffed animals away from his bassinette, watching diligently day after day that the bed didn't take him.

I started walking up and down the hospital hallways, and my sister bought me a notebook and pen so I could write about it. Controlling the pen was difficult, and walking required the help of a physical therapist who used a belt to hold me up from underneath my armpits while I managed a rolling walker. He laughed at me when I said, "I feel like a giraffe." My sister downloaded free music on her laptop, so we listened to Holst's "The Planets" and Korsakov's "Scheherazade" when nothing was on TV. I was starting to feel more alive. After a month they gave me water. When I managed to keep it down, they gave me a turkey sandwich. I took two bites and felt sick. I lay back in the bed and realized I would have to learn to eat again too. I made it a point to stay out of bed as often as I could, but one trip around the nurses' station was impossible without a walker and my oxygen tank. I also developed the notion that I would never get out of there unless I learned something from it, like a divine lesson. On a night when I was begging for some kind of reason for this, a nurse looked at me and said in a thick, Latin accent, "Only God can help you now."

I started going to the bathroom by myself, leaning on my rolling IV tree precariously for support. My sister was always nearby as I struggled through those first independent steps. While washing my hands, I caught my reflection for the first time in a long while and saw just how sick I really was. My eyes were sunken and bruised and my skin had turned a powdery white. Now that I was on regular food and off the IV nutrition, my body wasn't as swollen

anymore, so I could see how badly all my muscles had atrophied. One of my favorite nurses came whistling in behind me and said, "Hey! Look at you up looking at you." She put her arm around me and said, "You look so much better."

One of the doctors was adamant about making sure I had regular showers, and he picked up some scrubs for me to wear. My in-laws sent me a big red puffy bathrobe that came wrapped in a large white ribbon. My sister and I turned the ribbon into a sash that read "Miss Abdominal Drain 2008" and we hung it on my IV tree. But for every good day I had, I had three bad days of nausea and tortured sleep. Those good days made the bad ones more challenging to bear. I started to slip into deep depressions where I would listen to some free Tchaikovsky on my sister's laptop, cry and think about my son who I hadn't seen in weeks.

My husband called me every day, reassuring me that he was feeling better now that he slept and ate regularly. He was anxious to know how I was doing, so I always made sure I had something good to say. "I walked a little further today. I ate a little more." The other pilots were still grieving Chris's death, and my husband slipped into their very private circle of care. They all wanted to know how I was doing, so I walked for my husband and the troop. I talked to my son every day, but my voice was damaged from the respirator during my emergency surgery, so I wondered if he knew who I was.

I entered the bed a week before Thanksgiving, and it was on the 23rd of December that the doctors saw that despite giving the bed all the hell I could muster, the bed was winning. If I didn't improve enough over the Christmas holiday they wanted to do something drastic: another surgery. They said, "We'll get in there, we'll clean you up, start you at zero, okay?" I was more terrified than I had yet been through the whole experience. I knew that my weakened body was barely making any progress and another surgery felt like a giant kick coming in while I was

down. I was afraid I would die. I asked my sister to call in a chaplain.

I had called in chaplains before. I told them to pray for me, because God and I were on the outs. They muttered small prayers and left, and that's all I wanted one more time. The chaplain that walked in was a tall, Nordic-looking soldier, and when I asked him to pray for me because I had no voice for talking to God, he said, "Whoa, wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to die. Can you tell him I don't want to die?"

He grabbed a chair and pulled it up close to the bed. "What do you think this is that I'm talking to? Why do you think God won't talk to you?"

I told him how when I was a child in church, all my faith had been turned into fear, and once the fear left, the faith went with it. "But I can't believe that everything is going to go dark and that's it. That's so scary, and I really want there to be something else."

The chaplain said, "I can tell you what I believe. You're in this world right now, and God has some mixed feelings about that. He really wants you back. He misses you. Taking you now is just impatience."

"I don't see it that way. I think he's completely indifferent, like the guy on *Wild Kingdom* who tells the viewer that the bunny has to be taken out by the coyote because they're the breaks. 'We cannot interfere with Nature.' If God is watching, I don't think he is going to do anything to help me." I started to cry.

The chaplain's eyes filled with tears, and he said, "You're so close. I wish you could see how close you are, and how close your God is to you." He took my hand and prayed with me, but mostly we just cried together. My sister sat on the edge of her cot with her head down. The chaplain prayed with her too. When I woke up the next morning, I felt his words echo into a

presence near my bed. Was it God? I closed my eyes and prayed, "Please stay close. But not too close! It's still pretty weird, and I don't know you and we should probably set up some boundaries because this is creepy that you love me and I don't even know you, but don't go."

The chaplain returned and caught my sister and me on a walk around the nurses' station.

"Hi there! I was just looking for you. I wanted to tell you about the candlelight service we're having down in the chapel tonight."

"Oh, right, it's Christmas Eve."

"Yeah, I know it's a lot of work for you to get around, but if you're feeling up to it, I would like to invite you. I think it will help."

That night, I put on my red bathrobe and with my sister's help walked all the way to the elevator, through the downstairs lobby, and over to the chapel. They had taken me off the extra oxygen, so I was out of breath and very tired when I arrived. The room was warm and red and smelled like furniture polish. The chaplain said the candlelight we were about to share represented the hope that the child born this night brought into the world. He lit the candle of the ministers standing next to him, and the ministers shared the light with the small crowd gathered there. My sister and I held our candles, and with my broken voice I sang "silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." My sister was too choked up to sing. We were at the very edge of something much bigger than us, with the power to break us into little pieces.

When we went back to the hospital room, I didn't want to go back to bed. Neither one of us were getting good sleep with all the interruptions of drugs and vitals. I called the nurses and we worked out a new schedule for the night so my sister and I could get at least six hours of solid sleep. I woke up three hours into our protected time in pain. I had forgotten to figure into our new schedule the pain killers I was taking orally by then. I lay there for a moment, then quietly

slipped out of bed by myself, and rolled my IV out of the room, into the hallway, and down to the nurses' station. They were very surprised, so I told them I didn't want to wake up my sister. I thought I would come out and get my meds myself. I just needed a couple pills. They saw that not only was I able to get out of bed and move around on my own, I was able to think about someone other than myself.

Christmas was quiet. Few nurses worked that day, and the meal my sister and I had was terrible. We barely said anything at all to each other, we kept the TV off, and didn't bother turning on the lights. The day was thickly overcast. Blizzard conditions had hit the city overnight and I felt cornered while we waited in the dark to learn if I would have another surgery or not. My sister suggested we try to lighten up with some tunes, so we sat grim-faced and tense with Holst's "Mars" blasting when a couple of my doctors stopped by. The steely look my sister and I gave them fit the war-themed music. We were ready for battle. They heard about my trek to the nurses station the night before and asked me if I was able to keep my food down. I pointed to the tray and asked, "Could you keep that down?"

"No."

"I kept it down."

They looked at each other a moment, then me, then my sister and said, "We think you girls should go home now."

THE EAGLE MEN: A TALE

Teresa sat in her living room wearing her heavy winter coat. She didn't have the TV or the radio on, and her purse was in front of her on the coffee table. She sat very still until she saw the lights of Guerrero's car swing into the driveway. He was still in his flight suit when he rushed through the door without knocking. She picked up her purse and said, "I'm ready."

Guerrero was pale. She wanted to offer him a glass of water or a seat, but she felt she had to first call him back from wherever his frantic eyes had been. She called out his first name as if she was searching for him in a dark room.

He stared at her and said, "I want you to know you will see some things."

She stopped moving towards the door. It gave Guerrero pain to say, "Her face is really bad,"

"How sick is she?"

He looked around, as if for an escape, and answered, "It's not like that."

Theresa stepped backwards, further into her home and said, "I don't think I know what's going on."

Guerrero had already taken off his cap. Looking at it, twisting it in his hands, he said, "She was beaten. She had some health problems before, but that isn't why she's in the hospital."

Guerrero began pacing in the living room. "I've never seen anyone look like that. I don't know how she's still alive." He stopped, looked at Teresa and said, "I want you to know, when we go to her house, there's going to be some blood. Probably a lot."

Teresa felt coldness rush through her, underneath her coat. She looked at her floor and asked, "Where is he?"

"Jail."

Teresa looked back up. "So the house is empty?"

"Yes."

"Okay, let's go."

I will try to tell the story as the old Yupik woman told me, but I don't have a knife to draw pictures in the mud, drawing your eyes away from my mouth, clearing debris for a smooth surface where you can see all of the sharp images of the tale carved straight into the earth. But, I will do my best. A young woman was alone in the high grass to gather eggs. The vastness of the fields after many months in winter camp spread her spirit out in all directions. The soft winds and glancing rays of sun filled her heart with joy. She danced and sang, and beat out her song with her feet, softly against the spongy earth. The glare of the sun blinded her view of Eagle Man, soaring above her. With his piercing eyes, he observed her face, smiling in the sun, and in that moment, he loved her.

The night absorbed so much of Guerrero's headlights that Teresa could only see a few

yards out from the car as they drove along the park road. He thanked her again. "We didn't know what she might need from home, and we knew you would remember things like that. It must feel crazy to you. Another rough Christmas."

"How many people are helping out?"

"Not many. I guess they're trying to keep it that way. I'm sorry to ask you to do this. This is a terrible thing for you to do. Have you been okay?"

The car rolled into the short distance of sight, crushing little clods of snow and dirt that popped softly under the tires. Teresa answered, "I'm much better now." She stared out at the darkness and laughed. "The whole thing was so stupid. Who gets melanoma in a place like this?"

Guerrero answered, "The sun shines all summer."

"I know." She pressed her face against the cold glass of the passenger window, looking for stars, but clouds had blocked them out. "Maybe it will snow."

"It's too cold for snow." He shifted in his seat and said, "I'm glad you're coming with me. We all knew you would know best what she needs, but right now, I'm glad I'm not by myself."

"Don't worry. We've both faced bad stuff before, so I guess we're about as ready as anybody."

Guerrero agreed. "I've been getting help, though. I'm going to have to double up on my visits after this shit."

"Who are you seeing?"

"A Chaplain. EMDR. He does a thing with lights."

Teresa laughed. "Even your therapy has an acronym. I'm sorry, but a light show doesn't sound like you're getting your money's worth."

Guerrero smiled and said, "Good thing it's free."

“Is it like hypnosis?”

He thought about it and said, “Kind of. He has a machine I watch that has lights running back and forth, but I’m awake the whole time, thinking about things. Anything I want. I threw up the first time. It’s intense, but it works for about a week. Then I have to go back and think in front of the lights again. I don’t freak out in the chow hall anymore. They’ve been letting me fly again. I don’t have as many nightmares.”

Teresa turned to him. “The lights fix nightmares?”

“Yeah.” Guerrero stopped smiling. “Why? Are you having nightmares?”

She watched the headlights flash white against the pale birch tree bark for a moment and thought of bone showing through dark, decaying flesh. “Some.”

“What do you got?”

She turned her head slowly to Guerrero and whispered, “I see dead people.”

“Don’t fuck around.” Guerrero tensed up, and Teresa remembered that he really had seen dead people. She felt badly, and forced the words to come.

She said, “Girls. I’m not afraid of them, but they’re dead.” She kept going, watching the birch tree bones roll by, and Guerrero let her, keeping quiet. “They float in clear tanks of water, like I’m going through a museum, an aquarium, and my friends dare me to touch them. I know I should feel afraid, but I don’t. I don’t feel afraid until I wake up.”

Guerrero’s face twisted. “Yeah, that sounds like the stuff. I’ll give you the phone number for that chaplain. He won’t fix anything, but it will make you feel better. It got that bad, huh?”

Teresa laughed through her nose, and laid her head back against the headrest. She winced against a slight pain in her neck and back, but she was used to the pain, so she didn’t think about it.

“It was on my back, and you guys were gone for a year, so Michael wasn’t home to spot it for me. At first, I only felt tired. Really tired. It didn’t hurt until they started messing with it. Surgery sucked. Chemo sucked. Handing my son over to other people to care for sucked, until they finally sent Michael home from Mosul. Aiden was so happy to see his daddy again.”

Guerrero remembered. “Where is your boy now?”

“Kat has him.”

Guerrero smiled, “My Kat’ll take good care of him.”

“She already has, more than I ever thought anyone could. Aiden loves her. So, about this mess, I guess the rumors are flying around fast.” She forced a reassuring smile for Guerrero’s sideways glances and said, “I’m glad I can be here to help.” After saying this, Teresa questioned if she really was the right person. She swallowed her doubt down hard. She could remember enough to be helpful. She just didn’t like remembering.

Guerrero asked, “What did Kat tell you on the phone?”

“That Ford’s wife needed help.”

Guerrero nodded. “Good girl.”

Teresa clenched up against what he might have meant. She said, “I don’t like it that this feels like a big secret.”

He said, “I think it has to be.”

Eagle Man soared as his heart filled, and drew his wings back to dive where the young woman danced and sang. He lighted before her. She was terrified, but he spoke kindly to her and sang the same songs, like he had always been with her. He spread his wings and offered to fly with her. She was very afraid, but his songs vibrated through her soul, so she went into the

sky with him. She saw where the birds hid their eggs in the long grass. She learned the secret places to cross the braided river. She saw the trail to fish camp, and burned its patterns into her heart. She now knew what the elders knew. She loved Eagle Man for this great gift he made to her.

The Ford house was the last one along the park road that circled around the east side of a vast, cramped taiga of short spruce trees. The forest cut off the Ford's house from the communities west of the taiga, where Teresa lived, full of pilot families that saw each other every day. Two rows of tall birch trees lined the gravel driveway. There were no lights on in the house, so the rustic, cabin seemed to leap forward into Guerrero's headlights like a scene in a pop-up book. They jumped at the sight of it. Guerrero said, "I'm going in first to get some lights turned on. You stay here, and leave my lights on so I can see." He dangled the key to the house before him at eye level and squinted at it. His hand was shaking.

Teresa said, "Why don't I run up there?"

Guerrero glared at her and said, "I'm going now."

He ran up to the porch and wasn't long about getting the door open. The lights flew on so quickly it appeared the house was responding to him. The warm color of the porch light changed the home into something familiar, like they were there for a party. Teresa, leaving Guerrero's car running, stepped out towards the house and let herself in.

It was one of the nicer places she had seen in Alaska, with a lower-48 floor plan except for the big, black wood-stove jutting out into the living room. It was a little small, but everyone had a small home to save on fuel oil. The house was still warm. At a glance, it looked like nothing had happened there, and then Guerrero ran toward her from down a long hall of bedrooms and

said, "I can't find any pools of blood. We're okay. It's weird. It should be everywhere." He stopped before Teresa and said, "We have to be careful what we move around, and we can't clean anything. It's a crime scene."

Teresa slowly took everything in. The kitchen was to the left, which was also the dining area. Two huge breaded pork chops sat cold in a Pyrex dish on the counter by the sink. The sink was full of what had been dirtied while cooking that day. She walked over to it, wanting badly to throw it out, and not knowing what to do. She looked over to the table, where there was very little clear space. Piles of papers were intertwined with plastic grocery bags, and on top of it all was a new, satin Christmas tree skirt. It was red, with gold embroidered holly leaves, still packaged in plastic and cardboard, sticking halfway out of a Walmart bag. Everything Teresa saw in the kitchen indicated to her the work of someone trying really hard.

Above the kitchen table was a portrait of the family. Ford had a thick-necked Army look about him, and he sat with his daughter on his knee while his wife stood behind them both with her hand on his shoulder. They all emerged out of a soft, black background, as if a light had been flashed on them while hiding in a closet. Teresa found it hard to face Mrs. Ford, who looked very young, with small features and long, straight brown hair. Before she left the portrait, she noticed that the baby girl, about 14 months old, had a wayward eye. Her right eye looked off in the direction her family was smiling in, but her left eye looked into Teresa.

She collected herself and moved into the living room. It was there that she noticed the pill bottles. Theresa started picking them up, finally feeling sure about something she should do. She called to Guerrero who had gone back into the bedrooms again, "Gather up any pill bottles you see, Matt. Her doctors need these." She couldn't recognize all the names of the drugs, but noticed they all warned of dizzying side-effects. Teresa knew the pain killers when she saw

them. There were a lot of them, and she tried to control her judgment when she noticed that nearly all of them were placed well within arms reach of the toddler she had seen in the portrait. Teresa hunted for them like Easter eggs.

She looked at the general disorganization of the house and thought back to the previous year. Teresa had been tired for so long that when the ladies in the troop came to ready the house for her husband's return, it was a disaster. Teresa's home bore all the hallmarks of a body falling apart. The diaper pail was full. Piles of laundry and dog hair commingled in a cycle of filth that could never be made clean. Kat was the one who rushed her to the hospital. She said, "I've got your boy. You just get better." Kat managed to gather an impressive crowd of women in no time to wash clothes, vacuum, empty the trash, and clean the vomit-sprayed toilets. She told Teresa, "When things like this happen, we've got to have something to do with our hands." They erased all evidence of Teresa's sickness and filled her refrigerator in the three days it took to transport Michael home.

Looking down Mrs. Ford's hallway, Teresa noticed three laundry baskets of clean, unfolded clothes. She wanted to call the women who had helped her. Nothing was so far gone that they couldn't make it clean, but this crime scene was too dirty, even for them. At least they could stand with her and share her frustration. "Help. Clean. But don't touch anything." Instead, Teresa was alone, with two handfuls of pill bottles and a guy who, because he was a man, excused himself from venturing any idea of what to take to the hospital for Mrs. Ford. For that reason, they had only a few minutes to grab the essential things and leave everything else alone to tell its own story.

Eagle Man carried the woman to where her parents lived in the foothills of the Chugach

Mountains. He asked them for permission to marry her, but they refused because he would take her back to the Eagle lands, far away over the mountains. The young woman asked her parents to give him permission because she loved him, and they reconsidered. They feared that all their teachings and their ways would be lost if she went to the Eagle lands. The young woman also feared this, for she had the knowledge of the elders. They decided she could go and be married, but when she had her first baby, she must return with the baby on its first birthday and leave it with her parents to raise in the old ways. Eagle Man and the woman agreed to this.

When Teresa walked into the back bedroom Guerrero held up his hand and said, "I found it." He was looking down into the bed. Teresa couldn't see what he saw over the mountain of laundry and bedspreads lumped up in a mountain between her and what she guessed was the pool of blood. Guerrero said, "I thought there would be more than this."

Teresa spotted a closet on the other side of Guerrero and the bloody mattress. She said, "Look in that closet for some suitcases." Her command shattered the spell that held him, and he turned around, opened the door, and found a large black suitcase next to a red carry-on. Teresa asked for both to be rolled out. She walked into the master bathroom and thought about favorite lotions, shampoos, smells. She remembered Michael washing her hair for her in the hospital before it fell out by the handful. She found Mrs. Ford's razors and lip gloss, an unopened jar of pear-scented hand cream and a 2-in-1 shampoo that smelled like coconut. She checked the back of the bathroom door and found a fluffy pink bathrobe. Walking out into the hallway, she caught Guerrero staring at something on the coffee table in the living room. She dumped everything in her hands into the black suitcase and called out, "What's up, Matt?"

"I found the police report. There was some kind of argument over dinner. He took her in

the back and beat. He. He did a lot to her on the bed. That's where everything happened. She had a phone hidden in the room, and she called the police after he left her alone again. Then she had a gun, but he took it away from her, and held it to her head in front of the kid."

Teresa yelled, "Matt! I don't want to hear anymore. Okay?"

Guerrero was quiet for a while before finally saying, "Okay."

"We've got work to do, Matt. Can you help me?"

He looked pale again and stumbled into the hallway with her. They stood over the suitcases and the laundry together. Teresa gave him something to do. "I need you to go through the laundry and pull out anything for the baby, then put it in the carry-on. Then go in her room and find her favorite toys. They'll look the most worn. Look for extra diapers too." Teresa started looking for underwear, nightgowns and something for Mrs. Ford to wear back home again. She pulled at work shirts and uniforms that belonged to Ford, and found a small pair of sweatpants stuck to the Velcro on his BDU's. Teresa ripped them loose and read the word "spicy" written in sequins on the butt. She tossed them back and looked for something else. She called out, "Where did you put the pills you found?"

Bewildered, Guerrero walked out of the baby's room and said, "I still have them." In both hands he held three pill bottles and a little lamb with missing eyeballs. Teresa carefully picked up the lamb and asked him to drop the bottles in the black suitcase.

She held the lamb and said, "Good choice." They finished filling the suitcases, zipped them tight and rolled into the living room, shutting off lights as they went. Teresa noticed the Christmas tree slumped over in a corner of the living room near a big picture window. It had no ornaments or lights. She said, "We need to set that up and water it before we go or she'll come home to a dead tree."

Guerrero said, "We can't do that."

Teresa grew angry, so Guerrero explained himself while pointing at the report still lying on the coffee table. "They need to do forensics on it. It got shot twice." They both went over to the tree to check it out. Guerrero said, "You can't move the victim."

"This is bullshit. This tree was already dead. We're going to fix this, so hold the top straight."

"Yes, ma'am."

Teresa rolled under the edge of the tree to find the trunk in a stand, but not screwed in. The water reservoir was dry. "Alright, it doesn't need to be perfectly straight, but make sure it's balanced enough that it won't fall over after we're gone."

Guerrero let it sway between his hands until it stopped. He said, "I think this is good."

Teresa began the slow process of tightening the screws. The house was quiet aside from Teresa's strained breathing. She was lying on her bad side. As she turned the screws, the silence closed in around them, drawing the moment together into a focused point, like a stage darkening, falling away, favoring the action locked in a spotlight. They were doing something unlawful, and unseen eyes were watching them, squeezing them. When Teresa's phone rang out, buzzing in her pocket, Guerrero shouted a selection of curses that he couldn't completely commit to.

"Jesuh, fuh, Gah." Teresa struggled to remove her phone and said, "Relax. It's Michael."

Guerrero collected himself. "Why are you the one on the floor?" He helped her up while she explained to Michael that she was on her way home, that she was glad to help, that everything was just fine, and that Aiden was with Kat. Guerrero finished securing the tree and asked, "Did he fly tonight?" Teresa said he had.

"Was he mad you were here?"

Teresa answered, "He doesn't get mad at anything anymore."

The Eagle Man and the woman had a baby, and they loved it and caressed it until the baby's first birthday. The woman was overcome with sadness, so the Eagle Man carried their baby girl alone over the mountains to her grandparents. He held the girl, and begged the woman's parents to reconsider, but they needed the child to carry on the old ways or all of the woman's kind would die away. The Eagle Man understood their wisdom, and gave them his daughter. Eagle Man returned to his wife, and promised her many more children, but her sadness never left her heart. When she roamed in the long grass and found eggs, she would not take them. She had other babies with Eagle Man, and she loved them. She sang sorrow songs for her first baby who would know only the old ways, as she had, before Eagle Man found her in the sun.

Teresa spent the ride home asking questions that Guerrero couldn't answer. She had a sinking feeling that her role in the drama was played out. The Army had a tight hold on the situation. Ford was in jail. Mrs. Ford was in the hospital. No one knew if there was any family coming up to help.

She asked, "Who is taking care of the baby?"

"Hernandez. He has five. He knows what to do."

Teresa turned to look at the suitcases in the backseat, tweaking her back and neck again. Guerrero would deliver them and that would be it.

She asked, "How long do you think, wait, what is her name?"

"The baby?"

"No, Mrs."

"Ford's wife?" Guerrero paused. "Olivia."

"How long do you think Olivia will be in the hospital?"

"She looked really bad. She might have brain damage. She won't talk. She just screams."

"I suppose I would too. She went out and bought a tree skirt and some pork chops and did a mountain of laundry. She was trying to make a good day. Now she's barely alive."

Guerrero thought for a moment and said, "That could have been him, buying the tree and the pork chops. We don't know. She's the one who shot the tree."

"She shot the tree?"

"Twice. With a kid in the house."

The birch trees squeezed close to the car, as Guerrero rolled carefully on the packed ice covering the road. Teresa asked, "Will you let me know when she gets out of the hospital? I want to organize a group of ladies to help her clean things up. We can watch her baby and make her some meals."

"I don't think you want to do that. She was a partier. You saw all those drugs. She is completely out of her mind right now."

The "spicy" sweatpants flashed in Teresa's mind, and she squeezed her eyelids to crush the judgment away. "I don't think what you're saying is fair."

Guerrero took a deep breath. "You are not going to understand this because when you were sick last year, people loved you. This girl is ready to kill people. You can't make her a pie. You need to leave her alone."

Teresa felt sick to her stomach as she looked out the window for her home. She thought about Michael, and became afraid, feeling herself slip into ugly thoughts. She wanted Olivia to

be a bad person so she could go home and make pork chops and buy lopsided trees and never be beaten half to death for it. She wanted everything she had seen to make sense in a way that excluded her from ever having the structure of her life collapse. She had already fought to cling to that structure once, and because it was cancer, there was a network of support and love. She was a survivor. She had no idea what to call Olivia. Olivia had to deserve her pain somehow, or it could happen to anyone.

Teresa took a deep breath, letting her lungs break through the tight feeling her thoughts gave her. Then she exhaled and the steamy cloud of it wafted around her face. She couldn't stop herself from thinking those things, and she wondered if Guerrero was as afraid of Olivia as she was. If he was, then she could make sense of why he could close himself off after seeing Olivia's broken, screaming face.

She asked, "What is the baby's name?"

"Cute little girl. I don't know. She's got a wonky eye. I don't know her name."

Teresa stared at his face flashing back the birch tree light until he finally said, "Samantha. The baby's name is Samantha. It said so in the report."

Teresa thought about the lamb. "She's going to be happy to see that little lamb you picked out."

Guerrero said, "Yes?" He made a strange strangled sound as he said it.

"What is the father's name?"

"Ford."

"No. His first name," Theresa asked.

Guerrero gripped the wheel tightly and said, "Is that Mike?"

Theresa watched Michael carry Aiden from his truck into their house as Guerrero's

headlights lit up her home. He must have picked up Aiden from Kat. The snow had begun, and Michael's arms around Aiden's little body were quickly covered with it. Teresa felt a sense of panic well up within her until the moment she saw them both go safely inside.

I haven't thought about that story for many years until an old man came to the hospital where I work. He didn't want to see his daughter, the pilot's wife, but he could hear her screaming. He was wearing a light coat and the wrong shoes. He looked numb. He kept asking where the little girl was until someone from the family caring for her arrived. We all talk about what happens with the whites, so I know that the old man found his granddaughter and flew away with her down to Bellingham. I felt terrible inside for a long time after. I have been raised to think I am the daughter of eagles, but I am very scared to think eagle men might really appear in my world to do that to a woman's face and take her baby. When I think of the stories that my elders have told me, I like to think of them happening very far away. I go to the stories. They shouldn't come to me.

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