

Sleepy Men Staring at the Sky

by Ben Taylor

## Been There Done That

Will and Francis got anxiously down from the car and sought a path forward, seeing themselves nearly boxed in by a network of puddles and patches of muddy grass, noting that they would have to hop from one dry bit of pavement to the next.

"I think this probably takes the cake, Francis," Will said.

"For what?" She started laughing. "What cake?" Then she stopped herself. "You mean the puddles?" she said, as she maneuvered around a particularly long one.

"No...Henry, I mean. Not that I ever know what to expect from him, sure, but he didn't say a word to me the whole drive down here."

"He's in a stage, I think," she said, shrugging.

"What does he have to be in a stage about?"

"Well, I don't know, but at least that earthquake happened." They split to either side of a puddle, and both

sped up to reach the end.

"It's not like his house fell down on top of him."

"I guess not, since he's not flattened and he's here with us, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a big deal," she said. "How could it not be?"

"He hasn't said anything about it. And what was it, like 5 months ago?"

"Still, he just got home, he could be going through anything."

"How exotic is Chile, anyway?" Will said. Francis shook her head. She thought he was being very dismissive.

They spotted Henry down below, standing on the cement pathway that followed the course of the lakeshore. They paused at the precipice of the muddy grass incline above him.

"I'm not gonna climb down a slippery slope, I only have sandals on," Francis said.

"There are stairs if you go down a little farther, to the right."

She looked in that direction. "Oh, okay." She started to walk away then turned to call back to him. "Will, listen, let's try to be a little understanding with him, alright?"

Will scoffed. "We've known each other since kindergarten, and now he's barely talking to me."

Francis sighed. "We used to draw pictures of Star Wars battles together in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade art class."

"Yeah you guys had a really cool little table in the corner there."

"Hey you know the spirit of what I was trying to say..."

"Fine," Will said. He started down the slope.

"We can tease it out of him a little, you know," she said.

Will shrugged and walked off. Francis frowned and turned away, averting a near-disaster as she stepped gingerly around a puddle the size of a kiddie pool.

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Henry sat on the edge of the promontory curving out into the lake, or rather he squatted so he could turn behind him easily enough to have something to look at if need be. He did look back and he amused himself very much by thinking the concave cement wall that dropped off after the patch of grass beside the road looked like the design for a skate park at the edge of the world. You would roll down a short ramp that snaked around the coastline, hit a bit of pavement and have a few moments to consider what trick to pull off as you started falling through the air. It would be the last air you got in your life, so you would have to make it a real spectacle. But he had never touched a skateboard in his life so that was just conjecture. He didn't think he ever would, it looked hard.

There was a swishing of wet grass above him, and an

"Oh, Jesus." Henry twisted his torso and saw Will stumbling down the slope. He imagined Will gathering steam like a snowball or tumbleweed, rolling down the wall and getting launched out over the burbling muck. He would hang there for a moment but sadly miss the opportunity to go out with style, their eyes finding each other as Will twirled downward, looking a little betrayed. But Henry didn't warn or call out to him, because instead Will picked himself up and shuffled to the edge of the grass, then hopped with great trepidation down to the path. Will wiped his hands on the back of his pants and came and sat down next to Henry, his legs hanging over the edge and catching droplets off of the foam.

"Everything's still soggy from Rainpocalypse 2.0," Will said.

"Where did you park?"

Will's body stiffened and he smiled a little. "There's all sorts of stuff blocked off around the aquarium, I gave up and parked on the street above us." Bits of the lake dotted his pants. "Maybe not entirely legally, but that'll be everybody's problem if it's towed."

"We don't have to be here too long," Henry said.

Will looked at Henry squatting there, mouth open a bit. He looked tensely balanced but just kept staring off at the skyscrapers up the coastline.

"You ran off awful quickly there," Will said.

"Hmm?"

"When we parked, you just kinda walked off without notice."

"Well you knew where I was headed," Henry said tersely. Will frowned.

Was the sky the same color as always, Henry wondered, after these little monsoons? There was a blend of odd colors hanging now over the skyline. Did the sickened green that came with tornado warnings also show the skyline to have twisted a little, hunched over? Did all the lightning charge the sky and leave it a little pink, even after dark? Didn't the Hancock building look a little more haggard than usual to anyone else?

"Francis didn't want to leap down, she went to go find the steps," Will said, looking at Henry tentatively, not getting a reaction.

Henry knew little of extreme weather or, until recently, the movements of the earth. In thunderstorms, in those rare instances when a tornado warning came on the television and that green or wavering beige came into the sky, and the branches of neighbors' trees were tossed into the living room window, his father had often said how his own mother described tornadoes as freight trains bearing down on top of you, when they finally hit. He liked that remark, often repeated. It confirmed what people said in movies. The sky out over the expanse of the lake, away from the cluster of buildings, was dim, starless, quiet now, not as in anticipation of the freight train, just uneventful.

He wondered how much the water level had risen in these storms. Or was it usually high enough to dot Will's pants with lake-drops when he inched close enough? He hadn't seen the lake in person in many months, he had no idea.

"You haven't told us really anything about it," Will said, leaning forward, creeping into his view of the skyline.

"What about?" Henry looked him straight in the eyes.

"The earthquake." Neither of them blinked.

It seemed to him Will said it as if he was supposed to respond "Oh, right, the earthquake...", as if he had simply forgotten to mention it. He looked off to his right, saying nothing, and Francis was coming towards him in the distance, blurred out from moment to moment by spray flung upward off of waves hitting the wall beneath them. He flashed on a postcard he had bought at Pablo Neruda's house next to the sea: a set of three female maritime figures carved out of wood in round shapes - an armless mermaid, a girl sailor, and a sort of Venus rising from the waves. They were painted bright colors and superimposed over a towering wave set behind them in the middle distance, as though they had ridden out the surf to come bring you a message. Three wooden ladies brought together in purpose or conspiracy, with emotionless faces and acting as strangers to one another. They were probably scattered artifacts from around the old house. It was a weird, placeless, cobbled-together image. He had bought two of them and meant to give

one as a gift, but he had forgotten. He would put both of them up on the wall next to each other and maybe people would ask about them. Looking at Francis now, she seemed to have walked right out of the picture, foam at her back and her face far enough away that it may as well have been blank.

She approached and as she started to sit down he noticed how uncomfortable the squatting had made him.

"You gonna keep squatting there like that?" she said, sticking her legs out over the waves.

"No," he said, leaning back and disentangling his legs and resting them over the edge.

"It looked mighty uncomfortable."

"I reckon so," he said, adjusting his glasses then leaning back on his hands. Francis watched him as he began staring once more at the skyline.

"As I walked further down there were signs for stimulus projects and stuff, so I'm guessing that explains all the roads blocked off."

"I do love big government," Will said.

"It's a famous old romance, you and big government," she said, chuckling.

Henry leaned back on his elbows and exhaled with a little wheeze, sort of like a laugh.

"You haven't found work yet for the summer, have you, Will?" he said, staring straight up at the sky. Will and Francis glanced at each other.



"No, I mean, have you tried looking for anything? It's not all that simple."

Henry lay down fully on his back and clasped his hands on his chest.

"We should've gone in together as census-takers, what with your love affair with federalism," he said.

"A rare miss on our part, for sure. I love counting things at least as much as I love big government."

Henry closed and opened his eyes on the expanse of blank, gray-black sky above him.

"Let's not be crass, now, Will, it's counting *people*."

"Sure," Will said, laughing.

"They don't need your dismissive attitude, calling hardworking Americans *things*."

"Fair enough, fair enough."

"They have emotions, you know," Henry said, and let out a short loud burst of a laugh. Francis looked down at him but his eyes were closed. She looked at Will, who was frowning, and adjusted her dress as she leaned back on her palms.

"The cement is still wet, I'm gonna have a prominent dark patch on my butt," she said. Will looked away at the skyline. The waves sprinkled her legs and she raised them and wriggled her toes. She frowned at them; she thought them bulbous and sluggish. Out of the corner of his eye Henry caught them bobbing about. He kept watching until she stopped and lowered her feet.

"You're going to have to tell us sooner or later about your earthquake experience," she said lightly, trying to sound casually witty. Will ran his hand through his hair, still staring away from them.

Henry didn't rightly know how to answer that, and anticipated being tired of hearing it, though he had only been away from Chile for a week and it hadn't come up so many times yet. He opened his eyes and spotted one little star. He strained to tilt his eyes down, rather painfully, toward Francis on his right, who had looked away and was brushing her hair out of her eyes. Her head didn't stand out much against the darkness, not like her toes. It looked like a malformation, a slight color variation in the flat plane of deep gray.

It struck him just then that the earthquake might be the most that had ever happened to him. He had been in bed in a comfortable hotel on the sea for about ten minutes, and he was only awake for some thirty seconds of tremors, but he wondered if that wasn't more action than he had witnessed in any other instance. As he lay in bed for those seconds it was like a hydraulic ride at Universal Studios. Very precisely, he thought. And so, was that feeling, an ostensibly new and even radically unfamiliar one for a child of the plains, even all that new? He had stood up and gone to the doorway to ride it out but it was over nearly as soon as he was fully conscious. And then that was that. His roommate at that point was from California and he

stayed asleep for most of it like nothing notable had changed.

The spectacle of the most that had ever happened to him had been elsewhere. An image sprung to mind, one replayed incessantly on Chilean television, of a long, low apartment complex in Santiago, of garish modern design, that had cracked and split right down the middle. The two halves leaned away from each other without falling, like dancers holding hands as they leaned outward and spun in a circle, except ambivalently, like they would rather let go and fall to the ground already, but couldn't figure out how to extricate themselves. All they got in that hotel was a couple of cracked ceiling tiles found on the floor of the conference room the next morning. The hotel was built at the top of a strong old hill; all the Chileans said the hills were solid rock, which dampened the force of the tremors much more than the flat land in the rest of the city. Which made sense, of course, but felt like a topographical cop-out.

"I kinda feel like it speaks for itself," Henry said, sounding rather innocent, but louder than he had intended. "I mean, you all saw the TV coverage. It was like that. That's what it looked like." He closed his eyes again. He thought he caught trails of an echo of his own voice.

"Seriously?" Will said, looking down at him, nearly indignant.

"Will, come on," Francis said, making a face at him.

Henry opened his eyes and stared upward, and there was still just the one star. No news there, either.

"Yeah, I mean, it was wild, but it's sorta like...been there, done that...already."

Will exhaled pointedly and stood up, and Henry could see him pass through his field of vision. Francis turned back as Will was approaching the cement wall. He put his hands on his hips and stared at the top of it.

"What are you up to, Will?" Francis said, bemused.

"I'm gonna clamber up here and make sure my car hasn't been towed."

"Will, just-"

"Not something I want to have to tell my parents about, you know."

"Come back and sit down, we'll leave soon."

Will backed up and took a trotting leap at the wall but didn't reach very high. He exhaled heavily and put his hands back on his hips.

"Turns out I'm not gonna clamber up this wall after all. No, I believe I'll go walk up the stairs." He walked off slowly, hands in his pockets.

Henry lay there, quite still, then looked at Francis. She watched him, biting her lower lip.

"What's up?" he said.

"Oh I don't know, we just needed something to talk about, at least."

He scanned the sky for some difference, something

notable. It began to seem to him the sky was usually the same, maybe even with those odd colors, highly unusual apocalyptic rainstorm or not.

"There's not all that much to say."

Francis saw him fidget a bit as he stared off into the deadened sky. "Whether you have anything to say or not, it's not a small thing," she said.

He looked at her and she looked very serious. He couldn't imagine a response. He was staggered, the more he thought about it, by just how much it had been a small thing. "Do you think we're gonna get any more Rainpocalypses?" he said. She looked out at the faint horizon and said nothing.

He sat up, with no small apparent strain. He really wasn't sure whether the skyline was more colorful than usual. He hadn't been home for very long, and his memory of it was fuzzy. And besides, couldn't the lights of a big city make the surrounding sky pink, and purple, or green or whatever, on any given night, with or without the incitement of lightning? He guessed it wasn't much different. Even tornadoes don't change things all that much.

His hand hurt from pressing into the cement so hard. He glanced over and Francis was watching him, lips pursed slightly. She stood up with a grunt and looked herself over. "Would you look at that, my butt is indeed wet." Henry kept staring at the buildings, as he heard her

adjusting fabric beside him. He waited for those monoliths to do something. Though maybe it would be a fitting setting for the end of the world, a bland skyline where nothing was happening.

He saw her hand reach down toward him. He looked up at her and she indicated he should take it, so he unstuck his hand from the cement. He looked at it and saw all the little red gravelly indentations, then placed it in hers and felt himself pulled upward, rather despite his own dead weight and lack of effort. He stood facing her, looking her in the eyes, and she pressed her fingers into his palm and sighed. He could feel the grooves and divots in his palm lining up with her fingers as they found and matched the ridges in his skin. He could feel his fingers searching around her palm and settling in as well. As she looked him in the eyes and smiled and gripped his palm, he suddenly had the most dreadful sinking feeling that she knew everything about him. She could feel the calluses on his hand. Something hit the pit of his stomach with a thud, and he closed his mouth tightly and looked away. He had been comfortable saying so little only so long as he could assume that she expected him to have anything worth saying.

Francis considered for a moment what she could feel about his palm. She imagined it should be communicating something to her, but she saw no more deeply into his thoughts than to the recognition that he wasn't totally committed to their little handshake. His palm got a little

sweaty, and it startled to wriggle a bit, as though it were looking for an exit. She could only guess at the full weight of what he wasn't telling her, but it seemed like it would be complicated. He was right, she had seen the same coverage everyone else had. There was an image that stuck with her, of a building split in half. It was divided against itself, but the two broken chunks clung to each other for dear life. She wondered if he felt something like that bond in a firm handshake, and if it maybe hit a little close to home. She could feel his quickened pulse even in his fingers. He began to wriggle more furiously. She dropped his hand.

"Come on," she said as she turned and walked off toward the stairs. Henry stood watching the buildings but didn't know what to expect of them. Okay, what the hell did that even mean, to expect buildings to do anything? They don't really change with the rain, obviously. It was probably a really stupid thought.

He watched Francis for a moment before he followed her, and he tried to quiet his breathing and slow his pulse. She looked a part of some vision. The spray shot up behind her and she may as well have been some Venus, a sea-going sprite come ashore with the swelling of the lake; or something unleashed from the pits of the earth as plates shifted along the Pacific Rim. He watched the indentations fade from his palm, then looked up once more and breathed deeply, with resolve. He was free for the moment. He smiled

at his good fortune, that she had refrained from spilling all his innards right there on the pavement before him and making him stare at them. He was free to enjoy the scenery now. It had been a season of unusual weather, he thought, of all varieties. But there couldn't be anything new, he was sure, any which way it went from here. There weren't any surprises left. He doubted these rainstorms had anything more to teach him than earthquakes did. By contrast, Francis, off in the distance, was a stunning image of nautical mystery.

Waves hit the wall underneath him and shot up a jet of cold water at his feet. He scampered away quickly at the shock of it. He nearly ran for some moments but then stopped in his tracks and laughed out loud. Francis turned back at the sound, and Henry looked up and started walking again. She watched him, and as he met her eyes he moved gradually further back from the edge until he was walking right alongside the cement wall. He stared into her eyes the whole time, walking a slightly swerving path, and she frowned and wondered what the hell that earthquake could have possibly done to him. He was walking along in a wobbly trance; she didn't think he registered what he was doing.



## Joshua, Be Strong and Resolute

Joshua made up his mind, and so he plopped his book bag down in the snow, shoved the sleeves of his coat securely up past his elbows, and started out across the space between him and Claude, a hulking fencing champion and a degenerate of no account.

"What the fuck is this?" Claude said and broke out laughing.

Joshua counted out five paces and at that point realized just how clearly Claude had always had it coming. He stopped on the sixth pace, smiled, leaned back with a sense of dramatic flair, waving his fist in the air behind his head with little flourishes, and heaved the right side of his body forward to land a blow squarely on the crook in Claude's jawbone. Joshua did not like to gloat, or to hang around doting on business already accomplished. Even so, he allowed, as he saw it freeze in his mind the moment of

impact was delicious: Claude's head, in a slight anticipation of the arriving force, had just begun to fall out of parallel with the chapel bell tower behind and above him, so that the tower seemed to have impaled Claude up through his torso and popped out of his neck, like a second head that hadn't received enough blood flow, left to die and turn to stone. Claude looked in this moment positively mortified, aghast that now everyone would witness his unsavory, petrified secret. The sight was something ancient, monumental, legendary. But this was a fanciful vision, Joshua thought. He didn't need it to be surreal, or for anything particularly gruesome to happen to Claude's body. He was content with what must have looked, to a third party who knew the circumstances, like a display of great, virtuosic determination.

Joshua unfroze this moment and watched in slow motion as Claude dropped, limp and flopping, through the air like a hanged criminal cut loose from the scaffold. He stared down at the body sprawled out haphazardly in the snow. Blood appeared at the right earlobe. Joshua stepped back and nudged Claude's foot with his own. He let it go and it fell back heavily. The body was just a bag filled with guts now, Joshua thought. He started to turn around, and was thrown for a moment by the sheer number of people now gathered there, standing around him in a perfectly arced semi-circle. He turned slowly counter-clockwise, passing over each grubby face packed in tightly one next to the

other. Each had his mouth hanging open, and each was indistinguishable from the last. What a sorry bunch, Joshua thought. As if he hadn't just done the job none of them were willing to do themselves.

He turned fully back to Claude, who had not budged an inch or even spasmed or apparently changed at all. Joshua knelt down to inspect his vitals. The upper half of his body lay on the damp cement at the edge of the snow-covered grass. His left hand was draped in the snow, lying at the base of a mold with neat edges that it had cleaved through the surface. Joshua stuck his fingers past these crystalline little snow cliffs, gripped the meaty palm, which was astonishingly heavy even with all the energy gone from it, and groped along the wrist for a pulse. It was there all right; irregular, with a little hiccup every few seconds, but still plenty strong. He leaned over the body and it looked like his jaw was in one piece, though he wasn't about to try touching it. He stood up and saw drops of blood in the snow beneath him. He raised his right hand and saw the skin over two of his knuckles split open, a smear of red down the back of his hand. He looked once more at Claude's jaw and there were small smears of blood along the cheek. He wasn't sure now whose blood it was dribbling out at the ear.

A guy named George, whom Joshua had never thought much of, who always hung his head right over Joshua's shoulder in the Biology lecture to see what he was writing, breath

hot and irregular from his gasping mouth, walked up to Joshua's side.

"Hi, Joshua," he said quietly.

"Oh, hi George."

"You know, it's really up to you, but you should maybe think about whether or not you want to be here when Claude's associates show up." George was more than a head taller and standing a little too close, so Joshua contorted to look up at him, with his face blank.

"You know, the fencing team goons," George said.

"Yeah, of course, the fencing goons."

"Go ahead, we'll make sure he doesn't die." At that, one of the other fellows standing off to the right giggled. George turned back to him and frowned. "Shut up, Leonard!" he said.

"Yeah, okay," Joshua said. He started to back away. He turned and grabbed his bag, brushed the snow off the bottom and shoved his way through the assembled crowd, a number of whom grunted objections at him for disrupting their view. He broke through them and started off across the quadrangle, snow crunching without an echo across the still afternoon. In the corner of his eye he saw a little brown-backed bird hopping along next to him, weightless, leaving no track on the hard snow. Joshua watched it for some moments as they moved in tandem, the bird pausing every few hops to tweet softly and twitch its head. Presently Joshua stepped up his pace, making a beeline for his dormitory,

sinking heavily and tripping a little now and then as he trudged through the snow, spraying bits over its glassy surface.

"Don't worry, Joshua, we won't tell them where you live!" George called out. The way the sound carried, everyone on the campus would hear him. Joshua could hear Leonard scoff as the voice faded behind him.

"Are you kidding, George? You trying to say we're *not* gonna go watch them épée that man's face into a crazy fucking mess?"

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The hallway was lit like a monastery, with two arched windows at either end that glowed with a uniform wintry brightness, casting elliptical spans of yellow along the walls but leaving most of its length dark. It was silent, and if there was anyone around, their doors were closed and they showed no signs of activity. The sound of Joshua's panting grew enormous as he leapt up the staircase. When he reached the top he noticed he was altogether too loud and stopped himself to gather his breath. He felt the silent hallway glaring at him, as though this were the library and he had just walked in laughing. He walked in deliberately small movements to his door at the end of the hall, the floorboards crackling, and paused there. He tensed his bloody hand into a fist and stretched it out. No new blood showed at the surface, but expanding and contracting the

cuts stung like hell. He did it again to test if that had been the worst of it. That's enough, he thought. He stood still and gathered himself before putting the key in the door. If Herman were there he would have to summon the composure to act natural. He breathed in and out three times like he was getting ready to sprint for a long jump, then unlocked the door and gave it a decisive shove.

Standing in the cramped, angular entryway, he closed the door and was trapped in the dark. He knew the layout instinctively so he turned to his door on the left, wiping his wet shoes on the mat in front of it. He opened the door and his room was dark, but for the now failing light through the window. He groped about behind him for the entryway light switch, flipped it with a shrill metallic click and as the bulb flickered on he saw that Herman's door, to the right, was closed. He gave it a perfunctory tap and, hearing nothing, exhaled slowly. He slid the bolt back in place in the front door. He rubbed his burning knuckles as he thought that maybe he had escaped having to deal with the ramifications for the moment. He figured he must have other business waiting for him.

The tableau displayed on his desk as he turned to his open door - a letter propped up on a big brass globe-shaped paperweight, a letter-opener set at a diagonal on the leather tablet with the blade pointing at the bottom right corner of the envelope, the whole scene draped in a white glow from the windowpanes behind the desk, each square unit

of which had already filled up halfway with snow - would have appeared poignant if Joshua had not already known that the letter was from his mother. It was, instead, as he gave the door handle a squeeze and squelched his shoes again for good measure on the second coarse rug beyond the door, loaded with the promise of a light drama to be played out over the coming weeks as he decided, first, when to give up and read the letter, and second, how long he should wait, in order to introduce just the right level of anxiety into his mother's world, before finally responding. The two of them, he thought, were already stock characters in a rote conflict, their actions mostly conscribed by the outstanding structure. But he fancied that, this time, it would have taken so long to respond on account of how, wouldn't you know it, he had run out of stationery, and how Herman was going to pick some up for him when he went by the store but then plum forgot, and didn't bother to mention it for several days, you know how Herman can be. The process was a bit fractured, the details different each time, but that just meant he had to work out a slight new variation on the same rough method.

Joshua carried on into the room, setting down his bag and gingerly removing his coat without the help of his right hand. He stood behind his chair, pondering the baroque script of the "Joshua" on the front of the envelope, when he started to remove his blazer and looked up at the window. Well, of all places, Joshua thought:

there was the quadrangle arrayed in front of him, a large and growing crowd huddling in the distance around the point where Claude must evidently still be sprawled on the ground. He thought about how there was a certain basic lack of privacy to a room above the public square, so to speak. He took off his jacket with great care not to smear blood all up the inside of the sleeve, set it on the back of his chair and sat down. He could now only see bits of hair bobbing around outside, and that only if he craned his head over the top of the desk. So he hunched over it, laid his arms out in front of him, and surveyed the situation. The light falling on the desk was bluer now; the sun was passing beyond the top of a building at the other end of the quad. Staring at the letter once more, he shrugged, opened the drawer in front of him, and pulled out his fancy fountain pen and inkwell and a sheet of stationery the color of watery, unappealing oatmeal. In anticipation, he set them in a row at the right side of the tablet. He opened the smaller drawer to the right and checked the pocket watch lying there. It was a quarter of 4:00. He grabbed the letter-opener with his bloody hand and sliced through the envelope.

He flattened out his mother's letter in the center of the desk. *My dear Joshua*, it began:

*I suppose I should confess that I did a silly thing the other day. Our friend Dot - you remember Dot! - called, in hysterics, saying she*



*had spotted a raccoon climbing into her boat,  
even at this time of year and with the tarp over  
it.*

Just then a rumbling noise reached him from the empty hallway. He turned and thought about it and recognized it as someone running up the stairs, wet shoes squeaking on the steps. He took a cautious peek over the top of the desk: there were the same hair colors moving about. The runner reached the top of the steps and came still closer. Joshua stretched forward but couldn't see much farther, so he gave in and stood up to study the scene outside. There were some larger gentlemen around now - fencing types, he noted. The crowd parted to make space for them and revealed Claude, sitting upright now, his associates holding him by the arms, trying to get him to his feet. Somebody was fumbling with keys in the hall, right outside the door. Joshua looked back at his open doorway and sat down. He straightened his shirt and stuffed the bloody hand in his pocket. The outer door burst open and in slid Herman, hair tousled, out of breath. And, Joshua thought, looking conspicuously too worried about a thing that didn't concern him.

"Joshua!" he gasped, his face half illuminated by the light bulb over his head, mouth gaping like all the others.

"Afternoon, Herman."

"What the hell?"

"Spit it out Herman," Joshua said, turning back to the

letter, "you could be talking about anything, I'm sure."  
Herman slid the bolt back in the door, came in and sat down on Joshua's bed next to him, trying to slow his breathing.

"Would you mind taking off your boots, there's a doormat right over there," Joshua said. Herman took them off quickly and held them in his lap, fresh snow starting to drip. Joshua looked away and scratched at a little hair on his cheek.

"Joshua, they are going to come tear you apart!"

"The fencing goons?"

"The fencing goons!"

Joshua tapped a finger on the letter. "HMMMMM."

"I was on my way back here," Herman said, "and I stumbled into that crowd, and they're throwing your name around, like it's nothing!"

"George said he would cover for me."

"No one is covering for you at all!"

Joshua tried to start reading the letter again.

"Shit!" Herman yelled, looking out the window now.

Joshua sighed and stood up. A handful of very large men had started walking very deliberately in the direction of their dormitory. They were trailed by an excitable contingent of smaller underclassmen. Claude was standing with the rest of the gaggle, testing out his balance.

"Joshua you have to get out of here," Herman pleaded.

"The door is locked, Herman, we'll be fine."

"We?"

"You do what you like, Herman, but I have a letter to respond to."

"They are going to tear down the door and smash you to pieces with the whole school here for entertainment and I will be collateral damage!"

"Please, Herman, it's a solid door and it will take more work than that to wear it down or whittle it away or whatever they have in mind. Their attention will wander."

Herman squealed and ran over to his own room. Joshua put his bloody hand on the desk once more and rearranged items that had been displaced. He tried to read as Herman talked to himself and started to move his furniture around. Joshua couldn't find his place in the letter - instead he skipped over anything that referred directly to friend Dot.

*I know how much you enjoy the boathouse there, but, as I have been rudely reminded, the docks will be slippery! I cannot imagine anyone will be tending to them in January, so they are liable to be as treacherous as ours - and we don't even have a strong young man around the house to go clearing away ice. So I think it would be best if you found some things to do indoors. Be so careless as to get your leg locked away in a dumb and brutish cast like this and indoors and outdoors would hardly matter anymore, anyway. A snowball fight here or there, or whatnot, is fine of course. Boys will be boys, I'm sure. But don't*

*get so carried away! A ball of freezing snow in the ear is no fun! I only ask that you dedicate yourself, instead, to your studies. Bear in mind again what Moses said to Joshua: be strong and resolute! I think it's good that you hear that sometimes. Those words and your name suit you better than you know.*

*The weather will turn by the time you're here for Easter. I look forward as always to the little window of time you have at home.*

Joshua stopped. Herman was by this point dragging something very heavy across his floor, with great strain and some sharp grunting. Joshua turned and saw a huge desk moving bit by bit into Herman's doorway.

"Herman!" he called out.

"Shut up, Joshua! I'm installing a barricade!"

"That desk is never going to get through the door."

Herman stopped and moved to look at the doorway.

"Shit!" he said. The desk was by now jammed into his doorframe, so he scrambled over the top of it and stood in the entryway examining the setup. A commotion was now audible downstairs. There was much shouting, and someone was making demands of whoever was down there to tell him which room this Joshua lived in.

"Fuck, Joshua!" Herman yelled, turning to glare at him.

"Block the door with your body for all I care, Herman!"

Give me a minute at least!" Herman stood calculating his strategy. He propped his feet against the end of the desk in his doorway and leaned his back against the front door, making great heaving sounds as he tested out how much force he could muster from his overstretched body.

Joshua glared at the letter. *Be strong and resolute*, she said. It was a special favorite of hers in letters. She hardly ever said it twice in the same circumstances, though, he thought. When he rowed crew as a teenager she said it to him before matches, as she grabbed him by the shoulders and stared him in the eyes. One time she said it to encourage him to stand up and confront a professor about a bad grade. She said it when he told her about how George peered over his shoulder in Biology, insisting that he stand up for academic integrity and remind George, unswervingly, courageously, of his own moral obligations. She said it when he had moved into this room, after he had made a fuss about arranging the things on his desk with the level of precision that she preferred.

A huge throng was now racing up the staircase. Joshua could hear Herman squirming in anticipation and pressing more firmly against the door. He looked down at his bloody fist on the desk. The cuts were spread wide; he studied the pain for a moment. It built up and expanded out and down through his muscles. Small tendons were tingling under the surface. For some moments he focused on feeling only the pain. Then he felt a rusty switch flip somewhere in the

back of his head. He released his fist, and images of the afternoon's events came rushing back to him.

He had been something altogether beyond strong and resolute. He hadn't needed any prompting. Wasn't socking Claude in the jaw, a deliverance of justice for all of Claude's abuses and ugliness of character, on behalf of nearly everyone in the school, an instance of Joshua taking a stand for something of gravity? His strength in this case mattered. His mother hadn't been there to goad him into it. Her priorities for him were tied to another version of his life in a remote universe.

Feet pounded down the hall, and there were shouts like the hollering of a lynching party or a village out to hunt an ogre. "Is this the one?" someone shouted, and everyone else yelled "Yes!" happily. Someone knocked at the door, rather impatiently. Herman grunted and mewled. Joshua insisted once more that it was a sturdy lock, that they had nothing to worry about. He stared at the letter in front of him and frowned. He could go along with it and play into their usual pattern, assuring her that his studies had his full devotion and offering sympathy for whatever it was she had done to her leg - he would have to read that part again. He could go on to tell her any number of things about his collegiate life. He could make things up, as he usually did - tell her that he had joined a glee club, that they all got along splendidly together and wore coattails as they sang, that they were such a clever bunch and were

putting together a revue of the classics. He noticed how hard he was clenching his fist and again the burning in his knuckles. He could tell her to stuff it, that he would get good grades as he always did, that she was worrying for no reason and that it said more about her than it did about him. Or he could tell her how he had just socked Claude in the jaw, noting how especially strong and resolute he had been, wiping some of his blood across the letter as evidence. He didn't know if she could fathom how significant it was.

"Joshua, please!" Herman yelled.

"Okay, well, somebody's in there alright," someone muttered in the hall. They all pounded at the door more fiercely now. Joshua looked at Herman's feet straining against the bottom of the desk. He stood up and noticed that the quad was empty.

"We brought a special guest with us, friend, now open the door please!" someone shouted.

"Hewwo in theaow!" he heard a garbled voice spew forth with great relish. Perhaps he had dislodged some of Claude's teeth.

The sun had mostly set now. Everything outside was turning blue and it was creeping further into the light over his desk. The letter lying there looked gloomy and the writing was disfigured by shadow. He picked it up and tore it to pieces. He would have to open the door and let them all come flooding in. He had set off down his own path and

now he had to live with it, the mysterious bends ahead, the crawling dark of the forked road behind. He looked at his torn-up hand and rubbed it with care. He figured he could take a go at it again.

"You should really just let them come in, Herman," Joshua called out. Herman's legs stopped writhing. He peeked his head into the doorway.

"What the fuck did you say?"

"Unlock the door then get behind your desk. I'll take care of this, don't worry."

Herman stared at him quizzically. "This is madness, Joshua."

He watched Joshua happily rubbing his knuckles, almost smiling. He looked down at his own hands and rubbed the knuckles of one fist for a moment. Then he looked up at Joshua and frowned. His face confused and a little sad, he turned towards the front door, looked back at Joshua, then released the bolt and stumbled over the obtrusive desk into his room. Joshua rehearsed for a moment what he would say to the assembled crowd. "Why Claude, you look terrible!" he thought he would say. He called out to the boys in the hall that the door was, in fact, unlocked. There was a pause as they fell silent. Someone said "Oh." Then someone turned the handle and threw open the door theatrically, and the cold, wet, teeming multitude all burst through at once.

Joshua froze the moment, as he heard the door hit the wall but before there was anything more than a tangle of



hands bulging into view, and took stock of what he could envision being the likely outcomes. Maybe he would have a chance to demonstrate his witticism, and he could use it as a prelude on the way to arriving with these gentlemen at some sort of reasoned and dispassionate accord. Or Claude and his cohort might waste not a second in delivering him a comprehensive beating, which also seemed possible. Or they might all pause in his doorway, massaging their fists and contorting their greasy faces, and maybe a little brown bird would come crashing through one of the panes of his window. A sparrow, maybe. They would stand there mesmerized at the bird twitching and flopping on the floor, kicking up bits of glass, coated in melting snow, a lost fellow left behind all winter. Joshua wondered if he actually knew what sparrows looked like and if they migrated with the seasons. No matter, he thought. He pictured the helpless crippled bird, confused at its dumb luck, thrown into danger it had done nothing to deserve, and he imagined looking up at the crowd of boys as a hint of pity came into their eyes, recognizing an innocent soul caught by an intrusion of the unlikely. They would stand and stare as he gently picked it up, scared and mad and flapping, and held it to his chest and soothed it with his bloody hand. George would be among them. He would take a tentative step forward, looking sad and cowed. It would hit him, now, the import of the even-handed but decisive little speech Joshua had given him that time, about how academic integrity wasn't a hollow phrase

and how he had to stand up for the quality of his own work. His and Joshua's eyes would meet, and the two of them would nod ever so slightly. The gaggle assembled would see before them something of the stature of the first Joshua. Something of his real virtues, beyond Moses' shortsighted, nagging insistence. A figure for whom, the young man thought in this moment, he was suddenly proud to be named.

He unfroze the scene before him once more. Arms began to lunge in slow motion further around the doorframe, fingers extending, shoes knocking the doormat rudely out of place. He could feel an eternity pass as he turned back to face his desk. His eyes passed over each little unbroken windowpane, turning imperceptibly darker as the seconds crawled by, then over his desk and the items displayed there, all in precise order but for the shreds of paper tossed over them. Beneath some of the scraps the letter-opener lay set at the same angle as before. As he recognized it there, he paused; a rasping click, the noise of a switch crusted over, screeched through his head. He winced and frowned and felt a lurch in his stomach as he realized what he had done to the letter. It looked now like a messy and rash decision. His breath came short and he leaned a sweaty palm on the coarse wood of the desk. As they all rushed toward him, he thought, he would keep his gaze trained firmly on the letter-opener. It would be quite a display of strength and resolve, in the midst of this harsh chaos, to decide not to reach out for it and jab it

into somebody's side.

## In the Winter to Come

A very particular melody passed through Pete's head and he had to stop shoveling immediately. It sloshed around from ear to ear, the sloshing creating a pleasant and sort of lulling sound in itself. The vocals came back to him and had the shape of calm, unhurried birds, describing arcs through the puffy clouds up near the vault of his skull.

But he imagined he felt a thud as he stumbled headlong into a problem: this moment had happened before. He felt cheated, and it was all the more pointed because he could remember exactly when it had happened.

He was lying in bed on the first cool night of late summer and the song simply announced itself. He'd had some difficulty falling asleep that night. He lay with his forearm over his eyes and mouth open, trying to simulate snoring so his wife wouldn't be disturbed by an abnormal silence, and then suddenly this melody appeared and he was

surprised by how peaceful it made him feel. He lifted up his arm, looked at the back of his wife's head and smiled. But here lay a further problem: he had no idea when or how or where he had heard it to begin with.

A song, maybe, from earlier in that day, when he sat with a little box radio on his back porch watching the dog, Janet, a pristine Cocker Spaniel, asleep on the grass, then chewing her foot, then getting up periodically to take a shit; or overheard at the farmer's market, standing for an eternity in the donut line, as he turned and exchanged knowing, wry glances with the old man behind him, while a loudspeaker at the top of the stand played rosy pop songs at a very polite volume. But no, this song was too esoteric, too subdued. Perhaps he had written it himself, and if so he thought it remarkably well executed.

At this point he threw his snow shovel down in front of him. The handle hit the slope of the snow bank with a "poof" and slid down, the overturned plastic scoop grating against the sidewalk till it bumped into his boot. How could he keep shoveling now? It seemed so small, and all of an instant.

His legs quivered under him a little, which made his snow pants rustle. He crouched down, his head between his legs and nearing the damp bumps and crags in the pavement, and fell backwards with a "poof" into the snow. He lay still as the cloud of snow settled on top of him. He raised his arms overhead and dropped them dramatically out to

either side, setting still more faint particles dancing about his body. He took note that the song had left his head, at which point it came rushing right back. There were none of the birds it had brought to mind up in the sky today. He exhaled big heavy clouds of vapor and imagined tiny crows waltzing through them.

He tilted his head up from the snow and looked from side to side. To his right, there was the planter hanging off the front porch of his house, snow-covered, reflected in the windows. To his left, sitting cowered in the shadows of the porch next door, steaming beverage in hand, he spotted Walter, his nemesis. The last couple of days had been strangely free of Walter, but now the streak was up. Pete let his head fall back into its molded place. Some snow fell from a little branch at the upper bound of his vision. It floated down and speckled his face.

"Afternoon, Walter," he called out. The sound of Walter taking an exaggerated sip from his mug reverberated through the chilled air all down the street. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Oh, for at least as long as you were shoveling, all five minutes of it," Walter said dryly. "Hard to say, though, really." Pete frowned. His hands looked awfully red, it had to have been longer than that.

"I'm gonna come down there and kick snow all over your face, Pete."

"You don't have the heart, Walter."

"I'm gonna collect my dog's frozen poop from the backyard and cover the roof of your garage with it." Pete lifted up his head again. Walter had leaned forward into the light now and was smiling broadly.

"You're drunk, Walter." This was a blind guess.

Walter lifted his steaming mug as if in a toast. "Absolutely!" he said. Pete dropped his head. Maybe Walter was actually an alcoholic, and maybe that would explain everything. But he thought this too easy an answer.

"I curse you and all your descendents in perpetuity, Walter."

Walter cackled with joy. "And I hope your children develop bad personalities!" he said. He extended his arm far enough from his porch to invade Pete's field of vision. Pete could see the tips of fingers waving wildly, meaty pink dots at the edge of an opaque white dome. They withdrew, and the screen door creaked open and slammed shut with a shock to the air. Pete wondered: where did it all go wrong between them? He couldn't be sure. Enmity seemed to be simply their natural stance toward each other.

He saw a little burst of wind shake the branch above him. He couldn't remember a moment in which Walter had been outwardly normal. The day Walter and family moved into the house next door, some years ago, Pete never once saw any of them going in or out. Pete and his wife, Charlotte, went over to say hello at some point in the afternoon, arguing all the while about whether they should have baked

something as a gift, but when they got to the front door there was such a thick procession of movers speeding back and forth from the truck that Pete could only stand there holding the screen door open, smiling politely. "We could have baked something for the movers, I guess," he said. Charlotte sighed and turned back toward their own house, as he remained at the door. He sat at the bay window in the living room for the rest of the afternoon, watching the movers haul what seemed to him a really spectacular amount of furniture out of the truck.

As he lay in bed that same night, sleepless, quite alert to any noises from next door, he heard a screen door creak open. Bolting upright, he went to the window overlooking the sidewalk, but there was no one at the front of the house. He heard a door snap shut and he slid across the slick floorboards to the window on the opposite side of the room to check the back yard, but there was nothing to see there either. Deflated, he sat on the window ledge and pressed his head against the glass. They were phantoms, he thought. He looked at his wife, who rolled over and was very close to falling off the bed; Pete waited at the ready for a moment as she wobbled there, but she came to a precarious stop and he turned back to the window. He would have to stage an investigation into the lives of the ghosts next door. But just then there was another creak and Pete saw the man who would later turn out to be Walter saunter onto the back porch, a lit cigar hanging from his mouth. He



took a couple big drags then heaved the cigar, still lit, into a pile of leaves in the yard. Pete saw this as very alarming behavior. Walter walked back inside and let the door slam again. A little callously, Pete thought, as if it were not late at night and no one on the block needed their sleep. Moments later he saw a flame spring up from the dry leaves. Naturally, he sprinted downstairs in his pajamas, went out and stood at the fence, trying to spot a light inside Walter's house. Seeing no activity, he hopped over and cast about in the dark for the lit cigar. But wait, he definitely saw a flame, where did it go? Perhaps it just fizzled out on its own? He spent several minutes searching each of the leaf-piles left standing in the yard, taking excruciating pains not to rustle anything. When he found the smoldering cigar he brought it over the fence, stubbed it out in the alley and tossed it in his garbage bin. He wondered, lying in the snow now, losing the feeling in his fingers, if this wasn't the point at which their two moral paths had diverged.

Pete felt a little riled up now at all this thought of Walter. How did this very boring man keep such a hold on his attention, for all these years? He was a strange one, ominous even, possibly still a ghost, but he was routine enough about it, by now inexplicable on such a regular basis and at such a low simmer, that he was, at best, a very humdrum ghost. Pete had to watch each fall for smoldering cigars among the leaves. He had to remain

vigilant each December to make sure Walter had not once again tried the trick of plugging in an extension cord in Pete's garage, in the outlet tucked out of sight behind the family van, to sustain power to his own garish and, frankly, confusing Christmas display - it was always one uniform, off-putting color, a dark blood red or a bright blue; one year the three Wise Men, who were themselves skeletons leftover from Halloween, were all set up to point at a neon Jewish star hanging over the display. This disregard for basic iconography was upsetting, but in Walter's boring way it could be counted on to go up the weekend before Christmas and come down the night of the 25<sup>th</sup>. The whole family took part, Walter's dumb wife and eerie twin sons included, not to mention that quiet and unassuming little dog, which actually seemed nice and for which Walter always felt a little sympathy, even though it pooped like crazy all over that yard. It was their own boring, crazy tradition. Now already December, Pete made a mental note to learn the assignments of each of the breakers on the basement circuit panel. He would shut off power to the garage, if it came to that. He and Charlotte could park on the street for a couple of days. He smiled as he imagined sitting at the back kitchen window waiting for Walter to come slinking in through the garage's side door, grinning to himself as he stepped back out, thinking he had accomplished something. It was a mundane, expected, neighborly evil, but Pete felt it was equally expected that

he should be there to thwart it.

And yet he noticed suddenly that the song had left his head again. He closed his eyes to savor the moment, but again it returned just as fast. He created the need for the song, he thought, by recognizing its absence. He opened his eyes and saw the knotty branch shaking a little overhead. The snow had already fallen from it, he remembered.

Wait, but...that didn't sound right. His stomach did an unpleasant twirl as he tried to remember which he had seen first: the snow falling from the branch, or the wind shaking it in the first place. Had he just seen shake number one? The snow had fallen on him before he talked to Walter, or at least before this shake just now. He was pretty sure. Was he only now seeing the cause? He scrunched up his face tightly, which didn't feel so good in the cold. Could the snow stir from a branch before the wind got there? This felt like some textbook phantom activity. He would've been perfectly content to lay on his cold lawn with a song in his head, but then Walter had to show up and blow some crazy-dust all through the air. He was a vengeful spirit, a spoiler. A coward and a grinch. What had happened to cause-and-effect? Or did all cause-and-effect in the universe derive in the end from Walter, his neighbor? And along the same lines, what was Walter's problem?

Maybe cause-and-effect was just an unenforceable understanding Pete had had with the universe and the universe had reneged. He should've insisted at the time

that they put it in writing. The blood was pounding in his screwed-up face so he released it. He had always thought that he hated Walter only as a defensive response to Walter's own hatred. Or to his general fiendishness, which seemed a lot like hatred. But maybe he'd hated him from the outset, from day one. Maybe it was Walter's mysterious way of moving into a house that did it.

Some heavy steps echoed down the sidewalk, away out of Pete's vision to his right. The snow creaked as he turned his head and within a few moments he could see his friend and co-worker Jerry walking toward him. Jerry was carrying a big paper bag with apples sticking out the top. He gave Pete a little wave in greeting as he came closer and stopped, standing down near Pete's feet.

"Good day, Jerry," Pete said. He was about to say "Afternoon" but he realized he wasn't sure whether it was afternoon or not.

"You dropped your shovel here, Pete, if you hadn't noticed."

"I needed to take a break, I guess." Jerry adjusted the bag in his arms and frowned.

"Are you okay, Pete?"

"Not really sure."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Pete wriggled his extremities. "I'm pretty numb at this point, actually," he said.

"What's going on, Pete? You're being a total Walter."

Pete frowned. "I'm very cold, so please don't call me a Walter."

Jerry set down his bag and rummaged in his pockets. He held out a pair of very thick gloves. "Here," he said.

"I would like to sit up but I can't feel much of anything."

"One second," Jerry said, and stepped into the snow to pull Pete up into a sitting position. He knelt down and offered the gloves once more.

"Something has happened to the time, Jerry."

Jerry pondered this for a moment, then pulled his sleeve back to look at his watch. "It's 3:30," he said, tilting his head at Pete, unsure whether the answer had been helpful. He saw Pete start to tip backward so he grabbed his shoulder to prop him upright.

"I don't know," Pete sighed, "that doesn't sound right."

Pete looked away but he could feel Jerry watching him with a look of tender skepticism he recognized. Like the one Charlotte used when one of the girls would walk up and ask politely to stay home from school.

"What have you done to yourself?" Jerry asked, with an insinuating undertone Pete didn't like.

"I had a song in my head then Walter showed up and ruined linear time for me." Jerry held out the gloves again but Pete didn't move, so he scooted forward, held up Pete's hands and worked the gloves onto them for him.

"Well, yeah, he has that effect on people," Jerry said, chuckling.

"Really?" Pete said, sounding hopeful.

Jerry frowned. "I get to see as much of Walter from the other side of that house as you do over here. We each see one half of everything he does."

"Have you ever seen what he really does with those cigar butts?"

"Huh?"

"You've never seen him toss a lit cigar into his yard?"

"Well, I don't have a yard-view from the bedroom, but I get to see all sorts of things go down in their breakfast nook."

Pete grunted thoughtfully. "I guess we're each like blind men feeling one part of the elephant, huh?" he said. Jerry cocked his head at him, sitting plopped in the snow and spouting wise elephant metaphors. "Everybody thinks he's getting the full picture."

"Yeah but at least everybody smells all that dog shit equally," Jerry said.

"He just threatened me earlier with putting it all over the roof of my garage."

"Huh..." Jerry's mouth hung open a little, like he had paused to weave that behavior into his broader mental portrait. Pete leaned back on his somewhat warmed hands.

"Is that bag full of apples, or are they just sitting

on top?"

"Oh, it's all apples," Jerry said, snapping to attention.

"They look great, too."

"Oh yeah, they're not the mealy, wintry ones. I got lucky. They're the kind Madeline likes, so I'm stocking up."

Pete nodded and looked away, at nothing in particular. Walter watched him for a moment in silence. "So, what exactly is your problem?"

Pete sighed heavily. "I guess the heart of the problem is I have this song stuck in my head and I don't know when it got there."

"So...is this about Walter or not?" Jerry said. Pete squinted and looked lost in thought for a minute.

"I think he just confused the whole matter. I need a point in time, I need to know when I heard this song and I can set the whole timeline straight."

"You got a song stuck in your head and then Walter was being weird. What else is new? You can't ask a song not to get mysteriously stuck in your head and you can't ask Walter not to be confusing."

"Hmmm." Pete looked down at his limp feet and the shovel sprawled in front of him. "You might be right," he said, not sounding totally convinced.

"Songs come and go, you know," Jerry said. Pete gave a weak nod.

Jerry stood up and picked up his bag of apples.

"Listen, I have to go, Pete, but is anyone else home to look after you?"

"I don't know. You say it's 3:30?"

"Yeah, will your daughters get home from school soon?"

Pete took a guess. "That sounds right."

Jerry frowned. "Well, just try to forget all this. Remember that in a few moments your wife or your kid will open the door to call you back inside, and you'll talk about the day everyone's had, you'll take your wet snowsuit off and have some hot cocoa, and you'll - you'll do whatever it is you do in the evenings. And sooner or later this will never have happened."

Pete plopped back down into the snow and grunted in assent, to at least be done with the conversation. "Do you want your gloves back?"

"Hang on to them for now," Jerry said, starting off down the sidewalk. "You'll be seeing me again before too long." Pete grunted again. Jerry was already outside his peripheral vision.

"Just don't give Walter all your attention. I know you're not gonna stop staring at that house. But maybe try to imagine tonight that you're staring *through* it, over to *my* house. I'll be standing at the window and waving and smiling. We'll picture a friendly moment together."

Pete remembered suddenly what he probably should have asked to begin with. "Did you go in to the office today,



Jerry?" he called out into the air above him. He heard Jerry stop.

"No...firm holiday...you forgot that part too?"

Pete thought about it, but had to admit that it didn't ring any bells. "Oh...yeah...sure, sorry, I'm just a little out of it."

"Just remember," Jerry said, "think of me thinking of you, when you want to look over at Walter's tonight." Pete heard him start walking again. "We'll have an imaginary video conference!" Jerry said.

Pete stared up at the sky, not much listening. "Okay."

"Good luck, Pete," came the voice from down the block.

Pete heard Jerry open his front door and step inside. He watched a lone bird pass through the overcast sky and hummed the melody quietly. His wife and daughters would be home soon and he could go back inside. Fine. But Jerry's vision of his evening was off. The hot cocoa did not sound right. They would talk about their day, sure, but what could Pete afford the conversation? He wasn't sure he knew what he'd done so far today. He had needed Jerry to confirm that there was a reason for him to be at home. It was unsettling that he could've spent the whole rest of the day unsure of where he was supposed to be. And he didn't think he could disguise his confusion from Charlotte. She had been more attuned to it ever since they'd met Walter.

He'd walked into the kitchen the other day as she was looking through the mail and remarked to her how Walter had

been having a particularly notable day, a classic, one crammed with curiously uninteresting action. As Pete was on his way out of the house, he told her, Walter pulled up next door in his battered Chevy Bronco – already itself a notable purchase, didn't she think? – and got out and leaned against it. Pete of course ducked back inside the front door to watch, and within minutes a Postal Service van sped down the block, then pulled up and parked behind the Bronco. At this point Charlotte interrupted:

"And this was when you were about to leave for the office?"

"Well, yeah," Pete said. "I didn't have go in to the office today."

"So you were gonna work from home...but this is what you did all day?" Charlotte stopped trying to open the envelope she was holding and looked somehow incredulous.

"Yeah, just wait it gets juicier-"

"And you're always saying how boring this man is?" He let that hang in the air as she waited for him to say something. She was being silly, he thought.

He pursed his lips. "What's your point?"

"How are you skipping work to spy on him if he's so boring?" Pete leaned on the counter and stared at her right earring, twinkling in the bright, wintry sunlight from the window.

"Do they notice you at that office, ever?" she continued, sounding a little miffed. Pete shrugged.

He noted at this moment that maybe he just couldn't sustain Charlotte's interest on this topic. He didn't think Charlotte would want to hear about his forays outside of time. It could be the girls' bedtime story that night, if he was really careful, and insisted to Charlotte that he would take care of it and waited for her to settle in downstairs.

He checked Walter's porch: no more activity as yet. There weren't any lights visible through the windows. He could see a little of Jerry's house sticking out on the other side. But it didn't really work like Jerry said; Walter's house didn't just go transparent or something. Then Pete had a flash of what he hadn't really heard Jerry say at the time: they could have a pretend video conference.

Terrific. The memories called up in an instant at the thought made Pete a little queasy. Jerry had thought he was making a witty reference to developments around the office lately: the management was bringing in huge, massively expensive new video teleconferencing units. Staff members at all levels would be checking in periodically with their counterparts in the new branch office that the parent company would be opening next month in Shanghai. Each of the two conference rooms had one, so if you were using it by yourself you would be standing at one side of the shiny conference table in an empty room with the blinds drawn, with charts set up on easels to either side of you and

plans and notes laid out on the table, waiting for the little green bulb at the top to click on and the screen to light up so you knew it was time to begin your performance. Sooner or later, Pete would have to be making weekly presentations on the finer points of various nations' tax codes, as it pertained to international expansion, to a mid-level Chinese accountant, probably a 28-year-old who spoke better English than he did and would be, in his sleek suits and immaculate hair and reserved manner, the perfect picture of a globe-trotting assassin. And, most frustrating of all, he would surely be very nice, and eager to learn.

Pete anticipated realizing one day, as he danced around for the camera, that, surprisingly, it did not seem the video teleconferencing system was bridging the gap between them. After the management had called him in to tell him about this new responsibility, he'd gone and sat down and plonked his head on his desk and groaned quietly to himself for five minutes. This would now be, thanks to Jerry, what he thought of every time he glanced out a window and saw Walter's house. He would be forced to imagine Jerry on the other side, standing in his bedroom in his pajamas in front of a huge screen and cracking jokes to distract Pete from his own thoughts. Maybe it was nice of him, but invariably it would remind Pete of what he was supposed to forget. That eventually, his knowledge would all be transferred, and he would be an empty, slightly too old, useless vessel. The thought never went away for long.

And when it came back, as now, it made Pete all antsy.

He frowned dramatically and balled his hands into fists. He would make a snow angel, he said to himself. He needed to move his muscles, and to do it with a lot of force. He flopped his arms and legs about in the snow to limber them up. He could see the gabled roof of the little corner window bay that jutted out of Walter's attic, in the corner of his view of white sky, and it got blotted out and turned the same color as the atmosphere by the snow he shot up with all his flailing. Then he gasped and lay still as something occurred to him: what if Walter was watching him from one of those dark windows? Pete watched him often enough, *maybe Walter had been doing the same to him all these years*. Oh, how sinister, he thought. But was that really so wrong? Maybe Pete was an object of fascination for him. Maybe he had only come out on the porch this morning to watch in peace as Pete shoveled. Maybe that was Walter's moment of normalcy. Maybe they'd been brought together by these great snowfalls to see how much they really mattered to each other. Pete wondered if maybe he had been really inconsiderate to Walter all this time.

But surely Walter was still strange regardless. What could have produced him, he wondered, in his present form? Pete set himself vigorously now to shaping his snow angel. He felt mobile and powerful, making huge and masterful gestures in snow, shoving aside great heaps with one heave of his arm. His conception of Walter had exploded with

possibilities. *Could Walter have gotten a song stuck in his head?* seemed an especially fertile one. It could've happened deep in his dark past, a transformational moment that set him on his present course. He was quite a showman, Pete had to admit. He wondered at this strange kinship between them. It was possible that Walter, ultimately, had a lot to teach him. Maybe he could afford to become more of a mystery himself. Maybe this little branch above him, dancing outside of time, was a welcoming sign of an iteration of Pete still to come.

As he was settling down and making great progress on his snow angel, he heard the characteristic noises of the van scraping on the pavement in the alley. He smiled as he heard doors pulled open and caught bits of his daughters' bubbly voices as they disturbed the still air.

"Okay, everybody, okay, get inside," he heard his wife say calmly as she tried to corral the children inside the house. He heard the screen door creak open and slam shut and the excited noises died away. The dog barked a couple of times inside the house and then there was silence. He had forgotten about the dog. Maybe she had been watching him the whole time, too.

Forming the snow angel was starting to tire him out, and now that he paused to notice it he could tell his clothes were well soaked through, so he stopped and laid his hands on his chest. Just give them a minute to come fetch me, he thought. They'll like my craftsmanship. He

noticed suddenly that the song had disappeared. But that thought, for once, did not make it come back. He laughed out loud at this first victory. He cherished the silence, and no longer imagined birds passing through the sky above him. He was content just staring at it, blank and unchanging. "But you know what," he thought, "what if I like that song? I can make it come and go at will now. So maybe I can just enjoy it like anything else." He called it back up from his memory. It was newly lovely, calming. And birds were too easy a match for the movements of the music; he would make new sights to match it.

A speck became visible as it floated down through the empty sky, growing larger until it became an angel. It settled on Pete's roof, then walked to the edge and peered over and waved at him. It looked ageless, genderless. It had the grubby, happy face of a fat person. In place of a halo it had an unilluminated light bulb suspended over its head. Pete chuckled at this cheerily discordant picture. The angel sat down and dangled its legs over the gutter, swinging them in time with the music. Pete turned and propped himself on his side and with one finger drew a light bulb in the snow above his angel's head.

He lay back down and listened for any noises from the house. But it was quiet. He wasn't sure how long he had been waiting. Maybe it was a while already. Today he would go inside and freshen up, straighten himself out, and tomorrow he would decide whether or not to place the song

in his head in the first place. But for now the song all he heard, and he thought it was a fine accompaniment to his time spent relaxing on the lawn.

He remembered again, as he lay there waiting, shivering, just how cold he was. He vowed to decide tomorrow to remember not to go lying in the snow for so long, not once, for the duration of the coming winter. That should settle it. And what were they all up to inside the house, he wondered? They would have to notice that he wasn't around. With several grunts and much shifting of his weight, which disturbed the neat lines of his snow angel, he raised himself up on his elbows and watched the porch windows. There wasn't any light visible, as far into the house as he could see. No dog standing with her paws up on the windowsill, watching him and wagging her tail. No kids playing on the porch.

He remembered that it was probably still too cold on the porch for that. Even with the heat blasting throughout the house, the big, single-paned windows surrounding the porch radiated nearly all the warm air out of the room, of course. The girls had probably been sent upstairs to start on their homework, their mother having stuck a piece of fruit in each of their hands. Pete's body drooped, and he felt his dead weight pressing his elbows hard into the ground. He thought about it for a moment, and the song sounded so irritating all of a sudden. He looked over his cold, limp torso and legs in front of him. He wiggled his



feet, but that didn't help his mood. He had to go back inside. He had to keep this stupid song to himself. Was anyone going to come to the front of the house, and hold the screen open and step out and smile at him curiously, and laugh and ask him what he was doing? Sooner or later? He realized he didn't have any answer he wanted to say out loud.

But the house was still dark, and no one made any sound. He wanted more than anything now to get back inside and see what they were doing. He looked up at the gutter and the angel was still there, smiling at him. It made Pete's face turn an even brighter red and made him fume. But the angel raised a finger and shook it back and forth, and shook its head, both movements delicately matching the rhythm of the song in Pete's head. He couldn't go inside as long as he kept this thing around, much as he had enjoyed its company. But the song wasn't charming anymore, and so the angel seemed like a plague. The angel threw up its hands, as if to say, "Hey, what can I do?" It was a strange impasse: Pete knew it, the angel knew it. And Pete realized would have to pick one or the other, if he wanted to move from this patch of snow ever again.

## Saint Porcupine Full of Arrows

The whole town was leafy, but the church, in a more extreme case, was nestled up against the boundary of a forest preserve that looked almost feral along the outermost edges. The new, comparatively fashionable annex built to house the Sunday school and offices was set a short distance behind the apse of the dull, squat church, a shiny box nearly surrounded by a wooded enclosure, its smooth glass front peering askance down the narrow tree-lined corridor at the much older building across the way. Driving down the street past the church front, Doug was transfixed for a moment at how sad it was starting to look: an outpost maybe, roughly, in the shape of a proper cathedral, but only some tiny fraction of the size and with none of the pomp or confidence. This whole block looked cowed into submission by the tall, thin, dark, tightly

arranged trees at the front of the forest that stood like wispy battlements, though without a gate underneath, at least where this street halted after opening to the right onto the quiet north side of the block. Doug contemplated the setup and then his right front tire popped in and out of a pothole. He snapped back to attention in time to make a fast and overly broad right turn onto the stretch of road that fronted on the preserve, in sight of the gaggle of children and parents now exiting the school building. Some scandalized glances were shot in his direction, and he was immediately embarrassed at how the screeching of his tires had torn through the neighborhood's weirdly affected stillness.

He quickly corrected his steering and reached the curb and parked. Several mothers and fathers now seemed to disapprovingly steer their children off the entrance ramp, to the left down the sidewalk, toward the wooded clearing where wooden tables and folding stands were arranged and a crowd was gathering. They each glanced up at Doug then bent slightly to place a hand on his or her child's upper back and nudge him or her insistently away from this man who showed no taste or modesty in his driving. He sighed and felt now more than ever how much he did not want to go to the church picnic.

Timothy pushed open the school door, took a second to make sure the car was there, and bounded down the ramp, a folder under his arm and his long windbreaker billowing

behind him. He halted outside the passenger-side door and watched the interior lock pop up just past his nose, then opened it. Doug was surprised at how deeply the car bounced when Timothy plopped into his seat, but he was a healthy kid, and compact. So it was probably just that he was spry and tightly wound, made of dense stuff.

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hey buddy, how was your morning?"

"We talked a lot about Saint Sebastian."

"Oh yeah?"

Timothy brought his legs up under him and put his hands on the vinyl under the window, peering out and down the block at the picnic setup.

"Are we getting out now or should I put my seatbelt on?" he said.

"We have to go park first, buckle up. So what did they say about Saint Sebastian?"

Timothy stretched his legs out and put on his seatbelt, then pulled a photocopied sheet of paper out of his folder and offered it to his father. Doug took it and studied it, his brow furrowed; it was a black-smearred, many-times-copied image of what he guessed was a classical, devotional painting. A suggestively draped young man, his features barely showing in the high-contrast reproduction, was tied to a tree, a stately arrangement of three arrows sticking out of his sides, two women crouching and peering up at him, hands outstretched, considering his wounds from

a distance. The image took up not quite half the page.

"Boy, they really give you all the details, huh?" Doug said, flattening the paper against the center of the wheel, squinting at it.

"A couple weeks ago we talked about Stephen. Everybody threw rocks at him," Timothy said.

"Yeah I remember..." A scene flashed through Doug's head of Timothy in the backyard at dusk tossing a volley of Nerf balls at the dog, who stood staring at the child, wagging his tail, barking occasionally. "Remind me what you did last week?" Doug had been grading 9<sup>th</sup> grade history papers all that day, so he figured his wife had driven Timothy back and forth. He started to see the potential for a pattern here: maybe, if he were available on Sundays more often, Timothy would like it if they made a routine of recapping the lives of the saints. He seemed to like the images, at least.

"Mmmm I think we were off last week," Timothy said.

"Oh, okay. Yeah I think that's right."

Timothy coughed and stared off at the picnic and bounced his legs on the seat. "Are we going, Dad?"

Doug stared at the image, frowning. "You know, I remember seeing paintings of Saint Sebastian where he's almost all covered with arrows."

Timothy turned and his face lit up. "Oh cool!"

"He looks like a pin cushion," Doug said, turning to smile at him.

"Or a dandelion!"

"Ha ha ha..." Doug coughed and looked back to the picture. "That's right."

"Let's go!" Timothy said. Doug laid the paper in his lap and put the car into drive.

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Doug considered his options, and decided that a hot dog was probably the best he had to go on for now. He picked it up at one of the tables staffed by the gang of old ladies who always seemed to do everything church-sponsored together. Studying the available seating, there weren't a lot of benches that by now weren't occupied by all the parents who had marked him for their disapproval. They didn't acknowledge him, standing there, tall in the middle of the clearing with his plate in one hand, Timothy's windbreaker hanging over the other arm and the folder under his armpit, but he could imagine the pronounced clucks of the tongue that would greet him if he tried to sit between any of them. That was no bother; he could handle their disdain, he thought. He saw less of the parents than he did their children, who passed through his classes or played soccer with Timothy. But thankfully, as he rotated on the spot, he saw Martha, co-worker at the high school who hadn't been there very long but had always been friendly, on a not-too-crowded bench with her toddler standing and wriggling at her feet. He went over to sit

down and she smiled at him.

"Hi Doug!"

"Hey there Martha," he said, plopping down and settling the plate on his lap. The toddler looked up at him open-mouthed, a little mayonnaise smear on his lip, a glob of ketchup on his overalls. Martha pointed toward the side of the clearing at Timothy, who had just set down his bowl of ice cream between the roots of a tree, and now he and another boy were staring up into the foliage, hands on their hips. There were branches near enough to the ground for them to reach, but they were wispy and Doug hoped they weren't thinking about climbing them.

"That's your son over there, right?" Martha said. "I saw you two coming in before."

"Yup, that's Timothy."

"He's very cute."

"Thanks, I think so too."

"What do you think he's up to?" she said, patting her son's hair. "They going to climb that tree or just study it?" She laughed.

"I really can't tell. He's being a bit mysterious."

"Ha ha ha, okay."

"What's your son's name, by the way?" Doug studied his hot dog and took a bite.

She leaned forward to look the boy in the face. "Do you want to introduce yourself to Mr. Lawrence?" He gazed up at Doug and considered him, as he was chewing his hot

dog, smiling. The boy stuck his tongue out to lick the corner of his mouth then shook his head. Doug frowned, set down his hot dog and stopped chewing. Martha scoffed. The boy ran off to where the rest of the little children were congregated, laughing the whole time. Doug watched as he went, wondering what he had done wrong.

"I'm sorry about that, Doug. I swear he's been trying to work on his manners."

Doug hadn't been listening, but after a moment he turned to her and leaned back against the table. "No worries," he said. He scrunched up his forehead. "Maybe I seemed a little boring."

"Well I guess he's being a little mysterious these days too." She wiped crumbs off her lap and stood up. "His name's Justin, by the way...I should go hover over him, really. But I'll be back, we should talk shop."

Doug felt that was an invitation to offer an observation about the workplace. But now that he was forced to think about it, all that came to mind was a realization that as the end of the school year came into the picture, his students, or at least most of them, were morphing into totally different, erratic people. They were coming closer every day to being like this toddler and wanting nothing to do with him. He felt a lump in his gut as the thought sank in, over the space of a few seconds. But immediately he told himself that that was a bit much to say out loud, so he watered it down as best he could to a thin banality. "I



think most of the kids in that school are acting mysterious these days," he said.

Martha laughed and squinted down at him. "Yeah something like that, maybe. Well I'm sure you would know, I'm just a rookie." She smiled and walked off.

Doug looked up and scanned the tree line for Timothy. He spotted a flash of a white t-shirt behind the edge of a tree. Then he heard a sharp snap and winced and sat bolt upright, but in a moment Timothy and the other boy emerged carrying a long thin twig. Doug sighed in relief and scanned the rest of the picnic crowd. The priest was standing at a table nearby, chatting with a couple of men Doug recognized from parent-teacher conferences. The priest was tall and athletic and graceful, his movements restrained and controlled, except for the long thin wattle that danced about his throat above the collar whenever he turned his head. He noticed Doug and waved, flashing a friendly smile. Doug waved too, and as he did so had a flash of Sebastian's head from the photocopy. He pulled it from the folder after waiting a moment for the priest to look away. It was hard to say where the face ended and hair began, which was the same black as the tree behind it. It was like the priest's perfectly bald head: with the color of the tree, you couldn't be sure Sebastian had any hair at all. Doug wondered if the priest might have insight as to the consensus on what Sebastian's hair was like, or if that was maybe a silly question that wouldn't interest him. The

priest looked over again as Doug put the paper away and looked up. The two men standing with him noticed and waved timidly at Doug in unison. He put the folder on the bench and waved too.

He was going to check on Timothy again but then he saw a wave of light brown hair to his left as some girl or other sat down next to him. He turned and discovered it was Claire, one of his 12<sup>th</sup> grade civics students. She had a bowl of ice cream, too.

"Hi, Mr. Lawrence!"

"Hi there, Claire." He chuckled. He wasn't sure if he remembered seeing her around the church before. "Do you come to these sorts of things often?"

"Not really, but my little brother's in Sunday school and my parents couldn't make it, so I'm here to keep an eye on him."

Doug nodded. "So are you gearing up for finals yet?"

"Well..." she chuckled, and took a bite of ice cream.

"It's okay, you don't have to sugar-coat it for me, I'm not policing you."

She waited a moment to swallow. "You know, seniors..."

"Sure. And boy you have become an excitable bunch."

Doug laughed, then noticed the folder sitting between them and stuck it under his armpit.

"Listen, about the card games and everything, Mr. Lawrence-"

He waved her off. "Hey, I know what this time of year

is like for you guys."

"Yeah but I know that poker in the back of the class is a bit much..."

"Don't worry about it, Claire." He tilted his head knowingly. "You're not one of the real offenders anyway."

She spent some moments nodding and picking at the ice cream. Doug scanned the area for Timothy but the crowd was growing and he couldn't see very far.

"I'm sorry Toby threw that apple at the board, too."

Doug shrugged. "Really, boys will be boys."

She stopped eating and waved her hand furiously. "For what it's worth, he wasn't trying to hit you with it or anything."

"I wasn't offended, Claire, you don't have to-"

"It was just, you know, he had an apple with him from lunch and he wanted to see how easily he could smash it."

Doug spotted Timothy, backed up against a tree trunk, standing still with his arms outstretched, as the other boy held a loose portion of his shirt and tried with great concentration to force a twig through it.

"What the hell-"

"You could maybe get a little angrier with us, you know," Claire said.

"Do you see this?" Doug said, pointing towards the distant trees.

"Huh?" Claire did a double take. She set down her bowl and slid closer to Doug to follow his finger. She saw the

boy use a stick to successfully force a hole in the other boy's bright white shirt. "Oh hey, that's my brother!" she said.

"Sorry?"

"Yeah, that's my brother! Don't know who that other kid is, but looks like they're having a good time."

"That's my son!" Doug said, standing up.

Claire stood up and bit the nail of her index finger. "Oh boy, sorry about that, I can go stop him..." She looked up at Doug for a reaction. He kept watching, his hands on his hips, as Claire's brother jammed the stick into Timothy's shirt and balanced it there, then reached for another from stack they had gathered. Timothy was staring ahead, waiting for twigs, his back straight and pressed firmly against the tree, his arms held at a forty-five-degree angle above his shoulders and twitching a little. The other boy brought over a more slender one this time, and it cut right through the shirt on the first try. Doug's mouth dropped open. Timothy was turning himself into a pin cushion, and damn it if he didn't look like a seven-year-old version of that photocopied martyr, his thick brown hair blending cleanly into the bark of the tree.

Claire made a move as if to hurry off to intervene. "Really, I'm sorry Mr. Lawrence, I'll go get him-"

Doug threw up a hand. "Wait," he said. He sat down and rested his chin in his hands and watched. Claire slunk back onto the bench next to him. "Well, his mother's not going

to be pleased about that shirt," he said. Claire laughed hesitantly.

The boy drove each stick through an ever more taught and stressed shirt, pausing to cantilever it against Timothy's torso within. As they neared the end of their pile, Timothy dared move enough to peer at his set of spindly arrows. A smile grew across his face. Doug leaned his chin on his hand and marveled at how peaceful Timothy looked. When the stack was finished, Timothy dropped his arms, studied the dozen points sticking out of him, which gently scraped his skin and left his shirt in a many-poled tent formation, and he and the other boy broke into a fit of giggling. The sticks rattled but held their positions.

The crowd was bustling at this point. The stands for church functions were all staffed by a single helpful blur of old ladies. The priest wandered among his parishioners, trying as always to appear receptive to any concerns anyone might have, moral or otherwise. He figured there might as well be someone more severe and actively religious around amid all the festivity. He cast his head around, looking for anyone who seemed outwardly lost, and his neck flap followed gamely behind. Parents politely ignored the flock of children sowing mayhem beyond at the tree line.

So it was something of a minor controversy when Timothy with his shirt of sticks ran clattering through the congregation, leaving a trail of scraped legs in his wake.

He ran up to his father with a huge grin on his face.

He stopped short with his hands behind his back and the other boy arrived happily at his side. Doug studied the broken points of tree twigs jutting out at his face and at all odd angles.

"Me and Mark think I look more like a porcupine than a pin cushion or a dandelion," Timothy said.

Doug looked up at his son's grin, and it was infectious. He felt he and Timothy had understood something together. Sticks or arrows: it didn't much matter. He thought they both saw something in the picture of a young man in the prime of his life, dying and being totally calm about it. Timothy was really drawn to all this dramatic iconography, it seemed. Doug would be like the woman in the picture who tended Sebastian's wounds. He would pull the arrows out himself. Timothy grabbed onto a stick at chest-height and rotated it to scratch an itch. He looked very pleased with himself.

Immediately behind Timothy's head, Doug saw a whole mess of parents gawking in his direction. Some were laughing and others looked dumbstruck. He saw Martha, puzzled, limply holding up her distracted toddler's hand. Some of them couldn't fathom what business this man had raising a child, let alone how even schoolchildren should afford him the respect to call him "Mr. Lawrence." The priest pushed through the crowd to find the source of the commotion. He saw a child's back, his shirt lifted out behind him by a number of points, and his father, who had

taken hold of the boy's hands and looked as happy as he had ever seen anyone. Doug was almost staring in awe, and looked totally calm. The priest felt a pang of jealousy: Doug Lawrence was feeling something spiritual; he could tell. It was the real thing. It was what he always imagined someone would look like when they encountered something from beyond this world. But then he cleared his throat and tried to act casual. He couldn't help it, though, as his mind automatically scrolled through his long-accumulated catalog of iconography, seeking some kind of model for this sight, a kid with arrows stuck in his shirt. But nothing quite fit. The closest it came was to something like a saint shot with arrows, or stuck with daggers. But they were just sticks, he thought, and the boy was not yet old enough to be tragically beautiful. The priest didn't get it. He must be missing something.

Doug thought the boy did look beautiful. He nodded at him, judging that the porcupine comparison sounded about right. Maybe a backwards porcupine, with the spines poking out the wrong side. But, whatever. Timothy could call it whatever he wanted. The sight of him would still hold the same power.

Timothy giggled and then Claire's brother giggled. Timothy reached out and shoved him gently. They broke out giggling again. Claire watched Doug, who was trying to stare fixedly in his son's eyes, though Timothy kept moving and his eyes were bouncing all over. She looked at her

brother and they both laughed, then she looked back at Doug. She laughed to try to get his attention but he was immobilized, and she frowned.

The bystanders lost interest as Doug just sat there, holding his son's hands, lost to the rest of them. After a short while, Doug sat Timothy on the bench next to him and pulled out the sticks one by one. Claire watched for a couple of minutes, seeing Doug's care as he held as many sticks as possible in place with one hand while he slowly pulled each one out, very careful to avoid jabbing the boy with any of them, but making Timothy giggle nonstop anyway. She watched him focus on the entry point of each stick like he was trying not to damage an open wound any further. The priest lingered and squinted at this operation, but try as he might he couldn't make anything of it. He turned to go make himself useful but looked back as he walked. Doug didn't notice it at first when Claire took her brother's hand and walked away. But Timothy turned his head back as far as he could without upsetting his torso and waved at them. She and her brother both waved, and as she smiled at Timothy his face lit up. Doug looked over and saw her turned to face the two of them as she walked, and she smiled at him again, and his face seemed to light up in a quieter, maybe more adult way than Timothy's had.

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Feeling a drag as she realized she was now most of the



way through the last regular Monday of the school year, Claire tried to slip out the door after her Calculus class ahead of the boys who had spent the period - in a subtly mean-spirited way, she thought, though coated well enough in flattery - trying to goad their teacher into elaborating on what she had been like as a teenager. But even though she sat at the table closest to the exit, they moved as a sentient herd confidently out in front of her, on to confront whichever other teacher remained standing between them and the full enjoyment of their last summer before college.

Most of the people from this class, nearly all of them just as openly hostile by now as the central band of instigators, would be carrying on to civics with her in a moment anyway. But she would've liked to have that minute or so of peace in the room at the opposite end of the floor, after she had sat down at her desk, near the back and next to a huge arched window that was perfect for watching the afternoon sun, when she could enjoy the sight of a gym class playing clumsy flag football on the first field next to the building, but still before the big slothy bands of seniors that seemed to be forming so easily these days had finished slouching down the hall toward her. So she waited for the gaggle to pass, then picked up her nearly empty backpack - she was hardly immune herself - and paused before she turned to go. Her teacher was sitting with her elbows on her desk, her hands up around her face,

eerily still. She looked either like she was totally defeated and trying not to show it, or asleep, but Claire couldn't tell which it was.

When she got to Mr. Lawrence's classroom, she slipped into her seat and found it heated for her by a well-placed sunbeam. There was only one other girl in the room so far. She sat back in the deep right corner of the room and never said much. Claire rested her chin in her palms and closed her eyes to get cozy in the sun for as long as she could.

Doug walked out of the room across the hall where the photocopier was housed, a thick stack of civics study guides in his arms. He entered his classroom, the door conveniently propped open, and thought he saw Claire sitting there, but her face was too brightly lit to see clearly at first. He smiled in her direction, then saw that her eyes were closed. He reached his desk and dropped his bunch of packets with a hard plop, which she didn't register. He slid the stack to one edge of the desk and spread out the rest of his papers and notebooks from his bag. As he put things into the proper piles he suddenly spotted Timothy's folder at the bottom and felt blood rush to his cheeks. He looked up, but Claire was dozing and the other girl was staring downward and tracing her pencil hard around her notebook. Doug shrugged and flipped open the folder. He glanced at the photocopy as the noise level grew in the hallway and a bunch of smiling, scruffy faces showed up in the doorframe. He closed the folder and sat down. He

traced the edge of it with a finger and stared through its cover as the room blew up with noise.

Claire sighed as she felt people swarm in around her, the insides of her eyelids bright orange in the sunlight. Someone slipped into the chair next to her with a cheerful "Hey!" that sounded a lot like her friend Phoebe, though in an unexpectedly giddy tone. Claire opened her eyes and turned to see Phoebe, all bubbly and smiling at everyone around them.

"Hey Phoebe," she said, stretching her arms.

Phoebe frowned. "What are you all sleepy for?" she said, in a much too adorable voice.

Claire groaned. "What are you all annoying for?"

"Oh, ouch!" Phoebe said, her eyes wide. "Shut up, Claire!"

The boy in front of them turned back for a moment.

"Yeah, God, shut up, Claire."

She straightened up in her chair and scanned the room. "Okay, I'm up, I'm up," she said. The girl in the back corner glared violently at the chatty group around her. The last bell rang and Claire watched as Mr. Lawrence sat upright and got his public face ready.

"Last Monday before finals, Claire, get with the program," Phoebe said.

The boy turned back again and put his palms on Claire's desk, leering expectantly. "I bet you did the extra credit thing, didn't you, Claire?"

She covered her face with her hands and nodded.

"You scab!" he said, laughing. Claire couldn't help but laugh too.

"We're supposed to be a team that doesn't do anything, Claire," Phoebe said.

"You aren't being a great team player, Claire," the boy said. "In fact, you're being a real scab."

Mr. Lawrence stood up now, cleared his throat and flattened his tie. They all scooted slowly around in their chairs to face the front.

"Hi, Mr. Lawrence," somebody in the back said, droopily.

"Hi, everybody," he said. Claire stared at the framed painting hanging on the jut in the wall around the air duct over Mr. Lawrence's head. She liked this painting a little, a very quiet view of very English, rolling countryside, a picket fence tracing in and out of the hills in the middle ground. It was clear and bright with sharp colors. She surprised herself as, for the first time, she spotted a rooster, right in front of the fence's origin point at the left. It was tiny but well defined, so it was weird she had never noticed it. Funny how one familiar thing could take on such new, varying appearances. That was a nice insight into interpretation, she thought, and she would maybe mention it to her English teacher later by way of chitchat. The rooster strutted happily out of the side of the painting, surveying the fence as if inspecting the ramparts

of his hilly castle.

"Claire did the extra credit, Mr. Lawrence," the boy in front of her called out.

"There was extra credit?" another said, laughing, amused that he had missed the news to begin with.

"Boooooo!" said a girl in the row nearest the door.

"Scab!" someone yelled from the back.

Claire chuckled and saw Mr. Lawrence look over and shake his head apologetically. "All right, all right everybody," he said, waving his hands. "Thank you for updating me."

"Mr. Lawrence," Phoebe said, "if Claire is being a scab, I think I speak for the rest of when I say that that must mean we're striking."

"We know our rights!" the boy in front of Claire yelled. Claire shook her head at Phoebe, who wasn't paying attention and looked very pleased with herself.

Calls broke out all over the room. Mr. Lawrence clamped his mouth shut tight and looked down at his desk. Claire wasn't sure if steam was going to come out of his ears or if he was going to start crying.

He pressed a fist into the desk and looked up again. "I have your study guides ready-"

"Don't make us call you a scab too, Mr. Lawrence."

"Yeah, we try to be respectful, and that would hurt us as much as it would hurt you."

"Guys, what we get done this week is up to you, the

coursework is finished-" he started.

"We're not mad, we're just disappointed!"

"We can use the time to study for the final," Mr. Lawrence shouted, "or you can worry about it on your own time and get the grades you get." His voice was absorbed finally into the general hubbub.

He was breathing heavily and looked sad. Claire saw the veins in his temples popping out. She wished he would just stand up for himself. It couldn't really be that hard. She just wanted to doze off again. She closed her eyes and slanted her face toward the window and felt quite cozy.

Toby, right in the middle of the room, pulled an apple from his bag and assessed the angles around the students in front of him, wanting to know the layout in advance so he would be ready if he wanted to chuck it at the board at the right moment. The angry girl in the back watched him and steamed. Toby bounced around in his desk. After a few moments, as the noise level hit a plateau and everyone broke off into their own conversations, she chucked her pen at Toby's head, which landed squarely with a loud snap.

"Holy shit!" Toby yelled out, clutching at the back of his head. Claire snapped out of her daze, and Mr. Lawrence's head was up now, shocked into alertness and looking worried. Toby and the angry girl were now in a shouting match, and everybody else tried to scream over them at Mr. Lawrence, telling him to do something for once. Claire's head hurt with all the noise. This was really too

much. He had to get it together at least this one time. Nobody would come back to class again if he didn't make some kind of stand, and really she couldn't blame them. Everybody would take the period off and go play Frisbee or whatever, and they would show up for the final but it wouldn't matter because everybody was in college already, or at least that's what it felt like, and none of them would ever think about Mr. Lawrence again except for maybe to get a chuckle out of how they had seen Toby's mealy apple burst into a million wet pieces like a nova against the chalkboard. Claire did like that painting, and its commanding, self-satisfied rooster, but there wasn't a whole lot else to remember about the class. She was only *four years* away from having to strike out on her own. Why would she ever think of Mr. Lawrence, in *this* economy? What, was he going to be useful for networking or something? Phoebe pulled headphones out of her pocket and put her head down. Claire surveyed the class again. Almost everybody was shouting at something or other. Toby was brandishing the angry girl's pen and making showy slashing gestures through the air. Claire laughed. Toby looked like even more of a clown when he got deadly serious.

Mr. Lawrence was staring down at his desk again, hands on his hips. Claire couldn't fathom what he was up to. But now he looked up and put a hand on a folder he had in front of him, and he looked weirdly pleased. He looked totally calm now, like he didn't notice anymore that his class was

about to overthrow him. He had always been a slouch, a little hunched around the edges whenever he had to talk to the class. But now he stood up straighter than Claire had ever seen him. He was, somehow, happy. As he waited, for whatever the hell he was waiting for, he looked even more confident from moment to moment.

She sighed, closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. Goodness, if this was what she had to deal with for the rest of the day, never mind the rest of the week...She only had two periods left this afternoon...Just European History and English, and she thought at least her English teacher would hold up better against rebellion than Mr. Lawrence and the Calculus teacher had. Maybe not History, though. Claire winced as she imagined how that meek little woman would buckle under the strain. She put it out of her mind, though, because it was too grisly to think about.

She imagined the teachers she had had that day all in a row, melting into huddled masses of goop one after the other as the kids filed past them in scorn, nobody putting up any kind of a fight. It was like they were being shot down by the firing squad one after the other, she thought. Were a bunch of lazy seniors that dangerous? They were being weird. There had to be something in the coffee in their lounge all of a sudden. Cream that had just started to turn today, maybe, so nobody had noticed it yet. They should all grow up.

She opened her eyes just a crack, and the sunlight was



strong and soothing. Mr. Lawrence had picked up the folder and was holding it in his crossed arms against his chest. God, what a weird dude, Claire thought. She wasn't looking forward to whatever church functions she might have to go to in the future. But then maybe he sensed her watching him, because he looked back at her and smiled a little. She frowned and squinted at him. He cocked his head to the side, giving her some kind of knowing grin. What did he want? Claire said to herself. Was she supposed to help somehow? He looked at her fondly for brief moments at a time, as all order broke down in his classroom. Kids were flinging barbs at him now and he soaked it all up, as if he knew exactly what he was doing. She shook her head, her mouth hanging open, as if to tell him she didn't know what he wanted from her. He just kept watching her with that sweet look on his face, the same kind of way he had stared at his son the day before as he pulled sticks out of his shirt, and all Claire knew was that it weirded her out completely.

The Water Bear, the Nautilus and the Laughing Dark

When Henry thought about it later, he recalled that he first spotted her across the crowded, burbling living room - past some guy in front of him expounding on the Singularity to a girl who had her head cocked and was twirling a discolored lock of her hair, past a gaggle floating around the table of snacks, next to a couch full of strangers, where she was sitting perched on the edge of a deep armchair, leaning over the armrest, turned attentively to face some people to her right who were blocked from his view. He also imagined that, more or less, the warm tones of her voice he had picked up even over the guests' general murmur and distant cheerful shouts were as clear as, say, a church bell sounding from a sharp white steeple over a tiny New England coastal town in some other century, cutting through a night of dense fog to entice the fishing vessels slouching their way back to harbor. As far as he could tell in that moment, her other attributes hardly counted. He sat stock still in his chair against the opposite wall and stared at her between the bodies of acquaintances and strangers as they floated past, and hung to her words as she began to recite some sort of folktale

from memory.

"It's about this tiny animal that exists at the bottom of the ocean. I've found it helps if you imagine a soundtrack," she said. Henry faintly heard laughter from whomever she was talking to. "Some kind of dance track where sometimes the instruments get far away all of a sudden and it sounds like you're listening under water...You know what I mean!" They agreed cheerfully. She looked away and stuck a finger to her chin. "Or I don't know, maybe really droning rock music. Whatever, here goes anyway." She took a deep breath but then stopped herself again. "Oh also, it's a real animal and everything. The Internet will tell you more."

That she would be telling this story only seemed strange for a moment, until the soothing qualities of her voice wandered into the open spaces of his brain and curled up there, cozy and alone. She cleared her throat, closed her eyes and shifted in her seat. It seemed to tumble out of her perfectly, in one go, like she had been performing it all her life. He attended it so closely that he felt sure he could remember every word himself.

"A Water Bear - also known as a 'Moss Piglet,' a name of some contention in the Water Bear community - one sunless day down at the abyssal plain of the Pacific ocean, just past the steep drop of the continental shelf off of New Zealand, was heating himself quite nicely as he clung with his eight stubby paws to the side of a giant tube

worm's protective housing. It stood in a ring of tube worms around a set of powerful open vents, which had been belching hot sulfurous clouds into the darkness for hours now. He thought he felt pretty good. But the Water Bear is a basically competitive, glass-half-empty kind of creature. He leaned his head back as far as his partitioned little body would allow, and craned it around the bend. His tube-neighbor's head was nuzzled against the baking surface, deep contentment spreading over his smooshed face. Our Water Bear sighed, with a low-pressure release of gas molecules from every pore of his body. He pressed his face against his own stretch of worm-husk; to him, unlike what he sensed from his friends, neighbors and colleagues, this tower, which had spent a geological eternity being cooked by the burning vents, never felt quite as hot. It was all so routine. Somehow, clinging to a tube worm for a taste of extreme heat down here in the hollows of the Earth had lost its magic.

"He released his grip from the trunk of the worm and let himself drift free. The current boiling out of the mouths of the vents stirred the water around him, and for a moment he was tugged upward into even greater and more soothing heat. But he flailed his many limbs and pushed himself backward into the cold - at two thrusts backward, one pull of the current forward, imagining himself in a dance with the strong tides that he and his friends had speculated about in their adolescence, but that couldn't

exist at this depth. When he was free of the current he coasted down through ever more freezing water, and landed on the sandy floor with a minor 'poof.'

"He lay on his back and cast his eyes up at the black heavens. What light there was came off the garishly colored beasts that floated through the distant vault. A sparkling orb of a fish glided past. The faint warmth of its halo passed one by one over each of the Water Bear's pairs of legs and over his stubbly beak nodules, which he wagged reflexively. Then his body was sunk in shadow again. He lay silent, gloomy, and as the gaudy fish passed out of sight he swore he could hear it chuckling at him. The dark ocean conspired to taunt him, hiding up there with all its adventure, with its codes among fellows, like a secret club. The teasing light and the laughing darkness, the billowing heat and the stagnant freeze: this was a Water Bear's lot, he said to himself."

Everything went quiet. Then Henry snapped to attention and came back to his own eyes, which were staring at a point on the dark wall slightly above her head. He spent a moment petrified, until he recognized he had come back to himself and she had stopped talking. He closed his eyes and gave his head a shake. He checked himself over and smoothed out the fabric of his pants. He must have looked a little addled, he thought, leaning back and staring wide-eyed at the opposite wall, but no one around him now was paying him any mind. And now she had stood up and was making her way

to the left behind the crowd. He sat up and craned his neck around the bodies and saw her back for a moment, ducking into the hallway at the far left corner of the room. He stood up, put his hands on his hips and surveyed the crowd. Then he fixed his sights on the arch above the hallway and weaved through the people on his way toward it.

How could he imagine a Water Bear, he wondered? There were details in the story, sure, but this was a totally new concept to him, so he would need more of a knowledge base first, right? He stepped through the arch and the sound from behind him was muffled immediately. The front door was straight ahead down the long hallway. He checked to make sure he could still see his umbrella lying there in the corner next to the pile of shoes. There were only a couple other umbrellas there, weirdly, since it had been raining all night. The door to the right, immediately past the arch, was lit dimly. Henry hugged the opposite wall and shuffled toward the light. He nudged a foot first into the bright rectangle of floorboards to test how visible he would be, then withdrew it and sidled along to poke his head around the doorframe. She was there, sitting awkwardly upright on the edge of a floor-level mattress. Her face was in shadow from a weak floor lamp in the corner and rope lights curling around the windows behind her. She and whomever she was with chuckled about something and she cleared her throat to get back to her story. Henry pressed himself against the wall and it occurred to him he didn't

know where his friend Todd had gone. He had maybe just slipped past him in the crowd. He leaned far enough toward the arch, in order to check for Todd and to appear plausibly connected to whatever was happening in the living room, that he could only see a bit of dim wall through the bedroom doorway. But her voice carried well, and overpowered the murmur in his right ear.

"So the Water Bear rocked from side to side, picking up speed to toss himself onto his legs. He landed upright and kicked all the feet on his right side at the sand in frustration. He paused to get his metabolism under control, then set off into the darkness ahead, knowing the direction home only by pointing his rear end toward the stacks of worms and exhaust pipes. They were dimly lit by a crop of glowing fungus as a signpost on the near side. So he charged off toward the grim nothing in front of him.

"After a tedious journey of a few feet, moving indulgently slow since there wasn't any traffic forcing him on - a vacation day meant everyone went to the vents and stayed there till late - he knew he'd arrived at his neighborhood of sandy pits when he spotted the luminescent sea slug on the horizon. The community held him captive at the center of town as a much-needed light source in the midst of the void, as all such Water Bear colonies had secured for themselves. And secured at their great peril, at that; but that's a whole other story. Suffice it to say that the slug was held in a crude, dome-shaped cage of

clumps of coral, jammed and molded together. The bits of refuse building material had likely floated down from some reef overhead. The slug itself was a rarity. He didn't live around these parts, but just happened to wander too far down one day and get stuck, so to speak. No one could guess confidently at where this surface garbage came from; the mystery was ever an impossible distance away.

"As he approached through the empty neighborhood he could see the outline of his mate peeking over the lip of their sandy depression. Except there was now a way taller figure next to her. The Water Bear could soon make out a number of wispy antennae, a pair of bulb eyes and the edges of body plates: a disturbingly crustaceous set of shapes. The Water Bear's globe-like eyes twitched in anticipation. As he crested the ridge of the nest his mate rotated to face him and sighed. The great slithery shrimp stood towering next to her - really taking up most of the space - two of his little stick legs resting where one pair of hip joints *should* be, if he had a proper body instead of this gross, stupid, hard tube-thing. This shrimp was likely an insurance salesman; a tax collector; a proselytizer.

"The Water Bear's wife shook her head - there'd never been an official ceremony, but they liked to think of themselves as committed at that level. 'Honey, this gentleman is from the bank,' she said.

"'We're going to have to accelerate the interest on your home loan,' the shrimp said. He shook his antennae and



gurgled.

"The Water Bear scoffed. 'Hey listen, I don't know if you guys ever talk to each other over there, but we've already been over this with another officer.' His wife stuck her face in the sand, exasperated.

"'I speak as the bank's representative, sir. Your case is already decided.'

"'But we're doing as much as we can! The other guy said it was settled for now!'

"'Well I see your circumstances didn't stop you from taking a tube worm vacation this afternoon,' the shrimp agent retorted.

"'This is a scheme! It's a bunch of malarkey!' the Water Bear shouted. His wife groaned.

"'Sir, these are our terms,' the shrimp said.

"'Yeah, I'm sure the terms never get shifted when the time gets ripe to screw us over.'

"'I imagine you understand, sir,' the shrimp said, adopting a more highbrow tone, 'that it is not our policy to discriminate against *Water Bears*. Nor to give them preferential treatment, for that matter.'

"The Water Bear fumed. The way he had said '*Water Bear*' made his central nerve ganglion burn. You just knew he had said '*Moss Piglet*' in his head, you just knew it. The condescension and total disinterest in the family's welfare was all too typical. His wife looked up at him, sad and sympathetic. As if to say she knew what he was feeling,

but this was not the right time.

"He shook his head. 'No, this can't be what it's like all the time,' he said. She clucked her mouth feelers. The shrimp stood still, waiting, gazing at the little fellow from a great height. He was nothing, a spot on the ocean floor in a musty old sand trap. 'I'm going out for a while,' he said, rotating around to leave.

"'Where are you going?' his wife pleaded. He clambered slowly up the ridge. 'How long is this going to take?' she said.

"The Water Bear crested the ridge and stood outside their home. 'I don't know, but I'll be back,' he said. He rotated to face her. 'I mean, I'll have to eat eventually.' The shrimp snorted and made to lie down in the bottom of the nest. The Water Bear turned away as his wife squatted down and heaved a sigh.

"In truth, he didn't know where he meant to go. He had to be somewhere else for a time. He needed a taste of freedom from the layers of deep pressure the Water Bears found themselves crushed under so casually. He made for the one light source available.

"As he approached, the big bright slug in the primitive cage sensed him, rotated toward him on the slimy patch of ground he was confined to, and laughed. A moist, disgusting and derisive laugh. The Water Bear didn't need any of *this* either. He ambled right up to the cage and stared the big sucker in his neon yellow face. The slug

leaned his head back and cackled.

"'I need to get out of here,' the Water Bear said.  
'And I need you to point me in the right direction.'

"The slug giggled and shook with obvious glee. 'Hmmm hmm hmm what do you think you could be...little Moss Piglet?' He made some gruesome hacking noises and belched up a thick goo, adding to the pile next to him. 'You're so little I slither over you and you're gone, boom, zap!'

"'Hey man,' the Water Bear yelled, coming closer and glaring in the radiant jerk's face, 'you know that we won, right? We've got you in a cage, you understand?'

"The slug laughed some more and twirled around in the cage, smiling and twitching with happiness at being insulted so. 'This is what we keep you around for, to throw some light on things for us,' the Water Bear said. 'So could you give me a hand or not?'

"The slug leaned back, inhaled deeply, and let out the loudest and most obnoxious laugh yet. The Water Bear waited. Then the slug pressed his face against the rough bar of the cage, as if soothing an itch, and squeezed his eyes shut and seemed to think for a few minutes. Finally the slug woke back up, gazed above the Water Bear's head in the darkness, then stiffened one of his antennae and pointed it like an arrow toward some point in the distance. He stayed locked in this position, but a quiet giggle leaked out of his closed mouth. The Water Bear spent a minute studying the antenna and where it was pointing, then

gathered himself together, took a deep breath, aligned himself in what looked like roughly the right direction, and trundled into the blackness. While still within reach of the slug's glow he could hear him laughing, even more freely as he got further away. He had no idea where the slug might be pointing, except that it was far in the opposite direction from all known territories. He might well be headed now for some great evil, the Water Bear thought. In any case, the slug knew the directions. Maybe he was pointing him to wherever the excitement was.

"He passed the threshold of the slug-light, and the darkness became total immediately. You were in the light or you weren't. He plowed forward and his body relaxed, which honestly weirded him out a little at first. He was going off the map. Coming closer to the dark mysteries of the ocean, he guessed, than any Water Bear since the very first explorers entered the ocean and found themselves drifting downward, helplessly. And then 'poof', you were at the bottom and you would have to make do with what you found. Time to get a slug for yourself and set up a society.

"How long he continued in this way, he couldn't tell. Soon enough he stopped thinking about it altogether. He liked that there was nothing happening. There had never been less happening to him, he thought. He opened or closed his filmy eyelids and there was no change. Except for the feeling of his paws in the sand, there were no sensations to speak of. Just the intense cold. But he had spent nearly

all his life in this cold. If need be, go far enough, his experience told him, and you found heat.

"So he was a little disappointed when he felt the ground slope ever so gently upward. But he kept going, and he figured the strain he felt in his stubby legs was probably healthy. But after however many hours or days, the ground, as if the floor of the ocean were now lifting itself out of nowhere, or exploding in slow motion, began to slope *quite dramatically* upward. At this point he paused. He knew that his body might not be able to handle this much exercise. After even a couple of tentative steps his muscle fibers groaned.

"He realized just then that he was standing at the very bottom of the ocean's exit. He stared upward: the darkness hadn't changed. But somewhere, an eternity above, light would start to penetrate. He'd heard legends all his life about the light at the top of the world. Brighter than anything he could imagine. And he was worried that his segmented eyeballs would be too weak. But as he nudged his face into the cold, sloping sand he remembered the boiling heat that had never hurt him. Water Bears dwelled at the extremes, he always said. The darkness and the pure light were the two things he was made for. And so he waddled, bit by bit, up the steep ocean wall. His nerves screamed at him until they began to learn. It may have taken him a year, but sooner or later he either forgot about the pain or had made himself ten times as strong by will alone.

"He would slide and scramble - his flimsy paws could find little hold on the various layers and textures of rock. He could still hear the occasional fish pass behind him and chortle dismissively, a faint glow thrown over the wall. But once he reached a physically sublime, oblivious trance, he hardly noticed whether he was taking two steps forward and one back, or whether he was being watched. He went on constantly in this way until he began to feel meager warmth on the top of his head. He closed his eyes as it grew more obvious. Home became an afterthought.

"And then a front paw stumbled onto a stretch of alarming flatness. He opened his eyes and gasped: he was coated in a brightness somewhat weaker than the slug, but that was spread generally over the whole of creation. His eyes popped and strained. Light could be everywhere, he marveled to himself. In front of him was a small plateau. Above it, an apparently infinite stretch of sea wall. He clambered up to the level and rolled onto his back. The light was even stronger the further up it went - except in a uniform layer, like a billion glowing deep-sea animals crammed together and fastened to the ceiling.

"Struck dumb, and just when he thought he had to give up on this overwhelming new uniform atmosphere, and either float back down to his rightful place or go further until he could be comfortable up at the source of a blinding light, a spot began to show on the undisturbed blue above. The Water Bear frowned. Something else was coming to taunt

him. Life forms at all levels were in on it, he thought. Somebody sent word up this far: 'a Moss Piglet is coming!' some orb fish probably said. 'Imagine that. Tell all your friends to be on the lookout!'

"But as the spot grew larger, no laughter came with it. It wobbled and wandered from side to side as it drifted down. The bottom of it was bright and white-ish, clean and gleaming. The Water Bear realized it was approaching him pretty fast; streaks of coloring began to show on its underside. The Water Bear got scared as he got the sense that the thing would drop and squish him without ever knowing he was there. He rolled feverishly to get back on his feet. But a second later the thing bumped into the sea wall a distance above the Water Bear with a dull clunk. It made a gurgling noise, shook for a moment, and hung suspended in place. It bobbed and adjusted itself to float further from the wall. The Water Bear heaved once more and got to his feet. He stared up and the thing was getting bigger - huge, even - and he could see short tentacles sticking out to one side - it had a shell, whatever it was. He thought of crustaceans and his gut churned.

"The Water Bear turned to face the open ocean. The gigantic shape floated down from the upper bound of his vision, a short distance ahead. He almost gasped as it passed by and he recognized it for what it was. It was a mess of waving tentacles and flesh poking out from a striped, red and pearl shell - the shell a perfect spiral

curling inward to an unthinkable, fleshy point at the center: a Nautilus, he realized. He had heard tell of these animals, too. They were notorious, in that nothing about them glowed. This was a refreshing idea to Water Bears at the bottom of the ocean, where it seemed the only way to get attention was to be made of stuff that flashed all the time. The Nautilus floated gently but quickly down, puffing water out of its front valve in small convulsive movements that sent it jutting incrementally sideways. The Water Bear drooped as the Nautilus wobbled past. It was moving on.

“He let out a sorrowful groan, and was almost ready to turn back around, when he heard the Nautilus shoot a jet of water that sent it zooming back to just above his level. It sank gently down below him, then pumped itself up again. He couldn’t tell if it had eyes. Maybe it had heard him groan and become curious. It now hovered over a range from just above to below the Water Bear, extending a tentacle many times his length. With each pass it came nearer, the tentacle groping around on the plateau, the Water Bear frozen, waiting, until it passed along his body and quivered in surprise at the contact. The Nautilus moved with surprising delicacy for its size. As huge as the ‘boats’ you heard about in horror stories, he imagined. It came closer to the ledge and hovered now over a smaller range as it studied the Water Bear. He, for his part, had never been shown anything in light this constant: every part of the Nautilus’s body was clear, and radiated warmth.



Except, the warmth was between boiling and freezing, which he didn't know could happen and was sort of unsettling.

"'Where do you come from?' the Nautilus said.

"'From the floor of the ocean,' the Water Bear shouted, worried for his tiny voice.

"'You don't have to shout, I can hear you,' the Nautilus said.

"The Water Bear's eyes went wide and his mouth nodules gaped open, rather despite himself. 'Alright,' he said, shaking his head to clear his addled mind. 'Where do you come from?'

"'I live in the shallows.'

"The Water Bear gasped. 'The surface?' he yelled.

"The Nautilus jolted and zoomed higher, then got itself under control. It tucked in its tentacles. 'Yes that's right. You've not been near the surface, have you?'

"The Water Bear shook his head, forgetting for a moment that it couldn't see. 'Oh,' he said, catching himself. 'No, never.'

"The Nautilus gurgled and hummed. 'The surface is fine. But I like to come to the middle sometimes, too.'

"The Water Bear's eyes lit up. 'Are we at the middle, really?' He stretched his head up to its full extent, elongating his body, feeling all sorts of new sensations..."

Henry's foot slipped and he slid down the wall a ways before he caught himself. "Woah, wait," he said. He shook

his head and saw stars burst over his eyes. He got himself upright, leaned slightly to the left to peer into the bedroom, and saw her sitting upright now, leaning toward the other people on the mattress out of sight, no longer speaking. She laughed quietly, as did someone else in there with her. But there were only two laughs; Henry was pretty sure more than two people had been there before. He worried for a second that people might have come and gone while he was listening, that he had zoned out just that far.

He heard the sounds and grunts of people shifting in the room, so he glanced back in to see her standing now. He panicked for a moment and turned to face the living room, leaning against the arch in a way he guessed might seem casual enough. Footsteps and chatter were coming out of the bedroom into the hall.

"Oh hey, Henry," he heard his friend Todd say behind him. Henry flinched and turned his head and nodded, and slid back into the hall to make room to pass through the arch. Todd paused and finished off the contents of the mug in his hand. "So what's been going on out here?"

Henry shrugged and realized his forehead was a little sweaty and passed a hand over it. "I don't know, I've just been hopping about," he said.

"Hopping, you say? Sounds normal and fun."

"Well what was happening in that bedroom?"

"That's the girl I know who lives here. She was telling us a story!"

"Yeah, I heard that."

Todd laughed. "So yeah, you really hopped far-and-wide, didn't you?"

Henry smiled sheepishly. "Wait, who was the 'us' in there?"

"Her other two roommates and I. They wanted to go to bed, apparently."

"Bedtime story?"

"Yeah, I guess. They had long days today, they said? I don't really know, but I was interested so she let me come too." Henry nodded and glanced down the hall to the front door, but it was dark and quiet. "Anyway, she tells a story pretty well," Todd said, shrugging.

"Yeah, seemed that way," Henry said.

Todd looked blankly at him. But then there were footsteps behind them, and she stepped into the hall and closed the bedroom door. She smiled at both of them.

"So, Meredith," Todd said as she stepped toward them, "this is my friend Henry."

She stuck out her hand and Henry took it. He looked her in the eyes and tried to appear a little distracted but pleased at the sudden introduction, as if he hadn't spent the last - how long, really? - eavesdropping on her very long story. But he wasn't totally sure how to do that. Her eyes looked friendly, but no different than people's eyes ever look when they get introduced to a friend of a friend at a party they're hosting. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"Yeah, likewise." Henry nodded. They kept shaking hands for a moment too long, then dropped them hastily.

Todd smiled. "We also work together!" he said to Meredith.

"Oh, cool!" she said. Henry looked at his shoes. Her voice sounded a little more normal now. Nice, but grounded.

"And we were just talking, and Henry heard some of your story too, and he liked it a lot!"

Henry felt himself turn bright red and was thankful the hall was so dark. Meredith's eyes widened.

"Really?" she said, sounding enthusiastic. "That old thing!"

"Ha ha, yeah," Henry said. "Well, it was definitely unique." She smiled at him, her eyes seeming to soften a little. "Why did you just end it suddenly?" he said. Todd squinted at him, looking suspicious.

"My roommates fell asleep all curled up together, so we figured that got the job done," Meredith said. Henry smiled and felt relieved that the story didn't simply end that way.

Todd clapped his hands together. "So, you want to come to the kitchen for a drink with us, Henry?"

"Yeah, sure," Henry said, and glanced rapidly at both of them. They both smiled, and he stood back as they passed through the arch.

He followed them, and now the world was much louder. He bumped into a few shoulders as he maneuvered through the

crowd, which seemed busier and tighter now than he remembered. He had a sinking feeling as he wondered again if people had come in the front door and just passed right by him, looking like some kind of a drunk or recluse. One especially tall person in the crowd glanced a couple times in his direction as he approached. Henry had to get a lot closer before he could make out who it was in the relative darkness. But in a glance of a split-second he saw it was Will, whom he hadn't spoken to in - well, he didn't even know how long. He stayed focused on Todd's back, and tried not to notice if Will was still watching him or bother to confirm if he had even really noticed him to begin with. Henry just slithered through the crowd and tried not to dwell on the warmth of all those bodies crammed in a room together, or else he would start to get all bothered and sweaty.

He relaxed somewhat when he felt he had slipped past Will. He felt a little bad. But he definitely wouldn't feel comfortable talking to him when it was all sudden like that. Anyway, that was a problem for later. As he pushed through into the kitchen, he realized it had been quite some time since he'd seen Francis, for that matter. Certainly not since they'd been out of college, at least.

There was one light on in the kitchen but it was still rather dim. With the windows open onto the fire escape at the side of the building, it was quite refreshingly cool in there, Henry thought. The rain had stopped and a small

breeze played around the window. Meredith and Todd were fetching glasses from cupboards and various ingredients from the counter by the time Henry walked in. He stuck his hands in his pockets and figured he'd wait his turn.

"So, wait, Meredith, where did that story come from?" he said.

She laughed as she flitted about the kitchen. "Well, you know what, my uncle was a marine biologist!"

"Oh, wow, okay...so was he just an unusually imaginative marine biologist?" Henry said. Todd leaned against the counter with his drink and smiled at him, which Henry tried to ignore but made him increasingly uncomfortable anyway.

"I think of it as, like, a combination of stuff a marine biologist would find interesting and a story your weird uncle would tell you. You feel me?"

"I feel you."

She quit chopping and clinking ice and whatever else it was she was doing, twirled around, shoved a glass in his hand and dropped a slice of lime in it. He stuck his nose in and sniffed but it just smelled like lime, and fizz maybe. "But I'm glad you're so interested," she said.

Todd cleared his throat and turned to inspect the goings-on in the living room. Meredith finished fashioning a drink for herself and glanced in there as well.

"Ugh, I don't really need to go back among the people, do I?" she said. "I mean, my roommates are sleeping, the

party's kind of on autopilot, maybe my job should be done?" Todd grunted his agreement and smiled at both of them. "Alright, fuck it," she said. "Let's go sit on the fire escape."

She set her glass down outside ahead of her and clambered through the window. Henry went along and got through with some awkward, fast contortion. The two of them slid down the wet iron grille to make room, but then they both turned back and Todd was nowhere to be seen. Meredith shrugged. Henry frowned and faced forward. He kept placing his hands on the wet metal reflexively, but finally laid them in his lap. To his left, Meredith was leaning against the wall quite peacefully and resting the glass on her knee. The fire escape was set in the narrow gap between this building and the next. Henry looked out toward the street to the left; about all he could see was the huge, glaring, neon yellow-green sign for the sleazy-looking Mexican restaurant across the street. It seemed like the storefront should take up half the block, going by the proportions of the slice Henry could see in the gap between buildings. He tried to avoid looking at it. He felt like it was watching him.

He glanced at Meredith and her eyes were closed. He waited, but then she cracked all the knuckles of her right hand.

"Did that all come straight from memory?"

She looked at him but kept her head leaning on the

brick wall. "The story?" she said. Henry nodded. "Well, a lot of it, yeah. Or at least, I remember certain phrases early on better. But then I forget more and I make up some stuff as I go along."

"Oh..." he said, his mouth hanging open. "Well it's very impressive, if you're just making a lot of that up."

"Thank you. And yeah, it's gotten a lot longer over the years." She laughed and twirled the ice in her glass. She pressed it to her forehead. The night wasn't so hot, Henry thought. The rain had cooled it down. But even so, he could feel heat radiating from the mass of bodies behind him. He took a drink. It tasted elegantly of lime.

"What happens in the end?"

"Huh?" she said, quietly, still sounding disoriented.

"With the Nautilus...what happens at the end?"

"Oh...well..." She sat up straighter. "They talk for a little while. And he tells the Water Bear not to worry so much."

"That's it?"

She shrugged. "Basically."

Henry frowned. "It's just, there's a lot more going on when you actually tell it."

"I think that's the best summary I can manage. Having to tell that whole thing fries my brain a little." She laughed to herself.

Henry scratched at a bit of paint peeling off the metal. "Okay, fair enough," he said. She turned quiet



again. He could feel that yellowish glow on his face, and he could see it on his hands. He heard a door opening and looked to the street. Two men in aprons were stepping out of the restaurant, now lighting cigarettes and standing where he could see them between the buildings. They were joking together, loudly, cackling openly across the night. The sound got trapped between the two buildings and echoed like crazy. Henry scrunched his face up and stared at them.

"What are you making that face at, huh?" Meredith said. She was watching him now, smiling, rocking her glass on the bars under her.

"Oh...I don't know," Henry said, still staring, his face still contorted.

She looked in the same direction, then back at him. "Those dudes over there? What's so fascinating?"

The two cooks laughed uproariously, and somebody turned the lights off inside the restaurant itself. Henry shook his head. On the dark street, in between these dark buildings, the sign was now the only close light source. He closed his eyes and he could see it glowing there nearly as strong. Their bouts of laughter got louder all the time.

He looked at Meredith and frowned. She looked concerned, and nice, and pretty but for the sickly yellow glow on her cheek, and he wanted to be able to talk to her - about the story, he thought immediately, but probably not just? - but those nasty, taunting men across the way and their gross, unavoidable sign wouldn't allow it.

"I think I just have to go back inside," Henry said. She frowned, and her eyebrows furrowed slightly. "But maybe just for now, I think-"

"That's fine," she said. "We can go back inside." She turned away from him, and her words hung in the short silence between the cooks' laughter. By now, he thought, her voice had become pretty normal. As if what was left of the story had drained out of her. She was looking away at the big sign. She kept doing so as he climbed back through the window. He looked back, and couldn't grasp why she didn't seem fazed, even though they kept laughing at her right to her face while they held her in their light-trap.

## Landscape with Train, June 8, 1968

The bed of the truck rocks back and forth when we move around but the grass and the tracks and the people in front of it hold still. It's a new truck and it's sort of bouncy. The truck moves around and creaks a lot though the people standing around it don't pay much attention. There are many more people than at the house this morning, but no one cares how much I can make the bed of the truck rock back and forth. And now there's a mouse that runs between my feet. Some people point in one direction down the tracks. I look in that direction, but there's nothing moving there yet. I have to just stare at the mouse.

I saw a mouse this morning, too. Somebody I couldn't see opened the bedroom door a little and I went in under the arm, and a hot towel ran over my face, but then when I got past it the room was hot anyway. Everyone left all kinds of things in there and they kept going in and out and

their legs crossed all over each other. Anna was lying in the bed in the center across from the window, the one you can use to watch the neighbors fighting in their living room. Now the curtain was pulled down most of the way. It looked like it should be an empty room because it was so dark, so since everybody kept going in and out so quickly they looked like they didn't know what they were doing, running into each other over an empty room. Dad bumped into me and I hit my elbow on the dresser and fell on the floor, and I lay there for a second in the corner because there were things I could see down there. A baseball and a flower petal and an old necklace of Anna's were blocking the mouse hole behind the dresser, but I could see the corner of it. Everything stayed still, like no one had been in or out for a while, like the mice I knew were there got stuck and had to find a new door. I never told anyone about the mice because they would go crazy. I would have told Anna because she would understand but she can't handle mice. She doesn't want to hurt the mice, but she doesn't want to hear about them. But that's okay, I can keep it a secret. I turned my head to the bed in the middle of the room but it was too dark to see anything under there, and it was all dark up there at the ceiling too, except I could guess how dusty it was. I stood up, and through all the legs I saw the things that so many people in the town had brought. There were flowers in plastic and some kind of cake in tin foil. A horn honked outside the window and I went over to it, I

didn't move the curtain but I could see out the bottom of it, and Dad was out there on the driveway standing at the door of his new truck that he didn't want us touching yet. He was shouting something at somebody but I couldn't hear what and he was waving his arms. There was a fuss outside, there were cars on the road and neighbors shouting. It looked like it was a different one from the fuss about Anna. I could see into the window next door past the truck, and the television was on and lots of people were moving in front of it, but between the people I could see Bobby Kennedy's face. Everyone had been pointing out the face to me and it was a big new television so I was sure it was his. A woman sat down in front of the screen and leaned her head on her palm, and she looked all worried. I looked back into the room but there wasn't anybody coming in and out anymore. I looked at Anna but her eyes were closed and there was something wet in the corner of her mouth that was bright in the bit of light from outside, and she wasn't going to tell me what the fuss was about, though I kept looking at her. I wanted to see if the dust from the ceiling came down to her face from the running around. My aunt walked in and picked up a bowl from the table next to the bed and the water in it spilled a little on the floor. For a second I wanted to ask her to wake up Anna so we could figure out what the fuss was about but she walked out of the room too fast.

My shoes are the same red as the bed of the truck and

I can't see the mouse, but now I can hear him scratching at the corner. And I wonder if he had to escape to the truck because he found a baseball and a flower and a necklace in front of his room. My brother does not notice it, his head is on a slant and I follow where his eyes are pointed and he must be looking at the telephone wire. It is shaking in the breeze. A little black bird rests on it for a minute and my brother looks away. On my birthday two weeks ago he didn't give me a card like Anna. He shrugged his shoulders when I talked to him and mumbled a lot. Later he shoved me out of the way to go to the bathroom because I was standing near the door. There are all kinds of people around us in a fuss and he isn't even watching them. The woman who cleans the house next door is standing a few feet away with her daughters, I haven't met them before but I've seen them walking back from school sometimes. They turn away much earlier than we do, at the street where there's a dead tree that got cut off at about my height a few years ago, but I'm taller than that now. Her daughters are sitting by themselves pulling up the brown grass and they have a sign lying on the ground, though there are so many people that a couple of them are standing on the sign. A few others have signs but they have them turned away like they don't want us to see them. People stand around really close together and don't look at each other. Dad has his head stuck in the door of the truck, maybe doing something but I can't see what. Maybe he doesn't want us to see what he's doing. He

still didn't want us touching the truck this morning but someone yelled something I couldn't hear clearly, so he came back in the house and did some chores in a hurry, I tried to follow him for a little bit but he was moving too fast so I gave up. Then he went back outside and Mom told us to follow him. He didn't stop us from following him but he didn't say anything during the drive over. The crowd goes far to the left and to the right over to the edge of the station platform and lots more people sit on the edge there and farther back than I can see. Sometimes someone glances up at the big clock over the station, it's old and it has been saying the same time for as long as I can remember, and they look back at their watches then cross their arms again, and they don't look at everybody else doing the same thing, like they're pretending they don't even notice it. It's just one person at a time and it is just the men who do it though. The sun is pretty far above the ground but it's almost like it's straight in front of my head since I'm above the ground too, it's just a little bit higher. The man in the police car wouldn't let us get any closer so the track looks a little far away and it is sort of blurry from the heat on top of the grass. He's leaning on the police car but he doesn't have his uniform on. So he might not be the policeman, he might be a liar. The mouse is still scratching at the corner of the truck and now my brother notices and we both watch him for a while. I don't know what we have to do for the mouse just

because he's riding in Dad's truck. I was going to keep him a secret when I saw his hole in the wall but now it is too late, he's not a secret when he's running in front of other people like he's not worried about getting found. Maybe he's scratching so he can get away because he thinks it was a mistake. But I didn't put him here, he did it all to himself. Now we can hear the train, and everybody's head snaps in that direction, to the left. Now everybody has one thing to look at. We went to a museum in Washington this year and my teacher talked about the thing in the picture everybody looks at. She had a name for it but I wasn't listening to her so closely. She slapped me on the wrist once because I lied about taking Leonard's pencil. She didn't do it in front of everybody, she waited until they went out at lunch and talked to me almost too quiet for me to hear. She stared at me without blinking but she just kept talking with the same look on her face, and it was like she didn't see me anymore. Later Leonard poked me in the side with the pencil, and it hurt but I just said something too quiet for him to hear, like he would think I was mad at him. And my brother didn't wait for me walking home, so I was late and I saw the two girls walking home, and they looked back at me once in a while but I just looked at the ground.

I stick both my hands in my pockets and squeeze my hands real hard. It's a lot louder all of a sudden and some people pick up their signs without moving their heads. It's



really loud but it's not moving as fast as most trains. I let my hands go, and I walk to the corner of the truck and pick up the little mouse and hold him up and he is hard to keep still, and he scratches my hand pretty badly but I keep a hold on him. He knows he messed up and I feel sorry for him. I lean over and drop him off the side to let him go, then I look up again and the train is on top of us and there's no other sound. I never knew Bobby Kennedy but when he died they had to put him on a train right away so I guess that's how you know he's important. Dad is standing next to the bed of the truck with his hands on his waist, his mouth is pressed shut so hard his lips turn white. The train is moving pretty slowly so you can think about each car as it passes you. Up front is the conductor who I guess is really responsible cause he got the important train, and I don't know what most of the other cars would be for. There aren't too many of them, but after I think about what they use each one for I look around me a little and most people are standing still, or some are waving and some are crying a little bit but nobody's yelling. And he's there somewhere in one of those cars. There are probably people serving lunch in there and there are probably others who stand next to Bobby Kennedy to make sure he stays in one place even though the train's moving pretty slowly. I raise my head and a bone pops in my neck which feels pretty good. I raise and lower it between the slow train and the brown grass. The train is passing through and even though it's

slow it's still moving much faster than everything else, so you can't think of it the same way as the things in front of you.

When I was on the train to New England and we were on the way to see my Grandmother and Grandfather I read a book since it took so long, but even with that you need to look up once in a while to make sure the stuff passing by outside is still there. But some of it looks like stuff in the book, because it's moving by so quickly that everything looks like everything, so you may as well make it look like whatever you want it to look like. I look around on the ground for the mouse but he moved on, and I could try to imagine what he's doing now but it's not a story it's just the ground. And anyway I know nobody would want to hear the mouse's story they would just want to kill it. I look back up at the train and it is most of the way past me. The windows are all black though so I have to imagine what is going on inside, besides the conductor, it is easy enough to know what he's doing but everybody else is a mystery. Bobby Kennedy maybe has to just lie there and look up at the ceiling or the backs of the people making sure he doesn't roll away. There is a man standing on a tree stump nearby, and it looks like it's about as tall as me if I were standing on the ground. He's taking pictures and I wonder if the people on the train can see him doing that, and if they are okay with having their pictures taken. There could be someone on the train who is taking pictures

of us too because it is an important train so they might want to have a man around taking pictures. I do not know if my brother and all of us would make a good picture. He is standing next to me with his hands in his pockets probably looking for a piece of gum, because he does that when he ignores you. But we are almost all standing still now so we are like a picture already. My brother sneezes, then sneezes again and sticks a piece of gum in his mouth, then stares at the wrapper. He looks back at the train when he sees I'm looking at him. Anna wouldn't have just stood here like me, doing nothing at all like my brother, but she couldn't be here, she has the chicken pox or something really bad and she couldn't tell me why everyone was so excited. Anna's face lying on the bed with its problems could've been a thing that everybody looked at but it wasn't. I don't know what my teacher called it but I'm not sure she knows what she's talking about. Maybe Anna doesn't have chicken pox but that is one I've heard before. The train is past us now and we can see a few men standing on the end of the caboose, the other part I know the name for. They are not waving, maybe because they're not sure if we're important or if we deserve a wave. My brother is probably not important so it's good that they're careful. Everyone around us is waving, and some are putting down their signs so they can wave too. Now the train is getting smaller and there is some grass waving behind it by the side of the track. My brother looks at the bed of the truck

then spits his gum off the side and it almost hits someone standing next to the truck. He goes to jump down over the edge and now you can barely see the train at all. Most of the crowd stays still watching it go, and Dad has a look that I don't remember seeing on his face before. He's shaking his jaw a little bit. He looks at me in the eyes. He doesn't usually let you look him in the eyes. Suddenly everybody gives up on the train and looks away and nobody looks at anybody, and they shuffle their feet and now Dad looks at me like I should get down from the truck, I guess because there's nothing everybody's looking at anymore.

I must take too long because my brother hops back onto the truck and grabs my hand and pulls me to the edge. I watch the back of his head while I follow him, but then he jumps to the ground and I can see where the train went off in the distance and the heat that's on top of the grass follows the train too. The waves of the heat are bigger now. Everybody is leaving in a fuss but I keep looking even though everybody else is not interested. They are getting interested in new things really fast. The heat looks bigger and stronger than everything else now. Like in the room Anna's face had the brightest light on it. Maybe it's like I'm watching Anna over the tracks far away. But then I don't know where the window would be out here, so I don't think that's right. I can see in my head that I was at the window and that I looked back at Anna, and I couldn't see much in the darkness but I could tell that her face was

different. I hadn't gotten anything for her like everyone else did, even though she remembered my birthday and talked about how important it was, how it was an important birthday, though I don't know what she meant. I watched the bed frame and all the blankets holding her in. I couldn't see much of it, but other parts of the room were even darker. The quilts and everything and the lace on top was all up around Anna's face, and her face looked like it wasn't part of her body anymore. It was lying on the pillow but I couldn't see her eyes. She might have been looking right at me. The nose was Anna's nose that I could tell had the same point as before, but the rest of the face looked heavy. It looked like it was red and thick and if the quilts weren't tight around it it would roll away and fall on the floor and look at the mouse hole, it wouldn't want to look at it because it didn't like mice, but it wouldn't be able to move because it was so heavy. And after everything it would have to wait for the mice to come in and out to make sure they were still in the house. No one was coming in and out of the room or the mouse hole, and I was the only one to make sure her face and the head with it didn't roll away to be with the mice. And then I would have to make up more stories for it because it would be down there in the dark. Her nose twitched and her face turned away from me and I jumped a little bit. I was surprised that she moved it instead of letting it roll away. I noticed I had a back ache because I had been twisting

around from the window for a while, so I looked back into the light, now suddenly it was bright so I stepped away, and more light came into the room and across where the rest of Anna's body should be. It sat on top of the bed and showed me picture frames and pans and dishes I hadn't seen before. There was a lot of noise coming from the other parts of the house now but some legs still walked quickly past the doorframe. I didn't want to just look at the doorframe or at that one part of the bed now that there was more light, so I looked at everything. There were the pictures with the family from before we were born, and I hadn't seen them in a long time. There was dust on them and I could see dust in the light coming through the window. I couldn't tell if there was any dust on Anna's face. My brother walked past the door, I could tell because the legs were smaller than the others and these legs were not in a hurry. And then I looked at all the other things in the room. I looked at them but I thought Anna could tell I was looking at everything other than her. I tried not to stare at her face but then I couldn't help it and I looked at every part of it.

I was looking at her face in my head and staring where the train had been for a while because Dad calls up at me and I look down and a lot of the people are gone from the station. Dad has his hands on his hips and looks at me with his eyebrows all scrunched together. The clock still says the same time. The sun is a little closer to the ground and

the air is even more wavy where the train was now. I could never see Anna too well but I can watch the haze pretty clearly. And I know I only imagined Bobby Kennedy without seeing him. The heat is floating a little bit and has spots like the dust you can see in light, and it swims around until the whole thing over the tracks is covered in light and dust. There's dust all over in the spot everyone used to look at once, but maybe it could still roll away. Anna's face might roll away but nobody is watching it, Bobby Kennedy is dead but he could roll away too so they watch that instead. I look down at my shoes. Bobby Kennedy brought the people and the mice out here and it was just me watching Anna in the room, except now I wasn't there because he took me too. Anna is covered in light and dust, and his train probably got heat all over it. And he made everybody choose one or the other. And now he took away this whole morning from me. I could have figured out how to talk to Anna but instead I was here watching him lie on a train when there were already people to make sure he didn't roll away. I look in the distance and the heat is still there, and getting bigger like it's mad at me and has something to say to me. I wait for the air to say what it wants to say but it stays quiet and moves around like it's just dust.

Dad is calling up to me. In the corner of my eye I see him drop his hands from his hips and turn away to the front of the truck and lean against it. I'm watching him now and

the air above his head isn't anything special. My brother got in the front of the truck and he's sitting there very still, I can see his back through the window and it's not moving at all. I can only see the side of Dad's face and I can feel the sun still strong on the side of my face. He looks back at me with wide eyes and starts tapping his foot. I squeeze my fists and I turn away and twist my shoes in the bed of the truck real hard and something sticks in my throat. The first thing I see between him and the heat far away is the man standing on the tree stump with his camera. He is facing the platform and taking a picture of the people walking in all different directions. They are all far apart now and most of them are far away. He takes the camera away from his eye and starts turning, and he takes pictures along the way. There's a lady with sunglasses standing next to the stump and she puts her hand on his leg. My eyes are a little watery and things are getting a little blurry in front of me but it doesn't look like he notices her doing that. I wonder if she touches his leg like that a lot and I wonder if he knows what it means. She looks up at him but he keeps taking pictures, so she looks around and sort of smiles a little at the people going past her. She looks at me and some water drips down my cheek and that makes me angry too. I wipe my face with my sleeve and she tilts her head. She takes off her sunglasses and I can't look at her. I have to look down at the truck. I move my foot and I see a bit of paint came off



where I rubbed my toe. My Dad comes over and stands in front of me and puts his hands on the truck and I cover the spot with my foot again. He looks a little angry or maybe frustrated and now it's kind of hard to breathe. He says I should come down but I just look away and try to catch my breath. The heat won't go away. And it's bigger now and it's twisting around and everything is more blurry around it. It feels hot around me and the sun is hot on my cheek. The lady puts her sunglasses away and looks at me and puts her hands on her hips and my face is wet but it's getting warmer in the sun. I have to blink a bit but I see her frown, and she looks sad. She's watching me and not the heat. Dad says my name, and then my middle name like he's serious.

I want to tell her that everyone is too excited about Bobby Kennedy. The man with the camera is doing the same thing, so she might understand. She touches his leg again and he lowers his camera and sees her, then he looks at me and just stares in my eyes and looks confused. He holds the camera in front of his stomach and won't stop staring at me. I have to look back down the tracks because I think everybody should really find something else to look at. Dad reaches out and touches my leg and as I look down at him I can see the lady move forward a little, but then she stops. I look Dad in the eyes and he asks me what's going on. I try to breathe more slowly and I blink enough that my eyes are clearer. The lady noticed him touching my leg and I

wonder if he means the same thing when he does it and I bet she wonders too. Maybe she wasn't sure either and she thinks he's doing it without knowing why. If he doesn't know what's going on then I think I have to tell him about Bobby Kennedy. I know I have to tell him about it, and it should be him instead of the lady because I know I need to ask him why he thought it was okay to come here. But even though he says he wants to know he still looks angry. I don't think he wants to hear it. I can't tell him about the way the air looks. My eyes are drier and it's clearer now, so now I'm not sure if I made the heat look like that like I was reading a book, one that had Bobby Kennedy in it. But in this book he was mean and made people do things even after he died. I don't know if I made Anna's face look like it did too. I think maybe I made up both of them. Dad might know what I mean, I know I could tell it to him and he could understand. But I need to start at the beginning, and he doesn't want to hear it. He would be mad with me like I had just told him about a mouse living in the wall. Now he's just breathing really hard. He's breathing really hard and his lips are going white again and he just stares at me so I stare back in his eyes, and the air around his face looks clear. I can tell the lady with the sunglasses and the man on the stump are still watching my head. And I don't think I could make them stop unless I could talk to them, but I can't talk to them. I can't say anything out loud so I just have to keep my tongue moving in my mouth so

I can say it to myself. I stop moving it for a second though so I can open my mouth. And though my mouth is kind of stiff because it feels like I haven't said anything in a few days, and my throat is stuffed and my eyes are itching, and Dad has a look on his face that's making me angry, and those people won't go away even though everybody else already did, I can hear myself say down to him that I don't want to go home yet.