IF I AM A STRANGER

by

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To my husband and for my mother.

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I. IF I AM A STRANGER

The truth was I knew Jimmy was dead before he hit the ground. Maybe his wrap was wrong or it was a bad jump or just a second of inattention, but the horse jerked Jimmy and he was thrown.

The night before, driving from Tucson to Albuquerque, a case of Coors Light between us on the seat, both of us drank like we were drowning in it. We pulled over at a rest stop near Socorro, and I'd gone to sleep with the weight of his head on my shoulder. Now, I looked at his hat in the dirt, the soles of his boots, and I knew he was dead.

The wisecracking announcers who usually teased the cowboys and the crowd were quiet. Across the arena, aluminum gates clanged as people rushed to let the ambulance through. The sky was black beyond the arena, and thousands of insects beat themselves against the lights. Someone behind me muttered a prayer. Medics ran to Jimmy's body, heels sinking in the loose brown dirt, their movements quick and jerky. One of the announcers said, "Let's give that cowboy a big round of applause, folks. Keep him in your thoughts and prayers tonight."

My whole life crumpled in the dust and I sat cemented to the stands, my hands pressed together in my lap. He was dead, and I saw the rest before me—my father, the son I'd left, and the big empty country where they waited.

***

My son, Casey, climbs the sixteen-foot windmill tower. Once he is up there, he lingers a few minutes, one hand on the tower and the other pointing towards the horizon. I wonder how the country looks to him: the rocky spine of the ridgelines, the slope of the bare hills down into the canyon, the grass cropped summer-short and burnt gray, maybe a cow and her calf, grazing in the mid-day heat.

He leans far enough to make my heart jump and shouts down at us. "It's really high up here," he says. "Not as high as the tanks at the water-station, but still pretty high." He looks at the two hundred barrel stock tank below him. "Not much water left." He holds up his hands, about a foot apart. "Like this much."

"Yep," Dad says. The edges of his mouth are upturned slightly. "Just pull the brake and tie the blade to the tower." He raises his voice so the words will carry to Casey, but he doesn't sound irritated or impatient—there's no edge to it.

Casey takes the bungee cord out of his back pocket and stretches to get a loop around the lowest blade.

"Now come on down, bud. We got work to do." There is a kindness I've never heard before and he pats him on the back. The boy's face breaks into a wide and toothy smile like Jimmy's, and my stomach twists until I look away.

Above us, the windmill creaks and moans, unable to turn and face the wind. When it's working, the spinning windmill drives the rods. At the bottom of the well, three hundred feet down, a little mechanical pump moves the water up the pipe. Something is wrong with the pump: the metal ball that push the water up the pipe is

corroded or jammed, or maybe the leather cups that hold the water in the cylinder are worn out.

We will have to pull the ten-foot long, steel rods by hand to get to the problem. Casey is responsible for catching each rod with a pipe wrench, while my father and I hold the slippery rod until it is secure. Then my father takes the wrench and unscrews the rod, and helps me guide the rod to the pile. It is the worst job on the ranch, dirty and difficult, made harder by the fact three are doing a job better suited for four. But even when Casey is slow with the wrench, my father says nothing but encouraging words. Gone is the impatience, the screaming and cursing, the contempt for a job not done to his liking.

We call the well Little Partnership, so named because of an old boundary, but the neighbors sold out to my grandfather during the Depression. The name stuck. The warm water the windmill brings up from the ground stinks like sulfur. The water seems poisoned, clouded with black sediment and so foul I can't imagine how the cows stomach it, but somehow they do. It stains my hands black, and I try not to touch my face, even to wipe away sweat. The sun, like a hand pressing on the crown of my head, and the heat rising from the white dirt are punishing. Soon the cattle will be coming to water and find a dry trough. I have to watch where I step to avoid splattered cow shit.

We finish pulling the rods and Dad decides it is time to take a break. I unpack lunch—bologna sandwiches, a crumpled bag of potato chips, and three warm Cokes—and watch Casey take the pair of blue handled channel-locks and thump them against the fencepost. The barbed wire vibrates the fence line with a high-tension twang that makes my fillings buzz.

My arms and shoulders ache, and I can smell myself, an onion stench under the sulfurous stink of the water. My skin is gritty with dirt, a drop of sweat trickles down my neck. I hate being dirty and tired and knowing there is still more work to do. There is always more work to do, one of the reasons I left when I was seventeen.

"What're you doing?" I say.

"Nothing," Casey says. He hits the fencepost again, this time with more force. He twists his wrist and flips the channel-locks open, then closed. "Just messing around."

I hold out a sandwich. "Lunch is ready," I say.

Casey's expression is set in flat disinterest. I've been back for six weeks, and my son is a stranger at nine, not fully formed. When he catches me trying to find his father or myself in his face, he always turns his head away. Only in unguarded moments can I really look at him, and then for only a second before I start to hurt. He is like a puzzle I can't quite put together, the pieces scattered: he has my eyes, the green of a stagnant pond, and he looks like his father around the mouth, has the same toothy grin.

***

I met Jimmy when I was sixteen and he was nineteen, at the Fourth of July PRCA rodeo at the Sherriff's Posse Arena in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

The night was hot, and to the west big thunderheads crackled with lightning, the clouds too far away and on the wrong side of the river to do anyone any good. I shared a Coke out of a waxy paper cup with a friend from school and searched the crowd, trying to find someone—some boys—we knew. My father and I had fought earlier that day because he threatened to make me stay home, said I hadn't cleaned the barn to his

satisfaction. I stood there, checking the tips of my hair for split ends to heat him up, and waited for him to get mean. He always did, and then I could leave in a huff. He stepped back and said, "Get gone, you fucking lazy brat." And I walked to the truck, my jeans so tight I could hardly breathe.

But now I was here, and the saddle bronc riding started. The first guy was disqualified for failing to bring his spurs up in time, and the second guy was not much to watch, the slat-sided pony he drew too hungry to pitch. The rodeo was boring and amateurish. I yawned and then pinched my friend. "Let's go after this. Everybody's probably at the river, watching the fireworks." I was spending the night at her house in town.

The announcer chattered at the restless crowd. "And our next cowboy, well, he's almost a local boy. Hails from Lovington, New Mexico, just a few miles down that old dusty road. Jimmy Cummings is riding Tomahawk and this horse is an outlaw of the highest order. We're going to see some real pitching with this pair."

"I want to go to the dance after," my friend said. The horse pawed and snorted in the chute, and the cowboy sat himself, holding the rail. "You can hang in there a little while, Ruby. My folks won't be home from the Elks until after midnight, and they'll be drunk."

The cowboy nodded at the gate-man and the gate sprang open. The pinto horse burst out of the gate with a sudden jump, and then twisted to the right. With the hack rein pulled tight, the cowboy seemed to anticipate the turn and jump of the bucking horse as if he were *breaking* it and not just riding it for show. He stayed on while it twisted, all four

feet off the ground, him spurring it with all he had. I could see his spur rowels flash when he touched above the pinto's shoulder, and it was amazing, as if he'd slowed down the eight second ride. At the buzzer, he jumped off the bucking horse and doffed his white hat, bowed.

I jumped from my seat and hollered along with the crowd. We clapped for his score: an 87, the best of the night.

I spent the rest of the rodeo craning my neck to get another glimpse of the tall cowboy in the white hat.

At the dance, he lounged in the corner with a knot of cowboys. Thin framed and wiry, he was handsome in a rough way—blond hair curling out from under his hat and a big toothy grin. I'd make eye contact then look away, the heat of his stare spreading a blush across my face each time.

When I got up the guts to hold his gaze, he winked at me. Giddy, I bit my lip, looked at the sawdust. The band started a fast song, and he sauntered toward me, hat in hand, and asked me to dance. He smelled like sweat and rubbing alcohol, and was the best two-stepper. I could feel the pressure of his hand on the small of my back as he guided me around the dance floor, each little signal transmitted through him into me. I'd danced with other boys—the heavy-footed ones, the ones who pressed too close, or the ones who hooked a finger in a belt loop and dragged me across the floor—but Jimmy was different. In control.

We sneaked off to drink vodka out of a flask in the parking lot. He leaned me against his truck's dusty tailgate, and when he put his mouth on mine I tasted the mint gum he was chewing.

I spent the next four months meeting him after his rodeos and lying to my parents. When he was in the money, we'd get a motel room and have sex on a scratchy-sheeted king bed. When he wasn't, we'd drive on desert oilfield roads and do it in the cab of his truck. I'd come home with waffle pattern burns in strange places from the seat cover. I was pregnant by my seventeenth birthday.

***

Casey hits the fencepost again, swinging the channel-locks harder, and the barbed wire bounces and hums. He turns his head toward me, squinting his green eyes in the sun's glare.

"Why don't you come over here and eat?" I say. "Lay off that a minute."

He shakes his head. "I'm not hungry."

My father looks up from the worn out checks and leathers he is inspecting. "He's not doing anything. Just being a kid."

I narrow my eyes. "He needs to eat."

"I'm saying that he's fine."

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth and swallow hard. Casey stands between us, a sly grin spreading. He flips the channel-locks open and closed again. The two of them align against me, their own little team. I cross my arms and sit on the edge of the water trough. On the drive here, Dad had eased along at fifteen miles an hour,

watching for jackrabbits and cows, pointing out the arc of a hawk in flight to Casey. They had chatted about the cows in the pasture, about the last time it had really rained and the creek flooded. Casey had wondered if it would happen again this year. They had laughed together, and my father had sung "Strawberry Roan," an old cowboy tune, with Casey joining. I'd kept my tongue between my teeth.

Again the blue handle comes down, and the wire sings. He smiles, as the sound continues down the fence.

"Now you're going to sull up?" my father says. "That's familiar." The corners of his mouth turn up and he examines his sandwich.

"I'm not," I say. "It's just…" I have nothing good to say—it just crawls all over me.

Casey hits the fencepost again. The sound continues longer than before and he looks up at my father, his face puzzled. A buzzing cloud rises from the fencepost and surrounds Casey.

The yellow jackets fill the air, a furious cloud, like something out of a cartoon. The loud whine buzzes my brain and makes my teeth hurt. My dad shouts somewhere far away, and then he pushes past me and runs to Casey, grabs him, picks him up. He swats yellow jackets as he runs to the truck. I cover my face and put my head down, stumble to the truck, and open the passenger door.

Casey sits in the middle of the bench seat, welts swollen and bright red; his tongue hangs out, his breath is raspy and labored, and his cheeks are so swollen I can't see his eyes.

Dad is shouting at me, stabbing his pointing finger. "Get in the goddamned glove box. Get the fucking epipen, the fucking epipen out of the glove box. Get it, get it goddamn it," he says over and over.

His words barely register. I burn all over, each sting throbbing in time with my pulse. I open the glove box and a handful of receipts tumbles out. I start throwing junk on the floor: the slips of paper and manuals, the little red books my father uses to keep his tallies, a box of .22 shells, a pair of pliers, and a few flathead screwdrivers.

Dad crushes yellow jackets on my son, flapping his shirt to free the trapped ones and smashing them against the windshield. Casey grunts and rolls his head toward me, the bright pink of his tongue shocking: every little knobby taste bud, the shine of saliva coating it.

"Grab the fucking yellow pen," my father says. "Right there."

I see the yellow casing with black writing, thicker than a real pen, and grab it. Dad snatches it and jams it through Casey's dirty jeans into his thigh. The pen clicks, and Dad counts to ten under his breath.

"There you go, son. There you go. You'll feel better soon," he whispers to Casey. The boy nods, his head bobbing, his neck so weak it can't hold the weight. His breath is still raspy but a little less labored. Dad starts the truck and jerks it into gear. The tools on the tailgate scatter as he turns around, and they bounce in the dirt behind us.

"If you need something, if you feel worse, just let us know. I'm right here," Dad says. The truck shudders and lurches down the rocky dirt road.

"He's allergic to yellow jackets," my father says quietly. "He had his first reaction three years ago. At school." His hands are swollen from arthritis, his fingers crooked, but he squeezes the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles are bloodless and white. "I never did tell you about it. But we keep those pens around everywhere."

My father won't look at me, his eyes on the road as he speeds. Casey moans with each jostle of the truck, and with each moan, I feel a great anger building in my chest. I press my hand to my mouth to keep it from coming out. Casey could have died because I didn't know what to do. He could have just as easily been playing in the yard at home and stung by one instead of many.

"You weren't here," my father says.

***

When I told Jimmy I was pregnant, some part of me whispered he'd be gone before I could finish the sentence, like any rodeo cowboy would. I spent nights covered in a film of sweat, picturing his taillights dwindling in the dust. I couldn't think beyond Jimmy's reaction to the "what next." The thought of him racing away, stranding me in the same old dirt I'd always known, the possibility of being stuck on the ranch made dread creep up my throat. I dismissed the small hope that he'd take me away from this, just like he'd promised all those nights we were together.

I met him in a motel parking lot in Roswell. The weather had turned and a cold wind blew from the north, whipping dirt and trash across the asphalt. Tumbleweeds bumped through the lot, and it would have been funny if I weren't sick. I braced myself, ready to watch his face close, his eyes to start darting toward the horizon.

He folded his long legs into the truck, and threw an arm around me. "There's my darling," he said. He smelled like Bengay and cigarettes and leather, with a little horse mixed in. I tucked myself into the crook of his arm, wanting to be close one last time. His jeans creased a perfect line up the middle of his legs, his blue shirt soft under my cheek.

"I'm pregnant," I said. I held my breath to keep from sobbing.

"I wondered why your boobs looked bigger. You want to get married?"

His words drove the breath from me. I reached for the door handle and leaned out to puke on the pavement. Jimmy rubbed soft circles on the small of my back. "It'll be okay. We'll get it figured out," he kept saying. That was one of the things I loved about him: he took everything so easy. Win or lose, he went without complaint. I'd never seen him angry. Being with Jimmy was like coming in from a storm.

We spent the night at the motel, one more lie to my parents before the big truth, and the next morning he followed me the sixty miles home. I wished we were in the same vehicle, to see what he thought of the country. On the drive back to the ranch, it occurred to me that he might love it, that he might've chased me because of it, that he thought he'd step into my father's place when my folks got old. I turned up the radio and pressed the gas pedal, trying to leave those thoughts.

At the ranch, Jimmy opened the truck door for me and took my hand. "Don't worry too much," he said.

My father's cattle dogs barked behind the gate, showing their spotted tongues and the insides of their mouths. I spoke a word to them and they quieted, their tails gone wild

with wagging. The dogs pawed at Jimmy and danced around him on hind legs until my mother came and called them off. Jimmy tipped his hat and took her hand in his, and I watched a pink flush color her face. He had that effect.

When I told my parents I was pregnant, my father lifted his head from the *Livestock Weekly*, dark pouches under his eyes, his face shiny with sweat and grease.

"You've never been anything but a goddamned disappointment," he said. "Just another fuck-up." His voice was soft—none of the yelling I'd expected. He pointed a stubby finger at Jimmy and voiced my earlier fears. "And this piece of shit here. What, you think you've caught a ranch girl? Going to get you something better than what you've got now?" My face turned hot, the tips of my ears burning, and tears collected in the corners of my eyes. It was worse than all the insults, because he'd found the worst thing to say.

"I love your daughter. I don't have any interest in your ranch," Jimmy said. I blinked so hard a tear slipped down my cheek, and I had to put my hand on the back of a chair. I'd thought he loved me, he'd told me so, but somehow hearing it made me weak.

"I'd rather burn this place to the ground than let you get your son-of-a-bitching hands on it." My father stood. "I ought to kick the shit out of you."

"You can try it if you like, sir. But you've got a few years on me." Jimmy said. I imagined the fight—my dad took a short man's pride in being a dirty fighter, an eye gouger, a shin kicker. I'd never seen him fight anyone, but the stories he told when he was drunk had always scared me. Jimmy was a foot taller, but I couldn't see him fighting anyone. He saved his hands for the rides and avoided fights with his easy-going manner.

"I'm not a broke down rodeo cowboy, either," my father said. He moved toward Jimmy but my mother stepped between them. She'd been crying at the sink since I'd told them, her back turned like she couldn't stand to look at me.

"Quit it," she said. "Both of you. We can handle this," she said to me.

We married at the courthouse. He wore a Western sport coat, his good silver belly cowboy hat, and a bolo tie with a turquoise stone; I wore a cream-colored dress, the bump of the baby just barely showing when I turned sideways. We took one picture: Jimmy with his arm around me; I'm leaning into to him and we are looking at each other.

My mother decided I would stay on the ranch until the baby was born. The next six months were torture, being away from Jimmy all that time. I cried on the phone when he called—the connection always bad, his voice tinny from truck stop payphones. The roar of semis threatened to drown him out, and I thought of the miles between us, countless as the distance from the earth to the moon.

My father refused to speak to me, and my mother sewed piles of tiny clothes. They wouldn't let me go to town, afraid we'd run into one of our neighbors, so I watched cows graze the pasture, buzzards coast the thermals, clouds build and blow over. At times I stuffed my knuckle in my mouth, to plug a scream. I went for walks, heavy with baby, around the horse corral or down to the creek. The days stretched out, endless, and I'd fall into bed as soon as the sun went down, trying to sleep the time away.

Jimmy came to town the day after Casey was born. He smiled for a picture, Casey pink and tiny in his arms. In the far background, my dad sat in a hospital chair, his arms crossed and his face blank.

But the baby did something to my father. He was the only one who could put Casey to sleep with ease, and he marveled when Casey wrapped his little fingers around Dad's. He sang all the old cowboy songs to the baby in a surprisingly pleasant tenor. The songs made me sick: stampedes on the trail, cowboy-killing broncs, and "Little Joe the Wrangler will wrangle never more." Every one of them was bloody and sad.

Jimmy came to the ranch whenever he could between rodeos. We'd sleep crammed on my twin bed, the baby fussing in the bassinette. At night he'd talk in soft tones about the rodeo, what the other cowboys were up to, who was running around with whom. He moved up the standings, good money coming in. One night he said: "This is the only thing I've ever been good at. My whole life, I've stumbled around like a blind man, but when I get on a bronc, I just know."

I felt that way when I was with Jimmy.

When he'd leave, I'd hold the crying fit until he was out of sight. I was afraid he'd quit if he knew how unhappy I was, and I knew that would ruin him. I couldn't take it away from him, and I wanted that life for myself, as well, so I protected him from my tears.

***

The wheels spin out and throw gravel when we hit the highway, but Casey's breathing better. He asks for water and I look at Dad and he nods his permission. I hand Casey the thermos and help him lift it. He drinks greedily until my father says, "That's enough."

Dad drives fast, and the old ranch truck shakes as if it might come apart. There is no air conditioner, so the windows are rolled down, and paper swirls around the cab.

Tucked into the little canyons that fold the plain are shady places, where Russian-olive trees and big mesquite bushes put their roots deep and find secret water underground. Cows like to lie under these trees, and sometimes mothers put their calves under them while they go out for water or to graze.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes," Dad says. "You just hold on, okay?"

Casey nods and tries to smile, but his swollen face makes a mess of it. My instinct is to touch him, put my hand on his skin to comfort him. I think about all the times I haven't been here—when he was sick with a fever or the flu. A chickenpox scar, now distended, sits under his left eyebrow, and I can't remember if I even heard about when he'd had them. The skinned knees, cuts and bruises, times he'd come home from school upset when older kids who had teased him. All reminders of my absence, and now this new failure.

***

When the baby was six months old, I looked in the mirror and hardly recognized the woman there. My hair dull and flat: the shine gone, the ends brittle. The skin around my eyes was tender from crying, and my lips pale, my cheeks hollow.

My mother took pity on me.

"I can't stand to see this," she said. "What can I do? Do you want to go away?"

I nodded.

"We'll take Casey. You can't be on the road with a baby," she said. I didn't say it, but I knew of whole families who traveled from rodeo to rodeo, at least until the kids had to start school. The truth was, I didn't want to take the baby. He didn't trust me; he looked at me from my father's lap, shaking his rattle like an accusing finger. And I saw how much my father loved Casey. Sometimes I heard him talk to the baby about all the things they would do together, the kid horse and little saddle he'd already bought for Casey. When I watched them, something rose inside of me. It wasn't jealousy, but it was close.

The next time Jimmy called, nervous excitement made my stomach flip and roll. I thought about lying next to Jimmy in a queen-sized motel bed, rather than crammed together in my childhood twin, and I talked faster, trying to win him over. I thought about the long stretches of highway, putting miles under the wheels, and always new country to see—the green flat land of Texas, the prairie, the Rockies jutting up out of the ground, sharp and snow-tipped real mountains. The lights of bigger towns and then maybe cities, if Jimmy was successful. I thought about every night in a new place, about breathing different air, eating in restaurants, drinking and dancing. I thought of watching him ride, the thrill of those eight seconds filling me, and so I begged Jimmy for what I wanted.

"You want to leave the baby with your folks? Do you think that's a good idea?" He sounded tired.

"For a while. I can't stay here another minute. I'm going crazy. You don't know what it's like, being here. I miss you so bad I think I might die." I started crying then, and he made shushing sounds.

"You always said how mean your dad could be. Maybe we could take the baby with us instead," Jimmy said.

"No." I said, shocking myself with how final I sounded. "My dad loves Casey. More than he loves me. He's not mean anymore." I gripped the phone until my hand ached. "I want it be just the two of us, for a while. And then we'll come get him." I wanted to believe that was true, but I thought it would be hard to get the baby away from my dad once he'd had him.

Jimmy agreed and we set a date for him to come get me. When the day came, I felt happier than I had in months. Excited. Jimmy kissed the baby and my mother, shook hands with my father, and loaded my stuff into the truck.

I looked over my shoulder as we drove away. My mother held Casey. Jimmy stared straight ahead, his teeth were clenched and the muscles in his jaw jumping.

I wished Jimmy would drive faster, get us away from them. Rocks popped under the tires, and the wheel jerked as the truck slid into the ruts cut deep in the hard white dirt. We lurched to the right and then the left as Jimmy corrected his mistake.

"Rough road," he said. "Your dad ought to get a grader out here."

I started crying. The freedom of it, to be driving away from that place. Casey there, in my mother's arms.

"Do you want me to turn around? We can go back and get him," Jimmy said.

Away from the drought, the never-enough-money, the bottom falling out of the market, my father's heavy footsteps in after he'd drank a quart of whiskey. The dirty work, and so much of it, and no point or end to it, because there was always more tomorrow and the day after that. Driving twenty miles for a pack of smokes or a tank of gas, and even then the streets of Carlsbad deserted after eight p.m. I thought about the loneliness.

I wanted to get gone from there and it didn't matter what I left behind.

***

Now, I sit next to my son as my father races down the road, pushing the old truck above seventy miles an hour. The swelling is going down. I can see Casey's eyes: tears leak out of the corners, the whites bloodshot. I take his hand in mine and he doesn't pull away.

The hospital sits on the edge of town. The usual forty-five minute drive has taken us twenty-five minutes. Dad jumps out to tell them what had happened. Casey's breathing sounds a little worse.

"Does it hurt?" I say.

"Yeah," he says, his voice hoarse as if he's been screaming.

"They're mean little suckers," I say. He tries to laugh at that. After a minute, I ask, "Are you scared?"

"It makes you feel scared. Like the worst thing in the world has happened."

"You're going to be okay. Granddad knew what to do right away."

"Was my dad scared? When he died?" Casey asked.

I look at the hospital door. Soon an orderly will come out with a wheelchair, and take Casey to a small room, where a doctor will examine him. The nurses will be gentle and joke with him a little. But now he is sitting next to me in the ranch truck, and I am holding his hand.

"He didn't have time to be scared. It was over too soon."

And that is true. Jimmy didn't see the end coming—it was maybe one second of panic, when the horse twisted and he missed it, one instant of reaching out for something that wasn't there. And then nothing. I was the one who felt the slow dying, all the fear and regret and pain was mine as I watched the paramedics load his dead body into the ambulance. I knew I had to go back to the ranch, because I had nowhere else to go. Nothing left. Couldn't tag along to with the rodeo—the thought of another man was impossible. I'd never have another man. Jimmy was the only one.

Casey leans against the seat and closes his eyes. Despite the swelling, I can see Jimmy in his face. It presses the air out of me. This is the only thing left of him in the world, my life sitting here next to me. A nine-year-old boy with his father's face. I hold his hand in mine and wait.

II. MYSTERY

Alice and her brother had no interest in the church. They would have preferred to spend more time in Albuquerque, wandering one of the malls, spending money, and after they ran out of it, just looking at things they wanted, touching them with wistful fingers. They had driven to Albuquerque for her college orientation, and she was anxious about her future, ready to return to the comfort of home and her high school friends. But her mother, Cindy, insisted they go see the church.

It was ninety miles from Albuquerque to Chimayo, north past Santa Fe, traveling alongside the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, through the Indian reservations on either side of the road. This was before the casinos, so there was nothing to see but overgrazed land, a few poor looking cows and horses, and singlewide trailers. Squat piñon trees hunkered on the bare hillsides, and what grass there was, was seared brown by the drought. They passed the road to Los Alamos, where their aunt lived, driving through Espanola, traveling deeper into the Sangre de Cristos. Far up on those mountains a little snow hung on in the middle of summer.

Alice was sullen. Pissed off at this pointless trip, to see some old church. It was stupid. She and her brother kept fighting over the radio station, they were hungry, it was boring.

Her mother said nothing. She kept her hands on the wheel and drove north.

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The ranch was handed down from Cindy's father's side of the family—they settled in southeastern New Mexico in the 1880s. Her mother's beloved father died when she was sixteen, and she had always known that the ranch was her responsibility—her whole life revolved around it. She dropped out of college and married Alice's dad when she was twenty-one years old because she thought he was a good match: he came from a ranching family, knew the land, and was a good cowboy and an Agricultural Economics major. She didn't know he was also manic depressive, abusive, and an alcoholic.

Alice's parents had divorced the year before, and this was only the second vacation from the ranch Cindy had had in that time. Things were not going well—she'd gone to her banker to beg a loan for operating money, terrified she was going to have to sell the cows. Alice was leaving for college soon, and she served as her mother's confidant.

The years ahead would be lean, difficult for Cindy, and many times she would not know if she would be able to keep the ranch, or lose her family heritage.

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Alice and her brother didn't understand why she cared. They weren't Catholic—they were Episcopalian. They didn't believe in miracles. They were supposed to believe in hard work, not magic dirt from a hole in the ground. Alice was only fitfully religious, anyway. She responded to the ritual of church—the kneeling and standing and sitting, the stained glass, the way the priest pressed the communion wafer in her waiting palms, the sweet smelling wine in the silver chalice. But when she and her brother got bored

during the sermon, they would make eye contact and smirk. During Communion, her brother would grab the cup and drink much deeper than was necessary.

El Santuario de Chimayo might have seemed rustic and charming to someone who didn't grow up in New Mexico. But to her it was just another adobe structure, another dirt-colored Catholic church with a big gate and two bell towers, the same old beige-brown of every other building in northern New Mexico.

It was July, and there was a line to get into the place. Alice didn't want to get out—she had a new book. She wanted to sit in the hot truck with the windows rolled down and hold the hardback book in her hands, turn the crisp pages, and smell the fresh ink and paper.

Her mother grabbed her arm. "Get out of the truck," she said. "You are not ruining this for me."

Alice was that kind of teenager—fully capable of ruining things for everyone. She didn't travel well. She was embarrassed to be a tourist and embarrassed by the way her mother acted when away from home. Her cluelessness made Alice squirm, with her guidebooks and maps, her friendliness to strangers. There was nothing dignified about traveling with her family, and Alice's eye-rolling and loud sighs didn't make it any better.

She walked behind her mother, rubbing her sore arm. Her brother snickered at her, and she flipped him off.

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Their mother made them stand and read the informative sign in the parking lot. It went on about how El Santuario de Chimayo was the American Lourdes where people have been cured of disease, disfigurement, and handicaps. Alice had seen footage on the Albuquerque news of the pilgrims who came to worship during Holy Week, the thousands of people walking from Santa Fe to Chimayo, some of them walking shoeless or crawling the forty miles on their knees, every year. The sign recounted the legend: in 1813, a poor farmer was directed by God to dig at this place, where he found a wooden crucifix. The crucifix was removed from the spot three times, but kept returning, until it was decided that a church should be built on the sacred place. The sign went on to say that before the Spanish came to the area, the Native Americans considered the valley to be sacred. Alice rolled her eyes at this, but her mother seemed to entranced by all of this. She even read parts of it out loud, attempting to impress Alice and her brother.

But Alice was unimpressed.

Her mother knelt in one of the wooden pews, her back straight and her head bowed, her fingers laced together in front of her. She seemed out of place, her fine blond hair shining in the dim light. Unable to look at her in such a vulnerable position, Alice studied the Stations of the Cross, the brightly colored altar, the sad faces of the painted *santos*. The Virgin was particularly sad, looking off to one side, her head bowed and a look of infinite heartbreak on her face, as if she might start weeping at any second. Alice felt sorry for her, and for her Son, pinned and bloody at the altar, a spectacle. The Jesus on the altar at their church was Christ the King, beautiful, cold white marble, and robed splendidly, His wounded but not bloody hands outstretched, His holed, bare feet peeking

out from under His hem. On His head was a crown of glory, not the crown of thorns that pierced the wooden Catholic Jesus.

Her mother finished her prayers, and they moved with the crowd to the main attraction, the Sacristy. The dirt floor sloped under Alice's feet, and she was jostled by the people, the closeness of the adobe walls. Ahead of them in line was an old man in a wheel chair—he was so old Alice didn't know what he hoping to cure—his daughter or daughter-in-law pushed him and whispered in Spanish. Behind them were more people, tourists who illuminated the room with their camera flashes and laughed out loud. Believers mixed with the curious, the well pressed against the sick, and everyone took small steps, afraid to bump into each other.

It was dark, and the tall glass candles flickered. Religious pictures plastered the walls—the Holy Family together, the Virgin and Child, Jesus at all ages—and crutches. Crutches hung on every surface, rows and rows of them, old crutches made of wood, new metal crutches, leg braces, abandoned by the lame and infirm who no longer needed them. And canes, both the kind that old people use and the long white canes of the blind, along with arm braces and dark sunglasses.

It was terrifying and gross, a freak show. There was no way it could be real, all of these people walking away from their medical apparatuses. Alice recoiled at it all. Her mother seemed unaffected by it, moving through the dim room with her chin high, and Alice wondered what she thought about it. She had converted to Catholicism as a teenager, Alice knew, in attempt to pray her father back to health—she thought if she was a good enough Catholic he would stop having heart attacks. She had married Alice's dad

in the Catholic Church, and Alice was baptized there as a baby, so most of the iconography would have been familiar to her mother.

Alice and her brother were shocked into silence by the display, the tackiness of it, the crappy pictures of Jesus, and most of all, the sheer number of crutches. She caught his eye and arched her left brow, and he mimicked her gesture, looking like Belushi in *Animal House*. She mouthed *"Wow"* to him, and he stifled a giggle.

They entered El Posito. The room was unadorned, a relief after the Sacristy, and it was noticeably cooler, like a cave. In the center of the floor was a foot-wide hole filled with reddish dirt and a bright blue scoop. It looked like a child's beach toy, made for shaping sandcastles, Alice thought. A box of plastic sandwich bags sat on a small table, meant for the pilgrims to take the miraculous dirt with them; a sign tacked on the wall warned against playing in it. People used to eat the dirt, and now they mixed it with water and applied the paste to their wounds or afflictions, or simply gave it to their loved ones unable to make the trip.

Alice and her brother peered into the hole. She felt nothing besides mild disappointment, but she half expected her mother to take some of the dirt with her. She didn't, and Alice was relieved. She pointed at the sign on the wall and her mother smiled—probably thinking about an insensitive tourist plopping her toddler in the hole and taking a picture as the boy stuffed holy dirt in his mouth. It was nice to see her smile, and a weight Alice hadn't been aware of lifted off her chest, made it easier to breathe.

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A few years later, when she was dating a boy from Northern New Mexico, Alice told the boy about the trip she took with her mother, and he started laughing.

"You know where that shit comes from, right? They fill up ten gallon buckets of the stuff from the side of the hill. It's pretty funny people really believe in all of that."

They were standing outside of a party, under a feeble porch light. Moths darted frantically around the light, beating themselves against the bulb. Alice only told him the story to flirt with him, to show she knew a little about where he came from, to make him laugh. But now his laughter made her ears burn. The urge to defend her mother almost choked her, and she had to press her fingernails into her palm to keep from yelling at him. She was reduced to her most childish, wanted to rage and throw the words back at him: "You're stupid. People can believe what they want."

But she said nothing, just giggled and tossed her hair. How could she defend her mother when she didn't understand why they had gone there in the first place?

Alice didn't have the answer, but when she thought of it, she remembered leaving the church with her mother and brother. They went through the churchyard, passed the shrines and flickering candles. Her mother walked ahead of them, through the dappled shade, lit and dimmed alternately by the warm wind playing with the big cottonwood trees, her shoulders set, ready to face whatever was to come.

III. CENSUS

Corinne parked the car at the bottom of the hill, where Copper Street crossed McNeil Avenue, and gathered her clipboard, purse, and census forms. She checked her reflection in the window and smoothed her dark hair.

Old trees lined the avenue, and the Victorian houses, out of place in the high country of Southwestern New Mexico, sat back on green lawns. The residents had been made rich by the big copper mines, owned the smelters and the equipment contracts, and controlled the town. They made the decisions to hire and fire, and their maids, who opened the doors to Corrine, all had husbands who worked in the great pits outside of town.

Corinne and her best friend, Paula, had signed up together to take the 1950 census. They'd thought it would be a fun way to earn a little money. Corinne had her eyes on a pair of red patent leather Sabrina heels at the small department store in town, plus she had been bored at farm lately, tired of sitting and listening to the floors creak and the house settle. She wanted to get out of the country and into town for a few days.

Corinne had been assigned the nicest neighborhood Silver City, including the brothel that sat at the crest of the hill, which made Paula grab her arm and hiss jealously in her ear.

The brothel loomed over the neighborhood, and the longer Corrine knocked on doors and rang melodious chiming doorbells, the funnier it became: these wealthy and prominent people living next door to a whorehouse, within walking distance of it. She tallied the wives, children, and income of these men, and each step brought her closer to the place where they played. Paula's husband sometimes held business meetings at the brothel. Corinne imagined men discussing efficiency and output while prostitutes simpered and squirmed on their laps.

Corinne reached the top of the hill at lunchtime and realized the flaw in her plan. She thought it was a good idea to walk up the hill in the morning, surveying the houses on the right side of the street when she was still fresh, and walk down the hill in the afternoon, knocking on the doors on the left side when she was tired, but she had not factored in eating her lunch, which she'd left in the car. The sun made her dark hair hot, and her scalp prickled with sweat. Her girdle bit her at the waist and thighs.

The big house was quiet. A dog barked, and Corinne considered skipping the brothel, leaving it out of the count. There was no box on the form for "prostitute" or "madam."

Paula's face had been flushed with excitement at lunch after their census orientation. She wanted to discuss every detail.

"What do you think it will be like?" Paula said.

Corinne took a sip of her coffee. "I don't know. Just like a nice house, I suppose."

"Maybe something like out of a movie," Paula said. "Red velvet and dark wood and a lot of tassels. Tassels everywhere." She waved her hand around.

"I don't think men care much about tassels."

"I heard about a burlesque show that had a lot of tassels," Paula said. "But you're probably right, men don't go there for the furniture." She bit down on her dill spear and Corinne laughed.

Paula's husband was an administrator at the mine, who had gained prominence as a strikebreaker during the last big one. They had a nice house at the edge of town. Paula always wore pretty clothes and dyed her hair platinum blond. She had a bright, desperate sparkle, like a piece of costume jewelry, and fretted about wrinkles and her upper arms, constantly afraid of growing fat. Corinne loved Paula, but found the way she flapped around exhausting. Everything that happened to Paula was the worst or the best, and the thought of her disappointment, so much like a child's, now pushed Corinne toward the brothel.

She ran her palm over the wrought iron fence as she walked. The brothel's yard was twice the size of the other yards and manicured to perfection. Beautiful healthy rose bushes, heavy with white and pink blooms, spread out from their beds, and the hedge looked as though it had been trimmed with a level in hand. The grass was greener than the other lawns.

Her feet ached and a blister was forming on her big toe. Her stomach kept gurgling. At the last house, the woman who answered had sneered and slammed the door in her face. The shoes at the department store seemed far away, and not worth the price,

not worth having to walk for blocks and talk to prostitutes. Corinne missed her garden, the hummingbirds, her husband. He came in for lunch at this time of day, and she could see him eating the sandwich she had fixed for him before she left. She could almost taste it—a roast beef sandwich, on thick homemade bread, with mayo and a homegrown tomato. He would drink iced tea thick with sugar and eat some of the cookies she had baked the day before for.

She put her hand on the gate and pushed it open. It swung on discrete, uncomplaining hinges. She wondered if no one was home, if all the girls were out shopping or going to the movies or doing whatever prostitutes did during the day.

The doorbell chimed three familiar notes, and the doorknob was fancy—the brass-plated lion roared ferociously at her. She started composing the story in her head for Paula and smiled, imagining Paula's reaction.

Someone moved behind the frosted glass, and she sucked in her breath, ready for her speech. A motherly looking woman in her forties opened the door.

"Hello, my name is Corinne Stark and I am with the U.S. census. I would like to ask you a few short questions about the occupants of this house, if you have the time. Your participation would be most appreciated, as many important policies are determined by the results of the census."

The woman smiled. "Why, I would be happy to participate. Anything to serve my country." She put out her hand and Corinne shook it. "I'm Sally Thomas. I was just sitting down for lunch. Would you care to join me? Sara makes a delicious chicken salad."

Sally Thomas, the famous madam of Grant County, was not wearing a negligee or a dressing gown, her hair was not bright red, and her makeup was tasteful. She had blond hair, a more natural shade than Paula, who believed if you were going to go blond, you should go all the way. Her outfit was tasteful, suitable for a day around the house: a white, long-sleeved silk shirt, a pair of navy blue slacks, and white pumps. She had a generous figure and a pair of diamond studs in her ears. Her voice was low-pitched and pleasant, and Corinne thought she caught a whiff of Chanel no.5. The only startling thing about her was her nose, which took a dramatic turn to the left. Corinne's father had been an amateur boxer, and she recognized a badly set broken nose when she saw one.

"I'm not really supposed to." Corinne's stomach growled, and she peeked around the madam's shoulder. She realized if she didn't get into the house, her report to Paula would be lacking. "That's so kind of you, ma'am." She wanted to see the house, speak to this woman, and the feeling mixed up with her hunger, making her lightheaded.

The front parlor was sunny, and the furniture, which looked antique, fit perfectly. A beautiful Persian rug covered the honey-colored hardwood floor, and in one corner was a small bar, in the other, a fireplace. Sally arranged herself on a gold brocaded sofa with intricately carved arms and feet.

"Please, dear, sit down." Sally gestured to an armchair upholstered in the same rich material.

Corinne perched on the edge of the chair.

"You have beautiful posture," Sally said. "Look at your back, just ramrod straight. I appreciate that in a young lady."

"Thank you, ma'am. If I may, I'd like to ask you some questions."

"By all means. Let me call Sara and have her start on lunch." She pulled a tasseled cord, and somewhere a bell dinged.

Corinne bit off a giggle. Paula would be pleased to know there was at least one tassel in the house.

"How many adults reside in this house?" Corinne held her pencil at the ready.

"Oh, let's see. One of the girls just ran off—they're sadly prone to desertion—so that leaves ten girls, Sara and John, and myself. That makes thirteen. If I was a superstitious woman that might make me a bit nervous."

"And how many children?"

"No children," Sally said, with an edge to her voice. "My son lives at his school."

Of course she couldn't raise a child in a place like this, as nice as it seemed. Corinne wanted to see what the upstairs looked like, if the rest of the house was as lushly appointed and somehow as prim as this parlor.

"If you wouldn't mind, what are the races of the people who live in the house?" Corinne felt strange asking this, and in her brief experience people occasionally bristled at it, as though she was impinging on their whiteness by asking.

"I'm Irish, Sara and John are Polish, three of the girls are Mexican, one is a Negro, although she bills herself as a Nubian princess, one Navajo Indian, and the five others are white. I'm not sure of their exact origin."

Corinne marked the form as quickly as possible. "And the occupation of the money-earners in the family, or household?"

"I doubt you have a category for what we do, although I pay the same taxes as everyone else. I consider myself an entrepreneur, and the girls are entertainers. Sara is a maid, and John a driver."

A gray-headed woman with a sad, Old World air about her wheeled in a cart with two plates and a pitcher of lemonade. Ice cubes tinkled in cut crystal glasses, and the plates were a Limoges pattern with vines and flowers. Such a delicate pattern for a whorehouse—Corinne would be hesitant to set her own table with it, as understated and fragile as it seemed. But the simple elegance was undeniable, and she had the sudden desire to one day own something similar. She could see it laid out on her table, the gilt edges glinting in candlelight, linen napkins and lace tablecloth, the silver polished to gleaming. It seemed like the sort of thing she should be able to have, if not now then sometime in the future. But then she thought of setting the table for the men who came to work on the farm during harvest, the way the dirt clung under their fingernails, the way they scraped their plates with their forks to get every last bit of food. Her husband had told her that was how they showed that the food was good, that the urgent scraping was high praise.

Corinne took the plate and balanced it on her lap. The chicken salad looked delicious, and her stomach growled again. Corinne felt the weight of the woman's gaze.

"Go ahead, eat, dear. I'm sure you're hungry after such a long morning." Sally did not seem to be in a hurry to start her lunch.

"Not many women in this town have sat in this parlor and had lunch with me. They prefer to snub me in the streets. During the war, the girls and I made bandages all

day long, and I donated hundreds of dollars to all the different charities. Never received so much as a thank you note."

"Oh, that's terrible," Corinne said. The madam's steady gaze pressed on her, and she grew more fidgety each time she looked into Sally's flat green eyes.

"You are a pretty girl." Sally leaned closer, and Corinne definitely smelled Chanel no. 5. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No, ma'am. I grew up in San Francisco." During the war, Corrine had kept the books for an Italian butcher. She'd walk to work in her sensible black pumps, her skirt swishing around her calves, her white shirt crisp, passing the florist who sometimes gave her a calla lily, the old women with their market bags, the newspaper boys shouting on the corner. Now, she felt lucky if she went to town twice a week, if she got her hair done at the salon once a month.

"Why, it seems to me you've gone the wrong way. Why would anyone move from one of the most sophisticated cities in the country to a mining town like this?"

"My husband is from here. His family has a farm and ranch on the Mimbres."

During the war, her husband had sent her letters describing the farm in the foothills of the hulking Black Range Mountains and the smell of wet cottonwood leaves lining the irrigation ditch that ran by the house. He'd been specific about the house itself. Turned out, it was a wooden box. The floors creaked with the slightest pressure, and splintered with ease, until she had tired of picking splinters out of the soles of her feet and covered every inch with braided rugs.

Corinne was sweating through her shirt—the room was stuffy. Sally Thomas still hadn't taken a bite of her food, but continued to look at her in a way, appraising Corinne as if she were mechandise.

"So, you moved to this backward corner of the world for love. How sweet. I've known many girls who've made similar mistakes for the same reasons. What a beautiful complexion you have—so clear and pale."

"Oh, thank you." Corinne put her plate down on the coffee table and took a drink of the lemonade. It tasted bitter, the flavors unbalanced, and she swallowed it out of politeness.

"It is rather hot outside. All the girls are laid up, sulking in their rooms. They hate examination day." Sally took a big drink of lemonade. "Today's the day the doctor comes and looks them over. Old Dr. Kelly." She laughed and shook her head. "He's not happy unless he's up to his elbows in it."

Corinne cleared her throat. Dr. Kelly was her doctor. "I believe we've covered everything." She folded the sheet in two and reached for her purse. "Thank you so much for the lunch. That was very kind of you."

Sally just looked at Corinne with those flat green eyes. They were as dead and cold as a snake's. Corinne sat pinned to the chair, aware of the curve of her legs, crossed at the ankle like her mother always taught her. She wished the woman would say something. Girlish laughter drifted down the stairs, and Corinne started, but Sally didn't move.

"Kind, yes. I hate to think of a pretty girl like you wasting her talents on some farm." The woman reached up and caught Corinne's chin in her hand. "You could think of it as a day job."

Sally had cool, dry fingers, like a statue. Corinne didn't pull away. She wondered if she would be able to see the fingers' imprint when she looked in the mirror later.

Sally spoke in a low tone. "Such a pretty face. Nice teeth, a good, ladylike demeanor. Not a young girl, but a woman. Some men would pay for that."

Corinne relaxed under the woman's hand, let her chin rest in Sally's strong grip. It felt good to be supported, just as it felt good to be looked at. No one ever took the time to see her in that way—her husband treated her like a child, was so gentle, spent all of his time protecting her. The first time they had sex, she cried from the pain, and he stopped in the middle of it and refused to continue. She spent the rest of the honeymoon cajoling him. Every night she tried to walk out of the bathroom like a movie star, in the black negligee her mother had bought her, wearing red lipstick, her cheeks flushed with frustration and desire. At the Grand Canyon, she rubbed against him as she leaned over the rail, pretending to enjoy the view.

She thought about different men pumping away on top of her, hands on either side of her shoulders, big men and short men, asking for things she couldn't even conceive. Widowers and virgins and adulators paying to have her. Sweat sliding down the slope of these men's noses. She thought of Paula, who'd taken her by the arm and said: "It

wouldn't be such a bad way to earn a living. On your back. At least you wouldn't have to cook."

"I really must be going," Corinne said. "Thank you for your time."

The woman did not release her grip. "Think of all the things you could buy."

She had a vision of the longed for Sabrina heels, as red and shiny as twin apples, and then the other things—new clothes, glossy magazines. No more scrimping and saving. Again the men: foul breathed and cruel as they labored over her. Corinne wrenched her face away and stood up, banged her knee on the table. The plates and cups rattled. She stumbled to the door, clutching her purse and clipboard to her chest.

Something hard and difficult to swallow lodged in her throat—an old woman in her neighborhood back home had choked on a fishbone. The neighbors had found her when she started to stink. She was face down in her dinner plate, the rest of the fish stinking along with her. Corinne had thought that nothing could be worse than that. Now she was not so sure.

Halfway down the street, in sight of the car, the strap of her right sandal broke with a snap. She took another step and it flopped stupidly, almost tripping her. She knelt down and took off both shoes. The concrete was hot and hard on her feet, and she walked like a supplicant, tearing holes in her stockings as she went, toward the car.

Corinne fumbled with the car door, threw her things on the passenger seat, then gave herself a few minutes to sit gasping, before she put the key in the ignition. In the rearview mirror, she was flushed, her hair gone to frizz, and a thin string of blood came

from her lower lip. She must have bitten it during her flight. She studied her jaw line, looking for signs of the woman's fingers, but found none.

When Corinne knocked on Paula's door, she could hear the radio.

"What are you doing here?" Paula asked. She wore a pair of slacks and one of her husband's shirts. Corinne had never seen Paula without makeup; she looked washed out. Sick, almost. "What's wrong? Weren't you doing the census today?"

Corinne didn't know what to say, she stood in the doorway, her open hands held out to her friend. "I just—" she said. "I went to the madam's house." Corinne realized she was still in her torn stockings. "Can I borrow a pair of shoes? Mine broke."

"Was it amazing? You've got to tell me everything. I was eating lunch." Paula pulled Corinne by the wrist into the house, which was as cool and dark as a cave. Corinne stood in the entryway, waiting for her eyes to adjust, for things to come back into focus.

"Are you hungry? Do you want a sandwich?" Paula said from the kitchen. "At least have something to drink. Iced tea?"

"Why aren't you conducting the census?" Corinne asked, registering that Paula shouldn't have been home. She should have been going door to door with the same forms.

"Well, Richard decided I shouldn't. Wouldn't look good." She came out with two iced teas. "Just not done." Paula laughed and rubbed her wrist, and guided Corinne to the couch. "Now tell me what it was like. Did you see her? Did you see any girls?"

Corinne opened her mouth, ready spill all. Paula leaned close. Corinne could smell her perfume, some light and floral scent better suited to a girl than a woman, unlike the powdery Chanel no. 5 Sally Thomas wore. She remembered the appraising way the madam looked at her, as though she were a row of figures to be added for a total. And that moment, that awful moment, when Corinne had considered what Sally Thomas's offer.

"Disappointing," she said to Paula. "The maid wouldn't let me in. I kept looking over her shoulder, trying to get a peek, but nothing." Her lie spun out as easy as breathing.

"You've got to be kidding. Nothing?"

Corinne shrugged. "She wouldn't let me in. She hardly spoke English. It took me fifteen minutes to get through the questions. The whole time I stood sweating on the porch."

Paula sighed and rolled up her sleeves, revealing a fresh bruise on her right wrist. No, not a bruise, she realized—it was a handprint, the outline of four fingers on the top of her wrist and a thumb on the other side. A great sadness filled Corinne when she thought of the way Paula got the bruise, and she regretted her lie. Not so much that she had told it—she would never tell anyone what had happened at the brothel—but that she had told such a watered down version of it. She should have given Paula something, some little scrap. The bit about the tassel.

Paula rolled her sleeve back down, her face coloring, and Corinne felt even guiltier.

"I think I saw Dr. Kelly leave," Corinne said.

Paula smiled. "That dirty old goat." Paula rubbed her wrist again. "I bet Mrs. Kelly would be thrilled to hear that. She walks around this town like the Queen of Sheba." Her voice wavered at the end. "Richard…" she said.

When Paula looked up, her eyes shone with tears. Corinne blinked away her own. She would have to keep the lie tamped down inside her. It rested in the pit of her stomach, a squirming, nauseous feeling like a bundle of snakes.

"You should have come with me," Corinne said. "We could have gone together."

Paula nodded, and put her head on Corinne's shoulder. They sat in silence for a long time.

"I bet it's really nice in there. They probably serve everything on china. Crystal goblets," Corinne said, smoothing Paula's hair. It was as dry as straw. "Tassels everywhere. Not a bad place to be." Her friend's head on her shoulder verged on uncomfortable, but Corinne savored the heaviness holding her in her place.

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Corinne never told anyone what happened that day at the brothel, and gradually, she could think of it without shame rising in her. It had only been a moment, after all, one short moment in a life of them. A few years later, the county closed the loophole that had protected the brothel, and the madam shut down. Not long after, Sally Thomas died of a stroke.

Paula called Corinne when she saw the estate sale notice in the newspaper. "We've got to go. Everyone in town will be there."

Corinne agreed; she owed as much to Paula.

They had to park at the bottom of the hill. Corinne wanted to tell Paula about her dread the last time she made this trek, but she didn't. Paula's breath came in short bursts as she struggled to climb the hill.

Furniture was scattered in loose groupings on the lawn, as if by room: several poker tables, a long dining table with embroidered chair cushions, a big bed with a monstrously carved headboard. She noticed the "Sold" tag on the corner, and wondered who'd be brazen enough to take the madam's bed into their home. Corinne recognized the parlor furnishings, minus the chair she'd sat on. The old woman who had waited on Corinne stood in the middle of the furniture, looking like a lost child.

"Let's go inside." Paula grabbed Corinne and dragged her to the porch.

Paula turned the lion doorknob and opened it. A china hutch stood in the middle of the parlor. Corinne peered in; the china's gilt edges shone dully, the flowers and vines wreathing the outside as precious and delicate as she remembered. Twelve plates and saucers, nine cups with golden handles. Eleven salad plates, and a few serving dishes of different sizes. The Limoges china, after all this time, still made her burn. Corinne opened the hutch and removed one of the plates. It was cool, as cool as the madam's fingers. She flipped it over, to study the factory mark. A price tag marred the porcelain: $1.50. She did the calculations in her head; she could get the whole set for forty bucks, which would deplete her savings. She thought about setting her table with it, laying it out with the silver she'd inherited from her grandmother, serving holiday dinners for years.

Corinne caught the eye of the woman running the sale. "I'll take this," she said.

Paula came back, filled with stories about the bedrooms and holding a lamp with a red velvet shade. "Look at this. I have to have it." Paula took the plate from Corinne's hand. "Are you buying this? It's pretty. Subtle for a whorehouse."

Corinne watched the woman wrap the plates, thinking about breaking every plate, taking days to do it, savoring every moment. She could grind the porcelain to powder under her heels.

IV. THE NEW YOU

Melanie said it was her idea that Lucinda try out for "The New You." Melanie loved TV so much that her husband, Cal, had started cruising the bowling alley and the Western Shade for a woman who had other interests. None of us had the guts to tell her about Cal's indiscretions, so we held our tongues and agreed that Lucinda's appearance on "The New You" was her idea.

During the three months Lucinda was becoming new, we brought meals to her husband and daughter on a rotating schedule. Initially, Madison, her two-year-old, seemed sad and grabbed us by our pant legs every time we came over. Paul took our food and returned the empty casserole dishes and plastic containers without much conversation, too busy watching men weld things on the Discovery Channel, covering the baby's eyes when the camera zoomed in on the sparking blue arc.

The night of Lucinda's episode, we gathered at Melanie's house, because she had the biggest TV and her husband was out for the evening. We pressed our lips together at that little nugget of information, but said nothing. Melanie's table practically groaned under the weight of the food she had laid out: nachos and chicken wings, brownies and homemade donuts, chips and salsa and dips. We brought food as well—Carly's famous green chile enchilada casserole, SueAnn's seven layer dip, Rita's Better Than Sex Cake. There was hardly any place to put all of it, but we found a way. Melanie produced two

big bottles of wine—a white one and a pink one. We poured glasses and loaded up plates and chatted and smoked cigarettes while we waited.

Melanie's satellite was set to change the channel automatically when the show started, so when it flicked over we quieted and put down our plates. Before and after pictures of previous participants swirled: the woman with the lazy eye and gray teeth transformed into a confident, white-toothed blonde; the 300-pound man gastric-bypassed down to a more healthy 200; other women with wrinkles pulled taut and fat melted off. And then the shiny-haired hostess appeared and began talking about Lucinda from Artesia, New Mexico: her busted teeth, crooked and pushed together into overlap; those moles that spotted her face and arms and chest; that mannish chin; the brow like a caveman. And her fat. She was the fattest of all, and always had been since high school. And the nose—the nose was the worst, hooked like the Wicked Witch of the West.

They showed footage of Lucinda walking around the Super Wal-Mart, pushing a cart filled with TV dinners and snack cakes, not a single vegetable in sight. We shopped there, filled our carts with similar stuff. They showed Navajo Refinery's stacks, white smoke pouring out, putting whatever it was that made the town stink into the air. The feed store, the gas station where the old men hung out, and a beat up Ford pickup. It was Artesia, all right. But they didn't show the new buildings downtown: the renovated theater, the little park with the fountains paid for by one of the oil companies, the coffee shops where the secretaries ate lunch and we went on special occasions, dressed in our nicest clothes to blend in with the working women. They zoomed in on Lucinda's house, by the fairgrounds. The pitiful flowers she'd planted—we told her those flowers wouldn't

take, that it was too hot for them, but she'd planted them anyway. The camera focused on the wilted blooms, while Lucinda talked, her sweet voice sad: she felt trapped in her body, by her face, how she knew if she didn't get help things would only get worse, how alone she felt.

"I just want my daughter to be proud of me. I don't want her to be embarrassed when I pick her up from school." A photo of Madison filled the screen, all dimples and blond curls. "I don't want other kids to tell her that her mother is fat and ugly. A freak."

Now the camera focused on Lucinda, on the tears sliding down her wide face. She was repulsive. We never considered her *that* ugly, or that she felt that bad about it. SueAnn started crying, but she'd always been the most tender-hearted of us.

During the first commercial, we sat in silence, the food on our plates unappetizing. Several of us lit cigarettes and tapped the ash into pink ceramic ashtrays. Melanie left until the show resumed.

The hostess laid out the whole sad story of Lucinda's life. Born too poor to see a dentist, to eat right. Married to the first guy with whom she was serious, straight out of high school. (We all knew that she was easy in high school, gave it up to anyone who would take it, maybe trying to make up for her big soft body.) Twenty-five years old, with a two-year-old daughter, an ugly face, and all that extra fat. Trapped in a body, by face, in a shitty little town.

Carly broke the silence. "Well, she's not the only one. I mean, you think the rest of us have insurance?" She laughed a bitter cough. "My kids have never been to the

fucking dentist. You think I don't know that April's going to need braces? Tom wanted to keep his job at the refinery. He had to accept the benefits cut."

"Yeah," Rita said. She pinched her upper arm fat. "But not all of us get to go on TV and get everything for free."

Now Lucinda was at the dentist, and the camera zoomed in on her open mouth as the doctor shoved tools into it. Then she was at the gym with a trainer screaming at her. She struggled on the treadmill, half-moon sweat stains spreading under her armpits, back, and tits. In a sterile white room, the plastic surgeon drew on her face with a black marker, circling under-eye bags and sketching a new chin, a new nose. She took off the hospital gown and he outlined her fat thighs and stomach, the long smile of her cesarean scar hanging down. "Of course a breast lift and implants. We'll take you up to a full D."

Someone gasped. We watched them cut and scrape her face, watched the moles burn off with a laser's zap. Lucinda smiled, her face wrapped in bandages. Even when she threw up from the pain, she looked up with a wide smile. There would be more surgeries, more dental work, more treadmill, the work needed never-ending, although we knew the show was only an hour long.

That's when we began to catalogue the faults we found on each other, our gazes darting from face to face. Melanie was whip-thin, her teeth stained an ugly yellow, her nose hawkish. Rita hunched over, her pants tight, her upper arms as wide as hams, her bleached hair pulled into a sloppy ponytail. SueAnn's broad, pock-marked face, her mouth full of bad teeth, her unplucked eyebrows. Carly had been pretty, but her features

were lost in soft fat, her skin was oily, her part widening as her hair thinned. All faults we'd seen and catalogued before, but before, we'd always had our Lucinda.

Part of the show's gimmick was withholding the featured participant's new face with clever camera work until the end. We leaned forward for the big reveal. The shiny-haired hostess stood next to the distinguished doctor as he unwrapped Lucinda's bandages. A before picture appeared: Lucinda wearing a gray sports bra and a pair of gray boy-shorts, better to show all her fat and the yards of pale skin dotted with moles. The picture dissolved to the new Lucinda.

Melanie set her plate down so hard it rattled. We slumped, the breath knocked out of us, hearts jumping in our chests.

"She doesn't even look like herself," one of us said.

"I can't believe they did that to her," someone else said.

SueAnn started crying again, and Melanie reached over and hugged her. We stared at the new Lucinda: new cheekbones, new brow, new chin, new nose. Twenty-five pounds lighter. They'd dyed her hair a honey blonde that lit up her face. She was beautiful, but she looked as though they'd attached the most statistically beautiful features to a blank face. Botoxed brow, perfectly arched eyebrows, a much-reduced nose (Melanie said, "Looks like Jennifer Aniston's"), high cheekbones, an elegant chin.

"So that's the new Lucinda," one of us said. "Who would have guessed all that was there before?"

There was nothing else to bee seen or said. We made our way to cars through the cutting cold of the desert night. A stingy smattering of frozen rain hit our windshields like handfuls of ratshot.

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Lucinda had been back in Artesia for three weeks when Melanie invited her to join us at a new bar in Roswell the following Saturday. For three weeks, we'd ducked her, started going to Wal-Mart at eleven o'clock at night, pushed our carts around the pallets so we wouldn't risk meeting her. When her number came up on our caller ID, we let it ring. The local news ran a feature on her and we swore we'd never watch that channel again.

We'd been spurred to self-improvement. SueAnn lost five pounds on her diet, and Rita claimed she'd lost seven, but it was hard to tell. Melanie was quiet during this talk, ran her hands through her brown hair and drank wine, smoking cigarettes, saying nothing. She fiddled with the bracelet she wore, turned it round her thin left wrist. We glanced at her occasionally, nervous about what she was thinking, but she didn't say anything. We hadn't had a single moment of happiness since the show.

On Saturday, the wind blew out of the north in freezing gusts, and the clouds sped by overhead, in a hurry to get somewhere else. The forecast called for nighttime temps in the twenties and more wind, with a possibility of snow. We gathered at Melanie's, wearing slacks and puffy winter coats. Our shoes were sensible—only Melanie wore modest three-inch heels. We worked on each other's hair and makeup. Carly sold Mary

Kay, and she opened up her kit, as big as a suitcase, selected appropriate eye shadow and blush.

None of us had slept the night before, and Rita confessed she'd spent the night eating everything she could find in the house. "I took two pieces of bread, buttered them, and poured sugar on them. Sugar sandwiches," Rita said. She leaned her head on the heel of her hand.

"That's not a healthy choice," SueAnn said.

"Shut up, SueAnn," Melanie said.

SueAnn nodded, accepting her punishment.

"You know they gave her a new wardrobe. Worth five thousand dollars," Rita said. "None of her clothes fit her anymore."

"New clothes, new face, new tits," Melanie said. "Like one of those full-ride scholarships or something." She was bent over, plucking SueAnn's eyebrows. SueAnn's lower lip quivered each time Melanie jerked out a hair.

"That's a lot of money for clothes," Carly said. "Everything in my closet probably wouldn't add up to a thousand dollars."

"Me neither," said SueAnn. "Not even close, probably."

"Doesn't seem fair," said Melanie. The clock above the TV ticked in our silence. After a long moment, she said, "Not to me, at least."

As soon as we pulled up in Melanie's car, Lucinda ran down the sidewalk as though she'd been watching for us. She was maybe skinnier than on the show, but her makeup wasn't as well done, and she looked tired around the eyes. Her purple shirt-waist

dress and black high-heels seemed inappropriate for the weather, as did the black shawl she carried over one arm.

"Hi girls," she said, sliding into the front passenger seat we'd left open for her. Melanie kept her hands on the wheel while Lucinda fastened her seatbelt. "It's so good to see all of you. Do you have enough room back there?"

We shifted around in the backseat, our thighs rubbing together, and we nodded.

"Sure is sweet to let me have the front seat. I've missed you all so terribly. That whole time I just kept thinking about what you all were up to. I tried calling so many times."

"You look great," someone said.

Lucinda laughed and tossed her honeyed hair. Her perfume, apples and flowers, as fresh as spring, filled the car. Underneath that, we could smell each other, smoke and cheap hairspray. "It took a lot of work. Liposuction is the most painful thing ever. They just take a vacuum to all that fat. And the surgeries—they don't show how bad you look for a few days after. Like I had lost a fight. Or several."

"Huh," said Melanie, "isn't that interesting."

We headed north to Roswell. On the right, Navajo Refinery's smoke stacks sent great white clouds that stank like rotten eggs into the air. Yellow sodium lights lit up the refinery, the taller stacks were crowned by blinking red ones. Our husbands worked at the refinery, came home dirty and stinking, but after awhile the smell faded and we stopped noticing. The whole town smelled so bad that the Chamber of Commerce had

put up billboards that proclaimed "The Sweet Smell of Success" at the city limits. Like it was some kind of joke.

And then we were out in farm country, and when the farms gave way to the desert, the road grew dark. Melanie flicked the headlights on bright and stepped on the gas.

The road was flat and mostly straight, and we listened to the sound of the road under the tires until Rita complained the silence was getting to her and asked Lucinda to turn on some music. The radio was tuned to a Carlsbad country station, but the programming was beamed from a satellite, the voice of the DJs coming from somewhere far away. Occasionally, a gust of wind shook the car or blew a wall of dirt up in front of us.

"I've been talking to the producers," Lucinda said, as if she'd been carrying on a silent conversation the whole time. "They're interested in doing a follow up."

"That's nice!" SueAnn said. Carly elbowed her and SueAnn made a little grunt as the air was pressed out of her.

"Not a whole episode, but just a segment. But maybe, if they get enough footage…" she trailed off. "They would want to interview you guys, maybe. So you can talk about what it's been like for you. Seeing me after and everything."

"Oh yeah, that's great," Rita said, her voice tight and choked. Melanie caught her eye in the rearview mirror and shook her head.

"It's so fun to be on TV. And I've made so many positive changes in my life. I mean, I'm sort of an ambassador for a healthy lifestyle." She swiveled toward us. "It's hard here, though. Hard to shop—I'm lucky I got the wardrobe from the show."

"That's a pretty dress," Carly said.

"Thanks. Donna Karan. I love this color," Lucinda said. "You girls all look cute, too." After a minute, she said, "I'm working really hard. Got to keep the weight off. It'd be better if I lost some more, really. That's what the producers said. I've been working out for three hours a day. Lots of cardio."

"We've been dieting, too," Rita said. "Dieting like crazy. I'm hungry all the time. I about took Vince's head off the other day, I was so cranky."

"That happens. But my life coach always says: 'Fake it till you make it.' That's good advice. You have to push through the hunger. When I was on the show, I didn't have access to any of that junk I used to eat. And after a while, you just stop wanting it. After you put so much good food into your body, after it gets used to running on good fuel, you'll feel so much better. That's what my trainer says: 'the body is a machine—don't you want to put premium grade fuel in it.'"

"High octane." Melanie let out a whoop.

"That makes me want to puke," Carly said. "Who wants to think like that? Like you're a car. But then, you *have* had a lot of body work done."

We laughed then, a mean-spirited high school laugh.

"Come on now, girls, good times," Melanie said.

We quieted and settled in our seats. We were about fifteen miles from Roswell, and the countryside was empty—just creosote bushes and little bunches of grass cropped short, some mesquite bushes, when Melanie said, "I got to pee. I'm going to pull off on the next little road."

"We're not that far from town," Lucinda said.

"Since my second kid, my bladder isn't what it used to be. It'll just take a second." Melanie slowed to turn onto a dirt road. "Need to get away from the highway," she said. "Anybody else need to go?"

Melanie's car vibrated down the washboard road until the highway was out of sight. There was no one around for miles.

Something started to crack and spark inside of us, hot and alive, and it curdled our stomachs. Like a downed power-line jumping and arcing blue on the pavement. Our palms were sweaty, and it was hard to breath, as though someone was sitting on our chests. Excitement. We curled our hands into fists, cracked our knuckles. A nervous giggle tore loose from someone's throat.

Melanie stopped the car. "Be right back," she said.

We sat there, the radio fading in and out to static; Reba McEntire singing about the night the lights went out.

"It sure is taking her a long time," Lucinda said. Reba finished her song and then Carrie Underwood belted out her plans for her cheating man's vehicle.

Melanie knocked on Lucinda's window, opened her door. "I need to show you guys something," she said.

Something about her voice made us get out of the car without protests or questions. We gathered at the front of the car, squinting against the headlights. Lucinda rubbed her arms and shivered in the cold wind. It cut us too, the wind, but remotely. The electric spark kept us warm, and our hands, clinched to fists, begged for something to do. We turned our backs to the Roswell's orange glow, circled Lucinda and Melanie.

"What?" Lucinda said. "I don't see anything."

Melanie slapped her across the face, a flat smack that sounded final.

"Jesus, Melanie. What the fuck?" Lucinda said. Her eyes wide under her windswept hair, she looked from face to face, desperate for allies. She pressed the back of her hand to her cheek, and a tear trickled down, pulling a smear of mascara with it.

Melanie slapped her again, then grabbed her by the hair, twisted it up in her fist, and jerked Lucinda's head down. Melanie bent close to Lucinda's face, whispered: "You think you're better? Than us?"

The wind blew Lucinda's scream away.

And then we were on her, all of us, slapping and scratching and gouging. We busted her new nose. We grabbed her hair and pulled. We ripped her dress, the buttons popping and scattering in the dark. We hit her over and over again, and when she went to the ground, we kicked her. She lifted her head, the blood on her face dark in the glare of the headlights. We kicked until we were tired, and then we reached down and took her shoes, those fancy LA shoes she'd bought with someone else's money. The leather was so soft.

Melanie crouched next to her. "Turns out, Lucinda, that we don't care much for the new you."

Lucinda stared at us, blood coming from her mouth and nose, her face scratched by our clawing nails, and she no longer recognized us. We stood there for a minute. Carly's knuckles dripped blood, Rita's breath came in hard, wheezy gusts, SueAnn clenched the black shoes to her chest. Melanie's thin lips twisted into a smile, but tears streamed down her face. She wiped them off with the back of her hand and grinned at us. She nodded, and we turned to the car.

SueAnn got in the front seat, still holding those fancy shoes. Melanie put the car in reverse and backed up carefully. The car turned around and we headed to Roswell, to the new bar, to shoot pool and drink beer and margaritas, feeling like the old us for the first time in weeks.

V. FEET

We got to worrying about her feet— they were always her weak spot—like that old famous Greek with his heel, Achilles. Anyways, that was the worst thing about her being gone—those little white feet, with their terrible big purple scars. When she was born, her feet came out all tucked under, deflated, and when she was a year old, they went in and sawed them off and sewed them back on the right way.

So her feet always pained her, and she couldn't wear high heels to the prom like the other girls and one year she did wear them but had to kick them off in a corner and dance bare-footed—fifty dollars down the drain—but they were pretty shoes, sparkly gold with big chunky heels. All through high school and after, she waited tables at the restaurant and stood all day on those feet. We got to where that's all we could think about, those white flappy feet—flat as a pancake, and white like the sun never got to them. She'd take off her shoes and socks and put her feet up on the coffee table when she got home, first thing. She'd wiggle her toes as best she could and sigh. On her left foot, the second toe crossed over the big one, so that it always looked like the hopeful foot, like it was wishing for something.

Sometimes we'd rub her feet; they were always cold. We insisted that she wear the big woolen socks we knitted for her, pairs and pairs of thick socks made with our own

hands, the yarn we twined through our fingers and fed to the needles and pulled and knitted and purled. We gave her socks, homemade and store-bought.

When the police came round with that plastic bag with the muddy little run-over shoes and started asking questions, it's all we could think about, her feet.

Some might have made her into a cripple—our best friend, Linda, for instance, told us when she was still in her little casts, "Why, she'll never learn to walk—look at her."

And when she did start walking, right on time like any other baby, Linda said, "She won't learn to walk right."

But she did walk right, as right as anyone else, and Linda has a bit of a wobble to her, so her glass house is not exactly rock proof, if you take our meaning. Even when she got to middle school, Linda took us by the meaty part of our arm and hissed in our ears, "She can't take gym class, you go down to the school and get that waived."

We did no such thing, and while she didn't start the world on fire, she made A's in her gym class and ran on the track and played badminton and volleyball and gym hockey just like the rest of the girls. We never let any of that nonsense Linda spouted get to our girl, and the thought that she might be crippled or held back in some way made us weep.

When they found her little shoes on the bank of the river—

We don't like to think about that too much. We don't want to think of her walking around, barefoot on whatever bad dirt she came across, or worse, in that cold, black November water.

Black water, scummy and stinking. Her cold little feet.

All those sharp rocks and broken bottles waiting under the surface to cut her to shreds. Dead fish and the oil refinery stink—it makes our eyes water just to think of it.

They say that spill a few years ago had no effect on the water, that it is okay for us to let our children swim in the river, to eat the fish. We didn't buy that before, and we sure don't buy it now.

They still haven't found her, you know. She could be anywhere.

Those little white flapping feet, shoeless and naked wet, with that stinking black mud squelching between her toes, carrying her anywhere in this whole damned world she wants to go.

VI. PILLAR

After all was dust and ashes behind us, my husband put his bearded face between my bare breasts and laughed until tears ran down my skin. I flinched at the hot trickle of his joyful tears and the itch of his tangled beard, stained purple with wine and as thick as a ram's fleece. I hated him then, more than I hated him the night he had offered our daughters up to the men of the city, the same way one would offer a dipperful of well water to a thirsty stranger.

The air of the tent smelled like sulfur, goat meat, and his stink. He pulled my clothes off, pushed me down to the ground, and jammed himself into me. My daughters sat outside in the dark, picking at the carcass of the sacrifice that still smoldered on the fire. They had cried all night, their husbands-to-be destroyed in the city behind us, and now they covered their ears with their hands to block out the sound of us. I could see their slender backs through the tent when I turned my head away from his hot breath. They had cried as we ran, as if we had time for tears.

"What a powerful Lord I worship!" he said into my chest. "You've never seen one of your heathen gods do something like that, have you?"

"No," I said. I'd never seen one of my heathen gods do anything, except make it rain occasionally, when the conditions were right and the shaman did the right dance.

He started laughing. "All those gods. Gods for everything, every little rock and bush and dry lakebed. Cow gods, even. When I traded for you, you were nothing but an ignorant dirt-worshipper."

"Yes," I said.

"But look at where you are now. What I've done for you." He shoved his rough hand between my legs and started to snore.

I crawled out from under him and put my clothes back on, wincing as the rough cloth scraped against my skin. I felt raw, inside and out. My back was blistered through my clothes—we all had terrible sunburns from the heat of the city behind us as we fled across the plain. Even his back was blistered. His god didn't or couldn't protect him from the heat that set the scrub on fire and melted the sand beneath our feet into glass. As we ran, I could feel it like a giant hand pushing me along, the hand of his god made real.

The girls didn't look up when I came to the fire. They had their backs turned to the city, although we made sure to camp at the bottom of a small rise that blocked it from our view. The younger one had stuffed the ends of her hair in her mouth and was chewing on it, like a cow chews her cud, a habit from her childhood that made me gag. The matted hair was shiny with spit, and I swallowed the urge to slap her. The older one rocked back and forth to some unheard rhythm. They both stared into the fire, their blank eyes glittering as the wood popped and threw sparks.

They did not ask me the questions I thought they might have about the last night in the city. They were right in that, because I had no answers for them.

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When I met him, my arms were slim and brown, and three silver bangles danced on my right wrist, making a pleasant music when I drew water from the well my brothers dug. I think I must have been happy. I remember that my legs were long, and the muscles stood out when I pointed my toes. I was thirteen, younger than my youngest daughter is now.

He carried a staff and walked with a purpose that was alien to my tribe of farmers. His beard was long and streaked with gray. He approached my father and older brothers, who were standing in the shade, relaxing after the mid-day meal. My younger brothers had pulled some puppies from under the roots of the big tree, where the little bitch always made her nest, and they had kept bringing the puppies to my laughing father, until his arms were full of yapping, spotted pups.

I was learning to weave from my mother, and my fingers were beginning to develop calluses from the warp and the weft. I wrapped my hand around my wrist to quiet the bracelets and sat still at the loom, straining to hear the conversation, but the wind carried their voices away from me.

The next morning I was his, traded for two fine looking ewes and a ram. My sisters and mother dressed me in our traditional finery and our shaman bound our wrists together.

When we were out of sight of the camp, he cut us apart.

"All that nonsense," he said, throwing the woven rope aside. "We'll do it properly when we get back to my people. You should be glad, girl, that you are with me. I can give you much more than those ignorant savages ever could."

He called me girl for years.

That night, he set up his colorful tent by a creek—hardly more than a little trickle of water—and after he built the fire, he beckoned me to him. I stood by his side, my hands behind my back, and toed the red dirt.

"I expect you know how this is done," he said.

I nodded. I had a fairly good idea, having watched dogs and cats and cattle and sheep and goats and beetles in the dirt, and birds and once, by the reedy little lake, a pair of dragonflies hovering above the surface, hung together and glistening in the late afternoon light.

"It's often painful," he said, "for young ones like you, if you haven't already done it in the dirt with your cousins." He laughed, more a rumble deep in his chest. "Children play that way, I know. I'm not so old."

He caught my wrist where the rope had bound us. "You must know that I don't mean to hurt you. It's just what has to happen."

I can't say that he was either more gentle or rough than other men, as I hadn't done it in the dirt with anyone, not at my age. It did hurt, and after it was over, he lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine for a minute. There was tenderness in that, I think. I didn't like the way he stayed on top of me afterwards, heavy, hairy, and covered in sweat, as stifling as a wool blanket.

When his flock increased and he made his choice to move us from the hills to the plain of Jordan, I left with him. The plain was well-watered—little streams cut their way through the land and the rains fell regularly—and again his flock increased. I bore him two girls, and to his credit, he treasured them as if he'd never seen babies before. I continued weaving, the girls grew up strong, and he still walked with his heavy, purposeful step.

It was the step of a righteous man. His god protected him, made him strong. This god of his was more than any god I knew—much more than the cow-eyed mother goddess I grew up worshipping, or the goat-footed god of the traders, or even the rain-bringing father-sky god my own father knelt to. His god created the world out of nothing, all by himself—he had no wife to help him shape the world, nor children (besides the humans he created) to fill the world and divide up the duties. He did have scores of messengers, and the bad one that tried to foul his work, but the bad one was much less powerful. His god was without equal, and my husband knew him, benefitted from his relationship with this one god.

We moved from the plain to the city, and I never saw my people again. The city was strange to me—I'd never seen so many people in one place, and they built their buildings out of white stone, unlike the mud bricks that made up my village. The language was musical, but the people of the city had closed faces. The men had a bitter sense of humor, and they mocked what most people held dear. The women wore bright clothes and went around with their shoulders bare. Their gods were grotesque, more like insatiable monsters, and their worship of them as cynical as the poems inscribed over the

city gates. They disgusted my husband with their orgiastic rituals. *They fuck their gods*, he said, but he did business with them and appreciated their shrewdness and gold. The city was beautiful, and as the sun went down, the white building glowed pink and orange in the fading light. I was not allowed to leave our two-story house, and sent the servants to do the marketing.

I kept my little goddess hidden from him for many years. His god allowed for no others before him, he was a jealous god, and I knew my husband would be angry with me for my idolatry. I loved her broad hips and full stomach, the soft features diminished by generations of rubbing hands.

When I was pregnant for the third time, in our new home in the city, I left her out. My girls were playing by the hearth, singing songs and playing a little game they had learned from the town's children. He usually spent most of the day away from home, out in the market or on the plain, overseeing his flock and shepherds, but that day he came home early from a visit with his cousin.

"I prosper, as always," he said, standing in the doorway, "because of my Lord."

I smiled at him. He was beaming, his eyes wrinkled at the corners. The girls looked up from their play, and the little one clapped her hands and shrieked at him, excited by his booming voice.

"That's wonderful, my husband."

The girls' favorite game was to rush at him and climb up his legs. He held out his arms and they reached out for them, agile little monkeys. He was gentle with them, sweet even, calling them his little lambs or honeycombs, honeybees, honeybirds. He

swung the older one and then the younger one into his arms as they giggled and squirmed.

I stood up to embrace him, and my little cow-eyed mother tumbled out of my wide lap and skittered across the floor towards him, as if she had a mind of her own. He put the girls down and silenced their complaints with a dark look.

He picked her up, his hand huge in comparison to her little body, the body that I loved, somehow woman and cow and mother and sister all at the same time. She had kept me safe when I had bled the first time, when I had left my people, through the birth of the girls in the bare sheep-hills, and during our long trek to our new home. And now he held her in his hand—no man was supposed to touch her, a breach like that required a cleansing ritual for everyone involved.

But I knew there would be no ritual needed. He would destroy her.

He studied her for a minute, holding her between his thumb and forefinger, his arm away from his body, the way a boy might hold an interesting but potentially dangerous bug.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, his voice mild. The baby clapped her hands, wanting her hug.

"I have had it," I said. The child in my belly kicked. I knew he was a boy—he was more active than either of the girls had been in the womb. I put my hands over my belly, to quiet him.

"You have had it. I see. You have had it forever. You have packed this idol with you since I took you away from those savages scratching in the dirt. Those heathens."

The child inside me kicked again, and I felt that he might kick through me and join his father in chastising me.

He knelt down in front of me, his eyes tired and his voice patient. "How many times have I told you? You have a Lord now. You are under His protection. He is the only one that we need, and He is the only one that exists. There are no others."

"She's not bad," I said. "I don't give her anything—I haven't given her anything since I left with you! She's done nothing wrong, it's me, it's me that's done wrong. Punish me!"

"This is nothing but a piece of carved stone." He carried her to the window and threw her into the street. The child kicked one last time.

I wept for my goddess, her smooth curves, the way she fit in my hand, the way the stone warmed in my palm when I said my prayers. The baby was born dead, and the next one he put inside me was born too early, and was dead minutes after its first weak gasp of air.

He stopped having sex with me after the second dead one.

***

The cloaked and hooded strangers came to our home just after sunset. He brought the pair through the side door, whispering to them, and sent the girls to their room with a snap of his fingers.

"Bring our guests some refreshments, woman," he said. "The best wine, some of that cheese," he waved a hand in my direction, "and fruit."

I bowed my head and gathered the food and drink. When I returned to the main room, the strangers had removed their cloaks and sat revealed. I could not tell if they

were men or women—they seemed to be neither, or both. Their voices were flat, as if they didn't quite know the language, didn't know where to put the stresses.

One was pure white, almost too bright to look at. It blazed. It choked the room with light, threw everything into stark relief, and made the shadows shrink.

The other was opposite. It was black, black like burnt wood, and it soaked up the light the other threw out, as if it was the opposite of the blazing light, blackness made physical, darkness darker than a moonless night. It pulled the light to from the bright one into itself, and the lamps flickered, the flames sucked towards the dark one's form, as if a draft was blowing the flames towards the figure.

The creatures sat close together, shoulders and hips and knees touching, shining and darking together, two halves separated by some cruel force. They should have been together, as one being, but some accident or intention had snipped them apart. They were beautiful and sad.

"We have come to give you a warning," they said. It was impossible to tell which one was speaking, or if they spoke together. "This city, and all the cities of the plain are wicked, and shall be destroyed. Our Lord will erase them from the face of the earth."

"Our Lord is going to destroy this city?" My husband rocked back in his chair and took a drink of wine. "I will lose my flocks, all my possessions."

"That may be so. We care not for possessions. Our Lord cares not for possessions, but He ordered us to come to you and warn you, because you are the only righteous man in this place." They reached out and grabbed their wine goblets, as

graceful as dancers. "Our Lord looked for an ever decreasing number of good men, and found only you. The cities of the plain must be destroyed."

A sound like water running over stones reached my ears. The creatures did not stir, but my husband jumped to his feet and went to the window.

"Worry not," the beings said, "the men of this city come for us. This is another sign of their weakness. Our Lord knew this, and warned us as we warn you now."

I went to the window, and the men of the city spread out below us, stomping their feet like animals penned during a thunderstorm. They were chanting, but I couldn't understand what they were saying.

"They desire us," the strangers said. "They wish to take us for their own. We do not want this to happen."

My husband looked over his shoulder at the visitors. "They can't look upon you! You're the messengers of Our Lord, and they are base and wicked."

"This is true."

The voices outside were growing louder, the men in the street screaming their chant.

"I'll give them my daughters, and then they will go away and leave us, and you'll tell Our Lord not to destroy the cities."

He looked so pleased with himself for coming up with this solution that it made my knees buckle.

"No," I said. "You can't give them our daughters! They're just girls. I don't know what is wrong with the men, but they will rip them apart. It's these creatures that have done this! They are not from this world."

"We are not from this world, but from the world beyond. Our Lord knows all, is powerful, and will destroy this all." The beings turned their faces towards me, and I started to weep. They were terrible, incomplete, and too beautiful. I believed in his god for the first time, and knew no kind god could create such creatures.

The men outside were hammering on the door, throwing rocks and dung at the window, and I'm sure they could see the bright one's light blazing, unlike anything ever seen. In the creature's light, the faces of the men were twisted. Blood leaked from the corners of their eyes, and the bloody tears stained their faces and collected at their feet. They roared without language, their mouths opened too wide, as if they had become beasts, lost their words in the glow from the messenger in my home.

"Woman, don't speak. Fetch my daughters." My husband leaned out the window and shouted down at the crowd, "I will give you my daughters. They're virgins. Do what you want with them, but you can't harm my guests."

The men howled.

"Woman, get the girls. I won't tell you again."

I sank down to my knees in front of the creatures. "If you have mercy, please don't let him do this thing. Just leave here, and take your madness with you."

The beings stood up, again in unison.

"We will blind them." They made a gesture, and the howling from the street went silent. "And we will leave our home. You have sheltered us, and proved again that you are a righteous man. We will say to you again, you must leave this place tonight. Flee the plain and forsake the cities on it, travel to the hills. Do not look back."

"The hills?" My husband said. "I'm an old man, that's too far. You had mercy on the woman, now have mercy on an old man, and don't make me travel to the hills."

The creatures looked at each other for the first time, and something like annoyance creased their expressionless faces.

"We will let you travel only as far as the next village. Leave tonight. Do not look back."

"Why?" I asked. "Why can't we look back?"

The beings turned their faces towards me again, and I shuddered as a cramp ripped through my gut. They said nothing, but pulsed and darkened together. The blind men below were quiet, their bloody eyes sealed shut, and they stumbled into each other as they blundered around in the street.

***

My husband gathered us up after the messengers left, woke the girls and packed while I sat in the corner, my gut roiling, choking on bile. We ran from the city, the heat, the terrible noise—screaming men, children shrieking, the moans of the brightly clothed women with their almond eyes and bare brown shoulders—the sounds of fear and pain behind us were beyond deafening. Once I stumbled over a rock, and when I fell to my knees, I wanted to stay there, and let whatever was behind me catch up and burn me up to

cinders. But my husband grabbed me by the arm and lifted me to my feet, the same feeble old man who bargained with the messengers for a closer refuge.

He was not feeble. He pressed me down in the tent and had sex with me for the first time in years, as able as a rutting ram. I hated him.

The sky brightened. The girls were asleep sitting up, their faces peaceful, showing no marks from their night of weeping.

Do not look back, the messengers had said. I knew that my husband's lord was full of pronouncements and rules. He felt no need to give explanations, only commandments.

The small hill blocked our view of the destroyed city—my husband had chosen it carefully, and we had camped at the bottom of it, where a little fresh streamlet watered some trees. He was such a careful man, a good chooser, what my people would call lucky and what he called blessed. There was no denying his intelligence and quickness. *Do not look back*, they had said, the two terrible and awesome creatures, messengers from his lord. And we did not. Instead we had run across the plain, fleeing whatever was behind us.

Now, I started climbing the hill, up the gentle slope towards the city. The sun was coming up behind me, swimming up from the dark sea of night, and the plain in front of me was still in shadow. I noticed a glow coming from where the city used to be. The glow pulled me at the navel towards it. I wanted to see what was left.

The sandy soil was cool under my bare feet, cool and hard to stand on, always sliding beneath me. I dug my toes in for traction, and headed for the top. Before I

crested the hill, the ground crumbled and I lost my balance. I slid down a few feet, my hands clawing to stop my slide, and bit my tongue. Blood filled my mouth, and I struggled not to swallow it. I stood up and spit, my tongue hot and already swollen, the salty, red-tasting blood coating my taste buds and threatening to make me gag.

I kicked some sand over my blood on the ground. It was not good to leave something from inside of you open to the air, where anything might come across it. My tongue ached in time with my heartbeat, and that dull pulse of pain made my eyes water.

The top of the hill was only a few steps away. I avoided the loose sand where I fell and reached the top. My heart was beating faster, my wounded tongue echoing it. There was something like anticipation growing inside of me. I wanted to see it, to be the only one to see what his god did to the city. I needed to see it. I dropped my eyes to the ground in front of me, looking as I always did for snakes, the brown, poisonous ones that were so hard to see, and then lifted my eyes to the destroyed city.

Behind me was my family—my two girls and my husband sleeping, him spent from bargaining and fleeing and fucking—and in front of me I saw it. It glowed an eerie orange, destroyed. Melted, crushed, tumbled down all those white stone buildings, those big stones cut from quarries miles away, carried across the plain, now all knocked down, on fire, and I remembered. *Do not look back*, said the beasts, the creatures. They were the mouthpieces of his god. His god said not to look back at his work, and I did. I looked at a crater full of fire. I drew a breath and a hardening crept into my lungs. My insides started to petrify. I exhaled and blew out salt crystals that sparkled in the sunlight. I reached out, I looked down, my body was changing. I sparkled, the ends of

my fingers crystal now, perfect crystals strung together like precious stones. My salty mouth full of blood now filled with salt. Hardening, as slow as time, my heart struggling to beat—and then I kept defying, kept looking, frozen here forever.

VII. OBLIGATION

The ground, gritty with a rare two inches of snow, crunches under his feet. It is so cold his breath hangs in the air for a second before dissipating, and he fears his hands will freeze to the shotgun. The bright country stars shine, but their faint light does nothing to illuminate his path, and the moon is already set or in the wrong phase.

His wife walks next to him, on his left side, one hand on his shoulder and the other moving a flashlight. The beam of light sweeps forward in small arcs, the shotgun warms in his hands. His mother-in-law is on his other side, quiet.

His wife whistles a long, piercing note that startles him.. They stand listening, and the dog growls out in the field. His wife swings the flashlight and the beam catches the dog's green glowing eyes. A muffled growl from the back of the dog's throat carries across the frozen ground. The man brings the shotgun up to his shoulder and looks down the top of the barrel at the animal, its gleaming eyes caught in the flashlight beam.

His wife is always expecting these things of him. At the beginning of their relationship, she had brought him home during the roundup and had expected him to ride with the cowboys. He had gotten on a horse at six o'clock in the morning and rode for two weekend days, and weeks later he'd told her that he'd never ridden a horse in his life.

"That's not true," she said. "You've been on a horse before. Everybody has."

"Not me," he said. "That was the first time I've ever sat on a horse's back."

"Well, that's stupid. We had no idea that you'd never done it. I thought everyone—didn't you have any friends with horses, growing up? Didn't you go to summer camp or something?"

He shook his head.

"You could have been hurt. That's scary." She grabbed his hand and squeezed, her palm soft and warm. "You should have said something."

And now she expects him to look down the long barrel of the shotgun and shoot this dog. He can barely see it—it looks like some kind of chow mix. It casts a shadow on the snow under the flashlight beam. The women stand on either side of him, holding their breath, waiting.

The dog had come up to the house looking for something eat, drawn probably by the turkey carcass his mother-in-law had thrown outside for her dog, a fat Queensland heeler, and her herd of outside cats. The heeler was lazy, a remarkable trait for a breed known mostly for their high energy, and didn't work except as a guard-dog around the house. All the animals were stuffed from their own holiday feast of leftovers, and this stranger dog had come from their neighbor's a mile across the creek.

Their neighbor's dogs bred indiscriminately and their inbreeding and the neighbor's lack of concern made them mangy, vicious, almost feral. Months before, three of them came across the creek and attacked the lazy heeler when his wife's parents were in town shopping for the day. The heeler had to get nine stitches.

His hands ache from gripping the gun and his arms burn from holding it up and his finger twitches on the trigger. He can feel the women's eyes on him, waiting for him

to take the shot, just as he imagines the dog can feel his one-eyed gaze, and that is part of what holds it there.

"There's a strange dog outside," his mother-in-law had said. "It growled at me when I went to check the water."

He and his wife had been sitting in the living room, watching the late local news and yawning, full and warm, made more comfortable by the terrible conditions outside. His father-in-law was upstairs, sleeping off an all day drunk.

"I spoke to it and it made a noise." She made a gruff barking sound, imitating the dog. "We need to get the gun."

The shotgun was outside in the pickup, frozen cold. Frost crystals sparkled under the porch light as he jogged out to the truck. The gun was loaded, was always loaded.

They stepped outside, the three of them, and he could feel his wife's excitement as they went around the side of the house, towards the field. His wife had the big cop's flashlight, and it twitched elaborately in her grip, illuminating snow, trees, the fence, the field in quick flashes.

His wife's hand is on his shoulder, her quiet breath so close he can feel it, hot and moist on his neck. She contracts her hand, impatience flowing through her fingers and into him.

He puts his finger on the trigger. He might only wound the stray, and have to listen to it pant and whine, have to track it to where it twitches and growls and finish it off, up close. It is what the men do.

Her brother and father are hunters, and with them he has brought dozens of quail down out of the sky, has admired the quick flight of the birds, the way the barrel of the shotgun traces their arcs, and the chummy atmosphere in the cab of the old ranch truck as they bounce down dirt roads. He likes these outings, likes drinking warm Coors Light from a can, but he doesn't particularly care for the way the birds flop in the dirt, wings beating frantically, or the grating crunch of broken bone when he twists their necks.

His wife has approved of all of this, the beer, the hunting, the tiny bird carcasses lined up on the tailgate, even though she enjoys the way the quail run down the road in front of the truck. She told him once they had little families, coveys. But she likes the taste of quail in the fall.

He looks at the dog, its mouth open stupidly, and he pulls the trigger. He hates the dog and his wife's touch. The barrel flash dazzles his eyes, and his ears roar like an ocean as the echo from the cliff comes back to him, breaking up the silence, the deep country silence that makes it hard to sleep. He always hears his blood rushing out here.

VIII. HIDE YOUR FIRES

Grant drove down the mountain from Las Alamos to Santa Fe with the same calm precision that made him a good scientist and made his wife, Sylvia, sometimes shake with anger. She studied him from the passenger's seat: his hands at ten and two, his chin lifted, eyes on the road, the radio turned off. His dark hair was thinning at the temples and he'd started to develop a gut despite the four miles he ran a day. He had a Roman nose she had considered aristocratic when they met. The car's automatic headlights kept switching on and off as the car moved from the shadows' gloom to the still sunlit portions of the mountain road. Below them, the valley stretched, trees along the muddy Rio Grande going to yellow, the blue Sangre de Cristo Mountains beyond the valley.

In the backseat, her lover, Nathan, and his wife, Anna, made quiet conversation with their friend from out of town, Molly. Sylvia focused on Grant in order to stop looking at Nathan in the rearview mirror, but Nathan's presence filled the back of the car. He sat diagonally behind her, and Anna was in the middle, fluttering her hands as she talked.

Sylvia and Nathan worked together at the Santa Fe Opera. She was a costume designer; he worked as a carpenter and assistant set designer. He had capable hands, shaggy dark hair, and cultivated a five o'clock shadow regardless of the time of day. He was twenty-five, eight years younger than Sylvia, and built furniture in his spare time.

They carpooled to the opera every day, and when he drove, Sylvia always got out of the car weak-kneed from his recklessness. They would smoke cigarettes, the radio tuned into a rock station from Albuquerque and turned up loud, and she would force herself to not glance at the speedometer. He took the curves at ten or fifteen miles over the speed limit, even through the tribal lands were known for their speed traps, which financed the pueblos. It was as exhilarating as the first time they kissed, at the opening night after-party for *The Magic Flute*, when she'd felt the same weakness spread through her whole body. She'd come home, her lips swollen and bruised from the press of his, and stared at her reflection, trying to see a difference.

It had been Anna's idea to attend the burning of Zozobra. The two couples had been friends for a year, when Anna and Nathan had moved to Los Alamos for Anna's job at the lab. They went on dinner dates, played cards, went to art shows in Santa Fe—Sylvia had liked getting drunk with the younger couple, watching them flirt and fight. Going to Zozobra was the type of thing they did together.

Her friend, Molly, would be in town during the Fiestas de Santa Fe and Anna thought it would be fun for all of them to go. "I've never been," Anna had said, sitting at Sylvia's kitchen table drinking white wine. "It's supposed to be wild, though."

Since Sylvia had started sleeping with Anna's husband, Sylvia had gone out of her way to be nice. She'd brought Anna coffee, mid-priced bottles of wine, flowers from her garden. It was not guilt that drove her to bring the gifts, but the desire to keep Anna caffeinated, tipsy, placated by beauty. Malleable and satisfied.

Sylvia had agreed to go to Zozobra, smiled at Anna. It was hard not to—she was a pretty girl, blond haired and blue-eyed like a doll, with long runner's legs. Sylvia often saw her running through the neighborhood in short-shorts and tee-shirts that said "University of Rhode Island." Sylvia would put her foot on the brake and watch. Grant said the other researchers in their division called her Scientist Barbie. Anna exuded a silly sort of goodwill, and when she ran or laughed, her blond ponytail swung back and forth. Now, Anna wore a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of skinny jeans with ballet flats—like a college student.

Anna sat between Nathan and Molly, telling a story about a mix-up at the lab—150 plates had been contaminated. She made the story sound hilarious, although Grant had come home late the day it happened, his knuckles red from his stress-habit of biting them.

Sylvia looked at the foothills, orange in the setting sun. She wondered what Nathan thought about the story his wife was telling, how blameless she sounded in the whole comical mess. It had ruined six months of DNA sequencing, Grant had said.

Anna pointed out the Santa Fe Opera to Molly. "That's where Nathan works. And Sylvia, too. She's the main costumer. Isn't that interesting?"

Molly said it was. "What have you costumed?"

"We just finished *The Magic Flute*," Sylvia said. "We stage a Mozart opera every year, but *The Magic Flute* is the most popular. It sells out every time." The costumes were steampunk Victorian: metallic corsets on the women, waistcoats and goggles on the men. The Queen of the Night had worn a black leather bustier, silver thigh-high boots,

and a cape made of woven wire. "People love it because it's happy. The lovers are united at the end. There's not a lot of that in opera."

"It was wonderful. Nathan built some beautiful sets," Anna said. "But it's true, not many operas end happily. Mostly it's just affairs and suicides and stabbings."

At last, Sylvia looked at Nathan. He lifted an eyebrow and half-smiled. Heat spread across Sylvia's face and she turned her head. They'd first had sex backstage during a Sunday matinee, four weeks ago. She thought of the dark corner where they'd fucked, his pants around his ankles, her bare ass perched on the edge of a counter, the Queen of the Night starting her long run of notes during her second aria.

Grant slowed as they reached the outskirts of Santa Fe. The road was clogged with carfuls of revelers on their way to Zozobra. At a long light, Sylvia studied the people in the car next to them: a Hispanic family, father and mother and two kids. They looked excited. Sylvia wanted to sit next to them, wanted to listen to them talk about their day at work or school. Ahead, the police had set barriers funneling traffic to the parking.

Groups of people clustered on sidewalk, waiting for those who lagged. Sylvia picked out the couples in the crowd, decided which were happy and which were angry, sick of each other, disappointed.

"We'll have to park and walk," Grant said. The sky was purple with dusk, and crowds of people walked toward the park where they would burn Old Man Gloom. Sylvia shivered in the already cool air, and Nathan came to her and offered his flask.

"This will warm you up," he said.

The metal was warm from his body, and she held it for a second before she took a drink. It was whiskey, not the good stuff, but it intensified the burn on her cheeks. He looked at her, his face carefully empty, and took it back. He maintained eye contact as he tipped back the flask, and Sylvia bit her lip and looked away.

"You better hide that," Grant said. "They search everyone for liquor and weapons."

"Good old New Mexico," Anna said. "Here, give it to me." She drank and then put the flask down her shirt. "I'll hide it in my bra."

"That's the Anna I know," Molly said. "Quick thinking. A real problem solver."

The women laughed and Sylvia joined them, hoping her laugh didn't sound counterfeit. Grant and Nathan stood waiting. They looked a lot alike, although Nathan was a little taller and his face was less lined. Grant's shoulders were hunched from peering into a microscope all day, while Nathan stood straight. Maybe a stranger could mistake them for brothers.

But the wives, she and Anna, would never be mistaken for sisters. Sylvia's black hair was streaked gray at both temples. Her tits were bigger than Anna's but her ass was fatter, her skin pale in comparison to Anna's tan athletic body. After Nathan and Sylvia started having sex, Sylvia would sometimes strip and examine her body in the mirror, pull her face taut, tie her hair in a ponytail. She tried to imagine running through the cul-de-sac, her breath coming in hard bursts, her tee-shirt sweaty and sticking. Ridiculous. Sylvia didn't feel threatened by Anna—she was all bounce and shine, but there was nothing underneath. Her youth made her foolish, empty-seeming, soulless. Sylvia was

seasoned, ripe. A few lines around her eyes and some wrinkles around her mouth didn't change that.

Anna and Nathan walked ahead toward the park, holding hands. Sylvia focused on the broken pavement and tried not to think about the way his callused hands felt against her bare skin. She stepped carefully, intent on where her heel came down. Grant's long strides carried him away from her, and she welcomed the time alone, until Molly matched pace with her.

Molly said, "So, you're a seamstress?"

Sylvia shook her head. "No. A costume designer."

"But you sew things, right?" Molly made a sewing motion.

"Yes, I do," Sylvia said. "But think more Vera Wang, less 1950s dress shop."

Molly laughed, her curly black hair haloing. "I just don't get artistic people. I'm a CPA. Give me numbers, and I'm happy. All this opera stuff." She waved a hand over her head. "I'm the least creative person on Earth."

"Creativity is not all it's cracked up to be," Sylvia said. "There's a lot of staring off into space." She liked this plump girl—not fat, just a bit round. Molly would look strange if she lost much weight, with her heart-shaped face and big brown eyes. Sylvia smiled at her New Mexico costume: a broomstick skirt, a velvet jacket that was a bit too tight in the bust, and a new squash blossom necklace, heavy with turquoise, hanging low on her chest.

"Your husband's a scientist, right? So that's analytical and creative, because he has to think up new experiments," Molly said. "That kind of thing is amazing to me."

"Well, we can barely balance our monthly budget," Sylvia said. "So there's that." They walked in silence for a while. "How do you know these guys?"

"We went to college together. Anna was my roommate in the dorms, and then we moved off-campus. Nathan was like the unofficial roommate."

The protestors' chants grew louder as they neared the park. "Save your souls! Reject the devil! Say no to Satan!" A police barricade separated the protesting church groups from the festival attendees. "Don't participate in pagan rituals!"

Another group called in Spanish, and Sylvia could make out "el Diablo."

"You can't just enjoy something like this," a man in a clerical collar said. "You put your soul in jeopardy! I ask you, if you die tonight, will you be saved? Not with this pagan rite."

Another group sang a hymn, rosary beads in hand. They waved erratically capitalized signs: Say NO to Zozobra! Jesus Loves YOU! We PRAY for Your Souls! Go to CHURCH!

Molly stopped and grabbed Sylvia's hand. "What's this all about? It's like the outside of an abortion clinic."

Sylvia laughed. "Some of the church groups don't like Zozobra, obviously. They think he's pagan, although a white guy invented him in the 20s. They do this every year—get riled up and come to scream at the sinners. It's more for fun than anything."

The protestors thrust pamphlets at the crowd. An old man grabbed Sylvia by the wrist.

"Repent," he said. "Your sin hangs off of you." He pulled her closer and his grip tightened. His fingers were knobby from arthritis, but strong. "How much longer do you think you can keep this up?" Sylvia stared into his bloodshot eyes and held her ground.

Grant, Anna, and Nathan had also stopped, and now Nathan took two steps toward the man. "Let her go, you old fuck," he said.

"Repent, sinner. Hell burns hot," the man said, and his breath, a sour cloud, made Sylvia's eyes water. She jerked away, and her coral bracelet snapped. A policeman headed toward them, and the old man melted into the crowd.

"Are you okay?" Grant bent and started gathering the bright red beads. Molly joined him.

"Just leave it," Sylvia said. "I paid twenty dollars for it on the plaza. It was probably plastic anyway." She rubbed her wrist. In truth, she felt nothing but calm. Removed, even, as if she'd stepped away from herself for a few seconds.

Anna put her hand on Sylvia's shoulder. "You're sure you're okay? That was scary."

"I'm fine. It was nothing," Sylvia said. Nathan kept scanning the crowd on the other side of the barrier, looking for the old man. His fists were clenched. She resisted the urge to touch him. "Really, I'm fine."

Nathan took her wrist. "Looks like you're going to have a bruise." He brushed his fingertips over the area the man's hand had been, and for a second, the world contracted around Sylvia and she thought she might faint.

"I always said Nathan should have been a doctor," Anna said. "Are you checking for broken bones, honey?"

Nathan dropped Sylvia's hand. "She seems okay."

"I've been saying that. Let's go in," Sylvia said. The attention annoyed her—she was fine, ready to see Zozobra burn, tired of them looking at her with gentle compassion.

Grant was staring at her. She tried to read his expression, to separate concern from something else, but she couldn't decide what it was, so she offered him a smile. He smiled back and handed her a palmful of coral. "I think we can restring it. Maybe we'll get some turquoise to make up for the ones we lost."

"Maybe," Sylvia said. She didn't want a new bracelet—she wanted to scatter the coral on the pavement and keep walking. He put his hand on the small of her back. They approached the lines the police had set up to look in purses and perform cursory pat-downs on some of the shadier looking people. Anna made it through with the flask unscathed. Inside the park, Sylvia looked at the crush of people coming through the gates. It was full twilight now. The sky to the west was a light purple, a few high clouds tinged orange and pink from the last rays. Thousands of people crowded the park; many of them had spread blankets and lawn chairs on the dry grass.

"So that's him," Molly said. "Zozobra." She pointed at the three-story-tall effigy atop the little hill.

"He's a ghastly looking dude, isn't he?" Anna said.

"The biggest marionette in the world," Grant said.

The bigheaded monster's cruel face was stark white, his green eyes outlined in black, and his lips protruded. His hair was red and his ears stuck out. Long arms dangled at his sides, ready to be jerked and waved when the time came.

They spread out the blanket Grant had carried from the car and sat down. "They call him Old Man Gloom," Grant said to Molly and Anna. "For weeks before the burning, you can go down to the *Santa Fe Reporter* and write things that are bothering you on slips of paper, put them in the gloom boxes. They put the gloom boxes at his feet, people's bad luck and divorce papers and mortgages, and then when it's time they set him on fire," he said. "The idea is that you burn away all the bad things in your life, and start fresh."

The women nodded. Anna produced the flask and they passed it around again, everyone taking a sip except Grant. Sylvia's flush returned and she pressed the cool back of her hand against her cheek.

"When does this thing start?" Molly said.

"It has to be totally dark. Maximum effect," Sylvia said.

"It's not even pagan, really," Grant said. "Some artists started doing it in the 1920s. It's not a Native American thing."

"What would you put in it?" Anna said to Nathan. "What's the bad thing you'd burn up?"

Nathan tilted his head. "Me? I'm blameless. Nothing to regret or to worry about."

Anna looked at Molly.

"Oh, you know. Maybe I'd write all my exes' names down or something. All the men who've done me wrong." Molly laughed, but there was something sad in it. "Very Carrie Bradshaw of me."

"Sylvia?" Anna said.

Sylvia tried to see if there was anything in the other woman's face to be worried about. "I'd burn up a few sketchbooks of bad ideas," she said. "*Madame Butterfly*. I hate that one. Geishas and crewcuts."

Anna turned to Grant. "What about you?"

He smiled and ducked his head. "Rejected research proposals, I guess."

"Well, I'd put in my student loan papers," Anna said, and they all laughed. "But let's go again. All that's just surface stuff. Nathan, come on, play with us."

Nathan shook his head.

"Look at him," Anna said. "He wants us to beg. So like him. Wants all the attention." She moved closer to him. "Come on, darling. Tell us."

"Yeah, tell us," Molly said. Nathan lifted his hands and showed his palms. "You're so unfair! You could at least give us one little thing."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. It was ridiculous, and worst of all, he loved it. He was grinning like a boy. Anna took the flask from Molly and held it in front of him. "If you don't tell, I'm going to pour out this whiskey. There are consequences for your behavior."

Molly and Anna collapsed, giggling, and Sylvia had the feeling of being outside an inside joke. Something from the college days, no doubt. It was ridiculous, having to watch all this history between the three of them.

"No need for that," Nathan said. "I'll tell."

The women quieted. Grant leaned forward. His fingertips made gentle little circles on the nape of Sylvia's neck. It was something Sylvia had always enjoyed, a touch they shared from when they first started dating, ten years before. She closed her eyes and concentrated it. Grant still made her happy in moments like this, and in other times, too, when his kindness and consideration flowed over her, warm and tender.

"I'd put my speeding tickets in," Nathan said. He looked triumphant, but Molly and Anna started booing.

"That's the worst," Anna said. "You can't think of one genuine thing?" An edge crept into her voice, and Sylvia shrugged Grant's hand away.

Nathan curled his lip. "Guess I'm the worst. What else would you burn up, Anna?" He stared at Anna, a look of such cool on his face, he should have been leaning against a wall, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

Sylvia's ears filled with the sound of her heart. She looked down at her chest, and could see her shirt jumping in time with the beating. She wanted, maybe, to have it out. It could be a relief. But she looked at Grant, sitting with his legs folded, and couldn't face it. Not here.

Anna blinked hard at Nathan and turned to Molly. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

Molly shrugged. "If you are, I guess. Do you need to, Sylvia?"

"No, I'm fine," she said.

The women stood and so did Grant. "I'll escort you, ladies," he said.

Sylvia watched them weave through the crowd, headed toward the distant line of port-a-potties. She studied the effigy. "Wow, that was something," she said. "Does she know?

"Her?" Nathan laughed. "No way. You know she gets a little fighty when she's drunk."

"If she's going to ruin my life, I'd like a heads up," Sylvia said. "Do some damage control." She imagined herself begging for forgiveness, Grant's hurt face. Something twisted inside, but it was faint, a twinge more than a stab.

"Don't worry, she won't catch on. Anna sees what she wants—what she expects." Nathan took a swig of whiskey and handed the flask to Sylvia. After a few seconds, he said, "I almost went shit-house on that old man. I was five seconds away from decking him." He took her wrist again and caressed it. "That nasty old fuck."

Sylvia's wrist tingled from his touch. She decided to let him change the subject—she didn't want to think about it either.

"And Grant, just standing there. Fucking ridiculous," Nathan said. His voice was low, with a rough edge to it. "He should have been right there." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I never would have let that happen to you."

"Except it just did, so that doesn't make much sense." She pulled her hand away. "You were holding hands with her, ten feet ahead of me."

"Jesus, Sylvia," he said. "What did you want me to do? I couldn't exactly hold yours, could I?" He leaned, smelling like whiskey and faintly of cigarettes. "You look beautiful, by the way. In the car, I kept staring at your neck. I was thinking, what a perfect neck. The best neck. And your ear, your left ear, the smallest ear I've ever seen, with that coral earring hanging off of it." He touched the side of her face. "You wouldn't look at me the whole time."

"What did you want me to do? I couldn't stare at you in front of everyone," she said. But her anger wasn't real, just put on to amuse him. He leaned closer. She closed her eyes, ready.

"We can't," he whispered. "They'll be back soon. But once Molly leaves, I'll get away. We'll go out in the forest. Like the last time." The last time, on a Forest Service road, the seat in his truck pushed back as far as it could go.

She nodded. "More whiskey," she said, and when he gave her the flask, she tipped it back. Above, the brighter stars were showing. "They'll start soon."

"You two look cozy," Anna said.

Sylvia shifted. "Just looking at the stars."

"That bathroom was a nightmare. Maybe the worst ever," Molly said. She sat between Nathan and Sylvia. "When is this going to start?"

Grant stood at the edge of the blanket, looking at Sylvia. She smiled and patted the blanket. "Sit down, babe," she said. He pressed his lips together and cut his eyes at Nathan. Sylvia kept her mouth locked in the smile. Innocent, she thought. Look innocent.

Grant's face relaxed and he sat down. They chatted for a while longer, their breath showing in the cold desert air, until the MC started talking.

"We sentence Zozobra, also known as Old Man Gloom, to be burned. And with him burns all the heartache and sadness and troubles and anxieties that have plagued our city!"

The crowd chanted, "Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!" Sylvia's group stood to get a better view. A burst of fireworks dazzled Sylvia's eyes. The volume increased, and the fire dancers came out. They twirled their torches at the base of the monster. Zozobra's moans and wails were terrible, and he waved his arms and shook his head.

His groans echoed through the park, and the crowd grew louder in response. Sylvia glanced at Nathan. He had his arm around Anna. Molly stood off to the side, looking at Nathan, too. It was a familiar look—the same look Sylvia tried to keep off her own face. It was so naked and weak, as if Molly had opened her chest and left her heart exposed to the air. Sylvia wondered when they'd fucked. Had it been in college? A drunken night—maybe he and Anna had broken up, and Molly had consoled him. Or had it been longer—sneaking around, driving off into the woods, relaxing in bed on weekends when Anna went home to visit her parents. Sylvia had never been in a bed with Nathan; they fucked in his truck, on the ground, backstage. She'd told herself it added to the excitement, the fact they'd never slept together, but now the thought of Molly and Nathan's imagined leisure enraged her.

Molly's face was the most pitiful thing Sylvia had ever seen. He'd fucked all three of them. She turned her face to Zozobra, sickened. The crowd kept shouting, the dancers twirled, the monster howled.

"Burn him! Burn him!" Sylvia screamed along with the crowd. She felt drunk and her face was hot. Flashes of Nathan with the women filled her mind. Anna on her knees before him, her ponytail bobbing. Molly staring at him with loving tears in her eyes. Candles and flower petals, like something out of a romance novel. Sylvia fought the urge to vomit.

At last a dancer put the torch to Zozobra, and he bellowed. Sparks shot out of his eyes and ears; he thrashed his head back and forth. More fireworks, the explosions echoing across the park. The noise was deafening—the crowd screaming, Zozobra moaning, the drums, the fireworks. The monster let out a great groan and truly caught on fire, his face burning in a rush, his arms still waving. Sparks flew out of his fingertips, and in seconds his body was completely engulfed. He cast a bright light, the flames leaping thirty feet in the air and hanging there for a second, towering above the crowd. And then he began to crumble, unable to support his own weight. The flames leaped again, and followed him down.

Smoke filled the air, and bits of ash floated, buoyed by currents. The last flames licked what was left of the monster, then guttered out. The crowd cheered one last time, and the stadium lights flooded the park, flicked on by some unseen organizer.

"So, we are clean again, good people of Santa Fe! Zozobra's burned, and with him all our troubles. No more worries, no more dogs howling in the middle of the night, no more sad tears! Have a good night, and drive safe," the MC said.

The crowd moved to the exits in a great rush. Grant took Sylvia's hand and squeezed it.

"That was fun," Anna said. "Very dramatic."

Sylvia nodded, thinking about what she should have put in the gloom box. Adultery, jealousy that burned like a torch, lust, hate, anger, boredom.

So he'd fucked a girl. She would keep on until something happened—until it burned her up.

IX. SOMETHING TO BELIEVE

Morning light flooded the kitchen, and the slice of sky was already the pale blue of the hottest August days in New Mexico. Perhaps Marie would taked the kids to the natatorium in the afternoon. Julie was a great swimmer, and Damon a reliable doggy-paddler. Julie would stand on the high dive, waving at Marie before she jumped feet-first into the deep end. That moment when Julie's toes gripped the edge of the diving board before she jumped always stopped Marie's heart for a second, but Marie supposed that was the price of motherhood: fear and pride mixed up together.

Marie flipped two fried eggs and winced as a splatter of hot grease landed on her hand. She threw down the spatula and shook her hand to cool the burn. It was a small first-degree burn, but she knew it would hurt all morning. This was the sort of thing that made her hate cooking breakfast.

An insistent knocking jolted her. She scooped the eggs out of the pan and washed her hands.

Neil stood on her porch, his hand raised to knock again. Marie smiled, but her brother frowned back and took a drink of his gas station coffee. "Can I come in?" he said. He brushed passed her into the kitchen.

They sat at the table for a few seconds, before he started to talk. "These three lights," her brother said, "they hovered there for a minute or two and then broke up and

headed in opposite directions. I sat there for a bit and then, wham! All the sudden, the lights came back together and merged into a big bright sphere."

Dark circles ringed his eyes, which glittered in the warm kitchen light. She could tell he hadn't slept.

"Where were you?" she asked.

He sighed and jiggled his foot. "I told you—I was out in the North Hills, right at the property line, looking west, toward the flats. You know that's the best view on the whole outfit. You can see all the way to Texas, when it's clear."

"Okay," Marie said. "What time was it? Why were you out there?"

"Jesus Christ, are you even listening to me? I tell you I saw something strange and beautiful, and all you can do is ask what time it was?"

Marie held her tongue. He was exhausted and worked up, and if he got any louder, he'd wake the kids. She didn't want them around him if he was going to keep talking like this.

He sighed as if he was disappointed with her. "I go up there, sometimes, at night, when I don't have anything better to do. I like to look at the stars, see the big stretch of the Milky Way above me. A couple of weeks ago the Perseid meteor showers really lit up the night."

Marie nodded. She understood—understood the boredom and loneliness that led him to leave the ranch house and drive off into the night to look at the stars. The salt and peppershakers jumped with his foot's frantic movement. She wanted to take his hand in hers and stop his twitching, but she didn't.

Neil lived in the old rock house on the ranch twenty miles outside Carlsbad. When Marie thought about it, she worried about his aloneness, and whether that meant he was lonely. He'd had his last real girlfriend before their parents died, five years earlier. Marie hadn't thought much of the girl, with her wide mouth and dyed black hair, but he'd seemed happy. When he moved home to take care of the ranch, he never said another word about the girl, whose name—Willow or Rainbow or Sunbeam—had sounded made up. She supposed there could be a long string of women with broken hearts trailing behind Neil, but she doubted it.

He wasn't a bad looking man. Tall and thin, blond and blue eyed, he looked like their mother. Marie looked like their father, short and dark-haired. Family pictures always appeared schizophrenic, blondes versus brunettes, despite Neil and Marie's twinship. It was as though each parent had spawned one child without the genetic input from the other. Marie was amused by the Greek myth of the birth of Athena, and could see herself springing fully grown from her father's forehead, birth by migraine.

"So, you saw these lights," she said, aware of the long silence stretching out and Neil's agitated demeanor as he waited for her response. "Maybe it was a meteor. Sometimes they break up into pieces as they come down."

"It was so much more than that," he said. "You don't understand." He stood and gathered his hat and gas station coffee. "I've got things to do today."

"You're coming to dinner on Sunday, right?"

"Yeah," he said. He carried his shoulders high, bunched up around his ears, and his frustration came off him in waves. At the doorway, he spun and faced her.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said. "But I've dreamed about it. Someone else in the sky. I was meant to see it, Marie. It was meant for me."

Her mouth fell open, and a gust of hot, empty air came out. She felt as though she'd been popped like a balloon. The sun was rising behind him, and she couldn't see his face, obscured as it was by the brightness surrounding him. She reached to touch him, but he pulled beyond her grasp.

***

When Marie and Neil were children, their mother would take them outside on clear summer nights to look at the moon and the stars with binoculars. They had to be quiet, so negotiating the creaky screen door was always a moment of held breath. Their mother would hook two careful fingers around the doorframe to keep it from slamming shut and echoing up the stairs to where their father snored.

When they escaped the house, something expanded in Marie's chest, as though a balloon was being inflated in her ribcage. It was all she could do not to let out a shout of joy and run circles in the grass, turn somersaults. The New Mexico sky was dark, with no city lights to dim the stars. Their mother knew the names of the constellations and pointed them out, sometimes quizzing them about Orion, Ursa Major, and the others. She always made sure to point out Castor and Pollux, the twins, hanging in the constellation Gemini.

Marie remembered the damp grass under her bare feet, the cool eyepieces rings pressed to the tender skin around her eyes. The full moon was silvery-white and she could see some of the craters which pockmarked its face. After a short time, her arms

would start to ache and she would pass the binoculars to Neil. Marie had been more interested in the little glow worms shining greenly in the grass, winking signals to each other, but her brother had an endless interest in the stars and planets, their slow revolving dance across the sky. She liked to think it appealed to his patience, which seemed limitless, and his ability to be still, as if he could sit and watch the stars wheeling around in the sky forever.

When she was thirteen, Marie stopped joining her mother and brother to look at the stars. Neil would linger in the doorway of the living room, where Marie sat surrounded by pillows, the TV turned down low as to not wake their father. "You don't want to? Just for a minute? Mars is visible tonight," he would say, and Marie would shake her head and return to flipping through her magazine. Sadness would blank his face for a second, and Marie felt a blast of annoyance at the need she saw there.

As a teenager, he spent the long bus rides home hunched over thousand page novels with creased paperback covers. The same things over and over: spaceships streaking through the void, an elven princess with pointy ears, or an interstellar James Bond, laser pistol in one hand, the arm of a scantily clad space bimbo in the other. Marie was embarrassed by her brother's taste, and by the fact he read at all. It was not something boys did, especially not country boys.

The twins attended college in Las Cruces, and Marie continued to run with her same circle of friends, loud girls in tight jeans and cowboy-hatted boys who walked around with toothpicks hanging from their mouths. She studied nursing and met her husband, Ted, also from Carlsbad and several years older than her. Neil studied Ag

Business, but he took physics classes, enough for a minor. A year after they graduated, their mother and father died in a car wreck on the home-road, and Neil moved home to take care of the ranch.

***

The next day, Tuesday, Marie dialed Neil's number. She gripped the phone, holding her breath as she counted the rings and visualized the telephone hanging on the wall next to the refrigerator, the same place it'd been her whole life. As a teenager, she'd looped the long spiraled phone line around her wrist while she talked to her friends in town about their plans for the evening, sometimes retreating in to the far corner of the kitchen to whisper about a party, how to find beer and liquor, and what stories to tell parents.

Neil hadn't changed anything in their parents' house; he still slept in his old room off the kitchen. Their parents' bedroom, on the other side of the house, was larger and had a fireplace, but he refused to switch. She'd gone through their parents' clothes by herself, sorting them into piles for charity and keeping a few of her mother's nicer things—a camel overcoat, several pairs of shoes, and the dress with pink and purple appliqué quail decorating the bodice. She'd never wear the dress, but she couldn't bear to part with it. She'd asked Neil to help with their father's stuff and while he hadn't told her no, he never did. None of it would have fit him anyway.

After lunch and the third unanswered phone call, Marie considered loading up the kids and driving out to the ranch to check on him.

"Get a grip," she told herself. "He's fine." Saying the words out loud helped. He was probably out in the pasture, bumping along on an oilfield road. Or maybe he went to town, or maybe not to Carlsbad but thirty miles to Artesia or the sixty to Roswell, to go to the bank or the veterinarian supply store. He could be in the hay barn, counting bales and out of earshot. She pictured his day, how it spun out in any number of ways—an endless variety of tasks. Each day rising to greet a new challenge, solve a new crisis. It couldn't be boring, unlike Ted's job in the potash mines. How many times had she listened to the same stories, heard Ted complain about the foreman, the salt getting down in his pores, the hinky forklift that pulled to the left.

She decided if she didn't talk to Neil tomorrow she'd go out there. The kids would be elated to visit the ranch and see their uncle.

***

That night, after she put the kids to bed and Ted left for his shift, Marie went out to the back yard. The night air was warm, as the ground still radiated the day's heat. Far off to the west a few thunderheads crackled with lightning, their towering faces briefly illuminated. She imagined them dumping rain somewhere in Texas, on the other side of the Guadalupes. As a child, she'd longed to hook faraway clouds and pull them over the ranch, to make it rain and her father happy.

The Big Dipper was easy enough to find, and she followed it to the Little Dipper, the North Star shining in the handle. The orange glow of Carlsbad made the stars faint. She tried to remember what direction Orion's Belt hung, but couldn't make it out. The

Milky Way hardly visible, she struggled to find the handholding twins, Castor and Pollux, in Gemini.

In high school, she'd dated a town boy who had a telescope, and Neil had sometimes crashed their dates to stargaze with her boyfriend. Crashing was an uncharitable way to put it; really, Neil had been friends with the boy before she started dating him. Neil and her boyfriend had studied charts by the glow of their red flashlights and fiddled with the array of knobs, to zero in on Mars or Saturn or Jupiter. Marie would sit on the tailgate, until they'd call her over to look in the eyepiece.

Once, they showed her the Hale-Bopp comet. She'd rolled her eyes as they joked about the rumors of alien spaceships riding the tail and the suicide cult in California with their purple robes and Nikes. The comet blazed across the sky, and the boys had sobered, talking about the length of the tail and its distance to Earth.

There were no comets in the sky now, though. She would have heard about it on the news, or Neil would have told her. She thought about the endless vault of heaven, all those stars shining light years away. Neil had told her once that even the closest star could burn out and humans wouldn't know for four years, because of the distance the light traveled.

That immensity oppressed her. She closed her eyes and muttered a prayer. The thought of not knowing if a star had burned out, the idea of an empty sky—the isolation inherent in this might make a person question God, question the power that created such a universe. She wondered if that stuff had pushed Neil away from the church in which they'd been raised. Had he looked through a telescope and seen no evidence of God—

just great voids and tiny pinpricks of light? Did he feel so small and insignificant that he turned to some fantasy of aliens for comfort?

She'd tried to get him back to the church, but he was like a stone—unmovable. He wouldn't talk about it, but she'd always assumed it had something to do with their parents' death. They'd flipped their truck on a straight stretch of the home-road, five miles from the house. Maybe her father had fallen asleep at the wheel, or a deer had darted in front of them. There was no explanation, no answers in this world.

At their parents' funeral, Neil sat next to Marie in the front pew. The coffins barely fit in the small rock church, and the priest had wedged himself between them to perform the service. Neil refused to stand or kneel at the proper times. She remembered his booted feet propped on the kneeler. She'd put her hand on his at one point, and he'd tolerated it. He walked out of the church without a word to anyone and at the graveside, while everyone gathered around the two holes, he'd sat in his truck.

Now, standing in the dark, Marie wanted to cry again for her loss, and Neil's, too. She pushed the feeling down and after a long moment looking at the sky, went inside.

***

Neil called the next morning and he sounded fine, not agitated. If he'd seen anymore of the strange lights in the sky he didn't mention it.

"I was thinking about inviting Suzy from the hospital for Sunday dinner," Marie said. "You remember her from our Christmas party last year."

"I don't know if I do."

"She's a cute little thing—short blond hair, green eyes, got a good figure."

"Does that mean she's skinny or that she has a nice rack?" He laughed then, and she joined him.

"Nice rack. One of those short girls who's stacked. But not too short. You wouldn't look weird together or anything. She's got a kid. I think he's seven or eight. But she's a lot of fun. A real cutup."

"What's gotten into you? I thought you'd given up on match-making."

"I'll never give up on you, Brother." Marie heard an edge enter her voice. "I have given up on bossing you, though. If you don't want to meet her, I won't ask her."

"I like a girl with a good figure. You want me over at five, then?"

She told him to bring a bag of ice and a six-pack of whatever. He asked if he needed to bring flowers for Suzy, and Marie laughed.

"You really are out of practice with this whole dating thing."

"Whatever you say, Sister," he said and hung up.

She and Suzy worked in the ER. Marie thought she might like Neil. Suzy was funny and always griping about not having a man, wanting a man, being lonely. It was hard to find a good guy in such a small town. Maybe Marie could help her.

***

That Saturday, the kids wanted to go to the library, and Marie was happy to oblige. Julie had learned to read before kindergarten, and now, in second grade, was an excellent reader. Damon liked the picture books and the reading area in the kid's section, with its child-sized furniture and sunny window. He was especially fond of the red

squirrels playing on the lawn and seemed to think they put on shows strictly for his entertainment.

Marie perched on a little chair and watched her son press his face against the big window. He splayed his fingers against the glass, leaving smears. He looked like his father had as a child. Blond curls, pink cheeks, a baby angel. Julie was dark-headed, her front teeth bucked, a serious child with an almost constant frown. When she smiled, she was careful to keep her front teeth covered. Ted called her his little thinker, joked about her becoming a lawyer.

After an hour, Julie had a stack of books to check out, and Damon had two colorful picture books. Next to the circulation desk was a bank of computers. Marie glanced at the only person there, then whipped her head back.

She walked over, studying Neil's hunched shoulders. His hat was on the floor beside him, and his light denim shirt had sweat stains under the armpits. He was peering into the computer screen at a black screen with neon green writing.

"Hi, Brother," she said.

He started and turned. "Oh, Marie," he said. The dark circles were deeper, the flesh under his eyes bruised. "Just doing some research."

Marie sat next to him. "On what?" She leaned over and started reading the screen.

"*For thousands of years, the visitors have been coming to our planet, watching us. The Egyptian pyramids are proof of this, as are the megaliths in Europe, and the great temples of Mexico and Peru. Our job as watchful and aware members of the*

human race is to ask ourselves: why do they come here? What is their agenda? What deals have our world governments struck with these beings?" The text went on, in eye-searing green, speculating about these "visitors" and their motives: natural resources, experiments, a benevolent stewardship.

"Really?" she said. "You're reading about aliens?"

He blushed and ran his hand through his hair. "I'm doing research. Even the bible has all these mentions of lights in the sky." He opened another window. "And look at all these reports" –the mouse squeaked as he scrolled down a long page— "just in the last ten years. They say the incidents are on the rise."

"Uh-huh," she said. The kids ran over, clutching their books to their chests.

"Uncle Neil," Julie said, "what are you doing at the library? Are you looking for a book? I found one on horses." She held it out to him, and then peeked at his screen.

Marie stood and put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Let's leave your uncle. You'll see him tomorrow, anyway."

Damon had Neil's hat on his head. "Look, Mom, I'm a cowboy."

Marie removed the hat. "Well, good luck with your research," she said and handed Neil back his hat before herding the kids out to the car.

***

That night in bed Marie said, "I think something's wrong with Neil."

Ted was flipping the channels on the TV. "What?" He stopped on a late night talk show. "Look at the legs on her," he said, and gestured to the blonde on screen.

She told Ted about Neil's lights in the sky story, and he nodded at the right places. "I don't know what's wrong with him. I mean, aliens?"

"That is weird," Ted said. "What do you think he saw?"

"Honestly, I don't think he saw anything. Maybe he's going crazy. He looks like he hasn't slept in a week." She thought about the dark circles under his eyes, the way his knee bounced under the table. "We get these meth-heads in the ER all the time. They see stuff that's not there."

"You think Neil is doing meth?" Ted put down the remote. "Come on, Marie. He hardly drinks."

"But the oilfield's filled with that stuff. They take it so they can work the swing shifts, and then crash their trucks or get in bar fights and come in, cut and bloody."

"You always do this. Worry. I don't think your brother is on drugs. He probably just saw something weird. Remember that night in Cruces, when we were out in the desert?"

They'd gone to escape his roommate and had stretched out in his truck bed. Behind them, the lights of Las Cruces spread across the valley, and in front of them, the jagged hulk of the Organ Mountains took up half the view. There was no moon that night, the sky dark except for the stars and the hazy light pollution from the city. They'd been fooling around for a while when the sky lit up. A rocket on a tail of fire came up over the mountains. The rocket struggled against gravity, the tail wide and a glaring white, like a roman candle. A few seconds later, a sonic boom rattled the truck's back window. "Must've been a rocket test at the missile range," Ted said. "They shoot those

things off occasionally. Or a satellite launch." He laughed. "We'll never know for sure, because they don't talk about this shit on the news."

They'd joked about it for weeks, how they'd seen rockets blast off during a make-out session. Now, Marie thought about the bright white tail of exhaust or propellant, about how strange it would have been if they hadn't known about the missile range with its guarded gates and camouflaged vehicles.

Ted gathered her in his arms and kissed her. "I'm sure he's okay. If anything, he's just lonely. He's out there all day, alone, rattling around in that old truck. Maybe I'd go a little crazy if I didn't have anyone to talk to."

That didn't make her feel much better. She thought about all the things that could be wrong with Neil. Psychosis—they had an uncle who'd been crazy and drowned himself by crossing a flooded creek on a mule. Sleep disturbance could be a sign of manic depression, seeing things that weren't there might be schizophrenia, but visual hallucinations were rare—most of the time it was aural. She hadn't liked her rotation in the psych ward, the drugged shuffle of the worst cases—she preferred the hustle of the ER to the blank-faced mental patients. She couldn't stand the thought of her brother in a white bathrobe, pumped full of Haldol.

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At church on Sunday morning, during the Prayer of the People, Marie pressed her hands together and thought hard about her brother. She wished he would be fine—her prayers always felt more like wishes. "Please give him peace," she prayed. "Please keep him safe. Please give him something in his life to fulfill him."

Back home, Marie got the house ready for her dinner party while the kids played outside with Ted. He was a good father, when he wasn't tired from shift work. But he seemed to genuinely love the kids, and Julie had an attachment to her father that was fierce and powerful.

Neil showed up promptly at six, carrying a six-pack, a bag of ice, and a bouquet of flowers.

"What'd I say about the flowers?" Marie studied his face, and decided he looked a little better. He was clean, his hair slicked to the side, wearing a good shirt and a freshly pressed pair of Wranglers, the crease down the middle crisp. He wore his good silverbelly hat, custom-made in Ruidoso.

"Take it easy, Sister. They're for you," he said.

She smiled and took them from him. "That's sweet. Ted's out back, getting the grill ready."

The kids rushed him, clambering for his attention as they always did, and then pulling him to the backyard.

Suzy showed up half an hour late, as usual. She was a perky little blond, a dynamo at work, and Marie particularly liked her wide smile and sparkling green eyes. When they worked together, the hours seemed to fly by. She'd brought a bottle of tequila and the makings for margaritas. The bottle made Marie anxious. Tequila had a bad effect on Ted—sharpened his tongue and made him fighty.

Marie said, "Thanks for thinking of this. It will make the night interesting."

"You know I like to keep things interesting," Suzy said.

Marie led Suzy through the house. "Here she is," she said. "Neil, this is Suzy." Her brother shook Suzy's hand and tipped his hat.

They had a good time at dinner, and Suzy seemed to like Neil. He was pretty charming when he wanted to be, and he didn't say anything too strange. As predicted, Ted got into the margaritas and became tipsy.

Marie served a peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream for dessert, and the four of them sat around the table, drinking coffee.

"Seen anything weird lately?" Ted said. He kept looking from Neil to Marie, and she didn't his tone, or the way he raised his eyebrows at Neil. When it was quiet for a minute, he continued. "You know, have you seen anything up there?" He pointed to the sky. "Something mysterious? Remember that old show, *Unsolved Mysteries*? You know how they used to do those reenactments? That was a shitty show."

Marie suppressed the urge to kick Ted under the table. Ted could get a little mean when he was drunk, not abusive, really, but just an ugly side that came out after a certain number of drinks. It was the side of him that got him into fights at parties when they were in college. The best thing to do was to ignore him and let it pass. He was usually very sorry in the morning, sick with hangover and regret.

Neil fidgeted with his coffee cup, and Suzy yawned behind her hand.

"No, seriously. You girls work in a hospital. Seen any rednecks with sore asses from being probed? What about you, Neil? Seen any mutilated cattle? Hung out with ET?"

Neil stared at Ted. "Well, it's been a great evening. I better be going." He stood up. "Suzy, it was nice to meet you. I'd like to see you again." To Marie he said, "Thanks for the meal."

Marie followed him to the door. "I'm sorry, Neil. Please don't be upset."

He turned to face her. "I'm not upset. I just wish you believed me, even just a little, instead of laughing about it." The hurt in his face struck her deep in her gut, a twisting pain that made her want to hold her breath.

"I haven't laughed about it," Marie said. She kept after him, down the front porch to his truck. All she wanted to do was make it up to him. She could feel him slipping away, hardening against her. If she didn't stop him, he might be gone forever.

He got in to the truck. The night was warm, the sky clear. She could smell cut alfalfa somewhere far away, and the dusty odor of Neil's truck. She went to the other side, opened the door, and climbed in.

"What are you doing?" Neil said. She buckled her seat belt.

"Take me to where you saw them. The lights in the sky," she said. "You can bring me home after."

He looked at her, his face lit by the green dashboard light. "You want to go all the way out to the ranch? At ten thirty at night?"

Marie nodded her head. "Come on, let's go."

"And you think I'm the crazy one," he said, and pulled the truck into drive.

They were quiet for a long time; the only sound the low murmur talk radio he liked to listen to and the loud pavement. The streets of Carlsbad were empty under the

orange sodium arc lights. They drove passed the hospital on the outskirts of town, and followed the Pecos River for a while. Marie leaned her head against the window.

"Are you lonesome?" she said after they made the turn off the highway and onto the state road.

"No," he said. "I don't think you have a good idea of what my life is like when you're not around."

"But you haven't had a girlfriend in a long time. I just think of you, sitting in that house, in your old room, the house empty, miles from anything."

"Did it ever occur to you that I like it that way?" Neil said. "Not everybody wants what you have."

Though it was dark, Marie knew what the country looked like: the far off foothills that ringed the plain, the little draws, the creosote and mesquite bushes. She hadn't been out to the ranch in months—she didn't know if it was green or burnt dry, if the cows were fat and sleek or slat-sided. She'd always known the ranch would be Neil's responsibility, so she held it at arm's length. It was not her inheritance—she was expected to find a man with a steady job and work hard herself. Even if she had caught a neighbor boy, she wouldn't have ended up living on the ranch.

"So you're going to be one of those bachelor ranchers?" Marie said. "Just sit out here in the country and dry up?"

"Probably not. But who knows." Neil said. "I've given up trying to predict the future. The point is I'm not going to go chasing after something just because you think I should have it." They were quiet. After a few miles, Neil spoke again. "When Mom and

Dad died, I felt relieved. Because I could go back to the ranch, stop trying to be something I wasn't."

"Huh," Marie said. "I always thought you felt trapped. I would've, if I'd been in your place."

"Good thing we're not the same," he said. "And you'd do it, wouldn't you? Spend your whole life doing something you didn't like, because it was expected of you."

Marie felt her face grow hot in the dark. "I think I would start to like it after a while."

"Do you miss the ranch?" he said. They crossed the cattle guard that marked the ranch's boundary. She took a deep breath, trying to see if the air felt different here. If she could tell just by paying attention to the smells that she was home.

"I don't know. I spent most of my life getting ready to leave it."

"You're back now," he said. He drove them across the ranch. She knew the creek was on her right, following the road, bordered by cottonwoods. They used to go swimming there on the hottest days.

"We're almost there," he said. They went up the big hill and Neil turned the truck around. They got out and he let down the tailgate. She sat on the edge, swinging her feet above the gravel.

"Is it so bad to want something to be up there?" he said.

She looked at the bright spread of stars.

"I did see something," he said. "I know I did. But I know that people wreck their lives on stuff like this. One strange night, and they're ruined, forever chasing something

no one else takes seriously. You should read those websites. Crazy people. And I can't help thinking, maybe they were fine until they started to believe."

"Who knows," she said. "People wreck their lives on all sorts of things. I'm ready to see what's here." Marie leaned back, her hands behind her, pressing into the ridged truck bed. She threw her head back to look straight up. There was a cool night breeze, and it carried the scent of creosote. She'd forgotten how many stars there were out here, how they blazed on a moonless night.

She thought about all the stars, and the worlds that might be orbiting them, planets like jewels. She thought about the spaces in between the star, the emptiness and unimaginable distances. She waited to see the thing her brother believed, ready to believe in it herself.