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In Any Weather

A Collection of Short Stories

Stephen Plocher
Creative Writing Thesis
Fall 2006
Professor Jennifer Boylan

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UN ITALIANO!

Dante Esposito

As far as Faye Waters was concerned, there was no hope for Dante. He'd come to Blackfield, the junction of the Hawk River and the Missouri, to live with her family for a semester.

Blackfield, a small urban island in the middle of miles of corn and wheat. Dante had only been in Blackfield for three weeks now, only been in North Dakota for three weeks, only been in the United States for three weeks, but Faye already knew it wasn't working. She didn't know what to do instead, though, so things carried on.

Dante was a useless individual. He came from Italy on one of those exchange programs. His favorite American food was Cheetos.

He wasn't rude—far from it, and one thing Faye did wish was that some of Dante's politeness might rub off on her own son, James. Any time Dante asked for anything, it was always “pardon me” this and “thank you ma'am” that, although Faye could never tell if he was saying “ma'am” or “mom.” In any case, Dante was respectful.

Faye's husband, Rex, summed up the problem as a conflict of interest. The Waterses wanted to learn about Italy and about Dante. Dante didn't want to talk about that; he was content to lounge around, to eat, and to smoke. Even when he smoked he was respectful, going outside. And he'd explained right when they'd met that smoking was something he'd done for years. Whenever anyone tried to comment on its unhealthful consequences, he'd shoot back that it was his only connection left to his home culture.

“My great grandpapa smokes with me,” he explained. “My grandpapa smokes with me, my grand uncles smoke with me, my uncles smoke with me and my papa smokes with me. Is what we do, we smoke.”

James was just fourteen, so for a while Faye feared Dante’s less admirable behavior might also rub off on him, but it took little time for her to be reassured. James had initially taken it upon himself to teach Dante American culture, but very soon he figured out that Dante knew more about rap music than he did, had no interest in James’ “indie rock,” and had seen more movies and knew more about US history and city life than anyone in the family. Faye tried to argue to Dante that he had a distorted idea of everything, since it was through TV, but Dante would only smile and shake his head.

“Dante’s the lamest exchange student ever,” James would confide to his mother. “He doesn’t do anything, we haven’t learned shit about Italy—”

“James!”

“We haven’t! And he just listens to the cheesiest music...” Dante had a large place in his heart for metal bands from the 1980s led by incredible tenors.

Faye couldn’t argue with her son. Dante didn’t seem shy or homesick, but he wouldn’t talk about Italy.

“Is boring place,” he’d say.

Rex had hoped getting an Italian student might give them some interesting mobster connection, that Dante might have a tough uncle or second cousin. This dream made him alternate between excitement and fear in the weeks before Dante had arrived.

“What if *he’s* really tough? You know, and doesn’t take anything from anyone? The Italians on TV are all strong, lean, bite-into-a-piece-of-something-and-spit-it-in-your-face-if-you-give-them-any-shit types. I just don’t know if we want that in our household.”

That fear was ungrounded. Dante wasn’t even bold enough to be a television chef preparing pasta and drenching it in olive oil.

Sara Moyers

One-point-six miles away, and two hundred feet lower in altitude, lived a girl named Sara. She lived in one of the dingier neighborhoods of the city, but she defied this circumstance by dressing nicely and never inviting friends to her own house. “Against the odds” was her personal motto, so at school she did everything she could to contrast her humble domestic reality. She led the national honor society, sang in the jazz choir, ran the 200 in track, played a few intramural sports, volunteered at the elementary school, served on student council for years, and now was senior class president. Most weekends, she worked at Dairy Queen, earning money to pay for her ’94 Honda Civic and all her activities.

Her family wasn’t extremely poor, it was just that her mom, Helen, had to cut corners after Sara’s dad left, and so appearances were left to be what they would. Helen was never the hostess type, anyway. At work she had to answer to dozens of patients; she figured the last thing a nurse would want to face at home was the same sense of servitude. They still had a perfectly nice soccer-mom minivan for toting Sara’s nine-year-old brother, Jacob, and his friends around Blackfield, and Helen did her best to keep everyone fed, clothed, and polite. Even so, the hold on stability was often rather tenuous.

“Did you clog the toilet again?” Sara yelled as she carried a plunger through the house, searching for Jacob, who she soon found making a sandwich in the kitchen.

“No!” he retorted. “I’m not big enough to do that! I don’t poop enough to clog it.”

“Gross!” Sara cried, unable to stop herself. She thrust the plunger in his face. “You disgusting little brat. Go plunge it.”

He batted it away. “God, keep that away from my food!” He glared at his sister, then started laughing. “It was mom.”

Sara shuddered, disgusted, and dropped the plunger on the floor.

“Whatever,” she said. “You deal with it, brat.” And she walked off to her room.

Helen occasionally worried about her children, especially Jacob. He’d just been six when his father left. She worried he needed a male role model. At parent-teacher conferences, she tended to frustrate his teachers, asking questions well beyond her allotted appointment time, prying into every ounce of information they could give her about his social and psychological well being. Sara was another story, and Helen more often wondered how she had turned out so well. Occasionally at the hospital Helen found herself daydreaming about her daughter’s future, and more than once she’d caught herself wishing she was as bright and had had all the options her daughter would. Helen worried Jacob might get jealous of his sister; although the age gap was big enough it shouldn’t be a problem. She tried to assure herself her children were well balanced and doing fine, to remember that they had never really let her down and weren’t likely to. Still, it was a mother’s right to worry.

Blackfield High School

They met in French class. Madame Laplante assigned an icebreaker exercise: the class was to break down into pairs that would each present the other to the class. As Mme. Laplante pointed to alternating sides of the room, Sara looked across and saw him, a rather stalky, well-tanned boy with dark hair; their eyes met as she calculated that she would end up his partner. When their names were called, he smiled and walked over to her.

“Hi,” she said.

“*Bonjour*,” he said. “*Tu ne parles pas le français?*”

“I try to avoid it,” she replied.

“Why?” he asked earnestly, looking into her green eyes.

She sighed. “*Parce que c’est plus difficile si je parle en français, et je préfère les choses qui sont facile.*”

He laughed. “So you are lazy?”

“*Oui.*” She wondered where his accent was from.

He smiled and stuck out his hand. “*Je m’appelle Dante.*”

“Sara,” she said.

“*Enchanté*,” he said, and kissed her hand. She laughed.

Before long they were presenting each other to the class. Dante introduced Sara, rattling off a few key points from her resume, then adding that the best thing about her that he knew of was her smile, which was *comme le soleil à l’aube en été*, like the sun at dawn in summer: *brillant*.

She blushed, then stammered as she tried to say what few things Dante had been willing to tell her. This is Dante, he is *étranger*, foreign, but he loves America so far. He has no sisters or brothers.

Immediately Mme. Laplante asked the obvious question, and unlike Sara she got an answer.

“*Italie*,” he said, softly.

Sara glared at him. He grinned slightly. They sat together for the rest of class, but did not speak.

“So you’re from Italy!” Sara exploded as they walked out of the classroom.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why would you come to *Blackfield*?” she asked, her tone implying there was no good reason on Earth for anyone to spend one second in Blackfield in the middle of nowhere.

“Blackfield is—” he paused, “wonderful. But I come here because I have no choice.”

“Couldn’t you go to New York, or L.A.?”

“I like the frontier life.”

“The frontier life? That’s what you call it?”

“Wild west?”

“This isn’t quite the wild west,” she laughed, “but I guess you’ll just be taking what you can get.”

Over the course of a week or two, they related stories to each other in past, imperfect and pluperfect tenses. Dante learned about Sara making a snow fort in her yard when she was ten, how she brought her *petit frère* Jacob to see it, then by accident left him there when the phone rang. Sara learned about a childhood trip Dante took à *Venise*, during which he’d tried to leap from a water taxi onto a gondola, without success.

He put a note in her locker. Her friends looked on as she read,

Hello, Sara Moyers.

If you would like to hang out,

Find me after class.

One of her friends, a tall brunette, laughed as she counted on her fingers. “It’s a haiku. What a weirdo.”

“Wait a second,” another girl, shorter, blond, wearing glasses, asked. “So an Italian boy, who’s pretty much fluent in French, just asked you out in English, in a haiku? How multicultural!”

“He didn’t ask me out, it said hang out. He would’ve used ‘*rendezvous*’ if he meant a date.” Sara defended, blushing.

“Right,” the brunette said, and the circle burst out laughing. “You’re not gonna meet him, are you?”

Oak Hill Drive

Dante was lurking in the hallway by the library, conveniently positioned where Sara walked by daily on her way out of school. Today she made an effort to head out on her own briskly, so when she met him she was alone.

“Hi,” he said, as she approached. She was wearing jeans and a thin green hooded sweater—a normal outfit, but she was stunning.

“How’s your day going?” she asked. He was quite handsome, wearing dark slacks and a thick black sweater; she wondered how he could be comfortable being so hot. At this thought she laughed to herself.

“Why do you smile?” he asked. They began moseying out of the building.

“Oh...I’m just glad the weekend is here.”

Dante shrugged. As soon as they were outside he pulled out a pack of Camels and began to take out a cigarette.

Sara gritted her teeth slightly. "Would you mind not smoking?" she asked.

Dante looked puzzled, then smiled and put the cigarettes away. "Of course," he said quickly. "No problem."

"Thanks."

They were silent as they crossed the parking lot.

"So where are we going?" Sara asked. "I'm sure by now you know all the hot spots."

He laughed. "I have two things I want to show you."

"Is it a surprise?"

"One may be. The other, no."

When they reached the street, they turned up the hill to head toward the Waters family's house.

They paused as they reached a bridge over Oak Creek. Several trees were leaning out over the water, their canopies of golden orange reflecting up at the two pedestrians.

"Number one. Look," Dante said, pointing to an eddy in the creek, where water swirled around the roots of one of the trees. Two leaves were caught in this whirlpool, spinning again and again, trapped in the back current.

"It's beautiful," Sara said. "Does fall look like this at all back home for you?"

He paused. "It's more warm," he said, shivering. "And the colors are different."

Their fingers brushed as they stood side by side looking over the water. After a small hesitation, they let their hands meet and join. Dante's was much larger, but soft; Sara's hand was surprisingly rough.

They resumed walking.

“I used to live up here,” Sara said softly.

Dante looked up with interest.

“Before my parents separated. My dad’s a doctor. We had one of those big houses.”

“*Vraiment?* Like mine?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Well, here it is, what do you think?”

They stopped. He pointed to small mansion before them, with a perfect lawn, tidy landscaping, a two-car garage, and several bay windows.

“Well. Yeah, pretty much like this... This is where you live?” Sara asked.

“Yeah. Number two.”

They went inside. They heard voices coming from the kitchen and headed toward them. Mr. and Mrs. Waters were pacing across the room, apparently looking for misplaced keys or a purse. They were both dressed up, Mr. Waters in a dark blue suit and his wife in a long shimmering blue dress. Mrs. Waters was the first one to notice Dante and Sara in the hallway.

“Dante? You can come in,” she said.

He stepped forward hesitantly. “Faye... and Rex, this is Sara Moyers.”

Mrs. Waters looked Sara over. “I’ve heard of you.”

Sara raised an eyebrow.

Mrs. Waters continued. “Yeah. I think James has talked about you a bit. And you’ve been in the paper, too, haven’t you?”

Sara shrugged and blushed a little. “Once or twice,” she said meekly.

Mr. Waters looked up from his search and mused, “Well. Our Dante, bringing home a celebrity. Impressive.” He laughed to himself.

“I’m sorry you can’t stay for dinner,” Mrs. Waters said suddenly. “Rex and I are going to a company dinner of his. James is at a friend’s house. Maybe some other time?”

Sara wondered if she should be offended.

“It’s fine,” she said, looking at Dante.

“Would you like to see my room?” he asked her.

“Sure.”

They went upstairs and soon were lounging in Dante’s mostly empty bedroom.

“Do you have pictures of your family?” Sara asked.

Dante started to say something then paused. He got up and opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a small photo album.

“*Voila!*” he said, sitting next to her and opening it up, then added, “I didn’t bring much.” The first page had a picture of him and his parents dressed up, standing on a patio.

Mrs. Waters’ voice suddenly carried up the stairs, disrupting them. “Dante! You need to take Sara home now!”

He rolled his eyes and Sara gave him a quizzical look. He shook his head and sighed, and they stood and went downstairs.

“You parked at school, yes?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I will accompany you there.” After they stepped out the door he asked her, “Where is it that you live?”

Sara thought for a moment. Should she give her default answer—“Not far from downtown”—or tell the more specific truth? She let out a breath. “On Riverside Place.”

“Where is Riverside Place?” he asked. The neighborhood meant nothing to him. In Italy, no one cares about what parts of Blackfield, North Dakota are considered “troubled.”

Riverside Place

“I want to see your house,” Dante insisted after school on Monday.

“It’s boring!” Sara protested, but Dante wouldn’t give up. “And it’s kind of a dump. Certainly nothing like the Waters’ palace.”

Dante stared at her, giving her a look that came naturally to him, one that he’d quickly learned had some sort of charming yet nagging quality to it that made it persuasive.

Before too long they were in her Civic, heading toward the Hawk River and the poorest part of Blackfield. They passed a run-down, abandoned mill and several old houses in the densely filled neighborhood. Eventually they pulled over in front of a relatively dignified-looking home in need of repainting. The driveway was empty, but they parked on the street.

“*C’est ta maison?*” Dante asked.

“Yeah. Home, sweet home.”

Sara unlocked the door and they went in. “It really isn’t much, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The house was dark. Sara went ahead of Dante to turn on some lights.

“Jacob and I also have our suspicions that this place is haunted,” she yelled from around a corner. “So if you hear anything, it’s the ghosts.”

With the lights on, the house, though clearly old, didn’t look so intimidating. The living room was tightly packed with furniture, pictures of Sara and Jacob, books, and soccer equipment. The

hardwood floors creaked under each step, but overall the place was cozy. Dante followed Sara toward the kitchen.

“Mom and Jacob will be home in a bit. You want a tour? Or a pop or anything?”

“We could do a tour,” he said, nodding to himself. “Yes.”

Sara changed the tone of her voice to a supposedly more sophisticated one. “Well, you’ve already seen the living room, and this is the kitchen. Nothing particularly amazing here.” They left the kitchen and progressed down a hall.

“Linen closet, bathroom... but it doesn’t work so it’s just storage, Mom’s room—that’s where the functioning bathroom is, Jacob’s room... aren’t those sheets so cool?” Jacob’s linens were superhero-themed. Each pillowcase and sheet bore a different logo, effectively providing him with capes for Batman, Robin, Superman, or even Zorro.

“Very cool,” Dante offered.

“Now we go downstairs.” Through a door in the hallway they made their way down to the partly finished basement. “Here’s the laundry room, more or less, and some storage. And here,” she said, pushing open a door, “—is my room.”

The room was a contrast to the rest of the basement, in sight and smell. Her walls were lined with pictures of friends, a soft area rug covered the concrete floor, and her bed wore a lush, blue down comforter. Dante looked at the pictures for a minute, then joined Sara, who was sitting on her bed. He looked at her and smiled.

They sat in silence for a moment. Gradually, Sara leaned toward Dante and he leaned toward her—not simultaneously at first, each of them backing off like nothing had happened. Finally their lips touched. Dante’s hand moved to Sara’s face, holding her cheek. They held their first

kiss for a full minute and a half. Dante pulled back, trying to read Sara's eyes. She smiled and pulled him back in.

She kissed his neck as he ran his hands along her back. Her hair tickled his clean-shaven face and he twisted his head down, intercepting her. They each took in the warmth, the smoothness of each other's skin, and the vanilla cinnamon scent of Sara's room as Dante pressed his cheek against hers. The tip of Sara's tongue slipped over his teeth; for a second she shied back, but he stayed with her lips, lightly opening his and allowing her in. They fell back and extended on the bed, and Sara's leg slid between Dante's as they rolled over. She clung to his shoulders but relaxed, letting gravity push her into him. His hand fell to her lower back, reaching under her t-shirt to explore her perfect ribs.

They were snapped back to the world by sharp footsteps above them.

"Mom's home?" Dante asked.

Sara nodded. "My mom, yeah. We should go back upstairs."

Mrs. Moyers arrived home flustered, and it took her some time to notice the stranger standing next to her daughter in the hallway. Jacob broke the silence.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Before Dante had a chance to speak, Sara said, "This is Dante. We're in French together. He's from Italy."

"Hi," Dante said.

"Do you like pizza?" Jacob asked.

Dante laughed. "Yes."

"Good! That's what we're having for dinner."

Mrs. Moyers patted her son on the head, and whispered to him, "Go start the laundry please, dear." She then held a hand out to Dante. "I lost my manners ages ago, I hope you'll forgive me. I'm Helen."

"Dante," he said, and not knowing what else to say, he gave a slight shrug.

"Nice to meet you," Mrs. Moyers said. She then turned to her daughter and let out a sigh. They exchanged a meaningful glance. "Guess who's back in Blackfield?" she mouthed to Sara.

To everyone present, Mrs. Moyers announced, "I still need to order the pizza, so if you two want to do whatever, go for it. Dinner will be in forty-five minutes."

Dante and Sara returned downstairs, just as Jacob was coming back up.

"Dante, you wanna play poker later?" he asked eagerly.

"Maybe," Dante said.

"He'll have to go home eventually," Sara barked, and then turned to Dante. "What's your curfew anyway, like four o'clock in the afternoon?"

"Not quite," he said.

They returned to her room, and Sara sat at her desk while Dante sat on the bed. After a moment's silence, Sara asked, "Why don't you ever speak Italian?"

Dante sighed. "It is boring. I have nobody to speak it with." He looked at Sara, she was staring at him. "Really! Is more interesting for me to speak English or French?"

She crossed her arms and continued staring at him. There suddenly came a noise from outside her room. Whump-whump-whump-whump-whump-WHUMP!

Dante jumped. "Ghosts?"

"Could be," Sara said, mystery flashing in her eyes.

They stood and ventured out of the room. The noise continued.

“It’s the washer,” Sara said, somewhat disappointed. “The clothes get all on one side sometimes and when it spins it makes the whole thing off balance.”

They approached the washer, which was bouncing slightly and rocking violently.

“It isn’t ghosts?” Dante asked.

Sara laughed as she stopped the washer and rearranged the laundry. They returned to her room.

“Seriously, why don’t you at least talk about Italy? I want to know,” she paused. “I won’t tell anybody, if you want.”

Dante sighed again, and then looked up at her. “I got into some fights before I came here. My friends—” he paused. “My friends were involved in this political group; I did not want to work with them. They say I do not care about Italy, about democracy. I tell them I am coming to America, they say I abandon them. I am just going for a few months, I say, maybe after I will join your group. They call me bad names.”

Sara looked closely at him. “I’m sorry,” she said softly, then kissed him on the cheek. She rested her head on his shoulder.

“Is okay,” he said. “So they say I hate Italy and yell at me, I say I love Italy, they call me liar. So I say, okay, I hate Italy, I hate my home, I hate you. They say, good, go to America and stay there, mother fucker.”

Dante paused to look at Sara. He smiled. “So here I try to forget Italy and forget them. Is easiest that way. I am on vacation, I am exploring America. No time to talk about Italy.”

Sara forced a laugh.

“Besides,” Dante added, “truly Italy is boring place. I like North Dakota.”

She looked at him skeptically.

He shrugged and smiled. “You are here.”

Victor Moyers

The topaz blue BMW that pulled out of the Holiday Inn parking lot was a 325Ci convertible, but the top had remained up for all but one drive since it had been purchased six months ago. Victor had a fearful respect for the sun’s ultraviolet rays and avoided them as best he could, secretly using artificial tanning lotion every so often to make up for it. Furthermore, his hairstyle was a delicate operation that required almost as much precision as the surgeries he performed, and wind was a terrible enemy. But even with the car’s top on constantly, Victor thought to himself, he never would have driven a convertible when he had lived in Blackfield.

Jacob opened the door when Victor knocked. They stared at each other for a minute. Victor was wearing a grey suit, with a light pink shirt underneath, untucked and the collar unbuttoned. He was smiling. Jacob, wearing sweatpants and a Pokémon t-shirt, was expressionless.

“Hey, Jake,” Victor said, extending his arms.

“Screw you!”

Jacob stepped back, then ran to the kitchen. Victor stepped inside, looking around and smiling. He was only in two pictures on the wall.

“It’s fitting that you were always the photographer,” Helen said as she walked up behind him. “Since you were never quite in the picture for the family anyway.”

“So this is the little place you’ve ended up in?” Victor turned to her, shaking his head. “I have a pool back in San Diego. And there are enough spare bedrooms to fit the three of you.”

“Jacob doesn’t know how to swim,” Helen said sharply. “Why are you here, Victor?”

Sara and Jacob stood in the hallway, against the wall, watching. Victor noticed them and grinned.

“Why to see my lovely wife and children, of course! I have a few pictures up at work, people ask questions, I’m getting tired of making up stories about you guys.”

“Why not just say that you slept with a grad student? That the sex was *so* good you had an epiphany that you’d been wasting your life up to that point.”

“Helen, the kids!”

“They know how you felt! They heard enough about it.” She paused, catching her breath. “Why not say we’re boring? Why not tell your friends how you *actually* feel, Victor? Why not explain that you’ve kept in touch more with that slut Genevieve than with your own children! I assume she’s an MD by now?”

Victor scratched his nose and bit his lip slightly. Both Helen and Genevieve had once considered these nervous habits adorable.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“You’re only sorry that your reputation got tainted,” Sara muttered.

Victor stared at her. “I wouldn’t change any of it,” he shrugged. “But no matter what, I’m still your dad, right?”

Sara glared at him. He turned back to Helen.

“I was thinking of inviting you to join me in San Diego.”

“That sounds like a great plan,” Helen said, sardonically.

“But since you don’t like the idea of a pool,” Victor continued. “I might come back here. For good.”

Jacob turned and ran into his bedroom.

Black Mountain Bakery

Dante and Sara sat across from each other at a small table in the corner of the bakery, away from the window. The place wasn't far from Blackfield High, and Sara had been telling Dante for a while that he would have to go there to experience the Black Bear chocolate cookies, arguably the best thing Blackfield had going.

"So my dad's back in town," Sara said across their table. Dante was in the middle of a bite of cookie.

"You do not like your father?" he asked, although it sounded more like a statement than a question.

She sighed. "I'm almost to the point where instead of Dad I'd just call him Victor, except his name makes him sound like a winner." She poked at her plate.

"What happened?" Dante asked.

"He was always kind of snooty to everyone, even us. All about making himself look good. Didn't really care about me or Jacob. Or Mom. In hindsight I think he considered us all hindrances in his career path."

"What's a hindrance?"

"Obstacles, problems, things that got in his way." Sara shrugged. "So my parents just drifted apart because of all that..." she paused, letting a dramatic silence build. "And also he cheated on Mom."

"Ah," Dante said. He slowly chewed another bite of cookie.

Sara bit her lip. "So things are really fucked up right now."

"Yes," Dante said.

“He keeps coming over and calling. He’s been in California for three fucking years, why would he come back now?”

Dante nodded. “How are everybody?”

“*Is, Dante, is.* Well... Jacob’s doing okay. Sort of. But Mom is fried. I think for me the whole thing’s just weird, but for her it’s taking a toll.”

“Can I help?” Dante asked.

Sara took a deep breath, then stared down at her plate. Dante reached across and put his hand on her shoulder. Without looking up, Sara took another breath, then let it out slowly.

“I think we maybe shouldn’t see each other anymore, outside of school.”

“Oh,” he said. “I see.”

“I just think I need to be there for Mom. And for Jacob, since Mom’s on edge like all the time now. I thought I’d have time for you, but then you’ll be going away anyway...” she choked a little.

They sat in silence for a long time. Dante finished his cookie. Sara looked up at him, full of some combination of hope and worry and love.

“Dante?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Say something to me in Italian.”

Blackfield High School, Part Two

After a week or two in which they only talked in passing before and after class, it came time for the French semester exam. Dante looked exhausted. Sara somehow seemed unscathed, if

perhaps a little tired. Mme. Laplante herself looked weary. The word “final” seemed to weigh much more beyond the test itself.

“Excited for the test?” Sara asked Dante, a little too cheerily.

He stared at her for a second, then looked away. Then he turned back.

“How are you doing?” he asked, leaning in and searching her eyes.

She sighed. “I’m okay. I think we’re okay. Dad’s apparently got an apartment here now, but it’s working out. I think.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes, then looked at him. “You’re leaving soon, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be home for *Natale*.”

“*Natale*?”

“*Noël*.”

“Are the Waterses going to miss you?” she asked.

“I doubt it. We never talked a lot.”

Mme. Laplante handed out the tests.

Sara looked at her test. Please conjugate the following verbs: *se souvenir*—to remember, *oublier*—to forget, *aimer*—to like, to love. What will be remembered in the end? What will be forgotten? But what is “the end” anyway? And how do you forget anything, even if you want to? How do you escape someone who claimed to love you once, how do you chase after someone you love when he is leaving?

Dante looked at his test. Please define (*en français*): *libre*—free. How do you explain that freedom isn’t an abstraction or an ideal, but a person? How do you tell someone that being free was being with her, that the meaning of the pursuit of happiness suddenly was understandable when she became part of your life, that you find the meaning of “America” is not in the

Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, but in that girl that lets your voice have meaning and makes you be truly who you are? How do you say these things in any language?

As Dante walked out of the room, finishing early, he passed her. Mme. Laplante's back was turned, so he paused by her desk. She looked up at him, wondering why they couldn't at least have yearbooks to each sign, for an English sort of souvenir.

He bent down and whispered in her ear.

"I like you," he said, and walked out of the room.

Blackfield

That winter the Hawk River froze early and stayed frozen. Around the city, the farms laid still while the farmers debated whether the prairie dogs and gophers would live through the cold. The record-breaking low temperatures were enough to drive Victor Moyers back to California, although he swore he loved his family and wouldn't stay away from them again.

At an employee function, Rex Waters would be asked if his family missed (what was his name?) Dante. Rex would pause, look over at Faye, and then reply, "I'm not sure it's really that different from when he was here. You know?"

It was too cold for snow when Sara's college acceptance letters began arriving in the mail. Getting out of her car returning from school, she cursed the freezing wind as she trudged through old snow on her way to the door. Through a gap between houses on the other side of the street she could see the river. Long abandoned by geese and ducks, it was covered with ice, unevenly frozen on the edges, cracking and folding upwards around rocks. The broken sheets were spread at odd angles, jaggedly piercing the air, looking like shattered pieces of hard candy. The scene was hostile—all signs of life had disappeared, the trees were bare, the birds were gone, there was

no indication that the river was moving at all, even beneath the thick ice. The area was deserted. Blackfield is empty, Sara thought. The cold was making her eyes water and her ears were beyond numb; she opened the mailbox to find an envelope from Northwestern, but then quickly went inside and shut the door.

More than an ocean away, Dante sat on a patio, smoking and remembering Blackfield.

BABY STEPS

Daniel Swanson sits in Algebra roughly four chairs away from Alicia. The two of them are the only freshmen in the class. Daniel is rather small, wears glasses, and has short brown hair. He came into high school half-expecting to be bullied. He has known Alicia since kindergarten; she has red hair and thousands of freckles, and she wore braces for six years. Daniel's mother thinks she is cute. Daniel sometimes agrees, but generally considers her a pain in the ass.

Before long they do a group activity, and Alicia pounces on Daniel.

"Danny!" she cries, smiling broadly.

"Alicia!" he replies, saturated with false enthusiasm. "Aren't you so excited to do *math*! Oh my goodness I sure am!"

"Shut up, Danny." She hits his shoulder and then a ritual ensues: Daniel does the odd-numbered problems, Alicia does the even ones, they then look over each other's work, and all the while Alicia flirts but never explicitly enough to receive more than sarcastic responses from Daniel. All semester it has been this way. In some form or another, it has been this way for years.

Most of the assignment consists of very basic proofs, just starting to introduce the concept. Daniel sees the prompt for question two: "Given: $x^3=y$, $y=5$; Prove: x is an irrational number." Looking over Alicia's answer, he finds: "1) Alicia does not have a boyfriend, 2) Danny does not have a girlfriend, 3) By definition, then, they are both single, 4) There is a dance next weekend, 5) Alicia would like to go to this dance, 6) It is customary for a boy and a girl to go together to dances, 7) Alicia, being single, would thus need a date, 8) Danny, being single, is a possible date. Therefore, Alicia and Danny should go together to the dance next weekend. Q.E.D."

Daniel starts to smile but suppresses it as he feels his ears and cheeks grow warm. Keeping his eyes on his desk, he pulls out a new sheet of paper and begins completing the real proof. Forcing himself to stop blushing, he decides to focus on this chore, to focus on the fact that he always does three of the five problems in the assignments when Alicia does two, and to focus on the fact that today she conned him into doing four. When he finishes furiously working on the proof, he looks up. Alicia remains hopeful, and asks, "Well? What did you think of that second proof?"

Daniel looks down in front of him. "It wasn't that hard, you should have done it."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't go to dances," he mumbles. "I'm sorry."

That night, a warm one, just when the crickets stop their chirping and before the birds start theirs, Daniel lies on top of his sheets and listens. The open window lets in a breeze that ruffles the sheets of plastic hanging from the ceiling of his unfinished upstairs room. Amid the sounds of the night, he hears whispers. The voice is soft, but earnest.

"You are such a coward," it says.

No I'm not. I'm just not interested in dating right now. And I can't dance anyway, so why go to a dance?

"That worked in middle school. Hell, that was respectable in middle school. But now there are no excuses. Daniel, you are a coward."

I'm just fifteen, there's plenty of time.

"Then why is everyone else at school going to dances and making out with each other?"

I can't even drive yet; you know how lame parents driving you around for dates would be?

“But you’ve still never been kissed. You never hang out one on one with girls. You’d rather do nothing? You can go a few places without a car.”

I kissed Mary Carter in second grade. I’m ahead of the game.

“Right, ‘ahead of the game.’ You were playing house, and her lips tasted like peanut butter. Way to go, sport.”

Daniel sighs heavily, rolls over and tries to sleep.

Daniel doesn’t see much of Alicia after the episode in Algebra. She seems to have vanished from the halls of the high school, and he only sees her in class, now always on another side of the room.

A few days before the dance, he arrives late and sits next to her.

“Hey.”

“Hi, Danny,” she sighs, without looking up.

“How’s it going?”

“Pretty good.”

“Do you still want to go to the dance?”

“What makes you think I don’t have a different date by now?”

Daniel pauses. The thought that anyone else would go out with Alicia has never really crossed his mind.

“Maybe you do.”

“I don’t.”

“Oh.”

Several strands of Alicia's hair fall over her face, firebrick red curls gently obscuring her right eye. He considers brushing her hair aside and kissing her, but decides he wouldn't get away with it. Her lips are a color even cosmetic companies would have trouble naming, a subdued but glowing shade of light violet-red. Daniel only realizes how close his face is to hers when his eyes move up and meet hers, which are a faint blue, stone-washed denim like her jeans, but full of impatience. It's now or never, he thinks.

"Would you want to do something else? A movie or something?" he asks.

"I don't know... I haven't seen any mathematical proof that the two of us should go to a movie or something."

Daniel pauses, unsure whether the sarcasm means she hates him or if it's a playful joke.

"You were really proud of that proof, weren't you?"

"I thought it was clever."

"So what do you think of a movie?"

She smirks. "I don't go to movies. I'm sorry."

Daniel's route home from school takes him past several houses with leaves piled in their driveways, tire swings hanging from trees, and a few bikes and tricycles lying about. The neighborhood is full of small children, and Daniel misses being one. The street is quiet, the sun is shining, and it is a gorgeous fall day.

"What the hell does she want?" the voice asks.

I don't know.

"But you deserved that response, you know."

Yeah. But she knows it took some guts to ask her out. She should respect that.

“So because you’re shy everyone should be nicer to you?”

It wouldn’t hurt.

Daniel puts his hands in his pockets and quickens his pace. He will go home and read, and forget.

When Daniel walks into his house, his mother steers him into the kitchen. She is still bigger than him, but she’s developed enough wrinkles and grey hairs lately that she is not remotely physically intimidating.

“Don’t do your homework yet,” she says. “I made cookies. You should eat some.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

She stares at him for a second as she unties her apron.

“What’s going on?” she asks. She sits her son down at the table and slowly forces a few details out of and a few cookies into him.

“You’re fifteen,” Mrs. Swanson says, narrowing her eyebrows, “you have your life ahead of you, be happy about it, take risks, *live!*” She begins ranting about how *she* took advantage of her youth but still wishes she could have done more—Daniel just needs courage to ask Alicia out. She was basically saying yes the first time he tried, he just misunderstood.

The pep talk itself does little good, but Mrs. Swanson insists that he should persist. She tries to explain why Alicia would say no to him the first time, but although it makes sense to *her* that after her son’s initial reaction Alicia would act aloof, she fails to make it make sense for Daniel.

“Just ask her out again, Daniel. She likes you, that won’t have changed.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

Daniel decides to make a present for Alicia. He sits at the computer for an hour, listening on headphones, sorting through various CD's. The next day he manages to slide the gift into her backpack, initially unnoticed. A weekend passes before they see each other.

"I've never had a mix CD with so many instrumental tracks." Alicia approaches him in class. "Only one song has words, and those are in Latin."

Daniel shrugs. "Well, you know how they say it's hard to find the right words for certain things?"

"So Beethoven is a better way for you to explain how you feel?"

"Well, sort of. I just figured... well, classical music has that sort of timeless appeal."

She smiles. "I like it, Danny. It's very sweet. I'll never listen to the third movement of the Pastoral symphony the same way again. Thank you."

She kisses him on the cheek.

At night it gets colder. Daniel closes his window and gets a thicker blanket. As he starts to warm up, he smiles. Then the voice returns.

"Don't blow it."

I'm doing fine. I won't.

"Just don't be an asshole."

I'm not an asshole.

"You're already plotting how to fuck her."

No, I'm not. That's rather crude, please don't phrase it like that.

"It's your thought."

No, it's not. We're going to hang out this weekend, and that is all I am thinking about. How about you don't blow it for me, okay?

He goes to sleep.

Before Daniel walks her home from the movie they finally see—a mediocre apocalyptic action-drama, and he already can't remember whether it was about dinosaurs, superheroes, or global warming—they take a side trip, up the hill, to the water tower. Porch lights, floodlights, traffic lights, and streetlights are laid out before them.

"It's beautiful," she says.

"I come here to think sometimes, you know, just take a step back from it all. Up here you can see everything, it's easier to deal with."

Alicia smiles and leans against him. Timidly, Daniel puts his arm around her.

"You should kiss her now," the voice says.

No, she wouldn't want me to.

"Yes she would. Look at her, for Christ's sake."

I don't know if I want to.

"Why the fuck not?"

I just don't know, okay?

Lightning strikes less than a mile—one alligator two alligator three alligators—away, the loudest thunder Daniel will hear for years. He grabs Alicia, hugging her tightly. Their knees touch, and her hair envelops his face. It smells sweet and familiar, reminding him of the last time they were this close, wrestling each other during recess in fourth grade. It starts to rain.

They sit in silence, watching the clouds lit by the city lights. It gets colder. He kisses her forehead; her skin is cool and soft. He tastes almond on his lips afterwards. Alicia looks up at him, smiling.

Their eyes meet.

“Now,” says the voice.

Daniel closes his eyes and waits. Thunder strikes again. The rain picks up. He takes a deep breath.

“We should probably get going,” he says.

“Yeah,” Alicia says, looking back down at her feet. “I’m freezing.”

The sky is black, except for the occasional strobe of lightning. A flash flood takes its shape, an inch of water flowing rapidly along the roads, on its way to overwhelm the drainage systems, both natural and the city’s. They carefully climb down. When they part, Daniel suddenly notices how cold he is.

Daniel arrives at his bed just as hypothermia is almost kicking in. His shivering keeps him awake for a while. With each shake a soft voice repeats a mantra in his head.

“You missed your chance.”

I’m just taking things slowly. I’ll have another chance.

“But what if you don’t? What if you’re too slow and really did just miss your chance?”

Forty years from now I won’t remember or care. C’est la vie. It’d be dumb to dwell on missing out on something in high school.

“That’s your attitude?”

Daniel pulls a pillow over his head and tries to will himself into sleeping. He takes a quilt that he's had since preschool and wraps himself in it. The stitching has become worn, the fabric is thin in several places and there are more than a few holes, but he holds it tightly. It isn't warm enough. He wonders if Alicia is sleeping well. He gets up and pulls another blanket out of the closet and spreads it out. Rolling back and forth for a minute, he tries to imagine a song to clear his mind. All he summons up is Beethoven. He resolves to go to the next dance with her, and in the meantime hang out as much as possible. He leans off the edge of the bed and feels around on the floor for his jeans. Reaching into the left pocket, he pulls out the ticket stub for the movie. Holding it tightly, he slides back under the covers and gradually stops shivering. He will call her tomorrow.

RESTOCKING

Brad Jameson stared at the shelves of beer in the cooler and tried to get over the image burned into his mind. They had all looked the same, back there in his house. Eight years of life in the real world had somehow skipped over these nine people. Jimmy was a bit fatter, but Hooper was just as preppy as ever. Grogs smelled the same and had the same glossed-over, reddened eyes. Sally was still pretty and showing just as much of her famous cleavage. Warber was dressed fashionably, but her hair was a mess—like usual. The Jenkins twins still looked like their mother dressed them, still the matching sweater vests and bowties. Then Laurie was stunning, sexier than he would've remembered. And Neil Reddington, Neil, now standing with him in the 7-11, holding open the glass door and debating what ratio of Bud to Bud Light to get, Neil still had the same spiked blond hair and cocky grin he'd had when they'd first met twelve years ago.

Brad was the only one who'd changed at all. He looked wearier and felt wearier; earlier he'd had to escape to his deck while the rest of the party mingled with their latest girlfriends and boyfriends in his living room. He'd gone out to watch the waves through the fog, smashing onto his small, floodlit patch of beach. The company of the Pacific was much calmer than the crowd. He had gazed along the horizon; to the north the sky glowed orange, polluted by Crescent City's lights.

Neil had interrupted Brad's meditation: "We need more beer," he'd said. Brad's sense of entertaining had atrophied in the past several years. Neil graciously offered to join him walking to the convenience store. They hadn't said much on the way out, looking mostly at the ground, the scattered leaves and sticks, the sand on the pavement. Brad had pointed out a few houses he was trying to sell. Passing the Petersons' German Shepherd triggered a brief reminiscence about

Stefan, a dachshund they'd kept during their junior year, but really the extent of the conversation was how easily the Petersons' dog could have eaten Stefan. There were too many years lost to really catch up. It was a mild night for early autumn, and the thick ocean air had insulated them as they walked. Now the ocean humidity was fogging up the glass of the refrigerator door, and Brad, next to his old roommate, spending more time deciding what alcohol to get than they'd ever spent studying at Chico State, wiped it with the bottom of his shirt.

"Let's just get a case of each," Neil said. "Or maybe two of the light?"

"Three cases should do it."

"But if we do four we could get two of each."

Brad sighed. "Groggs will want Heineken."

"Fuck Groggs. He'll still chug this shit, and he'll love it."

Shrugging and smiling, they picked up their beer—two cases each, no Heineken—and walked to the counter. Brad started to get out his wallet, but Neil gestured for him to put it away.

"You put this whole thing together," Neil said. "This is the least I can do."

The reunion had actually been Neil's idea, but Brad had agreed to host. It was going well, all the former residents and groupies of the Hot House—Chico's most intense party spot for three years—back together again for one wild night in Brad's northern California beach house. Brad's wife Marilyn was on a business trip. He wanted company, and the Hot House alumni were eager to party hard together again.

"Did you see Groggs talking to Sally?" Brad asked as they stepped out the door to start the walk back home.

"Right. 'Talking' to Sally... you mean like this?" Neil leaned into Brad as though trying to climb into his shirt. "Hello Sally! How are you doing? You look beautiful!"

“He’ll never give up, will he?”

“Nothing’s changed, man.”

Memories of the college years flooded Brad’s head: surfing, drinking, dancing, backpacking with a mini-keg in his pack and the real gear and clothes in Neil’s, wrestling, trying cocaine, making out with an entire sorority, sitting on the roof and smoking pot. Neil and Brad had been inseparable, going through everything together—parties, classes, varsity soccer, hospital trips, academic probation. They’d cooked together in the Hot House, everything from grilled cheese to sushi to turkey dinner for Thanksgiving, which they’d spent together since Neil’s parents didn’t believe in the holiday. They were the glue holding the house together and a famous pair on campus—Neil was crazy, Brad was approachable—both of them knew how to have fun.

“Yeah right, nothing’s changed. I’m married. Hooper is, too, and Warber. But she’s not even Warber anymore; she’d be Jessica *Mitchell*. We’ve grown up,” Brad said.

“Maybe you have.”

He looked up at Neil, who was grinning to himself. “You still go out with the Jenkins twins, don’t you?” Brad asked.

“We’re just trying to reach out to the heterosexual female population of San Francisco. Being a minority just makes them hornier. And it takes another minority to satisfy them. It’s an affirmative action kind of thing.” He winked.

Brad laughed. “Wow, you still are an asshole.”

“I’m just helping people in need.”

“Sorry I didn’t round up Crescent City’s finest babes for you guys here tonight.”

“If there were any to begin with, you wouldn’t know them.”

“Touché.”

They made their way out of the parking lot. The streetlights shone on a few redwood trees that towered over the 7-11. A thin layer of needles covered the ground on the corner. They turned down Brad's street, a narrow road lined with weathered cottages, beach houses with large windows and cedar siding. A few televisions were on, glowing blue through the curtains. Porch lights cast a warm, yellow glow onto their path. Neil was sauntering, walking with a frat-boy swagger.

The pair passed into a stretch of shade where a large tree blocked the streetlight. Neil slowed down, stepping timidly, feeling for twigs and cracks. As his right foot's toes lifted off one particularly uneven patch of sidewalk, he looked ahead and found he couldn't make out the texture of the sidewalk. He stopped. Looking around, he suddenly couldn't see the texture of anything, whatsoever.

"What the hell?" asked Brad's disembodied voice.

"Did that streetlight just go out? That *always* happens to me."

"*Every* streetlight just went out," Brad said as he looked around.

"That doesn't usually happen," Neil said, nodding.

"I think there's a power outage or something. All the buildings are dark, too."

"Great."

They silently looked around for a minute. It was utterly black.

"We should be able to make it from here. I've walked this a million times," Brad said, leaning forward and staring ahead into the darkness.

"Marilyn lets you out of the house enough for that?"

"She doesn't 'let' me out of the house."

"Aha! I did have cause to worry!"

“No! I mean she doesn’t need to *let* me out of the house. We each have lives.”

“Hmm.” Neil’s voice came from further up the road; he’d resumed walking.

Brad stepped forward, acutely aware of the scuff of his sandals on the pavement and every stick breaking underfoot. The night was growing louder around them.

“Remember that time we went streaking?” Brad’s voice cut through the night air, fighting the stifling darkness.

“The one time Grogs got to see Sally’s boobs,” Neil’s voice answered from in front of him.

“It wasn’t that much lighter out than this. And we didn’t trip or get lost. Thank God.”

“Light enough to see Sally’s boobs,” Neil muttered.

“Wait up a second, will you?”

It was a straight walk—about a third of a mile—back to Brad’s house. They plodded along, testing the ground with each step, holding their arms slightly in front of them to check for branches. The smell and feel of the cool, damp sea air flowed around them, insects buzzed and leaves rustled.

“What do you think that sound was?” Neil’s voice asked.

“Chipmunk maybe? Opossum?” came Brad’s reply.

“Are there skunks around here?”

“I hope not,” Brad said. He stood still for a moment before walking on.

“So there might be skunks? Great. Why do you live here again?”

“It’s a beautiful area. You’ve been up here before, haven’t you?”

“I guess.”

The road began to slope down gently in front of them. Redwoods now creaked above them on each side as a gentle breeze picked up.

“Jesus Christ it’s dark!” Neil yelled. He waved his hand inches in front of his face, but couldn’t see it.

“Christ indeed,” Brad whispered.

“Can you see anything? Anything at all?” Neil continued waving his hand.

Brad performed the same tests. “Nothing. We could stop, I doubt it’ll last too long.”

“We can keep going. I’m not in kindergarten.”

“Sorry. I’m just saying neither of us can see a damn thing; I can’t see my hand in front of my face; I can’t see the sidewalk; I can’t see you.”

“I’m doing fine.”

“Okay then.”

The drone of a car suddenly joined the mix of natural noise.

“Look,” Neil pointed ahead of them. “Light.”

Trees and houses lining the street were lit first, faintly, then brighter, then the headlights appeared in front of them. The engine drone turned into a roar and the headlights became blinding as the car accelerated into them, nearly clipping one of Neil’s Bud Light cases before zooming past.

“Fuck!” he screamed. “I hate cars!”

Brad stood silently, the car’s roar dying away, his eyes seeing even less of his surroundings than before.

“Why can’t someone just drive slowly next to us, or pick us up?” Brad asked no one.

“I hate cars,” Neil muttered.

“I don’t,” Brad replied, speaking softly but tersely, the way he always spoke when he was upset about something. “That was the first time we’ve seen a fucking thing since the lights went out. You want to walk off a cliff? I’d like my path to be lit.”

“I just don’t like them driving so fast when they can barely see us.”

“Are you actually scared of something?”

“No. I just prefer to be safe.”

“That’s not the Neil I remember. Remember when we went skiing that one time? Somersaulting your way down a black diamond then getting back up and doing it again?”

“I couldn’t walk right for two weeks,” he mumbled.

“Didn’t we used to play chicken with the cars? What happened to using my Honda as a hurdle?”

Neil took a breath. “A girlfriend of mine got hit a year ago.”

Brad set his beer down and put his hand on Neil’s shoulder.

“Oh my god,” he said softly.

“It’s fine.”

They picked up their boxes and resumed walking. Neil interrupted the silence.

“I wonder how everyone’s getting along in the dark.”

“Oh yeah,” Brad laughed.

“You forgot about your own party?”

Brad adjusted his grip on the cartons of beer. His wrists were starting to get tired and the cardboard cut into his fingers.

“I kind of miss Marilyn,” Brad said, after a pause.

“Wait a second. You haven’t seen your friends for over six years, but you go two days without your wife and you’re moping?”

Brad stiffened. “I *am* in love with her... I didn’t marry you guys. I think I have a right to miss her. Maybe you’ve never felt that way about anyone, but that’s not my fault.”

“Do *not* give me a ‘you don’t know what it is to fall in love’ speech! You know that’s bullshit.”

Brad ignored him. Ahead of them they heard the gurgle of running water.

“Well, that’d be Elk Creek,” Brad said.

“Did this just turn into a night hike with Ranger Bradley? I didn’t know you’d quit real estate to join the Forest Service. What prompted that career change? Oh, I bet Marilyn has a thing for guys in uniforms.”

“Would you stop bashing my wife for one fucking second?” Brad paused. “We’re on the left side of the road, right?”

“Yeah I think we’re on the left. I haven’t touched anything for a while; maybe we’re in the middle. You know I was kidding, right?”

“Well, why don’t you come up with a new joke for yourself. You haven’t even met her.”

“Exactly, Brad. Why haven’t I met her? We were best friends, man!” He looked around. “So why have we stopped walking?”

“It’s a kind of a shitty bridge without much of a guard rail... I don’t particularly want to fall in.”

“Fuck it, man, let’s just run and when we think we’ve hit roughly where the bank is we jump, if we’re on the bridge, great, if not, hopefully we clear the stream.”

“We could get sticks or something to feel our way in front of us.”

“Dude, that’s so weak.”

“No. It’s a steep bank.”

Neil set his cartons down and started walking to his left. “Okay man, we’ll find some sticks. Didn’t you grow up riding a wagon down the streets of San Francisco? Where’d your balls go, man?”

Brad followed Neil, almost tripping on the Bud Light. They squatted and felt around for sticks.

“Fuck you. You know why I’ve never had you meet Marilyn? Because she’s everything you can’t appreciate in a person—smart, responsible, nice to people, rational…”

“You don’t think I’m mature enough just to meet someone? Christ, Brad.”

Brad started hitting the bushes, groping for any dead branches. His hand hit a thorn.

“Ow, fuck.” He turned his head toward Neil. “I don’t want you to meet each other and fight and make me pick sides. You’d be the one kicked out of the picture.”

Chirping, rustling, and gurgling filled the silence for a moment. Neil stood, slowly found his cargo, then he turned back toward the creek and began marching.

“You know what, Brad?” Neil called back. “You already picked your sides. You’ve barely talked to me for years.”

“I invited you out here, didn’t I?”

“After I mentioned in your birthday card that you should stop being so reclusive.”

Brad stood and kicked the underbrush.

“I made it across,” Neil yelled. “Follow my voice!”

“I can walk straight, thanks.” Brad said under his breath.

“You know I can hear every little thing.”

“Oh, I mean, thank you!” Brad loudly, false-happily chirped. “This fucking sucks.”

Neil started whistling while Brad made his way towards him. When they were again next to each other Neil tentatively asked, “Are you okay, man?”

“I want to go home and turn on all the lights and sleep.”

“That makes no sense. You know that, right?”

They stared at each other for a minute, seeing nothing.

“Neil?” Brad set his beer cases down. “Thanks for walking with me.”

Neil set his respective cases on the ground and stepped over to Brad. They hugged.

“You’re missing a party,” Neil whispered.

“You are, too.”

“I have other parties I can go to. For you this will be the only one for the whole year.”

“There’ll be a cheesy corporate New Year’s thing.” Brad shrugged. “But even without that I think I’ll be all right.”

“You’re fine with that?” Neil asked, stepping back and staring at his old roommate.

“Yeah. I like it up here. And I really can’t wait to have a kid. I don’t love my job, but I’ll sell every house in Del Norte County if it means I’m supporting a kid right.”

The two walked in silence for a minute. Tree frogs and crickets chirped loudly, wind rustled through the trees and the leaves, each step made a scraping noise as shoe soles rubbed sand against asphalt. The ocean murmured in the distance.

“Look up.”

“What?” Brad jumped, startled by the voice.

“Look up at the sky, man.”

The breeze had blown the fog back out to sea, and millions of stars were spread across the deep blue-black sky. The Milky Way formed a greenish stripe of stars and clusters and planets.

A dog barked.

“Son of a bitch!” Neil jumped into the air, dropping his cases of Bud Light. A few cans exploded, hissing and spraying frothy beer into the gutter of the street.

Brad quickly set his cases down, trying to stay calm.

“Neil, don’t run. He’ll chase you, and you can’t see a damn thing.”

“I know I can’t see a damn thing! I might’ve been on the verge of developing infrared sight, but this son of a bitch made me lose my focus.”

Then Brad noticed that the barking was coming towards him. He thought that dog usually stayed in its yard. He spun around momentarily to find his bearings, then sprinted back up the road they’d just come down.

“Brad, where are you going?” Neil shouted after him.

Brad had little confidence in his evasive maneuvering ability, but nonetheless he decided he didn’t want to lose as much ground as he was starting to. He looped back around toward the dog, toward Neil, toward the beer, toward his house, and toward the ocean.

A dim light appeared—a streetlight coming back on—illuminating everything in a vaguely yellow glow. As if in slow motion Brad saw Neil running back and forth in the background, and a German Shepherd charging in the foreground. The German Shepherd bounded at him, less than five yards away. And then it stopped. It twisted its neck, slowed its barking, twitched, then shook its head. Its shoulders seemed to spasm slightly, then the dog turned around and sprinted awkwardly back to its yard.

Neil stopped and stared.

Brad began to laugh.

“The shock collar activated... he was way past his line.”

“Jesus,” Neil said.

The streetlights slowly strengthened their glow as they came back on. Porch lights and a few lights in houses also revived themselves.

Before they could see the house they could hear Journey playing. When they got closer they could see silhouettes cast onto the sandy street, dancing.

Neil looked up at Brad. “Who invited these people?”

They stepped into the house and set half of the beer down, causing a mild commotion and slight cheering. Brad looked around the room, smiled slightly and shook his head. Hooper asked him something, but he couldn't hear it among the noise.

They retreated to the kitchen, wiping off the busted carton and putting the salvageable cans of beer in the fridge. Neil pulled a picture off the front of it. Brad and a woman were sitting on an overlook at Yosemite, squinting in the sunlight, their hair blasted with wind, with huge granite monoliths in the background. Marilyn, a muscular but lean blonde with most of her long hair in ponytail, wearing a red tank top and a hemp necklace, was thoroughly ensnared in a hug from Brad. The two of them had huge smiles.

“So this is the lucky lady?”

“Yep.”

“She's pretty.”

Brad looked sideways at Neil. “She's mine.”

Neil put the picture back and feigned raising his hands defensively. “I know.”

Brad glanced at a calendar on the wall. “If you want to stay an extra night, she’ll be back on Monday.”

“Yeah, she’d love that.” He rolled his eyes. “Welcome home, Marilyn! And surprise! Here’s Neil! Yes, the force behind everything wrong I’ve ever done with my life!” Neil switched to falsetto, sounding like a southern belle, “Oh my! What a delight to finally meet you!”

“She’s from Seattle, not the South,” Brad laughed. He glanced back into the living room and shrugged. “I don’t know... She doesn’t know much of anything about you, really. And if you stick around you could at least help me clean up.”

Neil looked back into the living room, a tidy, bright white room, with paintings of the ocean on the walls, a model sailboat on a bookshelf, a hardwood mantle above the fireplace, and a dozen thirty-year-olds, shouting and laughing and drunk, denying the passage of time. Neil stared for a minute, and then looked at Brad, blinking. He walked back into the living room, picked up a few plates and glasses and returned to the kitchen, setting them in the sink.

“Is that a real fireplace you have there?” Neil asked.

“What? Yeah, there are some logs on the hearth.”

“Let’s build a fire.”

Grabbing a box of matches on their way, the two men left the kitchen. Brad found some newspaper, and Neil started pulling a roughly split log apart into kindling. Neil laid out a complex arrangement of wood and paper and lit it with one match. Before long there were orange flames lazily reaching up the chimney.

“That’s nice, isn’t it?” Neil said, standing back up. They looked at each other and smiled.

THE LEAF WATCHERS

Jennifer Morrison put her plate in the dishwasher after scraping off the last of the macaroni and cheese. A white slime was left on her fingers, a remnant of the delicious sauce from Martin's recipe. She smiled, thinking of his dreams of attending the *Cordon Bleu* cooking school and becoming a gourmet chef, then looked at her fingers and laughed at how what she'd made was nowhere near as good as what he could do. She washed her hands and rolled down the sleeves of her thick burgundy L.L. Bean sweater. The house was cold; she'd have to turn the heat on soon. No Indian summer this year. Already Ashley and Sammy were complaining to her about the house. She didn't want to resort to the furnace until October, but the girls kept getting more dramatic. Just yesterday afternoon Jennifer had come home from work to find Sammy wrapped in four blankets and balled up in front of the TV, stuttering, "M-m-mom, I-I'm f-fr-freezing." Jennifer had told her to shut up, but she still found another blanket for her daughter and made some hot chocolate. As she'd stirred it she muttered something about how Maine natives were supposed to be tough. *I'm tough*, she thought. Then she felt a lump in her throat.

Out the kitchen window, the street was empty. The trees in Bob and Julie Epstein's yard across from them were swaying. She moved her focus closer, to the sugar maple in her yard. Martin had planted the maple there as a child, when the house had been his grandmother's. After planting it, his grandma would always give updates about its condition whenever she called, visited, or wrote. He'd hear when the buds came in each spring, and even after he moved to Bangor for more work, every year he would try to be there the exact moment the leaves started to fall. Martin would use the leaves to measure each year: how much he'd earned, how much fun he'd had, how good his life had been since the last fall. After his grandma had died, he inherited

the house and soon moved in. Central Maine still had work for electricians. He loved the small city. He immediately became involved in the Baptist church and joined the bowling league. He slowly fixed up the house, rewiring things here and there, changing some pipes, redoing the roof. It was this house that Jennifer and Martin came to at the end of their first date and played Scrabble in until two in the morning, this house where they had talked all night, this house where they had made love for the first time, this house where they had both developed coughs that lasted two weeks after exploring the basement, this house where they had conceived their two children.

As trees are apt to do, the maple had grown all the while and now took up most of the yard. At one point Jennifer had thought about cutting it down so the kids would have room to play, but Martin wouldn't have it; there was, after all, a small city park just blocks away. He tried to never let anything happen to that tree—after his grandmother died it came to symbolize her. He would sooner tear the house down than prune the maple in anything other than the most conservative fashion. After their fourth date, Jennifer had proposed carving their initials in the tree, but Martin flipped out. Maybe if they had been in their teens, he'd said, maybe if they were cute little Jenny and Marty, rather than Jennifer and Martin. If they'd met in junior high rather than at church when they were in their mid-twenties. But only *maybe*. That tree was sacred and that's all there was to it.

The leaves were now mostly a faint yellow-orange as Jennifer stared out the window at the tree. Maybe a maple leaf had fallen, but there was no evidence yet. A few birch leaves from the Epstein's yard were scattered on the lawn, but otherwise the grass was clear. No storms had come yet to strip every branch. Jennifer glanced back down into the sink, and a gust of wind knocked a leaf from its petiole. It flew sideways and floated down before settling onto the

sidewalk, where she saw it land when she looked back up. By Martin's definition, it had been one year.

Life had been hectic going into September last year. Bob Epstein watched it all from his window, periodically catching up when there was time for conversation. Martin missed most of the bowling league's games and whenever Bob looked out his window the house across the street was either empty or the Morrisons were scurrying about like mice on methamphetamines. The two couples for a while had gone out regularly, the Epsteins and the Morrisons, but now every time Bob or his wife brought up the idea it would just be met with sighs. Jennifer had just quit working her old job at the hotel to be a secretary for the history department at the local college, Sammy was going into eighth grade and had three boyfriends, Ashley was waitressing at Applebee's and making plans to skip the second half of her junior year of high school to go to Africa, and Martin was working overtime on the renovation of an old mill. Supper time was usually around 10pm, often something that came frozen in a box. Martin cooked on the weekends but everyone was too tired the rest of the time. Except for Sammy, conversation every evening consisted of nothing but complaints about work.

"You know, in Mali I could retire with this much money and live like a queen," Ashley said, looking at her paycheck.

"Maybe, but moving to Mali to live like a queen still won't get you a car here," Jennifer reminded her.

Ashley rolled her eyes and went upstairs to her room. Before long, reggae was blasting through the thin walls of the house, shaking a few floorboards.

Martin arrived home, with Italian sandwiches from the corner store. As everyone trickled into the kitchen, he snagged Ashley as she went by.

“I heard him on NPR,” he whispered, handing her a CD. “I thought you might like it.”

“Toumani Diabate?” she read, shrugging, before slipping the CD out of sight. “Thanks, Dad.”

“What are you two doing?” Jennifer butted in.

“*Rien, ma cherie, rien,*” he said, winking at Ashley. He suddenly asked her, “What language do they speak in Timbuktu?”

“French, at least a little, otherwise I guess it would depend on the ethnic group, probably Bambara?”

“Well I’ll have to look that up next time.”

“Your French is good, though.”

“No, it’s bad French. The whole neighborhood I grew up in was Franco. It worked there, but if I went to Paris I’d be shot.”

Jennifer was now hovering over them with her arms crossed and her eyebrows misaligned. When she was angry her right eyebrow always leapt higher on her face.

“Martin Jacob Morrison,” she muttered, “Why are you so keen on sending our daughter away on this study abroad thing?”

“It’s a safe program,” he said. “And it’ll be good for her. She’s barely been outside of Maine, and seeing people in need would be inspirational. I wish I’d had a chance to do something like this. And besides, it’s warmer there.”

“But it’s so far away! And maybe it’s safe compared with Afghanistan, but that still isn’t *safe.*”

“She’s a smart girl.”

“I know she’s a smart girl, but Mali?” She shook her head and looked down at the table.

Sammy’s sandwich had already disappeared, her presence was only known by the faint sound of typing coming from the living room. Jennifer yelled at her.

“Sammy! Tell Joey you need to eat supper with your family.”

No response. Jennifer walked out to get her renegade daughter, giving the other two a warning look as she passed. She pulled off Sammy’s headphones.

“Stop talking to Joey,” she told her.

“I’m not talking to Joey.”

“Stop talking to Mark, then.”

“Mom, Mark and I broke up like, a week ago.”

“Oh,” she said, putting her hand on Sammy’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am, he was a retard.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Sorry.”

There was a pause, as though both of them had forgotten what they were discussing.

“So who *are* you talking to now?”

“Jason.”

“Have I met Jason?”

“He lives in California.”

“Oh,” she said as Sammy stared back at her blankly. “Stop typing. Now.”

“No.”

“Yes. Come to supper.” Jennifer put her hands on her hips and squinted sternly at her daughter. Sammy looked right back at her, sizing her up. Jennifer broke the focus, glancing at the computer. She reached over and pushed the power button. Sammy screamed.

“Come to supper,” her mother repeated.

Sammy started crying and ran upstairs. Jennifer sighed.

Martin and Ashley were sitting at the table, just enough space cleared off for their sandwiches. Every now and then a pickle fell to the side of the cleared patch, landing on a stack of mail or one of Martin’s tools.

“Don’t worry about your mother,” he said softly. “She’ll come around. It’ll be good for you to get out of this place.”

“I love it here, you know I do, right?” she looked at him, biting the corner of her lower lip.

“Yes. And if I had this chance I’d take it in a heartbeat, even if I had to run away...” He trailed off and then frowned, quickly adding, “Don’t run away.”

“I won’t, Daddy.”

“Hey, on that CD I gave you... Check out track three,” he winked. “It was the one they played on the radio. You’ll like it.”

That Friday, Jennifer had come home filled with hatred for the history department. No, not just for the history department, for the whole college, for all academics. What a conceited bunch of assholes. She’d wanted to get home early to fix the house up, which had truly fallen to pieces when the school year began. Five minutes before she planned on leaving a professor had come in, needing to fax several things and make a bunch of copies. He didn’t know how to do anything, but rather than let Jennifer do it or accept coaching, he insisted that he was capable,

that his PhD should imply enough intelligence to be able to figure out a damn fax machine. And after him there had been another professor, and then another. Somehow she made it home before the kids. There was some time to breathe. Sammy was at the Boys and Girls Club, Ashley was at her friend's house. Martin's car—a green Subaru Legacy—was parked in front. She noticed a single maple leaf on the ground by the tree. She bent down and picked it up, and looked up at the tree, which was glowing in the late afternoon sun, a stunning yellow. The color brought back memories of years ago, sitting under the tree. She laughed, wondering if Martin was actually stupid enough to take time off just to be home in case the first leaf came down. Jennifer smiled and relaxed her shoulders as she opened the door.

“Looks like you missed it!” she called out.

Her words echoed, met with no response. Her nerves tingled, the awkward feeling of speaking out loud to no one without intending to. She twirled the leaf in her fingers and called out again.

“Martin?”

Again silence.

Her pulse quickened, she walked through the living room and the family room.

“Martin? You here?”

She checked the dining room and the kitchen before going up the back stairs.

“Martin?”

She found his body in their bedroom, slumped on the floor, leaning awkwardly against the bed. One arm was behind his back, the other was limp. She spoke to him, screamed at him, checked his pulse although she knew there wouldn't be one. She called 911 and tried CPR but

she again knew it wouldn't work. The doctors said it was a heart attack. She called Bob Epstein from across the street to intercept the kids.

Jennifer had tried hard. It was just like going back to the way things were before he had come into her life, wasn't it? But it wasn't. She couldn't remember how to do things without him, it didn't seem like there *were* things to do without him. And she certainly didn't know how to be a mother without Martin next to her. He was better at listening to Sammy and Ashley anyway; he'd always been the one to sing lullabies. He was the one who knew how to make good macaroni and cheese. Christ, she realized, Martin was both mother and father; she was just an accessory.

She couldn't remember how it was before he was in her life. She had a few memories of elementary school, a few of high school, a few of her single adult life, but she mostly felt like her life began the day she met him at the church yard sale. He was lying sprawled on a lawn chair, shirt off, a radio not far from his side playing Crosby, Stills, and Nash. He had said he was helping God advertise. After that she was spoken for.

The obituary had been nice, and the minister's words at the funeral left no one untouched. Afterwards, the family had packed up and gone to Jennifer's parents' for a week. Her sister came from New York to help however she could, but there wasn't anything they could do. Martin's parents came up from Augusta more often, but just seeing the house made them break down. They called Jennifer, and took Ashley and Sammy out for milkshakes every now and then, but they could barely handle it.

When Jennifer was home without the kids, she found herself gazing at a bottle of wine a friend had given them for their anniversary. She uncorked it, and poured herself a glass. She'd

never really drank before. When she finished the glass, she poured herself another. The next day the bottle ran out. The day after that she bought the first alcohol she'd bought in years other than cooking sherry. That bottle of wine ran out quicker than the first. She then bought a bottle of whiskey. She kept it in her room and drank herself to sleep every night for a week. After dinner she would sit at the table and stare at the wall. She looked exhausted, but most of the free time she had anymore was spent sleeping.

“Mom, can you take me to the mall tomorrow?” Sammy asked at dinner one night.

“In Augusta?”

“I need a Halloween costume... and some new clothes.”

“I don't have time to do that,” Jennifer snapped. “And we don't have the money, anyway. And you're too old to trick or treat. What the hell are you thinking?”

Sammy looked up at her and started crying. Jennifer reached out to her, but she turned and stormed off. Jennifer resumed staring at the wall, then cried. She didn't buy any more alcohol.

The leaves didn't get raked that year, every last one stayed.

Bob Epstein from across the street did everything he could to help. He shoveled the driveway and the sidewalk, helped Jennifer sell the Subaru. It broke his heart to watch the family that year. He wrote to charities and various radio and TV shows focused on improving peoples' lives, but no one had enough of a budget to offer miracles to everybody. And even if they did, it wouldn't bring Sammy and Ashley's father, Jennifer's husband, or Bob's bowling partner back. What use would it be? They didn't need a new house, or a dream vacation; Jennifer needed her husband and the kids needed their father. The contractors needed their man, the fastest and best electrician they'd ever seen. The church needed its baritone for the choir and its chef for soup dinners. The

house needed a plumber; Jennifer had never bothered learning Martin's skills because he could always take care of leaks.

Ashley forgot about Mali and rededicated herself to Applebee's, working almost every weekend to help pay the bills. She spent most nights lying in bed listening to world music, Toumani Diabate or others, more easily finding meaning in the chaos of languages she couldn't understand than finding meaning in everyday life without her dad. Sammy lost the last of her boyfriends. Most of them decided she was weird, or at least that on principle they didn't want to deal with that kind of baggage. She started running, never with a destination, and always looking defeated when she returned home. She didn't manage to get away; she always grew tired and was starting to develop asthma.

Jennifer began to feel dizzy as she stared out the window at that fallen leaf, which marked approximately the tree's thirty-fifth year of living at 64 Grove Street. She wanted all the leaves to fall off, for the tree to just die. It should all be easier by now; she should have moved on to a different phase of mourning, she should be at "acceptance." But it wasn't any easier. She was lost, they all were lost: Sammy, Ashley, Bob Epstein from across the street, everybody. The whole town was confused. But the town had moved on, just like the maple had moved on. She had considered moving, getting out of the old house, getting away from the tree that didn't really care about anyone, that never noticed the loss of Martin's grandmother, that didn't notice the loss of Martin. But that would not bring her husband back. She wanted to stop the tree from changing its colors, from growing, from adding another ring to its trunk like nothing had ever happened, as if the boy who had planted it was no one of consequence. *You ungrateful wretch*, she thought, *don't you have any respect?* The remaining leaves shook, perhaps in defiance, perhaps in sorrow,

but mostly, as they trembled against a grey September sky, the leaves looked like they were shivering, cold and miserable. She closed the curtain.

HOW IT STARTED

That summer was the wettest in decades. July in western Oregon is the one reliably dry month, but that year the gods controlling the weather decided to extend a drizzly May beyond June and to bring the August thunderstorms a little early. It was steady enough that there wasn't too much flooding—the Willamette River staying full but only breaching its banks to cover the golf course a few times—but camps and sports were rained out so often that several organizations gave up. Most people stayed indoors. It was probably the most successful year ever for the library's summer reading program, but for the rest of us it was a bleak and frustrating time. The rains had brought in misery, and no umbrella could protect us.

One rainy evening I was reviewing a spread of the “Local & Northwest” section. It was a good one—enough to make a reader think interesting things were going on. If you work at a small town paper long enough, you'll discover that half your job is tricking readers into thinking there's news when there really isn't. This issue was one of the better ones I'd been responsible for piecing together: news about pollution in Oak Creek; a feature article on my friend Jack, a national fly-fishing champion; a depressing update on an abduction case; some pictures of the floods; and a fun comparison of coffees preferred in Portland, Seattle, and the smaller cities. Something for everybody. I picked up my coffee (a travel mug filled with a local shop's “house blend”) and stepped out of my office into a small swarm of people.

“Is Sherry around?” I asked one of the senior editors. Sherry was our food editor; I thought she might enjoy a sneak preview of the coffee article.

“Sherry?” he repeated. “She was laid off a couple weeks ago. Didn't you know that?”

It took me a second to understand what he had said.

“I thought she was sick,” I murmured as the editor walked away, patting my shoulder slightly as he went.

“Roger, is your section ready?” Tom, a layout editor from upstairs, suddenly asked me.

“I already gave it to you,” I said.

“Oh. Really? Could you send it up again? I’m just a little overwhelmed today, you know. Thanks, buddy.”

As I became more aware of the people around me, I noticed everyone was frantically moving around. It had been bad since Nicki arrived, but everyone was *really* on edge now. I wondered if anyone else had been canned besides Sherry, or if there was some new sort of specific threat. I stepped aside to ask Larry what was going on.

He shook his cleanly shaved head. “I don’t know, Roger, I guess she’s been yelling at everybody, threatening everyone’s jobs right and left. Just extra bitchy.” Larry looked around. He was shorter than me, but he had the kind of personality that took up space. Not so much an ego as an energy. He’d somehow defied gender stereotypes, dancing and doing gymnastics as a child only to grow up to be a sportswriter. Occasionally bits of ballet or tap would come through in his body language, even as he’d speak like a football commentator. “I don’t know what anybody’s done wrong,” he cried. “But it’s suddenly like we’re down by two points in the fourth quarter, and we missed a field goal!”

“No one did anything?” I confirmed.

“Not that I know of.” He flailed his arms like a confused referee. This situation wasn’t within his control. “This is just the new way of life! Welcome to the future of the *Mid-Valley Journal!* And who is our coach in this game? Who do we have to thank for this wonderful new world order? Nicole Riccelli!”

Nicki was our personnel consultant. She'd been hired by the executives four months ago to help ensure everyone contributed their share to the paper and that there were no excesses. Two other people had been laid off since she'd arrived—no one I knew well, but it made us all uneasy. She was the only person in the office who wore heels, usually a pair of black stilettos, but occasionally sparkling red ones. The interns had taken to calling her the Wicked Witch of the East behind her back.

“So you really don't know what's going on?” I asked Larry again.

He shrugged. “Yep. I don't know.” His facial expression suddenly changed. “So you know how that dog show is coming up in Salem this weekend? Would you want to hit it up? You'd be surprised at the number of single ladies there.”

I laughed. “They aren't single, Larry, they're married to their dogs. And I'll bet you they'd cheat on a husband before they'd neglect their Cocker Spaniels.”

Larry was about to challenge this point, but Cindy of Op-Ed stepped between us.

“What I heard is that she failed her driver's test. That's why Nicki's, well, you know.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding without really listening. Then it sank in. “Wait, what?”

“Nicki can't drive. You know, she's from *the Big Apple*,” she carefully pronounced each word. “*The capital of the world. With mass transportation.*” Cindy laughed. “I guess she was going to try to get her license here this afternoon, but apparently she's not yet ready to step out of the world of taxis.

“Hmm.”

I turned into the break room to get my nightly Snickers bar. For two years now I'd brought one home to have as dessert while watching Jay Leno. Nicki was next to the soda machine. She looked shorter than normal, and I noticed she had taken off her shoes. On this level she was less

of a monster; in fact, she looked gorgeous. Her long, curly brown hair flowed out to her shoulders, falling partway down her slender back. She was wearing a fitted black sweater and a black skirt: the ensemble made her into a silhouette, curving from her small waist out to her modest hips and then smoothly back in down her legs.

“Hi,” I said. “How’re you doing?”

She looked away. Ever since she’d arrived she’d always refused to show any emotion. It made her good at her job.

She kept her back turned, not responding. I stepped closer to her.

“Are you okay?”

She turned to look at me. “Of course I am,” she said sharply.

Her arms were crossed, her fists showing the several rings she wore, ranging from simple bands to lost-wax skulls and Celtic designs. She was a witch with brass knuckles. I didn’t know if I should push my luck.

“I heard about your test,” I said, not making eye contact.

“What?”

“The driver’s test.” I shrugged. “It’s no big deal, I failed the first time I tried.”

She slapped the countertop. “Why is this *your* business?”

I debated saying “It’s not!” and running out of the room, but I was stuck. “I just wanted to say it’s not a big deal,” I repeated.

I remembered my driver’s ed. teacher, Mr. Gershwin (no relation to the musical Gershwins). He was crazy. Every time he had to use his brake pedal—the special one on the passenger’s side—he’d let out a holler. I almost slapped him once, when I tried to pull out onto a highway

and he decided I shouldn't. I started accelerating only to find the car groan and come to a stop with me halfway into traffic and him saying "Whoo-ee. Whoa there, buck-o."

Nicki glared at me. "You were sixteen, though, right?" She didn't pause long enough for me to answer. "I'm twenty-nine, and I can't even back up straight."

"But you've never had a chance to drive, have you?"

"Not really, but still. It's something I should just know."

"What about taking driver's ed.?"

She rolled her eyes and chuckled bitterly. "Are you shitting me? Be in a class full of zit-faced fifteen-year-olds..." She shook her head. "I actually almost did it. A month ago I went to register for it, but there was this long line, and it was full of forty-somethings signing up for their kids, and I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Don't they have adult classes?" I asked.

She groaned, "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But no, everyone here gets their license on their sixteenth birthday; everyone else can go fuck themselves."

I didn't really know what else to say. I probably should have left. "Do you want me to help teach you?"

She raised one of her thin, dark eyebrows. "It won't save your job."

"You're firing me?" My heart lurched in my chest.

She smiled and chuckled. "Not yet."

"Whew," I said, pretending to wipe sweat off my forehead. She didn't laugh.

"Also," she added, "Don't think of this as a cute way to get to know each other and eventually fall in love, okay?"

“I’m not that romantic,” I said. I was lying. I *am* that romantic, but I had long lost any expectation of such dreams coming to fruition. And on top of that, I was scared of her.

“And don’t think that whether or not we fall in love we’re eventually going to end up making love in the backseat of your car after driving to some secluded spot.”

“Of course not,” I stuttered, hoping she couldn’t see I was blushing (and convince herself that she had read my mind). I straightened out my posture. “Nope. Just getting you to the point of passing your test.”

“Okay. And don’t laugh at me. And don’t tell anybody.”

“Deal.” Instinctively I held out my hand.

She laughed, but shook it and confirmed, “Your day off is Sunday, right?”

So while most of the town was in church or doing housework, I drove through a light sprinkle to Nicki’s apartment. She came out before I got to the door.

“So how much driving have you done before?” I asked as I handed her the keys.

“Just a little when I’ve visited my uncle in the country.”

“He own a farm?”

“Yeah, so I’ve driven the pickup there a bit. That’s why I *thought* this would be no real problem.”

“Dealing with other cars is a different game. Granted traffic here is nothing like back home for you, but it’s still enough to complain about.”

She laughed as she got in. “You can always complain about something.”

I shrugged. As Nicki shut the door, her perfume wafted toward me. The scent was sweet but pungent, and it reminded me of the clove oranges my grandmother made. I turned to look at her.

She was wearing a skirt—thankfully no heels, but otherwise dressed the same as for work. I noticed a small run in her black nylons, just above her knee. She noticed me staring.

“If you can’t reach the pedals, the lever under the seat will put you back or forward,” I covered quickly.

“I know.” She watched me out of the corner of her eye.

“Sorry.” I shifted my seat, needing to pull it back myself. I was taller than my average passenger. Nicki was fidgeting slightly. “I assume you know to adjust the mirrors and stuff?” I added.

“Of course.” She immediately checked the sides and rear view.

She started to turn the key.

“Oh, you need to wear a seatbelt, too. State law...”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes and pulled it across her shoulder.

The car jumped forward and for the next minute I wondered if I should have taken her to a parking lot to start. I thanked God that my Taurus was an automatic.

At the first stop sign we abruptly came to a halt ten feet before the line. At the second she made a Californian stop, blocking the crosswalk completely and continuing to move forward even as she checked for traffic on both sides.

Nicki’s shoulders didn’t relax for one second, even when we were on an empty, straight country road. She craned her neck forward like an old woman, her chin just above the wheel, which her fingers gripped so tightly that her knuckles turned white above her rings.

“That lever there will adjust the wipers.”

“Thanks.”

“And you should probably turn your lights on.”

“Where’s that?”

“Over there. Oops, don’t want high beams.”

“Sorry.”

When we pulled up in front of her home her neck looked like it would be frozen in place for hours. I offered her a shoulder rub, but she declined and went inside. I lingered near her doorstep for a minute, but before long the rain was dripping down my back. I returned to my car.

Back at the office on Monday she was as wicked as ever, only giving me a slight nod when I passed her on my way in. During the week she perched over my shoulder several times, taking notes on a clipboard. I asked her when she would take the test again, but she just cleared her throat and didn’t look up from her notes.

On Tuesday, she was nowhere to be seen.

Tom came down to inquire about some photos that had been dropped off on his desk. They looked familiar.

“Yeah... those are of the riverfront,” I said. “They don’t go with any article... I think Matson took them?”

Tom nodded, then moved around to the side of my desk.

“Did you notice anyone who’s not here today?” he asked quietly.

Instinctively I looked around, although my office didn’t have much of a view of the rest of the floor. I pictured everybody I had seen that day.

“Larry?”

Tom nodded and said, in a singsong voice, “Substandard performance.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You got me.” Tom shrugged. “Ask Nicki.”

“What?”

“She was the one to do it, she should know.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “Wait, when did it happen?”

“The slip was on his desk Sunday morning... it must have been left there Saturday.”

“I should call him. Do you think he expected it at all?”

“I don’t know. He always had his work done well and on time.” Tom developed a somewhat distant look. “I’m going to miss him. I mean, the silly sports metaphors for everything. And he was so intense. Any assignment out of the ordinary and he’d be pacing and waving his fists all day. What a character!”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. We went to OSU together. I didn’t spend too much time with him then, but once we were at the Civil War football game together.” I laughed. “I had a couple Beaver things on, of course, but he was wearing a Speedo—just a Speedo—and had painted himself entirely orange and black. And he brought in a megaphone, smuggled it into Autzen Stadium—this was down in Eugene at U of O, so we were the minority group, mind you. But with the megaphone he didn’t do cheering or taunting, he just commentated on the whole game.”

Tom laughed. “Wow.”

“And he knew *every member* of both teams by their numbers. It was incredible.”

Tom shook his head. As he started to walk out of my office he turned back and said, “They must be planning to replace us all with computers.”

“What?” My mind was still in Autzen Stadium.

“Well, why else would they get rid of all our best people?”

She called me on Sunday morning, tearing me from a dream that all too likely centered around whatever we'd published the day before. When I picked Nicki up, for the first time since we'd met she wasn't wearing a suit. In jeans I could tell she was younger than me and dreadfully pretty, although she wasn't any less intimidating just because she was wearing a pink sweater instead of a pinstripe blazer. Whenever she said anything I had to fight an urge to respond "Yes, ma'am." *I* was the teacher here.

"Where would you like to go?"

"Wherever the roads take us," she said. I was sure she was joking, but I was game for a road trip. If only it had been sunny.

"How about the coast?" I offered.

"Okay."

I handed her the keys and got in. As we pulled away from the curb, I blurted it out.

"What did Larry do?"

She gave me a cold look and sat up.

"We're not going to talk about work. You said you'd teach me to drive, I never said I'd spare your friends' jobs just because of this gesture. Or your job, for that matter."

"So I'm at risk?"

Without responding, she reached for her purse. "What do you want? Should I be paying you for your gas and all that?"

"What?"

"You want me to compensate you for your precious time? I'm willing. How much do I owe you, then?"

"Just tell me about Larry."

“I can write you a check. Where do I turn?”

“Go right up here.” I flipped through the radio channels, but nothing felt good. I turned back to Nicki. “Look, forget Larry. I’d guess you caught him playing his basketball computer game. If there was anything else, it wouldn’t matter, the executives here and those Evans people in L.A. or whoever it is these days are all hardass enough that they don’t need much rationale.”

“I’d rather not discuss this here, and you might not want to badmouth Evans Enterprises in my presence. I might have to report you.”

“This is off the record, though, right?—Get in the left lane—Well, fine, we’ll talk about something else. What brought you out here? Surely the *Journal* doesn’t draw people from across the country.”

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s an hour to Newport. And if it’s a good story we’ll forget about you paying anything for gas or my *precious* time.”

“Fine.” She sat back a little in her seat. “My grandparents used to live here. They’d always talk about how pretty it was, how quiet, how peaceful, how much less stressful.”

“Why’d they go to New York?”

“My grandpa wanted an adventure, wanted to get away. He was born out here, grew up here, went to OSU, all of it—”

“Sorta rings a bell.”

“You’ve never left?”

“I’ve traveled a bit, but never lived anywhere else.”

“Hmm. So my grandpa did a lot of directing and set design for the community theatre; he’d help with touring opera groups and that sort of thing—Which way do I go?”

“Right. He went to Broadway?”

“Eventually, yeah. He had a friend from college out there who kept telling him he should go out there, that he could do things he’d only dreamed of before, the usual deal. Grandpa was an amazing carpenter, especially, and a person with his expertise could get into pretty cool stuff.”

“So they moved out east and lived happily ever after?”

“Sort of. They packed up their things and took the train across the country, set up an apartment; Grandpa got his job and Grandma did secretarial work until they had my mom. Then they moved into a house, but Grandma always hated that it didn’t have a lawn.”

The rain outside obscured most of the scenery, so my focus alternated between Nicki and every little thing wrong with my car—dust on the dashboard, a few pieces of trash I’d missed when cleaning, the missing cigarette lighter—but my eyes invariably settled on Nicki. She almost looked comfortable, even happy. I wondered if she had many friends out here.

“My mom was then a New Yorker through-and-through, she hated being away from the city for more than a weekend, she’d get restless and bored.”

“How did you turn out different?”

“I guess I just spent too much time with my grandparents. They’d tell stories of falling in love and chasing marmots while hiking in the Cascades. And my dad liked to go on trips, so we’d go up to the Cape or Maine on weekends, just the two of us.”

“But you still stayed in New York.”

“I love New York, it’s the best city in the world. Mom convinced me to go to NYU, and I loved it. There’s just so much happening everywhere. Out here it’s so different.”

As she spoke her gaze seemed to soften, as though she wasn’t looking at the Coast Range but at the Manhattan skyline. I thought back on my only experience of New York: a whirlwind trip

through all the tourist attractions, during which I was nearly run over by no less than four taxis. It suddenly impressed me that Nicki only honked a little more than I did.

“I always wanted to explore other parts of the country,” she continued. “And last year I went through a really crappy breakup and needed to get out, so I started looking. Eventually this came up. What’s the speed limit here?”

“Fifty-five, I think. So who was the guy, or girl, if I might ask?”

“It was a guy. My boss. That’s why I was up for finding another job.”

“What did you do over there? Other consulting?”

“Human resources—more or less the same thing as now. I like manipulating people.” She winked at me.

“And what happened with your boss?”

“We’d moved in together. Christ, we lived together for a year. We weren’t working together when we met, by the way. But he just got weird. Slowly fell apart, he’d get jealous if I went out on my own, he kept trying to get me to go to swinger’s parties, just a lot of weird stuff. When I broke it off he didn’t believe it and wouldn’t move out, he’d tell people we were still together, that I was just PMSing—I apparently was PMSing for five straight weeks. Finally I just left, went to my dad’s house, and then decided to try coming out here. Too much of the city was tainted by him.”

“Wow,” I said, suddenly feeling very boring. “So is Oregon everything you wanted?”

“It’s been raining constantly since I’ve been here.”

The rain lightened as we turned onto 101. It was misty, the Pacific barely distinguishable from the sky. A typical day, depressingly enough.

“Have you had clam chowder yet?” It occurred to me she probably hadn’t experienced all the essentials of the state.

“I had it in Maine as a kid. Is it something special out here?”

“We’ll let your taste buds decide.” I smiled. “Turn here. The best place is just down a ways.”

After lunch, we walked around the historic bayfront of Newport for a while, window shopping. Nicki suggested staying in the car, but, even if I had to drag her, she *had* to go to the kite shop. There are certain things that are not to be missed. The rain didn’t let up, so we had to sprint between the awnings. I grabbed her hand as we raced across a driveway. When we were safe under shelter, I loosened my grip, but she held on. When I looked at her, I think she smiled.

We took the coastal highway south a while before turning back inland to return home. A few rugged souls were out on a beach trying to play volleyball. They were actually pretty good. It reminded me of one time camping on the coast with some college friends, Larry among them. He was a volleyball fiend; he could put that ball anywhere, even in the wind. I started flipping through the radio, wondering about how Nicki had been able to fire him. How do you guiltlessly do that to a guy?

“Poison?” she said suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“That song— ‘Every Rose has its Thorn’ —that’s by Poison, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

When the song finished I turned the radio to NPR. I don’t think either of us enjoyed it, but she didn’t like my country music and I didn’t really like alternative or classic rock. So we learned about how to repair exhaust systems and whether it was worth fixing a ’97 Saturn’s transmission or if you should get a new car.

“Who taught *you* to drive?” Nicki asked as we neared her place.

“Floyd Gershwin,” I said. “He was this crazy old man with wispy hair that stuck out all the time. He had thick glasses, too, that he was always wiping off.”

“Sounds like a blast.”

“You didn’t miss much by avoiding driver’s ed.” I paused. “When you did something wrong he’d yell ‘whoo-ee!’”

“Wow, a real cowboy!”

“Maybe a long-retired cowboy,” I said, trying to imagine Mr. Gershwin on a horse.

We pulled up in front of her apartment and parked. I walked her to her door.

“You know you have a hell of a reputation at work.”

“The Wicked Witch bit?” she shrugged and paused. “It’s all to get the job done easier. It’s harder to trim the fat off a company when you know who the fat is and like them.”

“You know your nickname?” I asked, surprised.

“You really think those kids keep quiet enough for me not to know?” she laughed as she unlocked her door. “They’re twenty, Roger. If they had military secrets entrusted to them the US would definitely not be a world power.”

“I guess that’s true.” I shrugged. Halfway through the door, she paused, kissing me on the cheek. Her lips were soft and warm, taking away the chill of the rain on my skin. I turned to look at her just as the door was closing.

And then I didn’t see her again until Friday.

We met in the break room as I was heading home.

“Where have you been this week?”

“I was evaluating the second floor.”

“How did that go?”

“Depends on whether you’re friends with anyone up there, I guess.”

“That good, huh?”

I looked down at my feet. I had to ask.

“Who was it?”

“Duncan... Frannie Duncan—”

Frannie Duncan... I didn’t really recognize the name; maybe that was the blond secretary?

Nevermind, like Nicki had said, it was better not to know.

“... and Tom Cochran,” she added.

“What? You fired Tom? Who’s left on layout editing?” Tom wasn’t exactly my supervisor, but everything that came from me had been passed through him as long as I’d been working at the paper. “How many people do they think it takes to run a newspaper these days?”

“That’s what I’m here to determine.”

“Christ.” I felt like punching her. I felt guilty, like I was somehow partly responsible for the layoff. “You only make recommendations, though, right? It’s the people who hired you who are really behind firing everyone?”

She laughed and nodded.

I punched the Coke machine, then stared at it for a few moments. I realized my jaw was clenched; it took some effort to relax it. Nicki was just standing there. I turned around.

She smiled, then leaned and whispered into my ear.

“My test is next week.”

I let out a breath. “Will I see you Sunday then?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.” She smiled sweetly, slightly tilting her head and shrugging like an excited little girl, then turned and marched away.

We spent the morning practicing in the city, navigating one-way streets, railroad crossings, stop signs, and we tried parallel parking. I told her more about my parents, admitted I should have gone elsewhere to college, or at least found work further from home. Everyone knows me, and while it’s good for the self-esteem most of the time, it gets old hearing the same stories. I told her about Sandy, my ex-fiancée. She told me more about her college years.

In the afternoon, it was up to her where she wanted to go to review.

“I guess I’ll just surprise you then,” she said, smiling.

We started out again going west, but as soon as we were in the hills she started arbitrarily turning down various roads.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I asked as she turned onto a gravel logging road that hugged the side of a steep hill. I wasn’t sure if I’d kept track of every turn well enough to lead us home.

She grinned. “No clue.”

“Maybe we should stop?” I offered.

She looked at me, turning her eyes away from the road for too long for me to feel safe. She finally broke her gaze and braked quickly, just as a deer crossed the road thirty yards ahead. We came to a stop, and she turned the car off. Nicki looked at me and smiled.

“We stopped.”

Then it was silent. We were far from any major roads, and the deer was now out of sight. For the moment, it wasn’t even raining.

We looked at each other.

“I think I might miss doing this,” I said. “Unless of course you’d want to go on Sunday drives once you’re licensed.” She smiled lightly and leaned toward me. I closed my eyes at first, but then opened them to look deep into her eyes, her irises so dark a brown they almost faded into her pupils. Our lips met and it felt natural, so close and seamless our blood could have been flowing through and across the connection. Her breath retained the good aromas of coffee without the bitterness; her cheeks smelled like Christmas. She pressed against me, her fingers running through my hair and tickling my ear gently. At once imperceptibly and dizzyingly, her tongue slipped into my mouth. My heartbeat doubled. My hands moved to her cheeks, brushing her hair aside.

She broke the kiss first, straightening her back, smiling. I glanced outside, confirming it wasn’t raining. After a quick Chinese fire drill we were in the back seat, and I was feeling every powerful muscle in her body against mine. Every touch electrocuted the nerve endings in my skin. Again I grew lightheaded as her hands moved over me. Mine moved slowly up her shirt, and she pulled me closer. Her fingers danced about me, sliding across my chest and down my stomach. The cold metal of her rings felt like ice. The windows fogged up as it began raining again.

On Wednesday when I arrived at work she was standing outside the door to my office, holding a folder.

“Perfect score?” I asked.

She scowled. “Five points docked for one forgotten turn signal. I swear I turned it on, but my hands were shaking so much I might have switched it back off.”

“But you passed?” I confirmed.

“I passed,” she sighed.

I felt a small pang—how ungrateful!—but I got over it quickly and I couldn’t help smiling. I glanced around and quickly kissed her.

“I’m not here to tell you that, though,” she said.

A different pang went through my body—did she want a quickie? I dismissed the thought.

She bit her lip slightly, and pulled some papers from her folder.

“If you want you can meet with the head of human resources...” she paused.

I looked up at her, expectantly. She looked straight at me, her eyes meeting mine.

“You’re getting laid off, Roger.”

I felt my fists tighten.

“Who the *fuck* is going to work at this newspaper anymore?” I yelled, pounding a fist on the wall.

“Please don’t make a scene, this is for the best,” she said.

I put my head in my hands and sighed. It didn’t make any sense. I’d swear I was the only one left on local news.

“You can pack your things and leave. You’ll get two weeks’ pay. I’m sorry,” she said.

I couldn’t tell if she looked sad, spiteful, or numb. She continued to stand in the door as I picked my briefcase back up. I kissed her on the cheek and walked out.

Later that day I returned to the *Mid-Valley Journal*. Not to work, but to pick up a few of my things and to turn in an angry letter to the editor that I was certain wouldn’t get published. Or if it did, they’d take out all references to their corporation and let it seem like they stand up with all

of us in this age of impersonal monopolies. Evans Enterprises wouldn't take it upon themselves to advertise that they were cutting all of their staff.

It was also an excuse to see her, to see if she had a good explanation, to ask without holding back what made her cut so many people, and why me. I deposited my letter at the front desk, then made my way to Nicki's office. I'd never actually visited it before. It was more like a cubicle. She wasn't there, and the walls and surfaces had few signs of habitation. The only picture I found was of a little girl and a man on a ferry, smiling as the wind blew her hair wildly. Just below it was her calendar. There were a few scattered appointments, but it was mostly empty. She had marked each Sunday, "Driving." I smiled. I reached into my briefcase to pull out a parting gift for her, a little package of car things I'd assembled over the course of the week (considering it a congratulatory gift at the time)—a flashlight, a blanket, jumper cables, a few other tools. She would need them sooner or later. As I pulled out the other part of the gift, I realized she'd filled in Sundays beyond her test. I set the other gift, a little lighthouse ornament for her rearview mirror or her apartment, on her desk. I flipped to the next month of the calendar. "Driving?" was written, at least in pencil, on every Sunday.
