HOMEMAKERS
Short Stories

by

Aidan O’Brien

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

MFA Program for Writers
Warren Wilson College

May 2024

Table of Contents:

Greg's *Emile*

He bought a $60 snow globe

featured in the "Recommended For You" section of an online marketplace he frequented in quiet moments at the office or while watching a dinnertime movie with Mason—the boy, a careful eater like his mother had been, leaning over the wooden coffee table, plate on a bamboo mat, utensil lifting speared broccoli stalk slow to oil-slicked lips. Two weeks later, finding the box squatting on his front stoop, he popped it open right there, hands moving thickly through anticipation's sap. Styrofoam and packing peanuts swaddled the globe. This was how they shipped warheads, he imagined. He appreciated the globe's simplicity, the flecks winking in the water, the hand-blown glass like the organ of a superior being. He set the black velvet display stand next to the record player on the sideboard after cleansing the surface with a wipe, revealing a little square of darkly wetted wood. The globe clung to his damp palm. Yellow lamplight slid along its curve, bustled in its center. He would glance at it while working on his laptop or tidying, would lean around the little wall separating the living room from the kitchen while cooking or washing dishes just to see it squatting in the stand's soft dimple. He rarely picked it up though the seller had specifically mentioned how nice it was to hold, its *hand-feel*, but the idea of dropping it, watching its once-singular innards expand through shards into a simple puddle, stopped him. Often, he found himself looking back and forth from son to snow globe—his nine-year-old boy squinting at his calculator or reading a comic or playing on his GameBoy, chewing on the inside of his mouth when things got intense, freckled cheek distended inward,

gnawed skin throbbing rhythmically—and Greg, looking from the one to the other, wished that the child resembled in any way the globe. Its easy grace, its total transparency. To raise a boy who was less like a boy, he dreamed, and more like a snow globe: a boy with no hidden thoughts and in whom the light caught and coruscated, who gave joy simply by looking at him. Alone in the king bed, underneath the pink checkerboard comforter Caroline had purchased without his input, he imagined the snow globe growing larger and larger as though through his parenting of it (the care he devoted to it, the intentionality with which he spoke and acted around it, the Michael Pollen–directed all-whole-foods diet he fed it), while at other times he imagined himself actually inside it, strolling along the slope of its glowing and bowl-like bottom, the globe unshaken, tranquil, nothing settling on him so much as the stillness. It was a beautiful image, though one he worried might be misconstrued as containing some latent incestuous impulse, and so, although he wanted to express it, to say that he sometimes resented Mason for being emotional and finicky and lazy and globularly amorphous in the way of all humans and that he craved nothing so much as the enswallowing innards of his sweet imagined orb-baby, he kept it to himself. He remained silent. He persevered. And then, one random afternoon, Mason said, “How did I not notice this?” and picked up the globe and dropped it and it shattered—shattering just as he’d imagined it shattering—and he realized that he could not do this anymore, this parenthood thing, not without guidance, not alone, not since he’d come upon his current state of aloneness as one might swerve to avoid an animal on the highway and find oneself suddenly upside down. After all, Caroline had done all the research, read all the books about raising children. She’d defined their whole parenting ethos. If there was a problem, she’d say, “Here’s how we're going to handle it,” and that’s how it was handled. He needed someone else to do that for him. And because he’d taken

philosophy courses as an undergraduate and recalled deriving existential comfort from the old texts thus encountered—though, years removed, he'd forgotten what a deeply stable time that had been, everything structured, everyone caring for him, no one relying on him—and because he identified as something of a social conservative—not out of hatred for any particular group, he told himself, but because of a perceived disrespect for tradition in the younger generation—because of all of this

he bought a copy of Rousseau's *Emile*,

the Allan Bloom translation, which a former professor, with whom he'd studied Plato's *Symposium* and selections from Hobbes's *Leviathan*, once referred to as "one of the great books about parenting"—Emile being the name of an imagined child Rousseau raises in the manner he thinks best. The online, secondhand seller described the book's condition as "fair" noted "markings on the first few pages." They neglected to mention a tear along the spine which eliminated the first two letters of Rousseau's first name, rendering him *an-Jacques Rousseau* as though he were one of many Jacques Rousseaus. For two weeks, every night, after he and Mason ate dinner and took in a film (until, inspired by Rousseau, he outlawed these daily screenings) and after he helped or didn't help his son with his homework (the clacking keys of Mason's graphing calculator nagging at him as he wiped down the table), he would, after sending Mason upstairs, make himself a cup of lightly caffeinated tea with a splash of almond milk, set a candle on the table to produce an early-nineteenth-century ambiance, plug in Caroline's old reading lamp, its flexible neck bowed in mourning (the candlelight, though atmospheric, being

insufficient), and read. He underlined certain passages in red ink. He marked certain pages with little neon-yellow sticky-tabs. Rousseau implores the reader, the would-be educator, with respect to the child—re: "the help one gives them"—to "limit oneself solely to the really useful." But what was really useful? The answer was not as simple as he'd hoped. It did not have the easy grace once encountered in his now-lost globe-baby. Education, it turned out, was not sitting down with one's child and a textbook or a whiteboard or even a flannelgraph and explaining a given concept. It was the entirety of the child's existence starting from birth. "I'm behind," Greg thought, plodding through the first pages, and he resolved to give himself over entirely to Rousseau's program. And what does Rousseau say? Well, for one thing, that

"the only habit that the child should be allowed is to contract none"

and the great thinker is really quite firm about this. He fixates on the idea that the child should be ready for anything, psychophysiologically primed for the unexpected: being of sound body from days of activity—Rousseau being a big proponent of play-based learning—and mentally conditioned by the parent. "Sometimes I shall wake Emile up," Rousseau writes, "less for fear that he get the habit of sleeping too long than to accustom him to everything, even to being awakened, even to being awakened abruptly." The actionable quality of this advice appealed to Greg. The following night, he lit a match by the kitchen fire alarm (realizing, *I haven't checked these since Caroline . . . It was Caroline who used to check them*). The siren wailed. "Dad?" his son called from upstairs. "Mason," he shouted, "come quick." Mason barreled down, eyes red from sleep, hip bumping the banister. "What's happening?" yelled Mason. "A fire," screamed

Greg. The noise tore at their ears. They ran out front and stood on the damp driveway, dark houses to either side. Mason wore nothing but a T-shirt and a pair of boxers. Greg wore shoes and a puffer jacket. “It’s important not to try to save anything on your way out,” said Greg. Mason hopped from foot to foot, chubby arms wrapped across his chest, breath misting the air. “Are you going to call the fire department?” asked Mason. “I don’t know,” said Greg. “Why not?” said Mason. “Maybe it’s nothing,” said Greg. He approached the house and peered in in an investigative sort of way. “I think it might be nothing,” said Greg, “you wait out here.” “I won’t let you go in there,” said Mason. “It’s fine,” said Greg. “There’s a fire,” said Mason. “But maybe there isn’t,” said Greg. Mason held onto Greg’s arm. “Dad,” said Mason, his cheeks wet with tears. “All right,” said Greg, “we’ll go in together.” They went back in. “Why is there a chair under the fire alarm?” asked Mason. “I have no idea,” said Greg. Greg got up on the chair and pressed the button that turned the alarm off. “Well,” said Greg, “back to bed, I guess.” Mason went upstairs. Greg returned to the table and re-lit his candle—careful not to let the match burn too long—and congratulated himself. He rubbed his eyes with the bottoms of both palms and wondered what he’d do next. What did Mason need? What would be really useful to Mason? Rising, he scrounged up an old notebook and ripped out the first page which showed a grocery list in Caroline’s handwriting. He put the grocery list on the kitchen countertop and smoothed it out and looked at one of her oddly tall Os. Then, on the second page, which was now the first page, he wrote

Mason: Who Is He?

and then, underneath, a bulleted list including observations ranging from “Slightly Overweight” to “Timid But Not Cowardly” to “Loves Science Class But Hates Math” to “Short for His Age” to “Says That He Wants to Be a Scientist One Day But That He Doesn’t Want to Do Math,” which Greg had told Mason was impossible, but Mason still didn’t do his math homework. Or, rather, he didn’t do it the right way. Mason plugged all the problems into the expensive graphing calculator his grandparents on his mother’s side had gifted him the prior Christmas, a big blue brick of computing power with the manufacturer’s logo in the upper left-hand corner: the state of Texas with a little lowercase *t* carved out of it like seceded land and a smaller, lowercase *i* embedded in the *t* like those people had decided to return. Now, almost a year later, the elapsed time a heavy load, Mason had, as it were, learned the calculator instead of the subject, plugging in each equation that traipsed across his path and squinting at the numbers shat out by the little LED display—one hand fumbling around in the little bowl of Choco-Mountain Happy Trekker Trail Mix that he was allowed to pour for himself when he got home, his fingertips searching instinctively for the smooth, sloping surface of an M&M or the malleable point of a peanut-butter chip—before writing down the answer. This drove Greg wild. It totally played into his whole self-defined social conservative persona thing. It was just another example of young people doing a thing without really knowing how to do it and was indicative of mass psychosocial malaise and alienation but also jobs going to China and trends in suicide among young men. (“I don’t see why this bothers you so much,” Caroline had once said.) He’d confronted Mason about it, saying “But how will you do when you get to the test?” “They let you use a calculator on the tests,” Mason answered, causing a flabbergasted Greg to stand in the kitchen for a few minutes, eating Choco-Mountain Happy Trekker Trail Mix out of the bag—

fingertips searching instinctively for the smooth, sloping surfaces of the M&Ms or the malleable point of a peanut-butter chip—and contemplating the nature of education. Now, by candlelight, he went to Mason's backpack and dug through stained and folded and doodled-on papers until he found his son's math homework. He spread it on the counter beside Caroline's list. His son's handwriting in no way resembled hers. It was awkward and blocky. The letters did not run together like her letters but stood out like individual moments of punctuation, each letter an island. Except his *O*s. His *O*s, too, were a little too tall. He looked from Caroline's *O*s to Mason's *O*s. Then he looked at the sentences in which Mason's *O*s were embedded, the answers to word problems. Mason's math teacher made the students write out all their answers as full sentences rather than just letting them write down the number. It was, in Greg's opinion, capricious and inefficient. It also gave him an idea, an idea very much in line with Rousseau's preferred parenting style, which hinged (he had read half the book by now) on not overtly teaching your child (which would, after all, happen enough at school) but instructing them through

a series of highly orchestrated incidents

like how Rousseau taught Emile the value of ownership by having a gardener dig up his plants or the importance of physical fitness by organizing a seemingly impromptu race among local peasant children. The following Saturday morning, as Mason and Greg went out of the house, a small boy was on the front walk, weeping. When Mason inquired what was wrong, the boy said, as Greg had paid him to say, "I bought a pack of 280 jellybeans and I gave away forty percent to my friend Jim and Jim gave twenty percent of his forty percent to Alice and Alice gave ten

percent of her twenty percent of Jim's forty percent back to me and now I don't know how many I have." Mason said, "Why do you need to know?" The child, coached by Greg in anticipation of this very question, said, "I have OCD," and absentmindedly ate one of the jellybeans. "Let me get my calculator," said Mason. "No," said Greg, "I won't let you leave this crying child." Such scenes became regular. They might see two children throwing sticks to two dogs, the distances of the throws roughly equidistant, one of the dogs able to retrieve his stick in eight seconds and the other in nine seconds, and the children about to come to blows over whose dog would come closer to retrieving his stick 374 times—"It's our favorite number," one of the children explained —in the course of an hour. ("Do you always carry a stopwatch, Dad?" Mason asked.) The deliveryman from a local dairy, strolling back to his vehicle as Greg and Mason passed by, happened to comment that he'd dropped off eleven bottles at that house over there but next week the family was having guests and he'd been tasked with delivering twenty-seven. "I happen to know," he said, speaking as if to himself but standing in front of father and son, blocking their path, "that three people live there. I wonder—if we assume that the eleven bottles are distributed evenly between all three family members, and if we assume the visitor or visitors will drink no more or less than the current residents—how many visitors are expected, rounded to the nearest person?" Mason looked up at him, eyes bleary from having been dragged out of bed for such an early walk (he rarely got a full, unbroken night of sleep). "How many visitors," the milkman prompted, pointing at the sweating glass bottles in their blue milk crate. "Eight?" Mason said. Greg kissed his son's cheek. "Not rounded up," the milkman said, "rounded to the nearest person." In this way, Mason's education progressed: always when they were out and about, always with a physical correlate for the numbers flitting across the screen of his son's mind,

always without the calculator. Greg would lie in bed, not noticing the bed's relative emptiness, not wishing his child were an inanimate object, manufacturing these little incidents and, once everything was in place—the right people paid, the timings arranged, the lines written—he would anticipate them, waiting for the moment when, presented with the oddly numerical scenario, Mason would, after a minute's silence, proclaim "eleven" or "nine and a half" or "two thirds" and he, Greg, would see—the answer given, the knot undone; a knot as much temporal as numerical, considering how it held them in place, everyone together, stopped on the sidewalk or the lawn or the living room's blue carpet, waiting for the answer as the white space on a test waits for the pencil's self-triturating scrape—he would see pride effervesce pinkly on his son's cheek, starlight in his eye. But these scenes were difficult to orchestrate. They took planning. They took resources. They walked the razor's edge of any conspiracy built on shared silence. Something different was needed, and *Emile* provided. What did Rousseau do when he wanted Emile to learn to read? He sent the boy a number of letters, from the sort of people Emile wanted to receive letters from, and refused to read them to him. The boy, so prompted, simply taught himself. In this spirit, Greg began to leave sticky notes around the house with equations on them, all sorts of equations, utilizing all the tools in Mason's mathematical tool belt, coming together as components of a code that when all was puzzled out, would reveal something wonderful—

a wonderful thing yet to be determined.

But what would that thing be? Having placed the first few sticky notes before Mason got off the bus that Friday, Greg still didn't know. Even as his son peeled the first such sticky note off the

kitchen counter, saying, “Dad, what is this?” and he, evincing carelessness, said, “Huh? Oh, that. It’s nothing,”—even then he was floundering. A month later and half the code deciphered, Greg still didn’t know what the wonderful thing was, what it was that the code would reveal. It ate at him, not knowing. On the one hand, they weren’t a family of infinite means. On the other, his son had handled all the sprung-upon-him scenarios and late-night disturbances, had responded to the banning of TV at dinnertime and the disappearance of his calculator (which had just vanished, who knew how?) with such aplomb that Greg wanted nothing more than to sweep the boy up, reveal all, and tell him how proud he was. Of course, he could do no such thing or he’d risk undermining all of Mason’s progress. The reward, whatever it was, would have to stand in for that moment, would have to be equal to it. And then, hallelujah, his son came up with the wonderful thing on his own. “Dad,” Mason said, having completed the penultimate portion of the code, an algorithm which would allow him to compute for consonants in the alphabet’s middle fourth, “are we going to Disney World?” and Greg, though the project wasn’t yet finished, blurted, “Yes!” It exploded out of him. “Yes, Mason! We are!” What every sad small and recently or semi-recently motherless child deserves: Disney World. They would go on a vacation together. They would go on a vacation together and thereby prove that they could go on a vacation together. Splendid! He planned it out that night—airline tickets by candlelight—and his heart with filled with something like liquid gold, and something like stadium lighting burned beneath his skin. He called his son’s school and said that Mason would be out of class from day X to day Y because if there was ever a little boy who deserved a trip to Disney World it was this little boy, and all the teachers and administrators and general staff said, “Amen to that,” and two months later they were on an airplane and Mason was experiencing the miracle of flight and Greg was

sipping snapping Sprite from a little ice-frosted clear cup set into his plastic tray's dimple, little bubbles blitzing up from the cup's bottom and Mason lulled to sleep by the plane's steady roar and right then, right there, moving at what speed he couldn't imagine, who knew how many miles above the Earth, Greg felt a stillness inside himself, a peace he'd thought he'd never feel again. He might've stayed in that moment, abiding within himself,

but for the fact that, suddenly,

one of the engines said something loud and angry—an expletive, almost. Mason startled awake. The pilot came over the intercom and told the flight attendants to strap in. The plane was going to make an emergency landing. Already they were losing altitude, losing it faster than any plane intends to lose altitude. Greg grabbed his son's hand. "It's going to be all right, Mason," he said. "Shhh," Mason said. "Shut up, Dad." Near the front of the plane, in first class, a man screamed, and his screams pummeled down the aisle. Greg's brain felt like a lot of liquid sloshing about. His hands were sweating. He wanted to scream too but couldn't, because he could not scream in front of Mason. He assumed the brace-for-impact position, not intentionally but because emotion had molded him into it. The moment of calamity was so long, it seemed infinite. The plane was tugging them downward. He turned his head and looked up at his son, who was staring into the middle distance, who seemed to be seeing something that he could not. He watched Mason as he'd watched him so many times. Right after Mason was born, when it was his turn to hold him, he would often, instead, put Mason on his play-mat and stand there looking down at him. Even later, when Mason could walk and run and was just starting to speak, he would often disengage

from the boy and move away and watch him, and Caroline would sometimes comment on this, saying, “What, you don’t like playing with him?” and he’d try to explain that that wasn’t it. It wasn’t that he didn’t like playing with Mason. It was—he fumbled for words—it was like this thing from Plato’s *Symposium*, “which I studied in that class I told you about.” “It’s this thing,” he said, “which is where when you love someone you want to be, like, joined with them, you know? like you wish you could totally become a part of them, but also you want to just look at them. You want to, like, appreciate them as a complete and whole being.” Caroline gave a little nod. “And yeah,” he said, “the whole becoming a part of them might, in Plato, have like this sexual component but”—he felt himself getting red in the face as he spoke—“but maybe it’s like when you’re playing with your child and you’re making them react to you—you’re united with them in a certain sort of a moment, you know? like maybe the interaction itself makes a sort of oneness out of you?” What he liked to do, he told her, was to hang back, to look. He was trying to take Mason in. The fact of his existence: he was trying to process it. He was trying to take it all in, he told Caroline. Mason, her, himself as a father. He had not taken it all in yet.

He felt his son’s hand on his back.

“Dad, we’re going to be okay.” Greg looked up at his son from his hunched position. “It’s going to be okay, Dad,” Mason repeated. “I’ve calculated it all out. I know how close the nearest city is: I compared our flight path against how long we’ve been in the air. I’ve gauged our descent against those clouds beneath us. Those are cumulus clouds. They’re usually about a kilometer wide and form at between 1,000 and 5,000 feet. The average speed of a commercial airplane is

547 to 575 miles per hour—everybody knows that—though obviously our angle of descent has affected our land speed. The high temperature in Florida today is eighty-eight degrees. It's 2013. It's May eleventh. I'm nine. You're forty-three. Mom died 381 days ago. We have everything we need to figure it all out. We can pinpoint where we are and where we are going, and we're going to be fine. We're going to be okay."

Greg looked at Mason and hoped they would survive. He hoped, too, that if they didn't survive it would be quick, that they would feel no pain. He prayed that the speed at which they were traveling would make a hard object of their soft bodies, like ceramic, like glass. That they would shatter—only shatter—on the Earth.

The Comforter

"Wallace here… " begins Corbyn Borgnine, tilting his whiskey tumbler in Wallace's direction.

Wallace, so indicated, massively freckled, sitting to Borgnine's left, stiffens an already taut back, precipitating a spinal tensility more characteristic of suspension bridges than pillowy undergraduates. He braces himself against the eyes of the ten other boys (plus Borgnine) clustered around in lounge chairs or wooden seats pulled over from the long empty dining table nearby: the collected members of the Young Conservative's Association, ages eighteen to twenty-three (the oldest, Roland, having taken two non-sequential gap-years), all wearing white collared shirts; ties which have been fashionably loosened to show pale necks variously patterned with stubble, razor rash, or (poor Dewey) scabs of eczema like pinkly simmering pacific islands; and suit pants. But not jackets. Their jackets were sweatily abandoned when the drinking began at Borgnine's behest and now lie about bruising the room black and blue, draped over the backs or arms or seats of the many chairs in the chasmal, stained-glass-windowed, warmly lit, mahogany-carved, leather-upholstered, vaulted-ceilinged, book-brimming Whittaker Chambers rec room of Cornell's Citizen's Club, a room which now rumbles pleasingly as Borgnine's *basso voce* continues, saying, again, "Wallace here… "—the glass still tipping in Wallace's direction, brown liquid pushing against its clear curving wall, nibbling at its crystal lip, the tilt a gesture cribbed from Borgnine's former mentor, a man who seemingly could not indicate anything without the help of an alcohol-bearing vessel, be it cocktail glass or chalice, seidel, snifter, or pitcher. "Wallace here, who was good enough to arrange my visit, wanted me to talk about how I parlayed my undergraduate years into the career that has brought me here, to talk to all of you.

That has made me into the kind of person that you would want to talk to. In the interest, I imagine, of all of you becoming the kind of people that other people might want one day to talk to. But I don't want to talk about that. I doubt that there's anything from that time in my life that would be particularly edifying. All I learned at Yale was how to pass classes at Yale, as I imagine you've all mastered the art of passing classes at Cornell." (Gable feels himself flush. He pictures the unanswered email from the dean's office looming at the top of his inbox. All those little lowercase letters stabbing at him, their serifs cruelly sharpened. The other boys still don't know.)

"Whatever… " says Wallace, cutting in, feeling, having been singled out, that he *has* to speak, "whatever you'd like Mr. Borgnine. I just wanted to say, again, how pleased I am that you're joining us… which is very pleased… is how pleased we are. And to reiterate how sorry I am… we all are… about the unfortunate situation with the food."

(The Unfortunate Situation with the Food! Being that there was no food. Wallace, Club President, thought he'd handled the food. Had said to multiple members of the club "I'm on top of the food" or "Food is go." Had ordered University catering services' most expensive meal—after which, meeting Clayton in the dining hall, he had bragged, "Ya boy Wallace got us the good stuff"—a repast ranging from crisply crinkling spanakopita to a steamy pile of NY strip steak slivers to a frosted-glass bowl of lemon sorbet balanced in a misty bath of dry ice. But he had booked the wrong day. The sumptuous repast will be served next week to the delighted congregants of the Cornell Catholic Women's Club as they discuss a public condemnation of former member Kathleen Actually—Ms. Actually having recently converted to Episcopalianism—in their newsletter "Cornell Catholic Women's Weekly" and their sub-stack "Ms. Missal." The upshot being that none of the boys have eaten. Nor has Borgnine, who traveled quite a distance

to be here. They are hungry. Are uncomfortable. Are worried that Corbyn's good humor and relaxed attitude and suggestion that they "all laugh it off and have a drink" is a mask concealing a seething ire commensurate with his emptiness. That he is going to leave from here and go directly to the editorial office of every conservative news outlet in the nation and also all the law schools oh and plus The Heritage Foundation, and say, "Don't let any of these boys walk through your front door!")

"Thank you Wallace," says Borgnine. "But where was I? I was saying that I don't want to talk about when I was a student. Hell, I don't want to talk about my time as a staff writer at Civil Essentials, all those years interred with a band of swarthy Neo-Cons." (Certain of the boys, Tim especially, anxiously miscalibrate what should be polite laughter and produce dog-like yelps.) "What I want to talk about is the time right after graduation. Right between college and my first job. That's what I think it might benefit you to hear. This was a very short period of time. Just two weeks, in fact, seeing as I pretty much walked right into my first job." (Certain of the boys prickle jealously at this. Damian in particular feels like puking. How, he wonders, can Borgnine offer him any meaningful advice if he's never been through what Damian's going through? He's graduating at the end of the fall term and he's got nothing lined up. Just last week, he had a one-on-one meeting with Dr. Ansely, the Anthropology professor, in Dr. Ansely's office, and, the end of Dr. Ansely's office hours being coterminous with the end of Damian's session, and Dr. Ansely's office being way out on the edge of campus and not really near anything, Dr. Ansely had offered to drive Damian to wherever he was going next. "Where are you going from here?" Dr. Ansely had said. But Damian had misinterpreted this, had read it as a question about his whole life, more specifically his career, as in "what do you want to do with your life? where are

you going after you graduate? are you or are you not going to be a failure?" and Damian had looked up at Dr. Ansely's office's plaster ceiling and said, "I just don't know." Many of the boys feel this way. [Gable would just like to get to the point where employment, and not school, is the problem.])

"During my time at Yale, I wrote for a now-defunct campus publication," Borgnine continues. "I was one of…" He pauses. His drink, held by his face, seems to linger on a sip's precipice. "Actually," says Borgnine, "I don't want to tell it like this either." Borgnine's bottom lip puffs out thinkingly. The watching boys barely breathe. Here it is. The moment when he storms out. Wallace's Adam's apple dangles an anxious notch above its usual perch. Yellow light from the room's many lamps winks on the sweat-slicked pale foreheads of the assembled. Borgnine sloshes whiskey through his teeth like mouthwash. He puts the tumbler down. "What I would like… " he says, "I'd like you boys to get on the ground. Let's all sit on the ground… here on the carpet. Yes, up we go… out of our chairs. Push them all back. All… yes… like that. Clear a space. Wonderful… What I'd like would be for all you boys to sit in a circle and I'm going to go around, one by one, please don't balk at this… but I'm going to go around and give you massages. All right?"—looking from face to face, the collective quiet shock, instinctive dissent chastened by Borgnine's celebrity. "All right? Good. Well then… "—sitting himself down behind Benjamin Abernathy, the boy sitting criss-cross applesauce. Ben's butt muscles tense as Borgnine's torso slides up behind, feet emerging into either corner of his peripheral vision.

The famous writer has removed his shoes. His patterned socks show concentric golden circles on a purple background.

"As I was saying," says Borgnine, hands on Ben's shoulders—Ben, an Econ. major, who's only here for the connections and only conceived of the Young Conservatives Association as one of a number of social circles he'd intended to join at Cornell before finding out that being a member of the YCA functionally locked him out of a number of those other social clubs—"I was one of many such Yale graduates who would go on to work for publications like Civil Essentials—National Review, First Things, you know the sort"—sliding a thumb along the top of Ben's shoulder blade, dimpling the white fabric. "I was following in the footsteps of other, similar writers: Davy Oakland, Richard Lowry, Renata Adler, Drake Ableman. It's a well-trod, well-maintained path.

"The Polis. That was the name of the student publication." The tips of his fingers are exactly as firm as they need to be: not iron rods, not pool noodles. They squelch up the knotty swamp of Ben's back. "It was nominally run by a very prominent professor of political science—I don't think I need to tell you his name—who was really more of a spiritual guide than anything else. A lodestar. He gave us a unifying vision. We did all the real work." Borgnine's hands feel hot on Ben's back. Truly hot. Like hot stones heated for the purpose. Normally he would say "Hey now" or maybe "Dude, what?" but he can't bring himself to interrupt Borgnine's monologue. Anyway, the hands feel good. They slice through his tension. Burning fingers click vertebrae and shoulder blades into place like clock innards. It's quick work, the matter of only a minute. And then, even as Borgnine continues speaking, he's moving to the next boy, to Roland Escrow, and Ben, barely listening, feels himself upright but oozing.

"I'd written a number of fiery articles. I was the publication's attack-dog. 'Affirmative Action for A Handicapped Nation.' 'The Campus Abortion Crisis,' 'Dean Mayweather Spits on

the Constitution.' Things like that. It got my name out. The people who needed to know about me knew about me. There was work waiting for me, is my point. So, after graduation, and with two weeks left on my New Haven lease and my job not starting for another month, my plan was to do nothing. Maybe go to some cafes. See some friends.

"It was at this time," says Borgnine, "during those two fallow weeks, that I developed a… well, in fact, I thought it was an illness. Waking up the day after graduation, I found that my hands were emanating heat. A strange heat, localized entirely in my hands. Obviously, I thought, at first, that the problem was with my head"—giving a slow circling knuckle to a knot in Roland's back—"and not my hands. I called my ex-girlfriend, Elizabeth. She, too, was staying in town for a few weeks. I said that I knew that we'd just broken up and all—we were moving to entirely different ends of the country, I to D.C., she to Santa Fe, to help manage her father's ceramics shop—but could she come over? Our split had been mutual, albeit initiated by her. She'd said our lifestyles, going forward, were incompatible… whatever that meant. Anyway, I needed her to feel my hands, to tell me if this was real or a post-graduation stress hallucination. She said to me, 'Corby, you want me to come over and feel your hands?' " Borgnine, laughing, prompts the boys to laugh. "She thought I was trying to take advantage of her. She said, 'This isn't going to be like what you did with Amy Sandstedt our Junior year?' I promised her that that was not the case. I said I'd swear it on all the saints of the church. 'I think I might be having some sort of psychosomatic episode,' I said. She said, 'Fine. I'll come over.' "

Borgnine pats Roland's back twice. Rather than standing, he scoots across the Turkish carpet—legs bending and yanking, hands pushing—to Dewey, whose sizzled eczema scabs don't deter the conservative icon one instant. From a seat at the dining table on the room's opposite

end, one would be able to see only four or five of the eleven boys' heads poking up like pale tubers between leather chairs and reading lamps.

"Roland and Ben here," Borgnine says, indicating the two de-tensed and blissed-out boys with a nod in their direction, "are already well acquainted with what I'm talking about. Dewey's getting his first taste now. If you were to call up my ex-girlfriend—still working at Plateau Ceramics, I should note—she would further corroborate. She was quite stunned when she first felt them. She felt my hands with her hands and then she put one of them—one of my hands—on her face and sort of purred and told me how good they felt. Somehow, I don't know how, they wound up on her shoulders, massaging her. I massaged her with those—these—hot hot hands. While I was massaging her I asked her what she thought I should do. Was this a medical situation? 'This,' she said to me, 'is undeniably a medical situation.' " Borgnine's fire-white knuckle traces Dewey's collarbone. " 'My god,' she said, 'your hands! Your hands!' " Dewey purrs.

"She drove me to the hospital, the Yale New Haven Hospital. I explained my symptoms to the emergency room receptionist: my disturbingly hot hands, my otherwise happy health. She expressed some confusion. Confusion could be borne, was appropriate even. I invited her to feel. She swirled her thumbs across my palms." (Dewey cannot hear Borgnine, being touched by him, being so inward-facing. As if it is Borgnine's hands that are speaking to Dewey. As if each knot in Dewey's back correlates with a different anxiety and Borgnine's hands are addressing each in turn. "The eczema makes him unlovable," whispers one. "Nonsense," say the hands, kneading, "thousands of Americans suffer from eczema each year. It hardly makes anyone unlovable." "But," another knot chimes in, "he'll never get a date." "Women suffer from health conditions

too," say the hands. "Sexually active women have always suffered from one aesthetic debilitation or another." "His mother won't stop nagging him about his skin cream," whispers a bulb of muscle hunkered within the crease of Dewey's righthand shoulder blade. "Dewey's mother can just die," the hands assert.)

"When I went in to see the doctor the situation had gotten worse. I was now leaking a strange, amber fluid from the pores in my palms. A thick, sappy fluid that flowed uncontrollably and webbed between my fingers when I spread them apart." Patting Dewey, he shifts to the next boy, Gable. "Anyway, I didn't have to wait long. Doctors, it turns out, are as excited by novelty as you or I. We went in and the doctor—this tall, tall woman with very straight blond hair—this doctor said, 'So you're the fellow with the hand situation,' and I said yes but that the situation had changed. She said, 'it's not just your hands now?' I said no, it was still my hands, but they were doing something different. I remember I accidentally touched the little padded bed in the consultation room. As I tried to pull my hands away to show them to her, this long sticky thread of amber wetness stretched out between myself and the bed's disposable paper covering."

Borgnine pauses, stills his hands. ("Don't stop," Gable thinks, "dear god don't stop. For a moment there, just a moment… ") "In fact"—Borgnine is smiling—"I think it's coming on now… Yes. The sap is beginning to flow. I was wondering when it would. It always comes, always following the heat. Always in that order. The heat, then the juice." He holds his hands in the air and pulls up his sleeves by gripping the cashmere with his teeth. His hands glisten, amber-slicked and glinting in the many-lamped space. "It's… " Borgnine brings a finger to his mouth and licks along it. "It is a nutrient-rich, glucose-based fluid similar in composition to tree-sap and produced by a network of cells just beneath my skin which bear some resemblance,

appropriately, to the phloem sieve tube elements found in certain plants, Arabidopsis for example, or mustard." Standing, Borgnine moves from boy to boy, holding out his hands so that each can inspect their thin, glove-like covering of viscous liquid. "It seems, now, that these cells, which had always been just underneath the skin of my hands, simply, finally, matured—their doing so less than twenty-four hours after my graduation nothing more or less than circumstance. Of course, at first, the doctor had no idea what could be causing it. I was given x-rays. My hands were put into a mammogram machine. Some of the sap was collected to be analyzed. It turns out that this… " Borgnine pauses, lifting a hand high, letting an amber bead of over-flow drip off of his righthand ring finger to splatter on his upturned tongue. "It turns out that this sap is no more or less than one of the most fortifying comestibles ever produced. Protein, sugar, a portion of every major vitamin, including B-7, B-12, and B-2, as well as potassium, calcium, salt, trace amounts of iron. I wrote to a nutritionist and asked him what he would think of a product that contained these nutrients and in these amounts and he said that well, first of all, impossible, there was no such substance, but, second-of-all, that—barring water—this miracle product contained everything a person might need to survive indefinitely."

Standing at the center of the circle, Borgnine motions toward the table—empty of food, empty even of emptied food tureens, plates, and bowls as it should've been—and past the table, to a glass-windowed cabinet where thin and wide-fluted wine glasses and stacked whiskey tumblers sit in rows, saying, "Get a cup for me." Wallace retrieves a tumbler and hands it to Borgnine who runs the edge of the glass along his palm, along his fingers. A thick sap dollop crinkles between cup edge and flesh, drips down to the tumbler's bottom. Borgnine performs this motion a few times, filling the vessel with a shallow, yellow-orange pool of fluid, collecting from

either hand, always holding the glass gingerly with the opposite fingertips. When he gives the cup to Wallace—who, having sat back down, takes it without question, rising up into a kneeling position—five yellowish fingerprints cling to the cup's bottom. Standing, a bit of sap dripping onto the Turkish carpet, Borgnine stares at Wallace. Wallace holds the tumbler up, inspecting the liquid. The tumbler's glass walls glow yellow. "Well, Wallace?" says Borgnine. Wallace holds the glass beneath his face and peers in. The pooled liquid is a wide amber iris, wobbling almost imperceptibly. "Wallace," says Borgnine, crouching next to the boy, slapping a sticky hand onto his shoulder and letting it linger there. "Wallace," says Borgnine, "you've had a rough time of things. For starters: the food. But it's more than that. You're afraid that you aren't living up to the precedent set by the previous presidents of this club. Kenneth Weinstein. Jamie Lee. You thought that this was a well-trodden path, well-maintained, but now you're here and you see that no matter how well laid-out a path is, it is still you, still your old self, walking along it." (This: a lesson that Roland has learned many times over. All those gap years, those seemingly well-conceived escapes. A hired hand on a Montana buffalo farm. A ski instructor at Breckenridge. All those sprawling vistas that only, somehow, sent him slaloming down deeper within himself.) "I see you," says Borgnine. "I see all of you. I can see your worries. Your fears. Your anxieties. They're floating above your heads." He is looking into the air, his eyes fixed on something closer than the ceiling. "I'm here to tell you it's all right. I'm here to make you feel better."

Warm fluid dribbles down Wallace's back, trickling from Borgnine's hot palm. Borgnine looks around at the boys. "I didn't know what was going on, obviously, when it first started. My ex-girlfriend, the doctors, the nutritionist: none of them knew. But the symptoms abated. I reined them in. I pretended that they did not exist, had not existed. I moved out of New Haven. I began

working. Fourteen years at Civil Essentials. And then, of course, my book came out." He locks eyes with one boy after another, head ticking from face to face like a second hand. "I'm Corbyn Borgnine," says Corbyn Borgnine, "you know who I am. Sometimes the symptoms would return but I would always hide them. I would sense my hands beginning to grow warm and I would extricate myself, one way or another. I once had to excuse myself from a very intense conversation between Pat Buchanan and Newt Gingrich at the 1996 Convention. That was before any of you were born. Only once did I have to abandon a speech. I do a lot of speaking engagements. This… this right here… all of us in this beautiful room named after the dear, dear Whittaker Chambers, who could see so clearly, so ferociously… " he trails off. Tim, who can't stop nodding as though he understands, realizes he has no idea who Whittaker Chambers is. Wallace is stiller than he's ever been. The beading heat of Borgnine's hand fluid tickles down Wallace's back, can be felt on his spine. "This is nothing new to me… " Borgnine begins again. "In another sense, though, this is very new to me. I've never done this before. Done it like this, I mean. Like what we are doing now…

"I got a call just last week. Who from? From Elizabeth! Still interred in her father's ceramics shop, still selling his ceramics despite the fact that he died almost eight years ago. 'He has quite the backlog,' she told me. She told me that she'd been in, just the other day, for a manicure-pedicure. She went to a woman she usually sees. The woman's name is… I can't recollect… but they got to talking and Elizabeth happened to tell her about me, about my weird symptoms. Do you know what this woman told her?" Borgnine studies the Turkish carpet, the little yellow drops of sap that stutter across it. "The woman told her that there is a legend about me. Yes, a legend! She said that there is a legend that has been passed down from spa owner to

spa owner, masseuse to masseuse. That it is common knowledge among nail-salon employees. That it transcends culture. The Chinese know it. The French know it. It was spoken of in Roman bath-houses. Russian spa owners, flogging their patrons with tree-branches, know about it. If you're Catholic you may have heard of the elaephori, the oil-bearing saints. Sometimes, rarely, a man is born. A special man with hands that are a soothing fire. From his skin sweet ambrosia flows. He is able to look at a person and see exactly what is troubling them. This man, wherever he comes from, is known as… The Comforter! Yes, the Comforter!" Borgnine barks. "Like the big puffy blanket-thing. A man who brings comfort to the whole world! That was what Elizabeth told me. Of course, I only laughed at her. I said to her, 'Are you calling me to mock me?' 'No,' she said. 'I thought you should know,' she said. 'You should know about your purpose.'

"Just about a week ago, my hands became hot, hotter than they've ever been, and the sap began to flow faster than it ever had and I could not stop it. I knew, then, what I had to do. I needed comfort. I needed *to* comfort. I needed to go out and comfort someone. That was the only way it would stop. So I decided to give comfort to you, to you boys. You boys are my chosen ones," looking from face to face. "I am going to comfort you and you are going to take my comfort. I may never do this again. Not if I don't have to. Not if my body doesn't make me. But I must do it once. At least once. If only to get it to stop.

"Do you know what your worries look like, hanging above your heads? They're big black clouds. The room is full of them. Is choked with them. I can't see the ceiling. I can't see the stained glass windows. It's all fogged up. The lamplight is dim. I'll be pawing around like a blind man soon, leaving yellow slick splotches like a path behind me.

“Wallace, you are going to drink. You are going to drink and be touched and be soothed and be comforted. We’re clearing the air. Just this once. Just because I have to. It is a need for me. My own hands,” Borgnine’s laugh is a growl, “are forcing my hand.”

Dripping liquid pools at Wallace’s knees. His sip is audible.

“Oh,” whispers Wallace, his voice half-muffled by the drink, “oh wow.”

Excerpt from the Manuscript of *Pablo's Scythe: Berneria from 1955-1999*

…was relayed, via payphone from a street corner not two blocks from the burning American embassy, to the newly appointed Secretary of the Interior, Juan Alexander, who took it to Pablo.

Or, rather, who intended to take it to Pablo. But the President could not be found. A former servant would later recall Juan Alexander and Heriberto Bigotes (the Mayor of Tiriez, who'd helicoptered down earlier that day), along with a gaggle of secretaries, undersecretaries, and estate staff running up and down the halls of the Presidential Palace's government offices and apartments, shouting the premier's name and "bugging out their eyes and panting and trying to look as desperate as possible so that no one would be able to say, later, that they had not been looking their hardest."[1]

Finally, a guardsman eating an early dinner in the staff quarters told them where Pablo had gone: he was in the woods back of the mansion, playing frisbee golf.

---

[1] Aguilar, Melissa. *El asiento en el olimpo*. 1st ed., *Pinzón*, 1991. p. 298

Chapter 12: Tomahawk Shot

I do not have a problem… I think people are trying to make it seem like I have a problem…

—Michael Jordan (on his gambling habit)

Pablo Fulgencio first encountered disc golf while working for *El Informe Nacional* in Bonn, Germany in the 1960s, reporting on, and acting as a mouthpiece for, the then-ambassador's ongoing attempts to get the West German government to lower its embargo. Unbeknownst to the ambassador, this policy had been imposed on Western Germany by the United States and would not be reconsidered, regardless of appeals to the necessity of the two countries' interdependence considering "their shared continent" and what the ambassador termed their "cultural and historical similarities"—"similarities" which Pablo attempted to substantiate in his articles for *El Informe*, and which Ludwig Erhard of the Christian Democratic Union, one of West Germany's foremost political parties, described as "wildly offensive."[2]

Disc golf, which, in its modern form, originated on University campuses in the United States, was quite popular in West Germany[3] by 1964. "It appealed to a people suspicious of their own aggression, seeking a gentler, more meditative form of sport."[4] There were a number of disc golf courses throughout the region, specifically in the small town of Weilerswist, where the

---

[2] Verner, Melissa. *Germany and its Allies.* 1st Edition. Oxford University Press, 2002. p. 301

[3] It was not entirely unknown in Berneria either. Courses and instructional centers had appeared in Malagón, Azuer, Loja, and Tiriez, all between 1955 and 1961.

[4] Becker, Albrecht. *Soft Launch: A History of Disc Golf*. Translated by Eric Jones, 2nd ed., Aufbau-Verlag, 2009. p. 21

community had taken a real interest in it and young people from Bonn and Cologne could often be found playing a few rounds at Discgolf-Vergnügungsplatz or Schöne Discgolf-Tage. For a young reporter like Pablo Fulgencio, a man flush with ambition, fulminating in the ideas that would later lead him to reject the role he played in his government's propaganda machine, an afternoon of disc golf would've been a minor event, a pleasurable distraction from the real business of life. But in 1983, as an unchallenged autocrat occupying a former king's summer palace and a man for whom ideology had become something to fear, he was positioned to indulge in any entertainment that captivated him.

Pablo's disc golf course was a standard eighteen holes. It began near the stone walkway along the eastern flank of the Victoria Garden—then re-named The Garden of the Ascendant People—and looped through the estate's hills, leading the player around to the palace's western entrance where the eighteenth basket was within sight of the guards flanking the door. Course maps were eventually printed and disseminated among security staff. It's unclear why, at the age of forty-eight, Pablo suddenly became so enamored with the sport.[5] No professional disc-golf broadcasts existed in any country. For major tournaments, the Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA) often hired film students from nearby colleges to record the competitions for posterity. According to Carter Brown, PDGA's archivist, "These were, as you might imagine, highly amateur recordings. Because we couldn't afford to hire more than a few students for any given

---

[5] According to Palace gossip, Pablo's daughter had had an odd interaction with her father that might explain this. Apparently, she had been playing with some friends—mostly the daughters of palace staff—in her room. They were having a pillow fight. Suddenly, Pablo came in. He started throwing pillows at them, joining in the fun. Apparently, he began throwing them with a strange technique. He would grab a corner of the pillow and sort of flick his wrist such that the pillow spun as it flew. He kept throwing them that way. Then he told them, all the girls, to stop fighting. He put a pillow down on one side of the room and made them all try to hit it with other pillows—having them throw like he was throwing, with that flick of the wrist. He made them do it for over an hour.

All this was relayed to me a week after my arrival, by one of the palace cooks.

event, we could never get the full run of play from every player. In many cases, we don't have footage of the player who actually won."[6] However, their quality did not deter Pablo from acquiring a number of these recordings. Officially, the PDGA had no idea to whom they were sending the tapes and Pablo worked through an intermediary who never revealed his association with Berneria or The People's Government. That said, recently unearthed correspondences—mostly dealing with the finer points of course layout—between "Steady" Ed Headrick, the famous toy inventor and PDGA's Founder, and a "fan" named Bernard, whose penmanship bears a striking resemblance to Pablo's, suggest that the organization might've had more information than they were (or are) willing to let on.

The situation in Tiriez continued to deteriorate. Following the initial attack on the American Embassy…

…protesters killed in the crush of bodies trampling down the streets. More died at the hands of the militarized police force, whose immediate counter-measures consisted of driving their massive U.S.-funded ATVs and reenforced combat trucks directly into the crowds. "It was too loud to hear their vehicles approaching," recalled Gala Garza, a then-clerk at a hardware store, who joined the crowd as…

---

[6] He goes on: "Many of the tapes are ruined now, considering that our storage facility at the time was my Dad's garage, and it was leaky." (Excerpted from a brief interview, performed by this author, at Kendall Indian Hammocks Park in Miami, FL, August 2014.)

At a daycare in Tiriez's upscale Lado Norte neighborhood, instructors shot armed protesters trying to escape the rampaging police vehicles with guns they'd concealed in the building months earlier, determined to protect the children against any and all threats. At Carnation Park[7] rioters took shelter from police vehicles behind juniper and poplar trees. Barricades…

…products from nearby shops—foodstuff, children's toys, workout equipment…

…1,200 people.[8]

…Juan Alexander and Heriberto Bigotes found Pablo Fulgencio at hole ten of his private disc golf course three hours after the initial bombing of the American Embassy, just as the crowd was beginning to sweep through the old parliament building. Ideally, Juan and Heriberto would've approached Pablo Fulgencio on a different hole. Hole ten was a particular thorn in Pablo's side. It consisted of a long, wooded slope tracking upwards to the top of a hill, where it arrived at the

---

[7] *El Parque de los Claveles*: a green sprawl just south of downtown Tiriez. Couples huffing over peddle-boat peddles on the slow river. White bridges arcing over flower-beds. Rolling man-made hills. The statue of Adolpho Tiriez on the southeastern corner, once protested by students, destroyed by Pablo, now re-built, now protested again. A modest nine-hole disc golf course along the western border. The upper circle of hole nine's yellow basket reflected in pristine pond water: a halo, distended, wobbling on the scalloped tips of windblown ripples. The view from the start of hole seven, where you look out across two hills, across *camino Tiriez,* all the way to the Natural History Museum's neo-Gothic facade. Hole eight, where, during the warmer months, and if you play first thing in the morning, a good throw will send you sprinting into a copse of poplar where, if you look east, two trees will flank the sun rising up over a row of white-marble homes, the white stone city-smudged. You want to lick your thumb and wipe them clean.

[8] This number: formulated by statisticians based on aerial photographs captured by Spanish spy planes, photographs taken by those participating in and documenting the riot and subsequent massacre, and an analysis of Tiriez census data. The Bernerian government, following Pablo's deposal, challenged these numbers, claiming casualties were far higher. At the time of the tragedy, countries unfriendly to Pablo's government reported casualties in excess of three thousand. It was fallaciously described, by Great Britain's then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as "the bloodiest day in Europe in the last decade."

base of a low rocky ledge. Due to glacial movements in the distant past, this knoll had been shorn down short on one side, yielding a hill that looked like two hills, halved and awkwardly sutured together, with the crest of one standing a full eight feet higher than the other at its peak, and a short cliff separating the two. One could navigate around this short cliff by simply walking down the slope of the shorter hill until the greater incline of the hill's taller half brought it level with the other. However, hole ten's basket was just over the peak of this hill, between a hibiscus bush and chestnut tree, and the fastest way to get the disc to the goal, from the hole's starting point, was, with the first throw, to throw it right up to the base of the short cliff, and then, with the second, to throw it up and over. Ideally, this second throw would send the disc clattering right into the basket.[9] It was this up and over that was giving Pablo such trouble, necessitating, as it did, a Tomahawk shot.[10]

The shot was difficult for Pablo. During his time imprisoned at Saint Ignatius Penitentiary, in the course of being mistreated by the guards, he'd sustained nerve damage to his right arm, causing him to lose feeling when his elbow was brought level with his shoulder. When performing the Tomahawk Shot, just as his hand arced toward the point of release, he lost any sense of it. He either released the disc too early, sending it straight up over his head, or too late, sending it straight out in front of him. Both were embarrassing. And even if he managed to

---

[9] Not at all hard for a professional.

[10] The Tomahawk shot—named for a small ax associated with the indigenous people of North America—is a technique that sees the user flipping the disc on its side, gripping the edge of the disc between the thumb and near fingers, and throwing it overhand. The shot is particularly useful for clearing tall objects without the disc then veering off in a direction unintended by the thrower. From Winston Cayther's *Disc Golf, the Ultimate Guide:* "The technique of throwing the shot, along with the manner in which the disc leaves the hand—flying through the air on its side, perpendicular to the ground and therefore highly visible—makes the Tomahawk shot a particular favorite among fans of disc golf, and its use in the course of professional play is always cause for excitement."

release the shot at the correct moment, his fingers might slip, or his elbow jerk, and his shot[11] would send the disc flying off diagonally from his hand, the disc already starting the flip onto its side, wobbling in the air like a paper airplane.[12] While performing the shot, Pablo asked that nearby guardsmen turn their backs.[13] This, he claimed, was to allow him to focus and not at all because he felt ashamed.

It is easy to speculate that had Juan Alexander and Heriberto Bigotes simply waited for Pablo to finish his eighteen holes, he might've been more willing to take the situation in Tiriez seriously. As it was…

…giving oneself a competitive advantage," recalled a former officer, Juan Garcia, who would spend ten years in jail following his arrest five years after the collapse of Pablo's regime. "We really thought of it as a game."[14]

A competitive advantage. This in reference to the barbed-wire-wrapped cowcatcher-type constructions Tiriez police officers started installing on the fronts of their vehicles. The tactic

---

[11] A shot that must be shot with verve, with confidence.

[12] "It's your private course," I told him, pointing out that he could have the basket moved, or the hole's "official designation"—which was only official insofar as he'd had little score-cards printed for it—changed to a par four, which would've enabled him to throw around either side of the little cliff or out around the frankensteined hill's base and back up again. But he would do neither of these things. "The Tomahawk Shot is a basic shot in the disc golfer's tool belt, is it not?" he asked me. I admitted that this was so. "Well then I can't just ignore it. I must be able to perform it if I ever hope to compete in international play."

[13] For a moment, it would be just the two of us: the autocrat and I. My hand on his elbow. "Just follow through and trust your fingers," I would tell him. More than once, an errant shot caromed so off course it hit a guard. The first time this happened, the man swore. He was quickly removed from the palace. "Just breathe," I would tell him, looking at him seriously. "Remember, your exhale will cue your body." One could see the guards tensing against the throw they could not see: pants fabric pinching across their thighs, their taut, polyhedronal buttocks.

[14] Machado, Selina. "Victims of Tiriez Criminal Police Finally See Justice, Fifteen Years Later." *The Bernerian Star*. Oct. 12th, 1998. Pg 1.

was even approved by Heriberto Bigotes himself—who'd been voted Mayor by a huge majority back in 1981, as had so many of the country's politicians, based solely on Pablo's endorsement.

Gabriela Torres, a professor of history at the Bernerian National University, who was twelve at the time of the curfew and would later escaped to neighboring Spain with her family, recalls,

> It became usual to find one or more people sleeping in the hall when we left for school in the morning. We were in an apartment building, in a first floor apartment, on a fairly busy avenue. People would find that they had stayed out longer than they'd thought and would run inside my building to escape and spend the night sleeping on the tiles. Sometimes there would be more than one person spending the night in the hallway. These people, even strangers, would talk to one another when they could not sleep. In my bedroom, I would hear them talking through the wall.[15]

This is not to say that no one was ever caught out. Policemen would turn the radio on, turn the music up as loud as it would go, and speed around the city looking for people to run down. "There was a technique to chasing down a pedestrian," said a former policeman, who

---

[15] Excerpted from an interview with Prof. Torres, performed by this author, at his home in Miami, FL. January, 2014. Dr. Torres was good enough to take time from her busy schedule, attending a conference at the University of Miami, to visit me in my home. We sat on the porch and drank non-alcoholic cocktails. "I don't even know how to begin," I told her. We shifted our deck chairs to stay in the shade. Across the street, there was an inflatable pool in the front yard which had burst a leak. You could tell because one side was slowly drooping down like a drunk's sagging bottom lip. As it drooped, water spilled out, slowly and in a little stream running onto the lawn, onto the front walk, down and onto the sidewalk. I kept wanting to get up, walk over, and put my feet in it. "It's the hardest chapter to write," I told her. "I keep tearing it apart and putting it back together again."

would not give his name. “This technique was a major object of discussion at the police compound, as were the different types of runners.”[16]

From Prof. Torres again:

> You’ve got to remember that a large number of policemen had been staunch supporters of the prior regime. They’d been arrested, pardoned, re-instated, re-stationed…

…a disc golf trainer out to live at the Palace of the People, a man who’d been part of Tiriez’s burgeoning disc golf community and helped found Tiriez’s Association of Disc Golfers two years prior. The trainer worked with the dictator every time Pablo went out to the course.[17] Later, speaking about the trainer, a guard reported that he “had never heard anyone talk to Pablo like that.”[18] When the trainer suggested a fabric elbow brace, Pablo resisted. He felt the brace was emasculating. He wanted the trainer to just tell him the right way to move his arm. According to the guard, the trainer said no. “He said to him—this was the really incredible thing—the trainer said to him, ‘If you aren’t going to put on the brace you might as well send me home.’ No one talked to Pablo like that. No one. But he did.”[19]

---

[16] Nunez pg. 153.

[17] I would model proper throwing technique. He would watch me, and then repeat the move, and I would tell him what he was or wasn’t doing right. At times, I would guide his arm, standing beside him, using a light touch on his wrist and elbow. He would ask me questions about playing with the wind, about general tactics. I ordered a brace made for his damaged right arm, a small black spandex and nylon sleeve to help him better control the elbow when it rose level with his shoulder.

[18] Aguilar, Melissa. p. 339

[19] Ibid.

For a period of two weeks, Pablo was out on the course by 8am every day.[20] He performed special stretches three times daily to limber up. At night, in his room, he practiced a movement roughly similar to the Tomahawk shot: cocking his arm back, bringing the elbow up, and rotating through. The Bernerian who'd designed Pablo's course, a former PDGA member, had assigned it an overall par of 65. Pablo's goal, perhaps indicative of the mindset that had served him so well, was not to hit a set number once, as so many amateur golfers and disc golfers do, but to reach consistency. He wanted to throw par, and throw it three times consecutively. Only then would he…

…describing the events in Tiriez as "mismanagement." Heriberto Bigotes was arrested. Two days later, it was announced that he had been found in his cell…

---

[20] Pablo's course. The designer had outdone himself. The land—I don't say this lightly—the land begged for a disc golf course. Disc golf is unlike standard golf in one sense more than any other: it demands less of the land. No manicured greens. No trees cleared for fairways. The disc golfer is a symbiotic animal. The baskets tuck in neatly behinds trees, around rocky outcrops. The spinning disc sluices through light motes. The eye loses it, relocates it, loses it as it flickers across the dappled background. Cheeky pine needles reach out to graze the disc's face. The trainer and trainee stand together on a little hillock considering the proper throw / angle / force required for the next throw. The last throw having gone wide, the disc having listed eastward, lazily tilting, flipping, falling just uphill from the small lilypadded pond Bernerian royalty used to call *el baño de Apolo*. We, trainer and student, see the land in exactly the same way, seeing it through the lens of the next throw—the lens of the disc. We do not want it, the land, to be anything but what it is. We want to meet it with hands outstretched. "A back-hand flick," Pablo says, "let the elevation do the work, just focus on getting it around that big fir."

"Yes," I say, "You took the words right out of my mouth."

…[21]

…at this time, too, the baskets making up Pablo's disc golf course were removed, and the course's layout was re-listed as a walking path…

---

[21] In the evening, in my room in the servant's wing of the palace, I practiced killing a man with a disc golf disc. The white curtains tinted the summer light a soft sherbet color. The trees around the palace gave off a piney, sappy smell. When it was humid, the atmosphere became syrup.

The way to smash a man's head in with a disc golf disc is to bring it down, edge-first, with great force. It is a movement not dissimilar to the Tomahawk although, of course, one does not release the disc, and one grips the disc with all of one's fingers (rather than the two fingers needed for the Tomahawk)—the edge of the disc resting against the curve of the second knuckles, the thumb acting as a stabilizer—and the hand creeps up the back of the disc so that it is directly opposite the leading edge, rather than at an obtuse angle from it. The polyurethane material from which disc golf discs are made is not quite hard enough to present a truly mortal threat with a single blow. I would need to hit him more than once. I would need a moment in which the guards were not looking, when, for example, their backs were turned. That way I could guarantee at least a second hit. If the first blow knocked him unconscious and he were not able to cry out, perhaps I could even get in a third or fourth hit.

At times, I felt it was a real plan. At times, I saw the truth: it would only get me killed. It would not work. More than once, as Pablo cocked his arm back for the Tomahawk, I would feel my own fingers finding the grip I'd practiced.

Did you know that you will hold yourself responsible even for the unmade gesture? Something impotent. Something that would've changed nothing and been covered up and never made a history book anyway. No one there to write about what didn't happen. But still, even so, you will hate yourself every day for your inaction, for not at least trying, for not facing up to the retribution that would've come of trying. The opportunity that isn't an opportunity comes and goes so many times. Next time, you say. Next time. And then one day, out of the blue, Pablo is done with you. You are sent back to Tiriez and you finally see what you have only been hearing about through rumor, from whispered conversations between palace staff. When it's all over—the revolution, the counterrevolution, the bombing of Loja that claims even more lives than were lost in Tiriez during the riot and curfew killings—you move out of the country, to Miami. You go back to university. The parks are beautiful. There is disc golf. There's nothing you can do now. It's all academic.

On the Entangled Persons Theory

My History with the Article

I first read Dr. James Ludebaker's account of Dr. Haymon Walter's protracted study of "two entangled persons" in the fall of 2013. At the time, I was navigating a divorce that felt like not only a personal crisis but a public failing. My husband and I, both professors at the University of New Hampshire, often found ourselves in the same rooms at department events; we passed each other practically every other day in the hallways. As others looked on, we forcefully ignored one another. In the midst of all this, I received an email from a friend of mine from graduate school, Dr. Anna Winthrop, with the subject line *Inane*. In the body of the email, I found the word repeated—*Inane*—sitting alone surrounded by white space and hyperlinked to the article in question, published by an online quarterly focusing on human-interest pieces written by and about the scientific community. I skimmed it in my office, during my self-designated lunch hour, while eating a turkey and ham sandwich that I'd forgotten to remove from my satchel and place in the mini-fridge tucked underneath my desk. (The fridge's location was dictated by my desire that students sitting across from me not see it, that it not ruin the academic ambiance of the space.) The temperature of the mayonnaise was not ideal. I'd just met with a student who'd told me that I was grading him too harshly. I'd explained that all my tests were multiple choice, so it wasn't the sort of thing where I could adjust his score even if I wanted to. "These aren't long-answer questions," I said. "There's no room for interpretation. You're either right or you're wrong."

I'd met Dr. Ludebaker once before, at a conference years before my divorce, and only in passing: a tall, wide man with a mustache that a romantic partner in the seventies had probably found alluring—tastes being different at the time—cementing it as a permanent feature. I'd never met Dr. Walter, though I'd heard of him. He was a great "character" of the field, known as much for his discoveries as his eccentricities. Too distracted to really take in what I'd read, I replied to Dr. Winthrop's email with a throwaway: *Thanks for sending!*

That evening, on a whim, I pulled the article up again, lying on my cot in the Portsmouth apartment I was renting. The place resembled a museum storage room. The many objects of my former life—lamps and bookcases and books packed into milk crates and chinaware packed into boxes and board games and an expensive, hand-crafted wooden dresser and art prints (mostly Rothkos) and a television and a disassembled king-size bed frame and other odds and ends—were all packed neatly into the small space, stacked atop one another or leaning against the walls. My husband and I had agreed that he could keep the house and I could keep what was in the house, whatever I wanted from it, and the lion's share of our joint savings account. He'd said to me, "This is my dream house. How often have I said that this is my dream house?" And I was forced to agree. I'd never said that it was my dream house. I'd only ever said, "I love this house," but he'd said that too, with greater frequency.

I'd taken as much as I could. Every so often, I would go back there and knock on the door. It was different from seeing him on campus. On the porch we used to share, we did not hesitate to glare at each other. He would say, "Oh, hello," in an unwelcoming sort of way and I would say, "I've forgotten something." I'd roam around the house, he would disappear into his office, and I would almost get the sense of being properly home again, walking around, looking

at the spaces which were as substantial as the things I'd taken out of them. He would call through the house, "Are you done?" and I would grab one or two items, like our knife collection or the shower curtain, and I would return to my apartment and add them to the pile. The apartment contained just a single living-area, a bathroom, and a kitchenette with a hot plate. I ate instant oatmeal for breakfast and pasta for dinner. It occurred to me, sitting in class with my students, that our diets probably looked quite similar.

I was, as I am sure you have gathered, in an odd place. Reading the article for a second time, I found myself enthralled. In it, Dr. Ludebaker wrote of his good friend, Dr. Walter, who had undergone a study of two people he understood to be "phenomenally linked." Two women, one from San Francisco, California, the other from Cape Town, South Africa, who were paired, a set of elementary particles in human form, matter and anti-matter. "Dr. Walter," Dr. Ludebaker wrote, "thought that neither woman—her geographic location, her social position, her actions, her thoughts and feelings—could be explained without reference to the other, as is the case with entangled particles." According to Dr. Walter's theory, the one relied on the other, was influenced by her movements, and vice versa—a sort of physical inter-contextualization that had made itself evident both mathematically and intuitively to Dr. Walter's subtle mind.

Reading it, I said to myself, "Of course it's nonsense," seeing that it *was* nonsense, but feeling an unexpected affinity for it. It soothed me, somehow. When I finished it, I wanted to begin again. I wanted to linger with it, to live in the world that it seemed to imagine. Imagining that world put me at ease.

Of course, the scientific community reviled the piece. Letters of complaint were sent to the publication. One accused Ludebaker's description of the study as "exploitative" and called

out the quarterly itself for publishing the article "uncritically." A number of my peers shared the article on Facebook and Twitter with the express purpose of mocking its writer and the study it described. At a faculty dinner someone called it an embarrassment for the field. (I was eating a serving of Caesar salad as carefully as possible: trying not to take too big a bite, not letting pieces fall off my fork, not letting the Italian dressing fleck my lips or cheeks. My ex-husband was in the room.) Another colleague responded that it was valuable only as a character study of a certain type of febrile, elderly professor who leeches for too long off of the same institution.

So yes, I read and re-read the article in my cot in my overloaded apartment in Portsmouth. I read it in my office, clicking away the second I heard a knock on my door. Over a period of weeks, months, I read it almost every day. Then, one day, I closed the tab in my browser, closed my laptop, and didn't read it again for four years.

And yet, it became one of those associations that surface on a semi-regular basis. I had badly cut my index finger with a pair of cooking shears at age six—"down to the bone," my mother still moans, shuddering at the recollection—and I often think about that incident, an incident I have no memory of, when wielding scissors. It was just the same with this article. It would spring to mind when the subject of quantum entanglement came up, or celebrity divorce settlements, or even on nights when I was too tired to cook myself a good meal and the taste of canned pasta sauce lifted me from my new home, a house fifteen minutes south of downtown Ann Arbor, MI, and dropped me back in that Portsmouth apartment. I once spent real time pondering a study to measure the frequency with which certain subject matter elicited certain associations from me. The problem was that I could not track how often I thought of something, in relation to something else, without tracking those times when I did not think of it. However, in

not thinking of something, one notices oneself not thinking about it, and the something is thought of. Which is all to say that at times, not often, not rarely, I thought of Dr. Ludebaker's article and felt a certain warmth, a pleasant softness in my chest.

Then, just a month ago, I happened to run into Dr. Ludebaker at a conference. We spoke and, afterwards, I returned to the article. I re-read it. I printed it out and began writing in the margins. My marginalia spilled over into a lined notebook. The words from the lined notebook snuck their way, as sentences and paragraphs, into my laptop, into a word processor. Finally, I submitted those words here, to a certain online quarterly focusing on human-interest pieces written by and about the scientific community—my community.

A Summary of the Article

Dr. Ludebaker begins his account of Dr. Walter's study by emphasizing the non-scientific nature of the article itself. "I do not have all of Haymon's work on the subject," he writes, "but I was his primary confidante and source of feedback for the five years in which he pursued his theory."

"What I hope to deliver," he writes, "is a general, if not technical, knowledge of the project."

With this framework in place, he describes how the study came to be:

On July 8th, 2004, Dr. Hayman Walter, Professor Emeritus at NYU, strikes up a conversation with a tourist at a cafe bordering Washington Square Park. The tourist, a woman named Thabisa Moodley—South African, black, 5'7", 32 years old—tells him that she's on vacation. She's enjoyed New York City so far. Every morning she eats a bagel. Every afternoon she drinks tea and strolls around a park—"a different park each day." Every evening she goes

dancing. To save money, she and her friends are staying in a hotel right next to the Metro North Station up in Mt. Vernon. Laughing, she describes herself as the first person to commute on vacation. Later that day, she's going to The Cloisters. They talk about how the best vacation is often a generic vacation: people have fun in the same ways everywhere, the tourist sites are often the tourist sites for a reason, the beaten path often has the best architecture. Dr. Ludebaker writes that Dr. Walter called him a few minutes after the interaction ended—"as he often called me three or more times in a day"—and mentioned Thabisa: "That speaking with her had left him with that specific sort of cozy feeling of having completed a successful conversation with a stranger. The sense of the world as a universal neighborhood. That feeling that only a stranger can provide."

Two hours later, now getting his afternoon coffee at same shop where he'd met Thabisa, Dr. Walter had the exact same interaction with a woman from California: Louise Eunice, white, 5'3", 30 years old. According to Louise, she too, was on vacation to New York—though she was traveling alone. She ate a routine afternoon croissant. She was staying south of Prospect Park. She kept making plans to go to the MET and cancelling them because she found all that art intimidating. As the interaction unspooled, Dr. Walter found himself increasingly agog. He had trouble keeping his mouth from falling open. There was, here, a strange synchronicity. This was the exact interaction he'd had with Thabisa, though in a different register, played on a different instrument.

He was so shaken that he had go lie down in his home office with the lights off and his head beneath his desk. Lying there, he called Dr. Ludebaker and told him to come to New York immediately, at which time Dr. Ludebaker canceled class, got in his car, and made the two hour

drive from Philadelphia to New York City. Upon his arrival, he found Dr. Walter diagraming the two interactions utilizing many taped-together sheets of white printer paper and colored permanent markers. “The diagrams resembled sound waves,” writes Dr. Ludebaker, “with spikes and valleys showing moments in which, for example, the two women shared details about their personal lives or laughed at something Haymon had said. The two conversations were not, in actual fact, identical—not word for word. Rather, they were intrinsically the same—much like identical twins, born with the same DNA, can express that DNA differently as they grow.”

Dr. Walter told Dr. Ludebaker, “The conversations harmonized.”

Dr. Walter took two weeks to create a system for studying this phenomenon, and spent those weeks traveling continually back and forth from New York to Philadelphia to elicit the help of his dear friend Dr. Ludebaker. (“Haymon liked to ride double-decker buses,” Ludebaker notes in one of his many asides. “He loved the view from the upper-deck’s front seat. A pseudo-bird’s-eye perspective of the traffic’s tide-like tug and wash. And yet, even as he enjoyed his vantage, he feared that the bus driver might mistakenly drive into a too-low bridge, obliterating him where he sat, and he often arrived in Philadelphia, at my house, an anxious wreck, requiring a cup of tea and a long sit in one of my lounge chairs.”)

Contacting the women presented no trouble whatsoever. From talking to Thabisa, Dr. Walter knew that she edited for a women’s magazine, had a younger brother, and lived in Cape Town. From Louise, he knew that she was married, lived in Sacramento, taught kindergarten, and planned on having a child in the next few years. With the help of Dr. Ludebaker, he tracked down their places of work, discovered their contact information (and last names) and reached out, inquiring if they would be interested in taking part in a study which, he claimed, would involve

hundreds of participants. (Needless to say, this portion of Dr. Ludebaker's article created a flurry of condemnation regarding both Dr. Walter's actions and the institutional support he received from NYU, which was apparently available to him without any oversight.)

Over the next five years, Dr. Walter visited both Sacramento and Cape Town at set intervals, burning an irresponsible amount of jet fuel and paying Thabisa and Louise seven hundred dollars per year for six hour-long interviews (one every other month) which dealt with the goings-on of their daily lives, for a study that neither woman fully understood, because, they were both told, it might impact their responses. Once, Dr. Ludebaker asked his friend why all the interviews could not be performed over the phone, or virtually. "How else could I know them?" Dr. Walter exploded. "Of course I travel to see them. Why do you think I travel to see you? It's the paths that their hands trace through the air as they speak as much as what they do and what happens to them."

In between these visits, Dr. Walter would visit Dr. Ludebaker in Philadelphia. In fact, the bulk of Dr. Ludebaker's article concerns not the nature of Dr. Walter's study, nor even information on its two participants, but these long visits. Dr. Walter would sleep in a garret at the top of the house, overlooking one of northern Philadelphia's tidier streets, and, each morning, Dr. Ludebaker would carry two pieces of toast, scraped with peanut butter and berry preserves, up to the room, to sit with his friend and eat, sometimes in silence, sometimes while discussing interdepartmental disputes at the University of Pennsylvania or the current dietary regimen Dr. Ludebaker's physician had imposed on him, necessitated by the instability of Dr. Ludebaker's heart. Dr. Ludebaker's medical condition led to a number of conversations in which Dr. Ludebaker would make statements that began, "After I'm gone…" and Dr. Walter would make

an enthusiastic argument for his friend's health and longevity, at which point Dr. Ludebaker would say that Dr. Walter really was the dearest friend imaginable, causing Dr. Walter to become awkward with emotion. The two men would sit together in the garret, with just its bed and its desk, Dr. Walter on the bed, Dr. Ludebaker at the desk, both eating carefully so as not to spill the crumbs from their toast.

Together, they composed Dr. Walter's "Entangled Persons Theory," which they charted on huge rolls of brown craft paper, unspooled across Dr. Ludebaker's living room. "*Entangled*," writes Dr. Ludebaker, "meaning that the position of one can never be understood without reference to the other. So one must know that on October 12th, 2005, at 7am, Louise Eunice sat in a hospital ER waiting room with her husband, helping him hold a circle of gauze onto a badly sliced finger, to know that at 3pm, earlier that day, Thabisa Moodley visited a beach with her elder sister's family, and her nieces and nephew buried her in the sand up to her neck. Or, again, one must know that on April 8th, 2007, Thabisa bought a new daily planner, with thicker pages, because her old planner kept warping in her bag, and, on that same day, Louise folded paper airplanes with her students."

"Of course," Dr. Ludebaker continues, "as with real quantum mechanics, the analysis of any one particle within an entangled system also throws the system into chaos, destroys even as it understands. So, of course, whatever Louse is doing will not be exactly what Thabisa is doing, and what Thabisa is doing cannot be fully understood without, at the same time, losing all some sense of what Louise is doing. Their entanglement is an ebb and flow. On the one hand, you can only ever fully look at one person at a time; on the other hand, there is a depth of understanding

that can only be achieved by keeping both in mind—by envisioning them together almost—almost!—artistically."

Together, Dr. Ludebaker and Dr. Walter sat on the floor of Dr. Ludebaker's living room, surrounded by huge swathes of brown paper. They tried to hold the images of Thabisa Moodley and Louise Eunice in their minds' eyes simultaneously.

"There is another human out there," writes Dr. Ludebaker, "someone, anyone, but always a stranger, upon whom you are entirely reliant—a connection relayed between you and another that is faster than the speed of light and which, like most elements of Quantum Mechanics, is rife with paradox."

Dr. Walter suffered a fatal stroke on May 28th, 2010. According to Dr. Ludebaker's article, he could never locate all of the research, everything he would need to publish the study, and not just an article about the study. "Dr. Walter could be disorganized," writes Dr. Ludebaker. "He could also be secretive."

The Stranger

The divorce came upon me suddenly. My husband woke up one day and started accusing me—accusing me of anything and everything—and he could not stop accusing me. He claimed that I was an agent for misery. He said that I represented stagnation. Looking across the table at me, over the meal I'd made, over two bowls of blended white bean soup with dollops of pesto in their centers like huge crepuscular green irises, he said, "You represent stagnation." Like stagnation was a client of mine. He said that I was stopping him from developing. I asked him how he'd like to develop. He said that he didn't know. I said, "You've accomplished everything you've

ever wanted to accomplish. You've published books. You've gotten your professorship. Why can't you sit back and enjoy it?"

He pointed at me. He said, "Stagnation!" as though condemning me before an invisible audience. He said that I had no idea who I was, and he said it so much that I began to believe that I was someone I didn't know, a stranger. And then he divorced that person, that stranger, who was me.

My peers, for a time, treated me differently. They all knew about the divorce. They started tip-toeing around me. Their voices became softer when speaking to me. Their eyes became bigger, sadder, looked harder. I was the divorcee. He was the divorcer. At department events, who sat where became a negotiation. Obviously, I could not sit with him. If we were the first two to arrive, we would sit at different tables, or on opposite sides of the room, and whoever arrived next would have to choose between us. I started arriving late, not wanting to put anyone in that position. But then I would arrive and there would be one big group and he would be in that group. I considered not going at all, to anything. People I thought were friends revealed themselves to be acquaintances. Alone in my office, eating lunch—chicken salad and turkey and cheese sandwiches, apples crisp and cold from my mini-fridge—I said to myself what I'd said to him: *You've published books. You've gotten your professorship. Why can't you be happy?*

When married, we used to go to each other's offices for lunch. One of us would sit at the desk, and the other would sit where a visiting student would sit—on a hard-backed wooden chair in my office, on a little couch in his—and we would just be together for a while. We ate carefully, leaning over paper plates. We would often share stories about our students—their foibles, their absurd expectations—or our faculty peers, especially some of the older faculty,

speaking in low voices and leaning into one another, occasionally exploding into bouts of laughter. When we were done eating, either he or I would stand, depending on whose office it was, say, “Well then,” give the other a kiss, and go.

It began to feel as though I was hiding in my office, because I was hiding in my office. I worried that someone, one of my fellow professors even, would suddenly say to me, “You’ve changed. I don’t know who you are anymore.”

In retrospect, it sounds silly, adolescent, but in the moment it was as real as a bee sting. I’d pull out one of the spiral-bound notebooks in which I prepped lecture notes and begin reading my own writing as though I might find something there. I read my CV off the department’s staff page on the university website. I got out my computer and opened an email and looked at my own name, Dr. Rosamund Lunice, in the signature at the bottom, just to see the letters, to see my title.

In my flat, reading Dr. Ludebaker’s article, I imagined someone out there who, simply by being who they were, doing whatever it was they were doing—no matter how disconnected they or their action might seem—explained why what was happening to me was happening. As I poured water into the electric kettle, as I lugged clothing home from the corner cleaners, I saw in my mind’s eye another person, somewhere else, buying shoes, or returning library books, working who knew what job, maybe with a family they came home to, maybe with an empty apartment like mine, and I could feel how our doing what we were doing, doing it in concert, was somehow necessary, how we needed one another. I imagined being one half of that whole.

A Conversation with Dr. Ludebaker

As mentioned, I met Dr. Ludebaker last month, at a conference at the University of Pennsylvania. He "attended" the conference in the way older, semi-retired, deeply entrenched academics often do, which is to say that he sat in on less than half the panels, took naps at the back of empty lecture halls, disappeared and reappeared at random, and spent the majority of his time seeking out various other elderly academics and engaging them in conversation about his or their deteriorating health, the shenanigans they'd gotten up to when they were young—which, for academics, can refer to anywhere from a person's late twenties to early fifties—and certain long-dead, lionized figures of the field, whose quirks will soon be lost to time but were an endless source of petty amusement for the men and women who trained under them.

I tend to wake up early. During the conference, I wandered onto campus each day around 7am, ambling around in the still-cool air until a cafe caught my eye, where I would purchase a coffee, a baked treat, and find a small table to sit at, alone, and eat. I have been trying not to look at my phone too much. It became a habit of mine, after the divorce, even after moving out of the Portsmouth apartment, to stare at a screen during meals. At dinner: the TV (the plasma screen I'd taken from the old house). At lunch: my office computer. At breakfast: my phone. I became so used to staring at my phone at breakfast that I was no longer tasting my food, and, reading the news as I usually did, I would often become anxious and angry, and the combination of anxiety and anger would give me indigestion. For years, I was anxious and angry and indigested.

One morning, as I was eating an overly-iced cinnamon roll, Dr. Ludebaker approached me. He always got up early too, he said, and had gone "questing" for a small cappuccino, and, having recognized me from the conference, wondered if he might bother me with his company. I

said of course. Not knowing what else to say, I told Dr. Ludebaker that I'd found his long-since-published article on Dr. Walter's project fascinating. "You did?" he exclaimed. (This man: he was as enthusiastic as ever.) "Haymon," he said, "was an intuitive scientist. We would stay up all night talking about his theory, drinking tea. We would make pots and pots of earl gray tea whenever we were together. We over-steeped it so that the bitter flavor kept us sharp for our arguments." "You would argue?" I said. "We did indeed." "So you doubted his theory?" He frowned a little. "I needed him to understand how the broader scientific community would receive his theory and so I told him that it was pseudo-science, fantasy, fantastical—and then he would have to argue his case." He laughed. A little streak of cappuccino foam underlined his bottom lip. "He could be very convincing," he went on. "As soon as you began looking at the women's lives, you saw that there were certain… certain harmonies."

I asked him if he'd met either woman. He said no. I asked him if the women had ever met one another. "Impossible," he said.

He explained that two "entangled" persons could never actually meet—at least, according to his friend. "The physics simply wouldn't allow it. We were already—as I stated in the article—testing the limits of their entanglement simply by studying them. The risk of trying to bring them together was simply too great. Haymon came to believe that for all of us, there is someone out there, someone who explains who we are and everything we have ever done, but—he surmised—we can never meet them.

"You know," he continued, "that infuriated me. It was our one real fight. We were standing in my living room, which we'd mummified with the diagrams of Thabisa and Louise's lives. Their lives snaked all across the floors and walls and all these mugs lying around, half

filled with tea from so many previous nights. It was very late when this happened. I said to him, after he told me what I've just told you, 'How is that possible? How have you never told me this before?' " Dr. Ludebaker's eyes were filmy with liquid. His bagel sat on a little ceramic plate. Along the edge of his latest bite-mark, the hairs of his mustache had left minuscule indentations. "He could be very miserly with his findings, always wanting to keep something back. This equation—which he said proved his point—it was in his shirt pocket, on a notecard. He said I couldn't see it yet but that the math didn't lie. I said to him that—it's hard to admit, unscientific even—I said to him that I'd always thought of him and I… us… I'd believed that *we* were entangled. 'No,' he said, 'impossible.' He looked so damn certain of himself. I didn't know what to do. I bent over and started tearing the paper up from the floor, I pulled everything down from the walls, just tearing up the paper, tearing up the paper and telling him what an idiot he was, what a bad scientist he was. Just grabbing and ripping wherever I put my hands." Dr. Ludebaker's hands reached across the table, open, then clenched into fists, pulling back in. He was attempting to illustrate. It was a slow motion. Nothing at all like ripping paper. "Of course," he said, "by morning I was helping him tape it all back together again.

"Later, after he died, I would look for that notecard. I couldn't find it. Some part of me thinks it was buried with him. I know that some things were, certain beloved possessions, small things. Perhaps that was one of them. I had this idea of digging him up and getting it back. Like Dante Rossetti digging up his wife to get at the poems he'd written for her, which he'd buried with her."

"What about Thabisa and Louise?" I asked. "Do they know? What did they do when he died?"

"I don't know," he said. "I honestly don't know."

I wanted to say, "But you should know. How can you not know?" I should've. But the first panels were starting soon, and I was done with my pastry.

My Twin

At the conference, where I spoke with Dr. Ludebaker, I also saw my ex-husband.

We've been teaching at different colleges—I at the University of Michigan, he (still) at the University of New Hampshire—for three years now, so there's been no reason to see him. But there he was in the hallway, filling his water bottle at a water fountain, and when he saw me he said "oh" and "hello" and stuck out his hand, and I had the absurd feeling that I should introduce myself. We shook hands and I was staring at our hands, thinking, our hands don't look so different. Our faces have aged but our hands haven't. Or maybe they have and I just can't tell. I could barely speak, I was so full of my own thoughts.

After returning from the conference, I opened the article once again. Beginning to read, I anticipated that same comforting warmth I'd felt so many years ago.

But it wasn't as I'd supposed. Dr. Ludebaker's article, this nonsense, *was* nonsense, nothing more. It had never had any scientific value, of course, but it had been of value to me. I had found comfort in it. It had made me feel a certain way. Now, I could not find what I'd found before. I read and re-read. In it, I encountered, for the most part, what my colleagues had seen: how silly it was, how self-indulgent, how poorly it reflected on theoretical physicists everywhere.

Here is what I realized: the woman I'd been, the woman sitting in a small apartment, rented month-to-month, surrounded by leftover belongings from another life, eating stacks of toast and drinking instant coffee, was, after all, a stranger to me. I could not understand her, just as my former husband had failed to understand her. She had been so convinced that she did not know herself, that I cannot claim now to have known her.

Yet, I feel a great affection for her, for myself. She was my dear twin. Entering my home, now, after a day of work, I have the strange feeling that she is somewhere else, back in Portsmouth, entering her own apartment at the end of the day. I imagine going to visit her there. Watching her gingerly step over all the piled objects, apologizing as she clears a path for me. And I want to know her. She was so sad. An idiot, almost. She burned her hand grabbing the hot plate. She tripped over baskets of books. She'd needed that article, needed it badly.

Somehow, she survived. Eventually, she became somebody else.

At the Gathering of the 848 Children of Francis Trembly in the Conference Hall of the Downtown Marriott in Reno, Nevada, in the Autumn of 2018

Here, all of us, because in 1977 a young entrepreneur, then embarking on his second business venture (selling mail-order brain-teaser booklets to the elderly), and having made his first million off a chain of pop-up cookie stands dispersed throughout the greater San Francisco area—young men and women, mostly college-age, wearing yellow paper caps and toting propane-fueled portable ovens around the city, grunting as they unloaded them from the pick-up truck that he himself drove around—here, all of us, because that young entrepreneur lost a drunk bet to a friend, i.e., could he hit a seagull with a rock (see chapter eight, "Of Course I Can Hit That Seagull with this Rock," from his memoir, *Oh, Me*) forcing him, as the bet dictated, to donate a serving of his reproductive fluid to an S.F. Fertility Center, an experience he anticipated with more than a little embarrassment, but which he found, in practice, highly enjoyable, even titillating—"people—" he later wrote, "a middle-aged woman in a white nurse's uniform wearing thin latex gloves, who provided me with 'reading material' and a little, clear, plastic tube with a white screw-on cap; a young male secretary with a binder full of men's names, stamp-sized photographs, demographic information, and health records; other women, unknown to me, desperate for children, waiting in the waiting room, wanting something small and sweet and soft and warm and partially myself—they needed me, were desirous that I do what I was doing, which was never something anyone had ever *wanted* me to do, or even something anyone had ever known I was doing when I was doing it because you don't say to your girlfriend or flatmate or mom or dad, 'I'm just going to pop up to my room for a moment and…'" So he made a habit

of it. Traveling for work, he stopped at every sperm bank and fertility clinic he passed, looking them up in phone books or at city halls and visitor centers, driving around in the brown 1972 Ford Ranchero he'd inherited from his deceased step-father who'd been a chicken farmer in rural Montana and who'd once lost an entire industrial-sized coop's chicken population to frost when a heater broke at midnight in February and who he and his mother found wandering, dazed, in the gray ice-flecked air of early morning, breath steaming across the eight dead ice-stiffened fowl he was carrying, their blue bodies stacked, ice-adhered, a sort of sculpture, jagged beaks blue-misted, the man moving with dead eyes along a dirt track: this man who said that to care for another life, any other life, was a terrible thing. "You can never really look at it," his step-father said, blowing his coffee-scented steam breath into little Francis' pink, scarf-swaddled face, "not the thing itself, not *what* you are caring for—the child, the animal, whatever—that's not what I mean. I mean the act of caring for it, the activity you are engaged in, that activity that would be an object for you if you could look at it, really take it in, but which you can't look at because you can't bring yourself to, it is too hot and bright—the center of your life."

Here, all of us, because twelve months ago we all individually opened letters detailing an all-expenses-paid trip to this very spot, this desert city, this Marriott conference hall with its one thousand high-end folding chairs with padded seats, with circular tables, with a small black platform set up with a lectern and a microphone, with faded rococo designs shimmying up the wallpaper ("faded gold is beige," one of us noted)—that letter, an invitation in blue ink, on cardstock, the words hemmed in by a border of black flowers: "your biological father invites you…"

Here, all of us, watching Francis hack while giggling at a joke he himself wrote, reading it off a page of black-lined notebook paper, the paper creased with the fold he folded to place it into his suit pocket, now unfolded, our Francis. “I know it sounds silly,” he continues, “but I became worried, obsessively worried, considering the number of you out there, having been surprised by the sheer number—I mean, think of all the women who must’ve… well, I digress. And those are your mothers after all. But I got worried that two of you might meet up and… and not know. You know? Very funny in the abstract but if it were to really happen I don’t think we’d be laughing. So now you can all see one another. We can all know who’s off limits. And of course,” he says, “besides that, I wanted to get you all together and treat you, give you a good time, just once, like a father should. I don’t really expect any of you to think of me as your father, of course, except in the strictest, most technical sense of the word. I’m your father like a screwdriver is still a screwdriver even if you never use it.” He laughs again.

At table twelve, their seats scooted close, Elizabeth “Liza” Fontenot (the Baton Rouge Fertility Clinic, Baton Rouge LA, 1992; a picture of Madonna in a swimsuit—each of us corresponding, as we must, to a health center and an object of titillation: the place of climax and whatever brought him to climax, usually an image cut from a magazine or provided by the center itself) leans over to Ryan Dombal (Mass General Fertility Center, Boston MA, 1993; a nameless blond woman, nude, on her back, licking a purple popsicle) and whispers, “did you hear?” and Ryan whispers back, “no, what?” Liza pushes the grilled, lightly salted vegetables to the far side of her plate, as though the broccoli, carrot, and zucchini might listen in, and says, “He’s been tracking us, some of us, for years!” “No!” says Ryan, leaning closer. “Private investigators,” Liza tells him, her breath bubbling warmly between them, her proximity telling him the pattern of soft

wrinkles on her lipsticked lips. He met her twelve hours earlier at an airport Starbucks, Liza the one to approach him, coming up to the four-person table he'd commandeered and asking if he wouldn't mind her joining him, saying, "I think we were on the same flight from Atlanta," which saved him the trouble of saying it first, of owning up the fact that he'd seen her and not stared—he certainly hadn't stared, he reminds himself now, sitting with her at table twelve, his skirt steak untouched because he knew he couldn't eat it gracefully in front of her—he hadn't stared, just noticed, he'd been noticing her on the plane, and feared, when she approached him in the airport, that she was about to say, "You were staring at me," and he'd've had to correct her.

This private investigator business: Ryan is only learning what many already know, what most *will* know when we gather, later tonight, in room 415. He is the 321st to learn this. He leans closer to Liza, observation revealing a small freckle cupped by the inner upper socket of her, his half-sister's, left eye, just below the brow. He says, "Really?" "Yes," Liza tells him, sharing what Ellen Parsons (Magnolia Sperm Bank, Newark, NJ, 1974; polaroid of Francis's then-girlfriend, topless, kneeling on a bed, wearing parachute pants, her hands clasped and resting on the back of her head, elbows out), now sitting over at table three, had told her, Liza, as the two women waited together for the bathroom in the hallway just outside the conference hall, in a small line that formed because someone had locked the men's room door probably because it was out of order and the women's room was the default bathroom for everybody and it was only a one-room bathroom anyway with just a toilet and a sink "so why specify gender" someone wondered. Ellen took that opportunity, whispering, to tell Liza what she had already told so many of us and what Liza now tells Ryan. "Ellen," she begins, "is Francis' third child… " Yes, and the second-richest after Philip Randall (Hudson Valley Fertility, Tarrytown NY, 1981; two naked white women,

ruddy with spray-tan, kissing on a boat) who was adopted by a former GE CEO, making Ellen the richest self-made offspring, being the owner of a small chain of nail salons, although she takes issue with the word "small" whenever it's used in reference to her business, "as though eleven locations in the greater tristate area were 'small,' as though a woman becoming a prominent figure in business anywhere in the world were ever 'small.' As though all the bureaucratic hoops I had to jump through, never mind navigating ownership of a lucrative business in an area where the mob operates, were 'small.' "

"It was last October," Ellen had told Liza, waiting in the bathroom line, "a man dressed like a UPS delivery guy—the brown shorts, the short sleeve shirt with the collar, the little golden shield—came to the door with a big box. I hadn't ordered anything. I told him, 'I haven't ordered anything.' He says: 'Your name is on it.' I look. My name *is* on it. I bring the box inside and what do I find? It's this gorgeous mantlepiece clock, golden hands, an ivory face, individually carved black numbers, all set into this walnut wood that is… it smells like an air freshener, this clock. It comes with a letter: *From an old friend.* No return address. I have had eight friends ever. I call them. I never lose touch with anybody. If I know you I know you, present tense at all times. No one sent me a clock. I've dealt with the mob. I've been bugged. I once found a microphone hidden behind the right fang of a terra-cotta flowerpot shaped like a yawning cat. I put the package tracking number on the box into the UPS website. Nothing. It's all a sham. I go outside. I go down the street. There he is, the UPS guy, in his phony van. I pull open the door and show him my gun. I've got a gun. I know how to use it. I tell him that he may have packages but I'm packing. I tell him he blew his cover, should've made me sign for the package. I tell him to tell me who he works for. He tells me: 'It's your Dad. He wants to get to know you.' 'I don't have a

father,' I say. 'You must,' he says. 'I mean, there you are.' " So Ellen Parsons learned that her father, our father, had been hunting down each and every one of his biological children.

Ellen had contacted Liam Jones (Bangor Fertility, Bangor, MA; a picture of a burly man holding a woman in the air, the woman facing him, her legs over his shoulders) who she'd met at a support group for men and women who'd grown up "without a second parent," (that language: the gender-inclusive re-brand for what had previously been a support community "for fatherless children"—though it turns out that the "second parent" is usually the Dad, who is awol [or dead or incarcerated]) and which Ellen began attending after the disintegration of her second marriage, after her husband called her "a brutal tyrant" for her treatment of their then thirteen-year-old son, a boy who, speaking privately with the judge delivering the verdict on their custody battle, showed a marked preference for his father, a father who, yes, had done most of the housework and made the meals and drove the boy to and from soccer practice but who'd been living in a fucking fairytale as far as Ellen was concerned—a fourteen-year fairytale in which he hadn't had to earn a penny, hadn't once had to think about making ends meet. Ellen had protected him from that side of life. And yet, when that man walked out of her life, she was the one who fell apart. She'd felt like she'd felt as a child again, living with just her mother, a woman fighting to make time for both career and daughter. She'd longed for the father she'd never had. She tried to comfort herself. Told herself that of course, of fucking course, she, Ellen, had turned out like this. She was who she was, being who she'd been, raised as she'd been raised. The support group was the answer—the first step in a long process of self-examination. And, there, she met Liam, whose story was oh-so-similar to hers: a stressed mother, a father who'd first been infertile and then at large, and another father who was not a father but a glass

tube, curved at the bottom, with a plastic cap, white cloudy viscous reproductive fluid slopping inside, and the two of them, Liam and Ellen, discovered, wonder of wonders, that their mothers had shared a sperm donor, making them siblings. They'd fallen into each other's arms and wept, clutching each other and shaking with emotion.

In the heat of the moment, standing on the sidewalk a block down from her house, still holding her gun, the fallacious UPS driver having given her his business card (*Mark Priest, Private Investigator*), Ellen phoned Liam. She told him everything. Shocked, he revealed that he, too, had recently received a present from "an old friend," also a clock, but hadn't thought twice. He'd been quite popular in high school and college and really anywhere he'd ever gone. He had many "old friends," faces lost to memory. He'd taken the gift in stride, never suspecting.

Liam worked in market research for a company producing home and bath products ranging from laundry detergent to ceramic soap dishes. Utilizing his expertise, he tracked down a number of fertility clinic record-books. He interviewed nurses and secretaries. Francis Trembly was something of a legend in that community, he discovered, having "planted his seed" in sample tubes far and wide. Responsible, some estimated, for roughly one thousand, three hundred children. So Ellen and Liam began reaching out to us, contacting us, assembling us, one by one, forming us like the first industrious cells of a fetus. (Our consciousness is their work, their outsized contribution to the "us" that is the us of all of us sitting together in the glow of the many cheaply-made glass chandeliers hanging from the conference room's ceiling.) They told us about "us"—as many of us as they could—before Francis' invites arrived in our mailboxes. They told us that we were big, bigger than we could've imagined: a body spread out across forty-five

states and three countries. And they told us about Francis, that he was interested in us, that we should be wary of him—his spying ways, his insidious presence.

Ryan produces a series of small noises, indicative of shock and active listening, as Liza speaks. *Oh* and *gosh* and *really* and *wow* and *mhmm* and *no!* and *goodness!* He imagines a world in which someone suddenly stands up, one of his many half-siblings, maybe Clark Feinbaum (The Rosewood IVF Clinic, Minneapolis MN, 1996; Picasso's female nude, her blocky body imagined soft, his hands gripping her weird pillowy midriff) because he's a radio broadcaster, or Madeline Connor (Fourth Ward Fertility, Atlanta GA, 1990; the texture of an autumn leaf, orange-red, picked up off the sidewalk, its veins and midrib, its dissolving edges) an Instagram influencer, either of them would be appropriate, suitable to announce, as he's imagining them announcing, in a voice tight with shock, that the rest of the civilized world has been totally and utterly obliterated, preserving just this sole block of downtown Reno, like a scrap of unburnt fabric blown free from a conflagration, announcing that we, the occupants of this conference hall, "us," are all that is left, that we strangers, we siblings, will have to repopulate the globe—though obviously this last bit would go unsaid, an implication floating alongside the gnarled designs on the ceiling. He imagines this while watching Liza's lips work, her mouth forming soft words.

Ryan thinks: what is it to share a father? Look at a picture of a single sperm and a single egg. The sperm is so small, so dwarfed by the other. Consider sharing a mother, to have literally grown inside the same person, to have emerged from them. There's something concrete about that. But a father? An absent father, even? Didn't Strindberg—Ryan took a class on the progenitors of modern theatre as an undergraduate—didn't Strindberg write a play about fathers?

Wasn't it called "The Father"? A play about how no father can ever be truly certain that his children are his own? And isn't fatherhood a fluid status? Aren't we always talking about children who don't have fathers? Aren't kids always seeking out father figures in films? Found fathers? What is a father? thinks Ryan, looking across the room at Francis, sitting at table five, visible only as a puff of translucent white hair above the heads of so many of his own children.

"And it was during that search," says Liza, "that search for their siblings, for us, wanting to warn us about Francis, that they, Ellen and Liam, found out about the married couple."

"Oh," says Ryan. And then, understanding, "Oh my god."

The married couple. Two half-siblings who met and fell in love and had three children together. When she discovered them, at first, Ellen didn't want to believe it. Shouldn't they know? Hadn't they talked about where they'd come from and, realizing that they were both the result of IVF, checked to ensure that they did not share a sperm donor? But no, they had not. She came from Arizona. He from North Dakota. It is understood that the male enjoyed a close connection with his mother's husband, the man who'd raised him—who'd been, despite his infertility, and for all intents and purposes, "his father." There is some speculation, among our ranks, that he was simply never told, was raised believing that this man *was* his father in every sense of the word. Ellen and Liam argued at length over what to do. At first, Ellen believed that they should tell them. "They have to know the truth," she said. Liam argued otherwise. "The damage has already been done," he said. "What are we going to tell them? That their lives are perverse? That their children are abominations? They can't know. They mustn't know." They took it upon themselves to protect the innocence of that family. They were doing something noble, something beautiful for those siblings they'd never met. We applaud them.

Then the invitations came.

Ellen heard about the gathering, this gathering, from Mark Priest, the private investigator who she was now paying to act as a sort of double agent, to tell her everything Francis told him about the search for his children. Francis had asked him to confirm as many of their addresses as he could, Mark said. He was sending out invitations. He was bringing all of his children together. Ellen's first thought was: the married couple. She drove to their house: twenty-six hours, across seven states. She camped out in their town for two weeks, staying at a Holiday Inn, eating the continental breakfast, managing her salons by cell-phone. Their mail arrived in the early afternoon, and every day, after it was delivered, she rifled through their mailbox—the mailbox that their children had painted bright yellow, with the family name in crooked blue letters, with a little painted green snake, only the width of a paint-brush, which wound around the box until it reached the red flag and its head was at the bottom of the flag and its mouth was open and the flag was its tongue. The couple both worked and the children were in school and the only fear was that the invitation would be delivered on a Saturday. But it wasn't. It was a Tuesday. She found two invitations. (Oddly, it seems Francis never took note of the same address being on two of the mailings—there are simply so many of us.)

Ellen, at the mailbox, was about to take both. She took just one—the one with the man's name. She left the one for the woman.

She is not entirely a force for good, our Ellen. You don't manage a highly successful chain of nail-salons in a mob-controlled area if there isn't a streak of chaos running through your character, if you aren't piloted by something other than the simple pleasures. In truth, Ellen feels an ownership of us every bit as vital as the ownership felt by Francis, our Father. Ellen: our

sister, somehow our matriarch. She took just one of the invitations and let the other lie, the one to the woman, and drove back to her hotel and swam laps around the pool.

"She's here," whispers Liza, shifting closer once more. For Ryan, she is too close to look at without looking too interested. He stares at the dangling hem of the table-cloth. Liza's jaw and bottom lip loom in his periphery. Her words are sticky in his ear. "They're both here, in fact. The husband isn't in this room though: he's out on the town. He thinks he wasn't invited. The kids are staying with their grandparents. She's at table fourteen," whispers Liza, "at the far side of it. Facing in our direction." His eyes flick up. "Don't stare." Ryan's eyes latch for an instant on the woman's face: a flash of blond hair, thick lips, glasses with caterpillar pattern rims.

She will invite a few of us to her room after the dinner—just the people at her table—to meet her husband and have a few drinks. But many more will show up. Many many more. We will pack ourselves in to see them, to watch them—his arm around her waist, the quick peck she places on his cheek—in room 415. (Our cover almost blown when Lyle Cormorant [Smoky Mountains Fertility, Ashville NC, 1988; a little vial of hot sauce that he slicked across his tongue before reaching down between his legs] screams, suddenly, "I can't do this anymore," and runs out and the couple, siblings, husband and wife, will say, "What's that about?" and, trying to laugh it off, Ellen will say, "Oh you know, he's *that* brother.") And Ryan and Liza will be there. And so many others. To see them. Those two. Lucky enough to find one another. Doomed to find one another. They are not part of "us." They never could be.

(And there are a few other siblings who are not a part of "us"—we, who if we cannot find it in our hearts to love Francis, at least want to meet him. Like Randy Balfouer [Orange State Fertility, Winter Park FL, 1983; his girlfriend, pictured in his imagination, but only after he blew

up a number of balloons which he secreted inside his pockets to get himself lightheaded] a recluse who makes his money coding security software for phone applications and believed Francis's letter to be part of a scam; Whitney Hall [Eisenhower Center for Maternity and Women's Health, Kansas City KA, 1979; eyes closed, just the sensation, thinking, *god, we forget how good it feels to just do it, to not let anything get in the way of how good it feels*] who rejects the idea of meeting anyone just for the sake of meeting them; Jane Clements [Wayne County Fertility, Detroit MI, 1990; a picture of a naked man and woman curled into one another, making a sort of ball of exposed flesh, cut from an arts magazine] who hates Francis, yes, hates him, not for being absent or even for being rich and never trying to make her life any easier—which some of us do hold against him—but because he called her mother two months after she was born, calling her as she shucked corn in the kitchen to ask her why she'd chosen him, what it was about his profile that had stood out to her. Jane's mother was only woman he did this to. It precipitated a horrible moment, a traumatic instant. See, Michigan law says that sperm donors can request partial custody of their child, can claim the child before a certain amount of time has passed, and that amount of time hadn't passed. In the moment after he'd told her mother who he was, before he asked his question, her mother felt a fear like nothing she'd ever felt before. He was coming for her child, she thought. She gripped the corn so tight crushed kernels oozed between her fingers. She needed to place a hand over her heart and breathe deeply. Jane, who has never known Francis, hates him for this, this moment which her mother told her about, which her mother described—the fear, the corn, the hand on her chest, how her body started shaking—Jane cannot forgive him for this, which is overdoing it, we think, which is taking it a bit too far, but is the essence of loyalty, is how family should be.)

Pixie Ring

On November 12th, 1992, a woman taking a foggy late-morning hike with her dog through Tremaine Nature Area in Walford, CT discovered the body of six-year-old Albert Bengtsson lying near an oak tree in what should've been an uncomfortable position. A wine cap's hardly-chewed stem protruded like a pale cigar between his teeth. His lips sagged open in a sort of inebriated smile. A root rose to meet Albert's head, pressed against a cheekbone padded with baby fat. He had been missing since the previous night. The police, reverse-engineering his path, found that it led back to the Bengtsson residence, on a side-street bordering the Nature Area. Along the boy's reconstructed course, patches of bloodied spittle became small colorful half-congealed piles of vomit, the vomit's texture characterized by a fuzzy particulate of half-digested mushroom skin, white lumps of mushroom flesh, and little fungal structures like coils of white gill or stem-ring, detached from their anatomical context, trapped in the drying masses like little threadworms. Oddly, the puke didn't have that heady stomach-acid stink that so often sets off the gag reflexes concomitant to nearby olfactory nerves (capable of instigating what my mother once referred to as an "upchuck chain"). Rather, it gave off a woodsy, earthy smell, evocative of nothing so much as the mushrooms themselves. Albert's path had been fairly straight. Only once did he pause. In a small clearing, he'd spent a number of hours milling about or lying down—handfuls of tangled, wild grass plucked absentmindedly and strewn about, a patch of moss peeled off the forest floor and laid across a rock's top like a toupee—and it was here that the last (or, as it were, first, vis-a-vis Albert) piles of vomit were found, left just as he was leaving. It was also here that large amounts of mushrooms, and in many varieties, were discovered.

I've been thinking about Albert Bengtsson a lot lately—about Albert Bengtsson and a period of time in the fall of my second-grade year, no more than three weeks, when I became paralyzed. Recently, just in the last year, I experienced something of a major life event. I don't want to say what it was. It left me incoherent for weeks afterwards—the sort of gargantuan happening that puts a person into a sort of Hegelian end-of-history type mindset where the individual, i.e. me, becomes aware that nothing of any real value or meaning is going to happen to them ever again and the only thing left to do is to re-appraise one's life from the rear perspective, puzzling out how one got to be where one is, preferably while consuming large amounts of whole milk with ice—milk to keep one's energy up and one's brain fatty enough for long hours spent wandering through the marshes of memory, and ice because I tend to get overheated when consuming dairy because I'm somewhat lactose intolerant. I move softly. I never slam the refrigerator door. I don't just plop books down. At night, I direct the flow of urine onto the toilet bowl's sloping porcelain and not into the water itself where it might splash noisily. I've become more conscious of the balls of my feet—each footfall a five-step weight-gathering process of rolling onto the tips of the metatarsal bones, largest to smallest—because I've been walking on them. The milk gives me indigestion and my bowel movements have become loose, stringy with what looks like digestive mucus.

Some time ago, my then-child—then five years old—snuck into the living room and accidentally watched part of an episode of a low-quality crime procedural that my then-wife and I were watching. The name of the show was the acronym of the crime unit that the protagonists worked for, like CSI or NCIS, only it wasn't either of those. It was NCBT or APBI or something. I can't remember what the letters meant. Anyway, my then-child watched quite a bit of it,

standing in the doorless portal between the kitchen and the living room in that totally silent, almost haunted way of kids who get up at night and wander the home noiselessly until, in one's sleep, one feels that something is *not as it should be* and opens one's eyes to see them staring at you, their head roughly level with your head, their lips flat, their eyes only half-focused. The portion of the episode that my then-child watched concerned the main characters of NCBTAPBI investigating the death of a young female prostitute who had been disemboweled via common kitchen implement—this being the second such prostitute to have undergone this procedure in the episode—and the detectives had just discovered the blood-splattered implement the killer had used (which had also been left at the prior crime scene—and which, one couldn't help but notice, had been a KitchenAid last time and was now a Cuisinart) prompting the white, blond, preternaturally attractive female detective with the traumatic past to look into the camera and say, "We've got a serial killer on our hands," right before the show cut to commercial and an ad for FiberOne came on. My child watched through the commercials with us, and then through another large chunk of show as the detectives scoured the crime scene until the blond white woman's side-kick, a bald youngish bookish black man with glasses—who was written in that quippy, Joss Whedon-y sort of way that totally undermines a show's ability to be serious and generally makes for an abysmal viewing experience—found a clue and said, "A clue! A very palpable clue," prompting my then-child, who'd been watching for at least ten minutes by now, to finally pipe up and parrot, "A clue!"

Of course, NCBTAPBI was not the sort of thing my then-child was allowed to watch. I certainly hadn't been allowed to watch anything like NCBTAPBI, in terms of graphic violence—because the detectives on NCBTAPBI really went in for a slice of graphic violence, especially

the blond—until my teen years. For most of my childhood, my mother carefully screened every piece of media I encountered. In 1992 this meant no CDs with the parent advisory label, no books from the adult section of the library (the teen section having not been invented yet, at least not in Walford), no movies rated PG-13 or higher and only previously-vetted PG movies from before 1984, when the PG-13 designation was invented. ("I mean," Mom would say, "*Poltergeist* is PG. *Poltergeist!*") If I was at a friend's house and this friend wanted to screen a film, I was expected to ask the friend if I could place a phone call to ask permission and if my Mom had not seen the film already she would request to speak with the friend's parent and I would find myself standing in a poorly-lit hallway in my friend's home, fidgeting with a doorknob or running my hand along the wall, while Mrs. Venison stood in the kitchen with her hand wrapped up in the off-white phone cord gazing discontentedly out at her own back yard and saying things like "not much" and "nothing violent at all" and "the title is misleading, it's actually quite mild."

Only one questionable genre of visual entertainment received consistent approval from my mother: the murder mystery. Not the modern cop-show, with its lurid crime scenes and routine shoot-outs. No. I'm referring to shows like *Agatha Christie's Poirot, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Columbo,* and *Murder, She Wrote*—shows constitutive of, or just adjacent to, the genre now commonly referred to as "cozy mysteries," best typified by those mass-market paperbacks you find at the library with covers showing, for example, a photograph of a steaming hot chocolate on a tray by a Christmas tree with words like *A Killing for Christmas* or *The Blood-Soaked Stocking* dangling above the image. My mother loved these mysteries and she found nothing in them so offensive that her elementary-school-age son could not watch them with her. These were stories about crime, she said, not violence. "There's a difference." The

majority of the runtime of any given episode of any of these shows usually consisted of well-dressed individuals talking with indoor voices. If anyone got mad it was a polite old-timey mad. They said things like, “Now hold on here mister,” or, “Just what are you insinuating.” So my mother and I watched these shows together. And, because it was a lot less emotionally taxing to have my friends come over to my house than to go over to one of their houses and risk the rigamarole ensuant to “Hey wanna watch a movie?,” a whole lot of my friends were exposed to these mystery dramas as well. At school, starting in first grade, I became increasingly associated with murder mysteries. Even my first grade teacher, Mr. Eberfluss—who was himself a fan of murder mysteries—began engaging me in conversation about the great detectives of film and literature (“You’ve got to read some Sayers,” he would say. Or, “How’s my favorite sleuth today?”) The vocabulary of the murder mystery became a shared a language for me and my friends: four or five kids who could be found wandering the halls of J. Michael Adams Elementary School using words like “denouement” and arguing over whose deductive reasoning was “the sharpest.” I always carried a notepad, to be more like a “real detective”—which was what people wanted me to want to be. This mystery-mania even spilled over into a game we played at recess called “What Happened?”

“What Happened?” actually descended from another game, called “What Happened Next?” This was an improv game. The rules were simple. A given child, Elliot Mather for example, would initiate a scenario by proclaiming something about himself, say, that he had stolen something from the bank. Then, another child, Maizy Williams maybe, might say that she was a police officer and that she was going to catch him. She would chase after Elliot, who would already be running, sprinting up the playscape’s rubberized platforms, tossing himself

head-first down the spiral slide. It would be the responsibility of each child to insert him or herself into the scenario, each in an increasingly fabulous manner, such that child number five—say, Lee Clayton—would declare himself a time-traveling warrior and ally himself to Elliot the robber. Most iterations of "What Happened Next?" devolved into two or three children chasing two or three other children and ended either when the recess bell rang, or when a teacher came over to tell us that "it…"—"it" being one of the various playscape structures—"…wasn't meant to be used like that." (I should note, the name "What Happened Next?" is something I've invented just now. We never had a name for any of these games. We never thought of them as firmly established in a needing-a-name sort of way. They were just what we did.)

I am thinking of all this now, pouring myself another icy glass of whole milk—pouring a thin stream from the carton's top, not letting it slosh—just as I was reminded of all this on the morning following my then-child's accidental viewing of NCBTAPBI. As I groggily prepped three bowls of instant oatmeal that morning, he came into the kitchen and began rifling through various cabinets and drawers, pulling out various cooking implements—a wooden slotted spoon, butter knives, the blender's brick-like black base—and, holding each item by turn, proclaimed, "A clue! A clue!" I said, "What have I said about you going through the cabinets?" He went to the living room. A moment later, I began to hear brief bursts of my then-wife's nasal, machine-gun-fire laugh and, wondering what could have provoked it, discovered that my then-child had continued his little game, wandering around the living room picking up everything from throw pillows to the coasters showing my wife's ancestral Scottish clan's coat-of-arms and saying, "A clue!" which my then-wife was finding deliriously funny. I watched this for a while—my then-child saying, "A clue!"; my then-wife toppling over with glee—still holding the spoon I'd been

using to stir the instant oatmeal. I began to feel a pressure building in my forehead. It was not a feeling associated with any emotion. I was not angry or afraid or even embarrassed. There was just pressure. I had to leave the room. I ran back to the little bowls of instant oatmeal and tried to lose myself in stirring.

We began playing "What Happened Next?" near the end of my first-grade year. One day —this was in mid-May, 1991—when it was my turn to instigate a scenario, I lay down on the ground, face-up, arms stiff on either side, and said, because I thought it seemed like the kind of thing I would say if I were who people thought I was, "I'm a dead body." It took a moment for my playmates to re-orient themselves. The first to do so was Lee. He said, "I'm a detective," and, crouching beside the body—which was trying to breathe as lightly as possible so as to heighten the impression of dead-ness—said, "It looks like he was just coming home from work." He tugged my little purple notepad out of my shorts pocket. "Look," he said, waggling the notepad, "his briefcase." Maizy demanded to have a look and, flipping through, told the others I'd been carrying important documents. "Top secret documents." They began to scour the area for clues. "Look," said Elliot, "the bullet," finding a pencil nub nestled in the wood chips, its graphite core missing, the tapered wooden tip surrounding a jagged hole. "It's a clue!" said Elliot. I lay on the ground peeking at their blurry forms through eyes only mostly closed. The wood chips nibbled at my back. Other kids, not playing our game, sprinted past. Lee said, "Watch out! Watch out for the body!" After that, sometimes we would play "What Happened Next?" and sometimes we would play "What Happened?" And then school ended for the year. I saw my friends only intermittently over the summer, and only ever one at a time. I hoped, actually, that they'd forget about "What Happened?" But on the first day of second grade, they said, "We know what you

want to play." A few days later, Mrs. Blake, my new second-grade teacher said, "I heard from Mr. Eberfluss you're something of a detective."

But here's the thing: those mystery shows my mother showed me, which she thought were totally appropriate: they terrified me. For many adults, the structure of the cozy murder mystery is deeply satisfying, even existentially reassuring. Critic Patricia Eames, in her essay "A Soothing Crime," identifies this effect of the murder mystery with what she calls its "ultimate resolution." "In a classic murder mystery," she writes, "the entire plot is centered around a break: a break in relationships, a break in behavioral mores, a break in society's prescriptive power. The story's plot is centered around this break and in resolving it. In a certain sense, these mysteries are non-mysteries. The reader, even from the very start, *knows what will happen.* No other genre has a conclusion so circumscribed, so predictable, as the mystery." But—and here I insert myself—this certainty, this sense of an ultimate resolution, is not something the child feels. For the child, no conclusion can heal the rupture. The adult thinks: *a man has died, the killer must be caught*. The child thinks: *a man has died…a man has died!* I became increasingly paranoid. I would lie awake at night thinking of the dead, the many imagined dead, how all of them—Roger Ackroyd, James Ferris, Colonel Barkley, Miss Amelia Barrowby, Richard Jarvis, etc…—had been alive one moment and gone the next and all that was left behind to make sense of what had happened were scattered objects: a bloodied paperweight, a gun with a fingerprint, a shattered glass-bottomed lounge lamp, an envelope without a letter in it. My mother would say, "Want to watch a mystery?" and I would say yes because watching mysteries was what I did and who I was and everyone was telling me, over and over again, that it was what I liked, and then, after I watched it, I would go over the case again—the clues, the methods, the solution—again and

again, as though the case had not been solved at all, because the solution was, in a certain sense, a feeling, and I did not feel it yet.

"I've been thinking about Albert Bengtsson a lot lately," I told my then-wife, just days after the NCBTAPBI incident. "Who is that?" she said. I told her that wine caps are not poisonous. That, in fact, they are delicious and highly sought-after by mushroom collectors. "What are you talking about?" she said to me. I told her that it was not a wine-cap that had killed Albert. The autopsy found trace amounts of destroying angel, jack-o'-lantern, and death cap (closely related to the destroying angel) in his stomach. "I don't know what you're saying," said my then-wife. I told her that I was surprised to learn, while reading through old scans of newspaper articles, that nobody knew why Albert had eaten those mushrooms. *He knew not to eat things he found out in the woods*, his parents had said.

"When I heard how he died," I told my then-wife, "I thought everybody understood why it had happened. I thought they all knew."

"A clue!" said my then-child, holding up his stuffed bear. "A clue!" said my then-child, pointing at the modem's blinking blue connection light. "A clue!" said my then-child, staring down the lasagna on his little pink baby fork. I began following my then-child around, making sure that everything he touched was put back right where it belonged. "A clue!" he said, tossing a throw pillow in the air, which I would arrange carefully back on the couch. "A clue!"— sliding his plastic space shuttle across the floor, which I ripped from him, placing it back in the toy basket. "A clue!"—his little hand letting the soap topple into the bottom of the sink basin, before I grabbed it out and put it back on its little rubber tray. "What are you doing?" said my then-wife. "I've got a headache," I told her. "Want to watch a cop show?" she asked me. "Sure," I said.

In mid-October, 1992, Mrs. Blake took us—her second-grade class—on a nature walk in the forest behind the school. She pointed out which trees had already lost all their leaves, and which ones were still "hanging on." She described poison ivy to us, and said that she would "keep an eye out for it" so we could learn to identify it. We made rubbings of tree-bark with printer paper and crayons. One kid, I can't remember who, had forgotten his jacket that morning, but Elliot had two jackets in his locker, so the kid borrowed one. I wound up near the end of our line. The paths were unmarked but so unmissable that they did not need to be and we were only in a very small strip of woods anyway, behind a little newly built suburban neighborhood with homes with bluish grey or greyish blue siding that you could sometimes spot through the trees like patches of overcast sky fallen to earth. I caught sight of Albert wandering off the path. I said his name. "Look," he said, pointing. I followed his outstretched finger to a beige mushroom of middling size with a thick stem and wide, arcing cap. (My best guess, now, consulting a field guide, is that this was a meadow mushroom, Agaricus campestris. A perfectly edible specimen—though, of course, aligning memory with image is an uncertain process.) Albert's outstretched finger traced an arc and, following it, I saw that the first mushroom was actually part of a small circle of mushrooms. "A pixie ring," he said. I asked him what that was. "They trap you in it," he said, "forest spirits. You become invisible. You can't do anything until you find a way out." "Do you believe that?" I asked him. We hadn't really spoken before. "Maybe," he said. "Forest spirits," I said, "pixie rings…forest spirits…this is kinda your thing, huh?" "My thing?" he said. "Like my thing is murder mysteries," I told him.

I pictured myself dying. Or, no, I pictured myself dead. I pictured my mother coming in and finding my body. I pictured Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes and all the others coming in

and finding my body. They would walk all over our house looking at all the objects I left behind. Everything was possibly important. I'd left the sink in the bathroom running. They made a note of it. I'd left a book sitting out on my bed. They made a note of it. I was holding a half-eaten orange slice. They made a note of it. If I'd been filling out a worksheet of math homework, they'd say, "Look, he was doing his math homework." If I'd been spitting frothy bluish toothpaste into the sink, they'd say, "He was brushing his teeth." If I'd been building a track for my matchbox cars, they'd say, "He was building a track for his matchbox cars." There would be my body, and there would be what it had been doing, which was now the most important thing I'd ever done.

That fall, just days after Albert's death, I viewed a film without my mother's permission at a friend's home. The really ingenious plan I came up with was that I would *just not tell her,* but it turned out that my mother regularly called friends' parents after I visited them, purportedly to say thank you for showing me such a good time, but really to ask in a sort of careless way, "So what did the boys get up to?" and "Did they watch anything?" She came into my room screaming (really screaming—not even words but wordless, just shrill, clipped blasts like her lungs were large bubble-wrap bubbles to be popped repeatedly) and she tore at her own hair and slapped herself across the face. Even when she started to speak she kept hitting herself. She said to me, "This is how I feel. This is how I feel," with each slap—standing half-hunched in my room, holding herself up with one hand on the little side table beside my bed where I kept my volcano night-light and a "space explorer" LEGO set which she'd knocked onto the floor when she came in, breaking it into two pieces: a piece with the majority of the ship, and another piece with just the nose and the cockpit and the little LEGO man sitting inside the cockpit and smiling

hugely and cluelessly as his ship de-pressurized and his lungs ruptured and his body began to swell—this as my mother's hand reached up too fast to her cheek, returning to the already pink patch of skin stretching from her jaw to the corner of her eye, fingers snapping whip-like against flesh, showing me that this, *this*, was how she felt.

We were playing "What Happened?" It was late November, 1992. "Close your eyes," said Elliot. I was playing the body again, lying by the playscape. Someone put a hand over my eyes to keep me from peeking. I could feel them, my friends, digging around in the wood-chips, shifting them, the shifted wood-chips shifting other wood-chips, communicating to me a sort of diffuse movement—the earth a rustling, alive thing. When I opened my eyes, I could see I was in a circle of mushrooms, mushrooms they'd ripped up and had been secreting on their persons. "We're solving a real one this time," said Elliot. At first, they thought I wasn't moving because I was so committed to the bit. "This is the best you've ever been as a body," said Maizy.

Everything in its right place. On my bookshelf, the spines of the books are all equidistant from the shelf's lip. I use little squares of paper towel between stacked pans to prevent build-up of moisture and to keep the pans from scraping one another. My shoes on the shoe-rack are organized by type and then color. After I leave a room, you can't tell that I've been there. When I get up in the night to use the bathroom or to get a glass of water, I make my bed before leaving the room. I'm sharpening a knife so that it cuts cleanly. I'm on the other side of the house so that I can't hear the dishwasher running. The person who delivers my food knows to place it on the back porch. I'm sitting on the toilet, my bowels knotted with milk-shit. I'm trying to figure out how I got here. Again and again, I'm going over the facts.

Submitting to Ploughshares While Listening to "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot

You aren't one of those Ploughshares sycophants. You've never submitted to the Alice Hoffman Award for Fiction or the Ashley Leigh Borne Prize for Fiction or the John C. Zacharis First Book Award. You don't even subscribe to Ploughshares. Numerous literary publications counsel prospective submitters to tailor their work to those guidelines "implied by the publication" and as far as you're concerned Ploughshares might be implying anything. What you do know is that you recently became a father. Soon after, you wrote a story. Now, while the baby sleeps, while your wife sleeps with the baby in the baby's room—sleeping on the plush ABC play rug on the floor beside the baby's cradle—you're alone at the desk in your bedroom submitting your story to various literary journals, not even Ploughshares specifically, but Ploughshares right now, and you're listening—on a pair of mid-tier bluetooth headphones, notable only for not being AirPods because you're not one of those Apple Product sycophants—to "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot, and it's August and the room is dark because the dim feels cool on your skin and Gordon has just asserted that "the legend lives on from the Chippewa on down of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee."

People keep saying to you, "Congratulations." They send you text messages saying congratulations and leave voicemails congratulating you. Long-estranged friends materialize electronically to congratulate you in comments under the Facebook post your wife composed announcing the birth of your child. They are congratulating you on the successful existence of your baby. The existence of the child constitutes the sum total of what you can currently be

congratulated on, considering the child was grown by your wife, birthed by your wife, and, you realized only after the child's birth—even from within the birth's glossy afterglow, suspended in the warm wet threads of your new child's existence, a hazy atemporal euphoria fueled by love and sleeplessness—it has become evident to you that a child is not an accomplishment, not as such, qua child, insofar as you have not yet raised the child, and even then congratulations would only be in order if the child survives, if the child is a good child who grows into a good adult, which isn't entirely up to you, just partially up to you, and partially up to the child, re: nature or nurture, and, anyway, that's not even the central issue, the central issue is that of the child's birth which, albeit totally healthy and copacetic on all fronts, is also the site of a shameful happening, a sort of kidney stone of memory lodged within, a recollection you cringe against like a cold wind, the sort of thing a person turns to art to metabolize and so you wrote a story and then decided to try to get that story published and its publication, were it to be published, would constitute, you think, a real achievement—something meriting of a congratulations.

Unlike most literary publications, Ploughshares doesn't use Submittable, the submission management platform that put the beat down on SubmissionManager.net a number of years ago, nor do they just list an email *à la* The New Yorker or The Atlantic or N+1 or any of those other publications with a cultural footprint so well-contoured they can just lob their email at you like the cool kid flicks cigarette ash on the high school foyer's checkered carpet like "here you go, knock yourself out." No. Ploughshares uses an in-house submission system, and it's hard even to find the system because after you click "Submit" on the main page you're taken to another page that does this whole door-to-door salesman song-and-dance like, "You want guidelines? We got guidelines! Are you submitting to the journal? Is this piece right for our 'longform' category? Is

this a ‘Look2 essay’ ”—whatever the fuck that is—“or are you looking to apply to our contest?” After you select “Journal,” you are taken to another page which still isn’t the submission manager. Text scurries down the page telling you how to submit via mail and what they’re looking for and they want to ask a second time whether or not you wanted to submit a “Look2 essay” and there isn’t a button at the top or bottom with just, like, a “Submit Here” so you scroll up and down twice—the text blurring with the speed of your two wadded-together fingertips slashing across the trackpad—before finding the link which is just embedded in a wall of text, stuck there like a sticky note, like a corpuscle of grit left on a window by some once-anonymous wet blot which has now dried, tucked into a crevasse in this mountain of text like they expect you to read all this, like you’ve got time to read all this, like Ploughshares is the only place you’ve ever wanted to submit and you aren’t trying to submit to a billion other journals. You’ve been told to expect a lot of rejection when sending a story out for publication and Ploughshares is just one of many. Though it is very good. An article you found online called “The 50 Best Modern Literary Publications” has it ranked at five. “As the big freighters go it was bigger than most,” to put it in Lightfoot’s terms. It would be kind of a huge deal if they published your story. It’s hard not to feel a little electric buzz in your heart, something small and white with heat, at the thought of them accepting your story, which they won’t, but they might.

When you click on the blue linked text reading “Submission Manager” on Ploughshares’s “Submission Guidelines” page it takes you to yet another page that is still not the submission manager and this one is the worst yet because all it is is the words “Access Denied” in big letters and, beneath that, text that says that you can’t do what you’re doing with, quote-unquote, “your current permissions.” It suggests that you create an account. So, after staring dead-eyed at the

page for a few seconds as Mr. Lightfoot describes, for what must be the fourth time in less than three minutes into his six-minute song, the eerie quality of Lake Superior's autumnal wind, a wind metastasizing into a major storm, this being the precipitating event that lead the 13,000-ton Great Lakes shipping vessel, the Edmund Fitzgerald—named after who else but the President and Chairman of Northwestern Mutual, an investment firm with oodles of cash plugged into the iron industry—to sink with its full crew of twenty-nine men in a storm on November 10th, 1975, sinking down to the bottom of Lake Superior which, as Mr. Lightfoot has already informed you once (and will inform you again by the end of the song) "never gives up its dead," which isn't, per se, a true statement but a hyperbolic reference to the fact that bodies really are quite difficult to recover from Lake Superior because of the nature of the deep currents within it, though, surprisingly, Lake Superior isn't all that deep, relative to other major world lakes that is, being that it's the largest freshwater body in the world by square miles but only the third largest by volume, meaning that it's only, in fact, the forty-first deepest lake (getting, in the depth category, absolutely bodied by rift lakes the world over, Lake Baikal's absolute bitch) meaning that the bottom—were you out in the middle of Lake Superior, able to see nothing but horizon and water—that the bottom would be closer than you'd think, but you aren't a diver, and there's only one condition you'd be in were you to touch that bottom…

Mr. Lightfoot waits two verses to bring in the drums.

Here's the thing about Gordon, he's willing to lie a little. Like, for example, the ship wasn't coming back from "a mill in Wisconsin" because big freighters aren't loaded at mills, they're loaded at docks… duh. And he implies that the ship sank because a "main hatchway caved in" which isn't true, and the Maritime Sailors Cathedral isn't "musty"—as one woman

actually complained to Mr. Lightfoot—it's quite a tidy little church, but you do understand that its better if it's musty, that "musty" preserves the sensibility of the song in a way that freshly lacquered pews and washed hardwood floors just don't. It's roughly in line with how your wife says that the birth went "swimmingly," which might suggest a water birth, though people usually don't ask, but which, that descriptor, glosses over a single moment of sudden and stunning turbulence which also happens to be the epicenter of your shame. And what were you looking for? A way to create an account? There's a button that says "My Account" in the upper lefthand corner. It takes you to a login and it's the usual rigamarole of generating a new account. Nothing you don't know. You can do this on autopilot. (Why even narrate it?) You dragged up the box fan from downstairs before starting this submission session and it's sitting on the floor not five feet away shoving air across your calves. You pick your feet up off the dusty wood floor and articulate your toes to better taste its soughing cool.

Stereotypically, your baby's birth made you think about death which made you think about communal experiences which may in some way account for the fact that the story you wrote was composed using the once maligned and now possibly overused second person perspective. One problem with second person, you realized, in the course of writing the story, is that "you" is a high-variance receptacle for identity. The "you" is either so marginally constructed that the reader simply pours themself into it like a liquid, filling it perfectly with their personality / quirks / demographics / history—in which case to what extent can any readerly appreciation of the text be separated from a certain solipsistic self-aggrandizement and attributed to the author vis-a-vis "craft"—or it becomes so specific, (for example, the "you" turns out to be Letitia Montgomery, a 45-year-old Dutch-Irish woman and terrier enthusiast working as a bank

teller in Albany, New York) that it turns into a worthless gesture and the story should've just been written in the first or third person. Most stories, you've noticed, written in the second person, start in the first scenario and eventually enter the latter, the "you" undergoing a process of being shrunk down from the expansive and general "you" of the opening sentence to the "you" that is very specifically this "you" and no other, i.e. not *you*—a sort of sickening contraction, a series of characterological amputations performed on the reader who is invited to find less and less of themselves within that initially welcoming "you." It's a minor tragedy. Not so big it can't usually be withstood. Hell, even the awful shameful birth-related memory that you shy away from like a lab rat from a too-bright light can, ultimately, be withstood. You can sense how time will eventually render it palatable. Just look at what happened with SS Edmund Fitzgerald! Twenty-nine men died when it sank in Lake Superior and perhaps this is a product of your post-9/11 American consciousness but that just doesn't seem like that many people. In 2021, 1,205 women died in the united states due to what the CDC calls "maternal causes." In fact, the United States has one of the worst maternal death rates in the quote-unquote developed world. Your wife told you this. She sprang this data on you over a dinner of Trader Joe's lobster ravioli—overcooked slightly, partially dissolved in the pot, the ravioli flapping open into loose scallop-edged lips that disgorged pink lumps into the seething water. "When suppertime came the old cook came on deck sayin' 'fellas its too rough to feed ya,' " Gordon sings. Apparently, sometime in the mid-twentieth century, the American medical community writ-large decided, just decided, that they had maxed out (well, minimumed-out) the maternal death rate. It couldn't get any better, they said. So we stopped trying to improve it, just stopped. The number of women dying was the best imaginable amount of women dying. "At seven PM a main hatchway caved

in, he said, ‘fellas its been good to know ya.’ ” But so anyway we switched over to trying to save infants and our infant mortality rate actually looks pretty good. But our maternal death rate is trash, just trash, worse than trash if you’re black but you, *you*, aren’t black. We’re zooming in on “you.” You aren’t any other “you” but you. Here you are, yes *you*, a white guy with a white wife somewhere in the region of the United States known as the Midwest, a guy who just had a baby and then god-help-him wrote a second-person story and is now clicking “Submit” and “Journal” and scrolling down past “Look2essay”—which, maybe you *should’ve* written a “Look2essay”, there can’t possibly be that many people writing them—and clicking on the highlighted text that reads “Submission Manager.”

Gordon Lightfoot died earlier this year. There were all these articles about it, obituaries and such, with titles like “Gordon Lightfoot Remembered.” One such article really stood out. It was an obituary on NPR’s website and it read—and this is an actual quote, this was actually a thing someone wrote—“Lightfoot never displayed the range or inventiveness of such contemporaries as Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell.” When you read that you thought, that absolutely cannot be how we handle this. We can’t all be judged like that. We can’t be measured against the best to do whatever it was we did. That’s inane. It’s unreasonable. Someone’s funeral isn’t an opportunity to ask if they were the best ever. To say, “Yes we’re very sad that Bob or Blake or Claire or Vanessa died but were they even all that valuable? Were they goated?”

That had better not be where the bar is.

Here’s where the bar is: through a mouthful of damp lobster ravioli your wife told you she needed you to be her advocate. That was the word: advocate. “I need you to advocate for me,” she said, “in the hospital. I need you to tell the doctors what I need because I won’t be able

to at times and they won't always be acting in my best interests." And the situation was this: once you got into the hospital, you knew you'd be a bad advocate, being over-awed by the antiseptic smells, the rooms full of various winking and beeping devices, the forms at the front desk, the doctors in their doctor costumes—you recognized instantly that if they said that something must be done then you would say "do it." You: one of those hospital sycophants. One of those institutional yes-men. Because sometimes something is so big it gets to get away with being bad. With being not at all user friendly. Like how now—now, finally—now that you're all logged into Ploughshares, now that you have the permissions necessary to actually access the submission manager, you click "Submission Manager" on the "Submission Guidelines" page and are taken to a page that is not the "Access Denied" page but looks exactly like the "Submission Guidelines" page all over again. You jumped through all those hoops, you went and got the necessary "permissions," just to see the same thing twice. Are the people at Ploughshares having fun at your expense? Is this some sort of in-joke for the Ploughshares staff? You scroll down the page a little ways and then back up and back down again. You scroll to the bottom and, yes, now you see, there's a little form at the bottom: a field to attach a file and a field for the title and another for word count. Only but there isn't a field for a cover letter and there's always a field for the cover letter. On Submittable, the cover letter is just a standard part of the application. Hell, on SubmissionManager.net it was just a standard part of the application. So you scroll back up to the submission guidelines and what Ploughshares says is that they want you to include the cover letter as the first page of your story which only requires totally reformatting the document in ways which will need to be un-reformatted when you submit it to pretty much anywhere else and you sit there in a daze, like you can't even see the screen anymore you're so blinded by the

mindlessness of it all, blinded by your computer's bright screen, by banks of fluorescent lights and signs with arrows labeled "maternity ward" and white styrofoam cups packed with crushed ice. She was in the delivery room, delivering, giving birth, and the doctor, this white fellow with dark hair and a bit of stubble nibbling around the edge of his mask, said, "The baby's head is too big… " Said: "We're going to need to give you an episiotomy." (An episiotomy, for the uninitiated, being an incision made in the vagina during childbirth to prevent worse tearing, "Except that," your wife's voice juts across the narration, saying what she only said after the baby was born, after what happened happened, "episiotomies have been shown to hurt more and ultimately heal worse than natural tearing" [and, opening a new tab in your browser, you can quickly confirm that, yes, the CDC and the Mayo Clinic and who knows who else have come down pretty harshly on episiotomies]) and your wife, in the delivery room, said, "No." She said, "I don't want that." She said it very clearly. And the doctor said, "It's perfectly routine."

And you said:

And with the permission of no one at all he went ahead and did it.

Gordon Lightfoot says: "And all that remains are the faces and the names of the wives and the sons and the daughters."

"But," he continues, "statistically fewer wives than we'd like."

Your wife said, when it happened: a noise like no other noise you've ever heard. You remember thinking, later, and (you admitted to yourself) pretty problematically, *that was not a first-world noise. That was not a this-time-period noise. That was a plane crash eight-car-pile-up the ship is going down type noise.*

I didn't think I'd ever encounter a noise like that, you thought.

It's becoming clear that everything is broken and bad. Ploughshares. The American Medical system. The Edmund Fitzgerald. And yeah we're dealing, you recognize, with many different magnitudes of awful here, but here you are, holding all of these things together somehow, a confluence of overlapping thoughts / memories / characteristics / demographics / history. You: a guy who wrote a short story in second person and who just had a baby and whose wife got an episiotomy that she shouldn't've gotten and who (you) didn't do a damn thing about it but did think, after it was all over, after the screaming and pushing and new life and everything, to say, to her, your wife, "You must be hungry," and you got her a banana and she said thanks and what she says now is "swimmingly" and what people say now is "congratulations." You are as bad as you can get away with. Most things are like that.

Is this song even all that well written? Is it? There's a passage in the lyrics where Gordon Lightfoot uses the word "came" four times in five lines and not even artfully and it just kills you. The word "on" appears twice in the span of five words in the opening couplet. "Gordon," you wish you could say, "wasn't there a way around that?" At one point, describing that evil autumnal sky—that sky which presaged the deaths of a statistically insignificant twenty-nine men—Gordon uses the word, "gloomy." Gordon, you think, opening up the file of your second-person story, getting ready to totally re-format it in line with the demands of Ploughshares's submission manager—not implied guidelines, nothing implied at all, guidelines insisted upon, guidelines imposed—Gordon, you think, opening up the file—and sensing that, in looking at your story, you will feel compelled to change it, to begin re-re-revising, the first sentence was never any good, you remember, you'd meant to change it yesterday, it should've already been changed—Gordon you can't get away with this, you think. Bob and Joni would never do this.

They would never let this happen. They would never use a word like ‘gloomy’ here. In this setting. Under these conditions. Gloomy!?! Gloomy is a word in a children’s book. Gloomy is 5am on a rainy Thursday. Twenty-nine men have died and what you’ve got for me is gloomy? Gloomy is too small. Gloomy is this dark room with the air whooshing across my feet, air which has gone from soothing to too cold at some point. This place is filled with gloom. I am flush with it. It’s a fog rising up over the water. Floating there. Totally still. Nothing like a storm.

If only your child would cry out, would need you. If only your wife would lean into the room and say, “Hey, can I get some help?” You would be able to move again.

Homemakers

After all the family photos come down—except the one of just the two of us, brother and sister, taken at a CVS photo-shoot four years ago, when we were six and eight, and set in a circular silver-filigreed frame on the living room side board; that and, in the kitchen, a black-and-white of Damian our recently deceased beagle, posed in a pensive moment on the back patio and held to the fridge-face by a Niagara Falls souvenir magnet—after they're all taken and boxed up—every photo showing either Mom or Dad or Mom and Dad, even if they're barely visible, like the picture from Uncle Blake's backyard where we're peeking out of his above-ground pool with our goggles on and Dad's just barely in-frame, just his hands, one carrying a mimosa for himself and one carrying another for Mom who's over on the porch, unseen, arguing tax rates with Aunt Matilda—after all those photos are boxed up and after living with boxes and bare walls for two weeks, on a Sunday which is the fourth such Sunday since the separation, Dad arrives with seven art prints purchased from the poster racks at Barnes and Noble and he spends the morning placing them in colored frames where each frame's color is meant to complement a secondary or even tertiary color in the painting, he tells us, rather than a dominant color, which creates, for the viewer, he says, quote, "A hard-to-place sense of well-being, an alignment felt in the subconscious," and he's recently gotten really into color theory we've noticed and we say that what would be really sweet would be getting a new dog and he laughs and asks us if it seems like we, as a family, are "in that place right now" and each of us, Raymond and Ella that is, should pick a poster for our own rooms, and we pick Matisse's *Dance II* and Van Gogh's *Starry Night,* the latter of which Dad says is a safe pick but he's not here to judge and he's going to park

himself on the couch here for some R&R and HGTV and here's a nail for you and a nail for you and you'll have to take turns with the hammer.

Mom sees the art on Wednesday. Says "Ick!" These prints were printed on ass is her assertion. The glossy finish makes Adele Bloch-Bauer look oily. Like she just came from a fried chicken binge. Where did he buy these? Why'd he do this? Did he even use a stud finder? She juts a sharp pink nail at us. "Did you two see him using a stud finder?" We say, "A stud finder is what?" It tells you where to nail, we learn. "It looks like a calculator," she says. "You point it at the wall. Did he do that?" Mom stands on the red suede couch holding *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon.* It's a big print. We can't see her face. Her voice is half-muffled by geometric women. "Can we get a pet?" we ask. "It would give us a hard-to-place sense of well-being." Mom asks what does she look like? The cushion fabric dimples around her bare bone-white heels. Anyway: a stud finder. Did we see him using it? "We didn't," we say. "But we were putting them up in our own rooms." She lays *Les Demoiselles* down on the coffee table and runs off to look. We hear her asking the air if, quote, "He even knows anything?!" We inspect the painting Mom left behind. One woman's face looks like the tribal mask from their honeymoon in Morocco. They fought over where to hang that up too. Dad wanted it in the living room. Mom wanted not to be the kind of white people who hang tribal masks in their living room. We wonder who got it in the settlement. The settlement says that Mom lives here from Wednesday evening to Sunday morning. Dad lives here from Sunday morning to Wednesday evening. Between Mom leaving and Dad coming there's always about an hour of just us. That's by design, so they don't bump into one another. We live here full time. No school because it's summer. It's the same home we've always lived in. We stay. They come and go. "It's called nesting," they said. We are

being “spared the trauma.” We hear Mom talking to nobody upstairs. She wonders did he Google search the seven most generic pieces of art ever? She comes back down, says she’s got to go for a run. “I need to get this out of me,” she says. She yanks her laces like a serial strangler. “I mean,” says Mom, “The Great Wave? The Great Wave?!” Probably referring to the painting with the big wave. Dad put that one in the bathroom. “Where there’s water,” he said.

Four days later when Dad walks into the living room he says “where’s all the art?” and we point him to the home office which is unused since they both moved out and where Mom stacked it all—all except the two from our rooms—and, after he puts the clothing from his suitcase into the dresser in the adult bedroom where Mom and Dad sleep and where they each have two drawers that are just their drawers like they each have a pallet in the basement with boxes with their names written on them and they each bring little toiletry bags with them when they come and go and they always change the sheets on the adult bed so they aren’t sharing sheets and Dad says he’s never slept on clean sheets so often and what a revelation!—after that he goes around the house putting them back up, the prints, re-inserting nails in the holes Mom took the nails out of, saying he “can’t believe her, it beggars the imagination” and telling us that it’s just unconscionable and “I can’t even find all of them!” and he grumbles and stews all day and the next as well and on Thursday evening, when he’s ready to make himself a mug of warm water with cayenne and honey which is this new thing he’s trying, he sticks his nose in his black galaxy mug which is just black until you fill it with something hot and the stars appear on the side and he takes a sniff and asks if Mom’s been using it because he can’t stand green tea and this cup’s got a bitter tang and Mom does sometimes get a devious look around the mug shelf we admit and he says that if she wants to play it that way then he’ll play it that way so we all get in

the car and drive to Home Depot at 7pm and on the drive he talks to the road in front of him, asking it what hypothetical world that woman is living in and taking loud breaths and saying that "what's needed is a broad perspective" and "who are he and Mom to be dictating to us the decor?" because it's our home and we should be able to decorate it like we like and it's not like we got any input on the divorce and frankly he didn't get very much input either but that's neither here nor there and it's home makeover o'clock—which, remember, he's a big HGTV guy so none of this comes as a surprise—and we can each, he says, when we get there, pick a potted plant from the greenhouse and we say how about we go to the PetSmart next door and he says that that's "not a likely outcome this evening" and he's going to go look at bathroom tile prices and off he goes with a cart with a bum wheel…

(It's just the two of us. Home Depot's aisles are cut deep like canyons. The greenhouse entrance is a misty green glint way at the back. "Hey, look at this." We stop to peer through the glass of a twenty-gallon tank and a helpful guy in an orange vest tells us that they don't also sell fish. Nearby, a bag of black sand manages to both be black and sparkle. We jab a finger at it and say, "How much is this?" The guy says that we need to pick our substrate based on which animals we'll be getting. This sand is perfect for any animal that likes to bury itself. But maybe if what we're getting would prefer pebbles, pebbles would be better, he says. We should ask our parents.)

…and when we find Dad again he's frowning at two different tiles he's holding—both rectangular, both very much the same shade of blue except one is shinier like almost plastic-y and the other isn't and looks more like a really smooth river stone—and we tell him that we need to buy some black sand and also here are a couple succulents we like and he says "these are just

cactuses" and we say we know we think they're neat and he says "black sand?" and we say "because of the ants" and Dad says "ants?" and he didn't know you could use black sand to deal with ants or that we had ants and we tell him it's not a substrate they like and he shrugs and says "I didn't know black sand could mitigate an ant problem" and we say that Mom said that we needed like forty pounds and Dad says, "Oof."

Mom asks why the sign on the home office. We're eating fruit loops for lunch. Sitting at the kitchen island. Little yellowish milk flecks splatter the marbled counter. "Keep out?" she asks. She just got here. She's holding her black mesh pencil cup. Must've picked it up off the desk in the hall. We dragged it out there, the desk. You've gotta squeeze past. "We need to move that to the basement," we tell her. "That'll be a conversation about whose pallet it goes on," she says. "Dad put up the sign," we say. Mom makes a face like *that man!* "We need a space that is just ours, he says," we say. "To mitigate the trauma." Mom says, "Mitigate?" She says, "Where did you hear that? A therapist?" We say, fast, not even thinking, "Yes." She puts the pencil cup down hard. She says, "Are you two doing counseling with Dad?" We say yes. We are in deep. "The counselor says we need the room," we say. Mom tells us we already have two rooms. She storms around. Says it's just like Dad to be out here building trust on the sly. She goes into the bathroom to scream, screams, comes back. Also, "The shower?" she asks. "New tiles? That man!" Mom says home renovation is not in his wheelhouse. She takes her computer out. "We're doing the same thing," she says. Twenty minutes later we have a family counseling session set for Friday. "It's digital," Mom says. She does a loop of the house, taking down Dad's art prints. That's the routine now. She puts up new prints. Large squares of painted color. Aquamarine. Yellow-orange. A just-off-white white. "It's about establishing a mood," she tells us. She leaves

the sign up on the home office, doesn't go in. We can't believe our luck. At night we watch heist movies. *Ocean's 11* (the new one), *The Italian Job*, *Le Cercle Rouge.* Her comfort films. We've seen them a million times. She likes it when people have a plan. She takes us to a fitness shop. She buys this large jungle-gym type thing to install in the living room. We find some good stuff there too. One of us knocks over a display of workout water bottles. Cylinders of semi-transparent plastic shark across the aisles. Lots to pick up. "These puppies can roll!" says one employee. We stuff our pockets. The new jungle gym looks like a little prison in our living room. Lots of bars connected to other bars connected to other bars connected to the wall. Mom does pull ups. "Oh yeah, it's secure," she says. You bet she used a stud finder. It takes up about one quarter of the living room. Mom says that's reasonable. "It's dynamic," she tells us. Two days later we meet Jada the family counselor over Zoom. "Your mother's told me a bit about the two of you via email," she says. "I'm excited to get to know you on your own terms." Mom mentions that Dad's doing this same thing separately. "I think that's great," says Jada. Mom says she suspects Dad's trying to get a better bond than she has. Jada says speculating about Dad's intentions probably wouldn't be productive. "Being as he isn't here." Mom tells Jada about the home office. The "keep out" sign. "Interesting," says Jada, "sort of a safe space. Consistent. Unaffected by parental comings and goings."

That Sunday, Mom leaves at her usual time and Dad arrives late because he was volunteering at a potluck at the Episcopalian church, which is a new thing he's trying. We take black trash bags and cut them down their centers with the box cutter so that they unfold like wings. The home office has already been cleared out, the floor swept. We layer the floor with the trash bags, taping them to the wood and to one another and to the baseboards. We pour the black

sand out across the floor and swish it around with our feet. The sand unfurls, sparkling. Our arcing toes draw furrows and ridges, the shifting a delicate hiss. On the wall, a woman with a blue head-wrap looks at us over her shoulder, one of Dad's prints which we took after Mom took it down. We get the cactuses from our rooms and bury their bases in the sand at the back corners of the room, mounding the sand up around them. What is this? we ask one another. What have we made? An indoor sandbox? A sand garden? A fish tank interior? Except, we say to one another, this tank needs, like, one of those model pirate ships. It needs a new light to make it really shine. We bury the bicycle reflectors for cyclists and the ankle and arm band reflectors for runners that we stole from the workout store, the reflectors pointed up, patches of pure red and orange refraction nestled in the diffuse sparkling of the black black sand. The room needs something else. We don't know what. It's missing something complementary, something that will produce an alignment. And of course, we say, we still need a light. We lie on the floor and nestle our heads into it. This is our substrate, we say. "I wish it was deeper."

For consistency's sake we tell Dad that working with Jada has been a wild success and seeing as our "bond with Mom" has grown so wonderfully strong, dangerously strong, we should do the same thing with him and he says that he's pleasantly surprised with our maturity and he's also surprised by Mom's maturity, frankly, and he's willing to try this—"a new thing!" he says—and he finds a counselor named Lukas who's available to see us the next day and in person and when we get to Lukas's office we see that he has a little display shelf way up high behind his desk and one of the items on that shelf, sitting on the stand that holds it upright, is, to our infinite surprise, some kind of light-producing apparatus with a bulb and a lens all strapped into this black steel construction that looks like it was designed to put the bulb and lens in a state of

unease and we nudge one another and raise our eyebrows and Lukas explains that one effect of "nesting" can be emotional whiplash where the children find that the "emotional character" of their home becomes radically different based on which parent is currently there and that, in some cases, children actually benefit from going back and forth between their parents' houses because the trip itself, the literal act of going from one place to the other, creates a sort of reassuring physical correlate to the psychic shift of traveling from one parent's "emotional sphere" to the other's—"if that makes sense," he says, looking at us—to which Dad says that he certainly hasn't benefitted from going back and forth between the house and his new apartment and Lukas asks Dad if he would feel comfortable leaving the room for a few minutes so that he can talk to us "without the parental element" and Dad leaves but we can hear him clomping around the waiting room and we ask Lukas about that bulb-and-lens thing up there and he says it replicates the effect of a lighthouse and we say, "Wow a lighthouse light" and "that's the kind of light we've been looking for for we don't know how long" and "maybe what should happen next, after we talk about how we're feeling, is we should leave the room so that Dad can speak without the child element" and Lukas asks if we'll be fine in the waiting room and we say yes and, later, when we let Dad back in and tell him our idea, he tells us he's better than fine with it, he thinks it would be great to talk to Lukas "*Mano a mano*"—he needs this, he really needs this.

Alone together, in the waiting room, we make a plan. Lukas runs his practice out of the second floor of an office complex. Lukas's suite—"Suite 211" it says on the door—contains, first, a waiting room, broken into two parts by a dividing wall separating the seating area and the secretary's cubby, and, secondly, Lukas's office itself. There are bathrooms in both the first and second-floor halls for communal use. At the front of the building, a security guard sits at a little

lectern. He asks you who you're here to see and tells you where they are even though you already know. We tell Lukas's secretary—this young woman with lightning-blond hair—that we are going out to use the bathroom. Then, in the hall, we pull the fire alarm. The siren comes whistling down like a storm wind. We run down the hall, down the staircase—because you always use staircases in the event of a fire—and split up. One of us goes outside, to wait by the entrance and tell Dad, when he comes out, that the other has gone to the car, which won't be true but it buys a little time. The other, ducking away, hides in the first floor bathroom. Waiting in a stall, hardly breathing, this one, alone, hears a tremendous number of feet slamming past. It's like listening to popcorn: first one person goes by, then another, then more and more in a great rush, and then one or two stragglers—unhurried, either disbelieving or somewhat welcoming a flaming end—and then nothing but the siren. "Go," we say to ourself, "go, go!" And this one goes: back into the hall, back up the staircase, back into Dr. Lukas's suite and through the waiting room into his office. The lighthouse light is too high to reach, but we have recent experience with desk relocation and the desk is quickly shoved over to the wall and the object snagged. It really is a beautiful little thing. The one of us who is there runs our hand along the curving lens. Look through it: the curved glass doubly curving the bulb beyond it, carving it into a transparent blossom that bulges and doubles back impossibly—a single space sharing many glass petals, not simply overlapping but actually on the same point. We, the one of us, leaves the building via the back entrance and loops through the forest to the parking lot. By that time, Dad has been led back to the building. Everybody is standing in a group watching the road, waiting for the firemen. There's Lukas the counselor with a hand shading his eyes, watching for that red

glint, listening for the siren. The lighthouse light is placed in the trunk, tucked behind a stack of still-unwashed casserole dishes from the last Episcopalian pot-lock.

Mom says “nesting” is for the birds. The parental well-being is way off. “We’ve been speaking,” says Mom. We say, “What?!” They went behind our backs, she says. The last few weeks of counseling have revealed that the situation sucks. Tall this space-sharing will kill them. All the going back and forth is ass, she asserts. They each need their own home. It’ll be good for us. Our parents will be better parents, she says, if they don’t have to think about each other so much. This: the product of their secret conversation. We’re losing the house. “Hell no!” we say. We run off to our rooms. We hear Mom in the living room doing dynamic crunches on her torture gym. We text Dad asking is this true? ‘*fraid so*, he says. We go back downstairs. “This is our house,” we tell Mom. “Well,” she says, one word per sit-up. “Technically. Legally. No.” “Spare us the trauma!” we shout. She is in her torture gym. The only bit of body outside the structure is one white toe’s tip. Her torso goes up and down. At the top of her sit-up a red bar blocks her mouth. “It’s actually. Kind of good. Dad re-did. Those tiles,” she gasps. “Resale,” she says. “Value,” she says. We say, “Dad’s color theory is whack.” One of us is sobbing and buries their face in the couch. “Look at us!” one of us says. “Look at us. You can’t do this to us.” She’s going to go for a jog, she says. Give us space to cool off.

The situation in the home office is that they still haven’t gone in there because they don’t think there’s anything in there anyway. Sometimes grains of black sand blow under the door into the hall, but we’re quick to vacuum them up. Whatever else we’re imagining for the space probably isn’t doable and we have no time and no money. For no reason other than numbness, we pick through Mom and Dad’s pallets. They already don’t have enough space for their own

things, never mind ours. “My new apartment,” says Dad, “is very space-limited.” Mom says, “I have no space!” We find mostly out-of-season clothing and old papers like from previous tax filings but also Mom’s high school diploma and a lot of boxed-up books. In one of Dad’s boxes we find the honeymoon tribal mask. Our first thought is to hang it on the office wall, but we are sick of nails and studs. Instead, we bury it in the sand in the middle of the room, staring up at the ceiling, little bulbs of semi-congealed black sand poking through the eye-holes like no human eyes ever. We lie beside it, looking up. The lighthouse light sits in one corner, plugged into the wall outlet, its beam smashing across the space, jarring off of black sand particles, one of the bike reflectors so bright you’d expect it to burn up. We still don’t know what this room is. The plain beige ceiling is wrong, though. We get a ladder to take a closer look at it. There should be a window up there, a skylight. Raymond gets the hammer, starts hammering the ceiling. Hammering at it until chunks are falling all over the room, all around me. “Stop,” I yell. “Stop.” He’s trying to break through to the open air. Plaster dust rains down, dulling the black sand. I run to the window and shove it open. “Mom,” I yell, “Dad”—at the empty road. In comes the wind. Sand shifts across the floor revealing more sand below, the new top layer now also shifting, showing more, shifting too, all collecting in a black mound against the far wall.