Niche

issue nº

6.

ART

FICTION

NONFICTION

POETRY

MICROS

Niche

ISSUE # 6

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Niche is an online literary magazine that was designed to be limitless. It aims to provide a place where an array of voices from experimental and conventional, pulp, and literary, non-fiction and creative nonfiction, graphic mediums, artwork, and audio can coexist. As people with varying passions, we have striven to find places where we can express fearlessly and belong unconditionally. We're for those who have already, or have yet to carve their perfect niche within literary and non-literary communities.

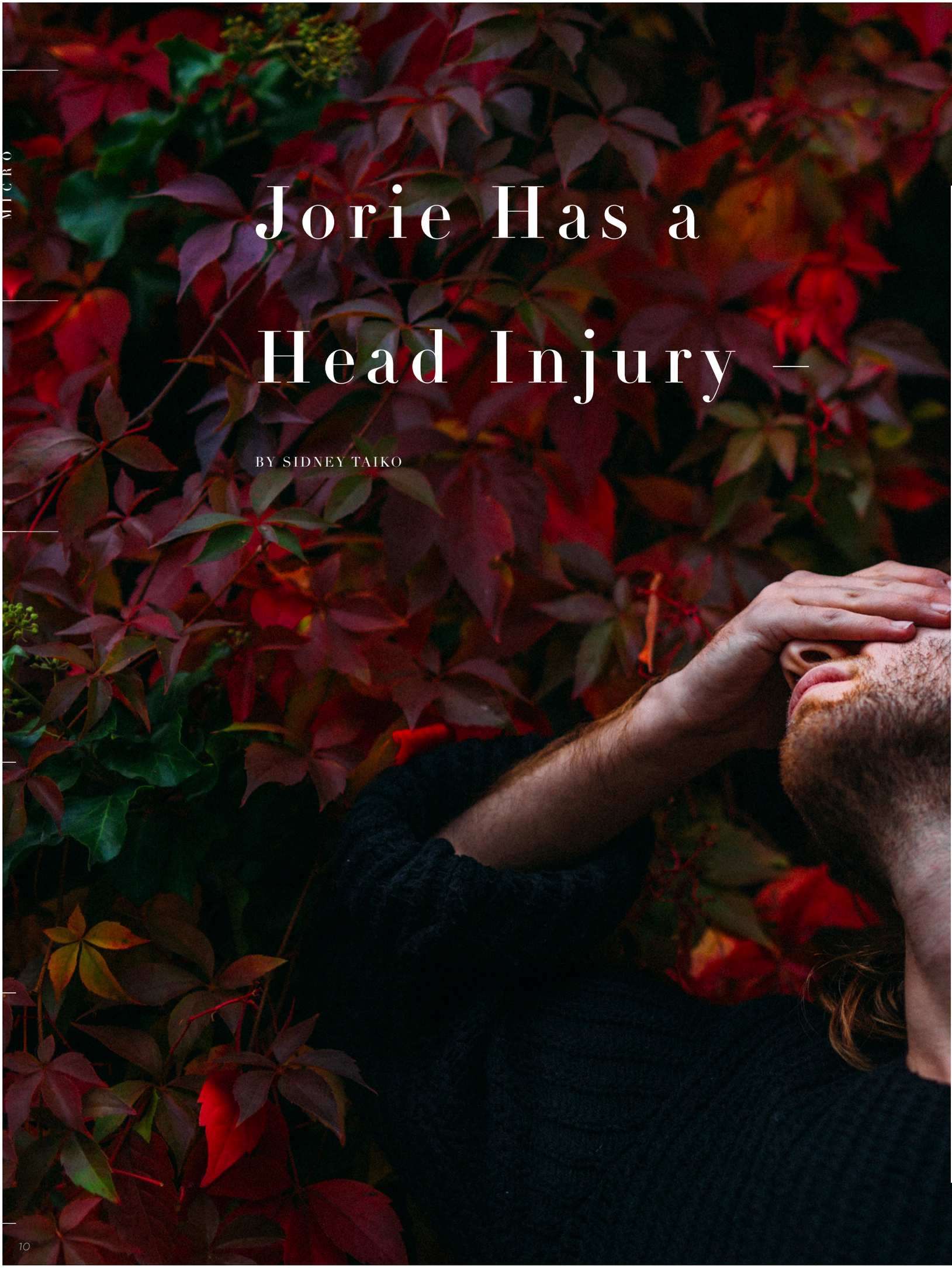
Please check us out at www.nichelitmag.com.

The Greater Western Beef Growers Association

BY W. JACK SAVAGE

Jorie Has a Head Injury —

BY SIDNEY TAIKO



Jorie thinks her head is going to splash open. The pain feels like *know-that-life-is-short*. Rx in bag, broken brain in head, Jorie must appear equivocal. Her broken brain hurts, the comfort of sharp pain says *alive alive*, but also makes things fuzzy and Jorie's emotions are flying out of her like bats. "I'm sorry!" She's saying, "I die a little every night!" and "Am I the only one who's haunted? What about you?" Jorie's brain is under pressure.

But Jorie doesn't know who she's talking to any more. She only wanted to happy-stumble through art, but she can't any more because that idea disappeared around the corner of some nightmare. Jorie rubs her hands across her forehead, her messy mop spills over her face and she wonders if anyone knows the color of her eyes without looking. Her broken brain is waiting to be split open by more fever.

Jorie is both desperate and sincere: *I am still here*. Jorie will take a pill – feel better in the morning. In the morning she'll know how to hold herself and her broken brain back until there's nothing left of them but a little dead skin on the bedspread.

—

She took a pitfall stumble. She had a stairway decline. She was prone to migraines before this even happened. She clumsy-fell out of favor with her own body displacement. Jorie took a tumble and then was feeling vandalized. She tripped and flew: because their shoes were everywhere. Their shoes, the shoes of some *they* being chucked from an above-apartment during a lover's quarrel. The shoes of they, fall in front of Jorie, saying *we are full we are full* and Jorie saying *we are fully falling*.

She can only get up, she can only shake a fist at the up-above-apartment window. Jorie eyes the shoes. They are not her size, they are not cute. Jorie thinks *I walked into a situation*. She walks out. Walks past strangers, is posed a question, replies *nobody did this to me*.

—

The next morning, Jorie has righted. Her head did not splash open, that was just warm blood racing to the point of impact. Her brain is not broken, her life will not be short. The fuzzy has lifted, the bats are long gone. She isn't sorry, nor dying nightly, nor haunted by ghosts. Jorie isn't talking to anyone and she has combed her hair, feverlessly. She has taken a pill.

Jorie remains sincere, but shrugs desperation. She does laundry, washes sheets of their sweat and dead skin once hers. She fits herself to the memory: she had been walking to the train. She had nearly reached the stairs tunneling down below the sidewalk. Then the shoes rained down from the apartment window above, the harsh voices of a couple at arms. Jorie tripped on a shoe, some shoes, and fell halfway down the stairs. Jorie hit her head hard. She eventually got up and walked. A stranger asked Jorie who did this to her. *Nobody. Nobody did this to me.* ¤

Jorie in the Hallway –

BY SIDNEY TAIKO

Jorie rarely sees anyone in the hallway of her apartment building. Every now and then a crumpled gum wrapper or muddy footprint will grace the beige and olive carpet as a small reminder that other people have been there, even if she doesn't see them. Maybe she'll walk by the door to #201 and hear the faint whine of a violin. Jorie feels like she lives in a building of ghosts. On a Thursday she walks out to the hall and is instantly wrapped in the warm blanket of his cologne. She can't remember the name or the brand. Something fancy. Chanel? Maybe she never even knew the name, but the scent was unmistakably his. But the hallway is empty, always empty. She even walks its full length as if he might materialize in front of her, as if it's a game of hot and cold. She never gets warmer though, just more confused. The smell was so strong, so obviously there. Had he been there? Had he been standing in her hallway, maybe right outside her door? And why did he leave? Why did he leave her behind with the other ghosts?

—

They fought in the hallway once, a long time ago. It wasn't being rude, no, it was back in the very beginning, when Jorie's apartment was the only one finished in the building and rented to Jorie, all Jorie's. That first couple of months her rent was cheaper, because of all the work noise still happening, because of how she had to wear a little mask when she entered the building from the garage and walked through the hall up to her apartment, a fine, dangerous dust everywhere. So, they had fought in the hallway because Jorie didn't want all that mean in her new home and the hallway had to be re-done still any way. So they fought out there: Jorie's mouth filled with that peculiar taste of you-have-bitten-your-cheek-and-now-there's-the-metal-of-blood-and-yet-not. She shouted some words in a tongue she barely knew. Jorie stood in front of him with a cheek-sting and gin-spit. She thought he must be lying with his beautiful mouth. She could've been making the meanest mistake – she was enduring the strangest of catastrophes. Jorie thought the problem is mine, all mine. She sent him back out through the narrow streets to bars full of darkness and trembling. She remembered someone told her once that if you want to fight right, the stay together kind of fight, you never do it when you've been drinking.

—

Jorie makes her favorite people gone into ghosts, attendant spirits. He was always her number one, all-time favorite. Jorie has all kinds of theories of absence. Someone might think she's way crazy, but that doesn't touch her, not now. Jorie is too busy sniffing up that cologne in the hallway. Ghosts don't wear cologne, which means he's coming back for her. ¤

Bone of Contention

BY BILL VERNON

The women are upstairs, planning their strategy, I think, while their father is on the couch downstairs using a magnifying glass to read his bills, acting as if he might be able to take care of them himself. The bills are one of the bones of contention. I'm in between him and his daughters, sitting on a lawn chair on the protruding side porch, aware the house around me is falling apart. All that's held it up the last few years are my wife, her sister, and duct tape.

The sun has shifted, or the earth, or both, so the shade I sit in has slowly spun around into the sun. There is no air-conditioning in the house so for relief I'll have to use the cooler basement soon.

The roof leaks, letting rain radiate inside along the studs, stain the wallpaper yellow, plus crack and flake the plaster. How much would anyone pay for this property? Or would it sell at all? That's another bone of contention.

When we point out the damage, the old man refuses to let us get help—they're outsiders, you know, crooks, or at best potential crooks. He knows all those people's tricks. He retired from carpentry twenty years ago after 65 years of working. Still belongs to the carpenters union and has the plastic ID card to prove it. Gets his health insurance through the union. That, along with Medicare, is how he got his pacemaker and the new lenses in his eyes. Both are 15 years old, and while he can't see worth a damn, he feels fine. Except in the winter. He can't take cold weather no more.

I once asked him how he got in such a fix. "Live long enough and you'll find out," he said.

You'd think he'd want to move south. Though it'd be only 200 miles from here to my home, the weather is better there than up here in Cleveland. Warmer in winter, sometimes by as much as 10 degrees. Less cloudy, less snowy and rainy too. But he's lived here for 90 years, knows the area like the back of his hand although he's already given up driving. How many years ago was that? "Twenty," he says. I remember he kept his old woody station wagon, loaded with his tools, parked in the driveway until the tires rotted and it became an eyesore even to him.

Like his house, he's not in great shape, but he's holding up, enduring. He claims he doesn't need anyone to live with. He can take care of himself. That's a big bone of contention.

Two buttons on his shirt are usually left unfastened unless one of us helps. That's the least of our worries. There are other, more personal problems we have to deal with. Most important are concerns that include the wandering off and getting lost problem. The other evening I was ready to call the police after an hour of searching the neighborhood for him. Then when I leaned on my car, trying to get my bearings, I noticed him asleep on the backseat, his old brown overcoat pulled over him from shoulders to knees. He later explained that he wasn't sure he was at the right house and was

tired so he took a nap.

Bad judgments make him vulnerable to physical disaster. Cooking on the electric stove unsupervised is bad enough, but he likes to put up the ladder and clean the gutters as if that might stop the leaking. Anne caught him climbing onto the garage roof to tar and seal it a month ago--a job he did yearly until now. How do you stop a lifetime of habits? There's maybe the real bone of contention.

Now the city is in our face, inspecting the house, the driveway, and the garage, then listing 20 violations of the building code. There's a deadline pending for their correction. However, even spending a fortune, I wonder if, for the things that need to be done on this house, is correction possible?

If he's in a dilemma, so are we. We don't want to impose a solution. We don't want a decree of guardianship. We want him to choose, we respect individual rights, but he also has to choose correctly. Instead of dictating, the sisters intend to describe the facts so he recognizes his limits and therefore desires the solution they like.

Of course he's been slowly recognizing his new limitations for decades. The process of aging past your prime forces you to face facts. Painful consequences for not doing so control that. With the ultimate moment of choice at hand, I'm sweating in the one o'clock sun, which has swung west enough now to hit and begin burning my skin.

I'm also sweating because the pattern he's setting is too familiar. You might say that he is me in 30 years. I'm aging, fat, aware my own demise draws nearer every moment. Moving in with us will have to be the old man's bitter choice. This being the longest day of the year seems appropriate, on the edge, ending something old, beginning something new. ¤

The process of aging past your prime forces you to face facts.

Punctured Mindscapes

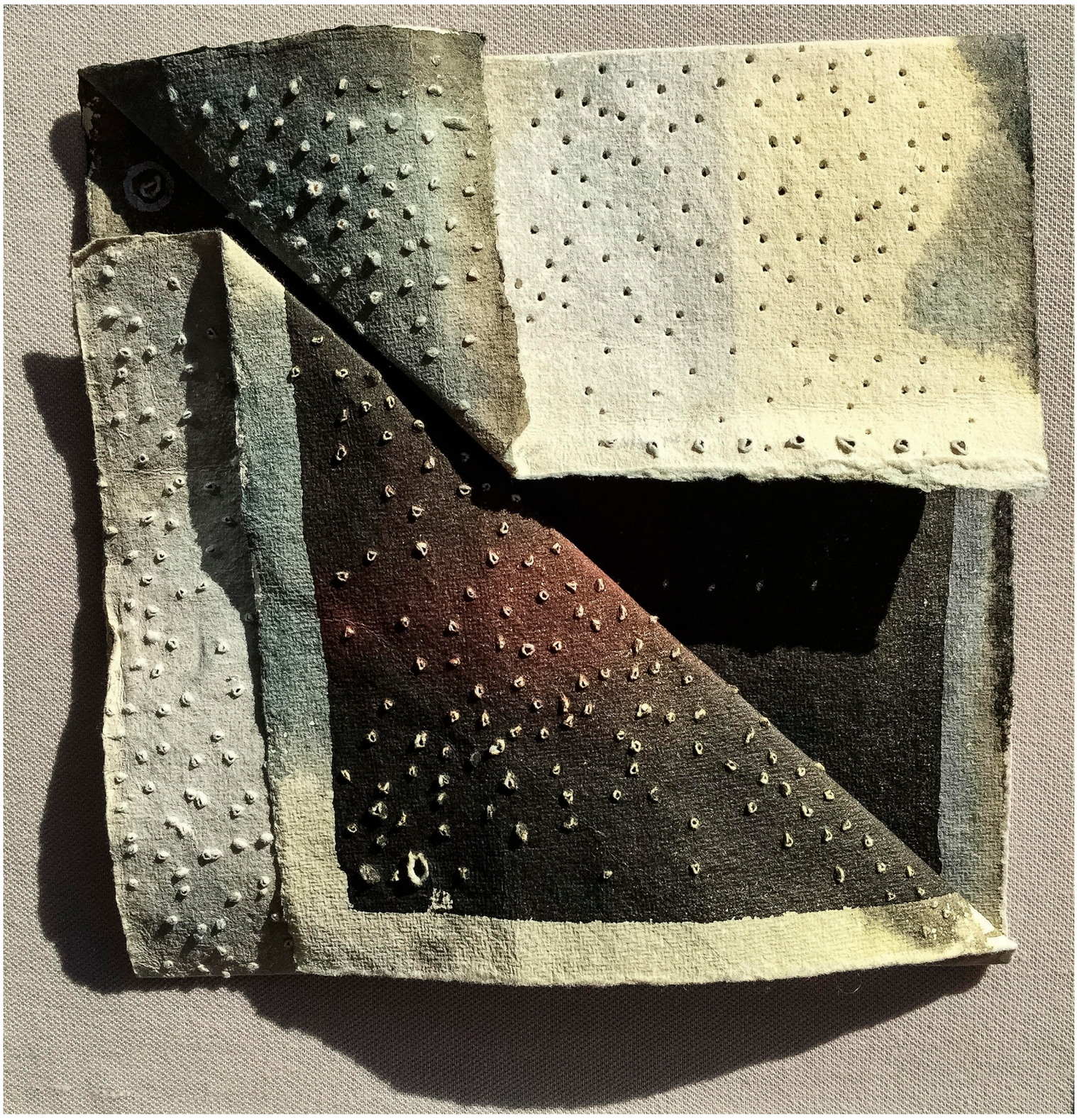
PUNCTURED MINDSCAPES series explores imagined places and spaces. These works on paper are created with spontaneous brush strokes and punctures for three dimensional textures. I hope the viewer escapes into my art with imagination.

Red Sky

BY RICHARD VYSE

Infinity

BY RICHARD VYSE



Edge

BY RICHARD VYSE

Lebanon on a Map

BY STEPHANIE PAPA

During dinner as you dipped
Flat bread in pomegranate babaganoush,
You quoted someone who said,
"Everything is mysterious."
I tried to think of something
Not mysterious,
But I couldn't:
Starlings
Sorrow
Sleep
The electricity of sex
All the workers
Who lay pipes
Build bridges
Fix toilets
Blue blood
Red blood
War
The lady eyes of a donkey
The cashew that grows
In the pocket of a caju fruit
The smell of dirt
Knowing you will die
Horse hairs on a violin bow.
We were the only diners in the restaurant.
The waiter insisted on showing us
Where Lebanon is on a map,
Pointing fervently with a flexed index finger.
We could have been nowhere else
But here.

Saigon's District Five Skid-Row

BY LANA BELLA

In the Saigon's district five skid-row,
a wistful isolation in the wake
of the departing birds
hoped to coax guidance and relief
from the gods, but famine trickled so deep into
the rocks in the keels
of myriad human's footprints
that she dug up her heart and permitted
herself the leave to die.

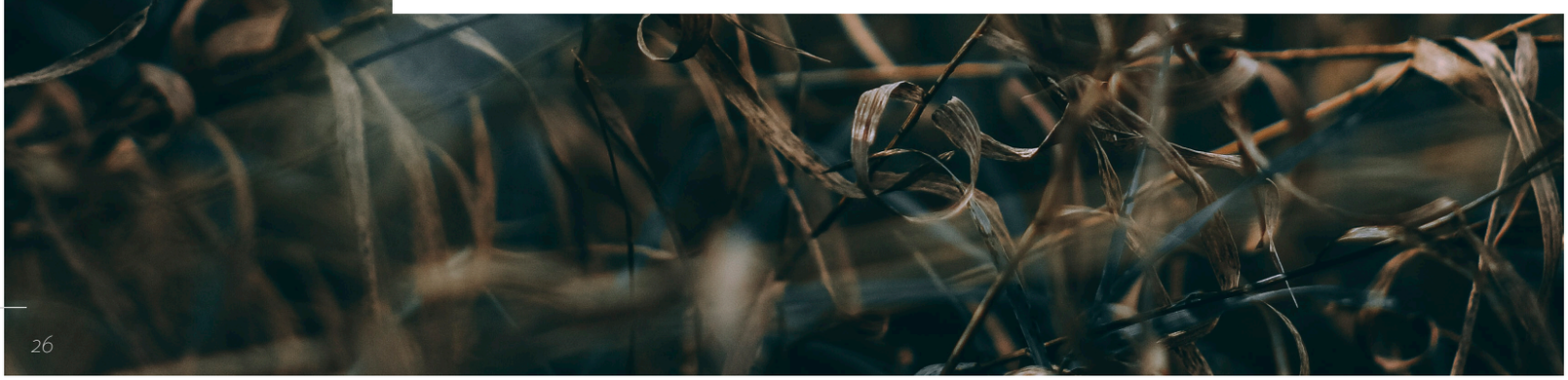
Between the summer of little rain
with humidity leaving wide,
patient stitches over her desert of scars,
she tucked her knees' bones into those regal
minuscule arms, letting a swarm of flies
wandered the length of her sweat-soaked hair,
the dogs' floppy black ears,
setting them to keen snarling and her eyes to
stare past the pin pricks of a life lived
and a life waiting.

Hunger was her chains rattling
through the air driving a violet cloud into
her torn pockets,
where her listless hands grew so desperate for
food they picked away lint
that crunched on her fingers like old dried bones:
a known sensation of crackling stirring
across her conveyor's belts,
drawing her near to a far destination.

Autumn of the Body

BY LYNN HOLMGREN

Teacup vision steams open old pores,
ports for dirt, makeup, matter,
skin, flints, and fire; they have
sweated love, soothed children,
enveloped tears. Tiny tumblers
of recessive hope, even as the seas rise
and the portholes close against
the backlash of another storm,
flushing the body colorless,
flashes of young white lightning,
memory intermittent as a thunderclap.



Long Weekend

BY BRUE MCRAE

The one irony nicknamed ‘nature boy’
in, what is to him, an unnatural setting,
sneezing with every sniff of drifting pollen,
scratching a patchy rash and the irrational
urge to frolic *al fresco* in a faux countryside
constructed by city-bred champions of the idyll –
they who bicycle rustic lanes, snatching snapshots,
allergies temporarily nipped in the flowering bud.
Those who vacation seven miles from home,
having read of Rilke’s ‘other side of nature’ –
the nice bit, forgoing bugs and bites and burrs,
dirt under the nails so damned distasteful.
They bed among nettles, glamorous campers
agog in the ivy, itching for the total experience,
gone home two days early because of the wind.

Refraction 9

BY DOUG BOLLING

if to compose along a fissure
an undoing

a swarm of poem to be unclasped

within the shadow of an unknown
the voice that
rethinks
the grammars of a complicity

a murmur a roughing of a legato

as though to deny

as though to celebrate a disjuncture

for if to greet a silence as the nouns flee
if to welcome Gertrude Stein to the feast
wherein a refusal
of the cakes

In Paris did they say to tear open the umbrella,

let the chaos in

(Deleuze & Guattari)

I remember you Alyssa your poems that rainy
evening that found an innocence of
spaces between the tropes

how you made of parataxis a virtue
no one could resist

how we rose to toast you in a

passion of renewal, a

ripping out of rubric, realism's false teeth.

Milepost 350, 2:33 AM

BY HEATHER J. MACPHERSON

I walked into the restroom, recognized you
immediately, and kept going. Flashback:
twenty years ago when you were older,

leaning over the sink, checking your makeup,
false eyelashes reset–your beauty is everything I lack.
I walked into the restroom, recognized you.

The lighting is terrible. A short woman sweeps around stalls, looks up
at the back of your head, you, braver than me in a wig cap
twenty years ago when you were older.

I wonder what you're doing here, phone propped up, a youtube video on play;
you watch and copy, draw a thick line across each lid, add triangles, all in black.
I walked into the restroom, recognized you,

witness a red rash on the side of your right thigh erupt;
you just got here–getting ready; practicing. Back
twenty years ago when you were older,

I washed my hands at the sink next to you. The water is cold, but
I say nothing. You knew what you were doing. Thank you for the lipstick. I want you to have it back.
I walked into the restroom, recognized you
twenty years ago when you were older.

After the Fire

BY PETER FORTENBAUGH

The widow Xenia DeLeon's house at 456 Main Street was little more than a charred and roofless frame, a chimney, and a set of concrete steps leading to a still-smoking mound of rubble as I passed down Main on my way to work. The white vinyl siding on Danny and Sally Pinder's house next door had bubbled and blackened, and water from the fire hoses stood in ashy puddles everywhere. Smoke unwound itself from the debris into an early October sky much the same smoky color of grey, and by evening, the WBOC weatherman claimed, it would rain for the first time in three weeks.

I was running late and didn't get to the Post Office until 7:42, already twelve minutes behind schedule. Virginia Price, the Postal Clerk, was there at our small Post Office's front desk. We greeted each other like every other morning, and she kept up a stream of idle chat as I went back to my sorting desk to case and bundle the day's mail.

After a minute or two she asked me, "Any idear what all the commotion with the fire sirens was last night?"

That was when I realized that because Virginia lived on West Water St. on the southern end of island she hadn't seen the DeLeon house yet.

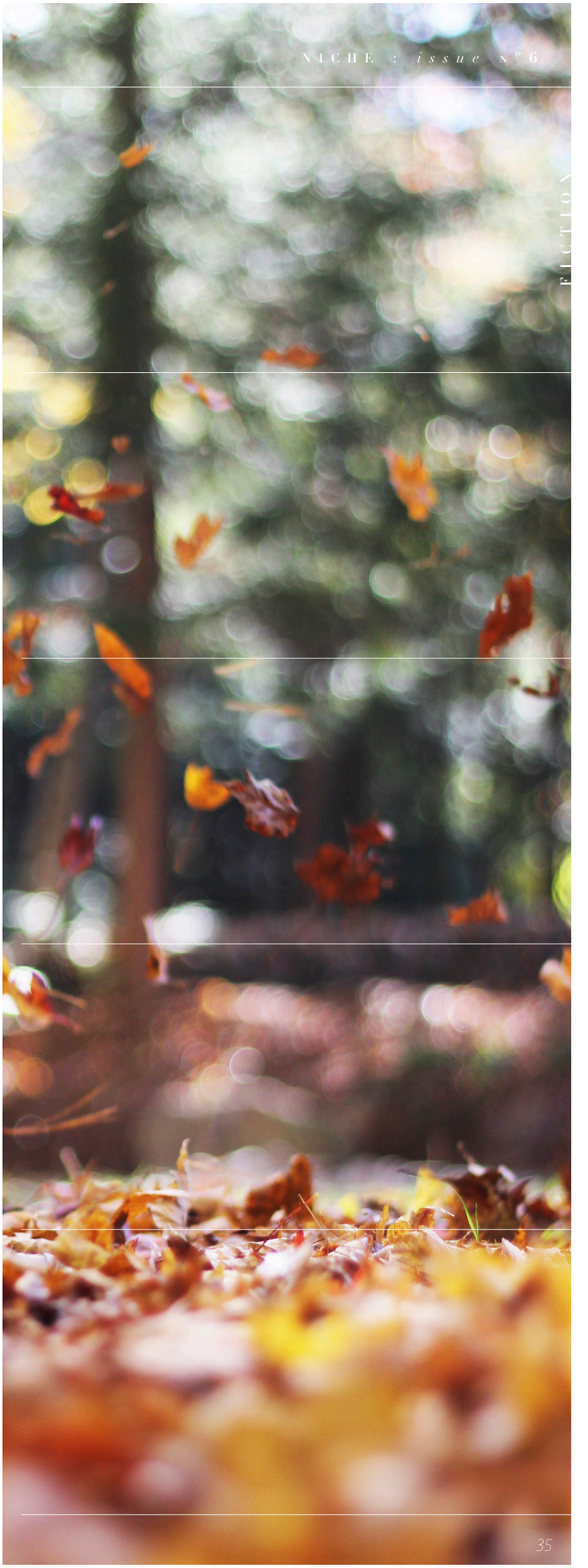
"My Lord, Virginia, you ain't heard? It was Xenia DeLeon's place. Went up like a box of matches. She didn't make it out," I said looking right in her eyes.

"Goodness gracious, Xenia passed last night?" Virginia's simple face went as white as the envelope in my hands.

"I'm afraid so Virginia."

"Lord-a-mercy, poor angel couldn't been but forty-five." Then after a pause, "They got any idear how it started?"

"Not so far as I heard yet, but I expect we'll both hear many a opinion throughout the day," I said, returning to my work. It usually takes me about an hour and a quarter to reorder the mechanical sort and to bundle the day's mail by blocks and by sides of the street. I shoot for hitting the bricks by 8:45 and I knew I would be lucky that morning if I was



out by 9:00.

Thinking back, my clearest image of Xenia DeLeon was as I most often saw her: driving onto or off of the island in her Subaru, face barely above the steering wheel, black hair pulled back, large sunglasses covering most of her face, and smoke trailing out of a cracked window from a thin cigarette between her long, darkly painted nails. She was an intensely private woman. She kept her curtains closed. She did not shop at Callahan's. When walking the streets her tiny form floated past clusters of chatting islanders as if she was untethered and driven by a wind. And then, on top of that, she was a Catholic, an unpopular persuasion on an island all but entirely Methodist. She and her husband David were the first Hispanics to move to the island. For the first four years they lived on Johnsontown Mrs. DeLeon sent thick letters with expensive postage home to Panama City and received back smaller letters with tropical looking stamps. When I delivered a final thin letter, Mrs. DeLeon went home to Panama alone, came back wearing black for a month, and no more letters came.

The DeLeons had come to Johnsontown so that Xenia's husband, David, could serve as a principal for the Tighlman Parks Elementary School here on the island. David was Panamanian born, but American educated, from a family with money. He got the job here because he had made a good name for himself working in the Middle School up in Cambridge. He was immediately likable and by the end of their first September he was talking retrievers and rockfish over weekly lunch at the Skipjack Café with Charlie West and Eugene Travers, getting his hair cut and talking baseball playoffs at the Olde Towne Barber Shoppe with the Butchard twins, Teddy and Tony, and discussing tropical flowers at Parks Flowers and Gift Shop with Betty Parks and Simone LeFracc, her roommate, or companion, or whatever you want to call it. Every Friday, after school let out, David would buy an ice cream for himself and any student that happened by Twinny's Drugstore, go across the street and pick out an tulip or a rose for his wife, then walk home up Main Street cone in one hand, flower in the other, whistling something Spanish sounding and saying hello to every man, woman, child, and dog he passed.

The fire was the final chapter in the DeLeon's tragic story here on Johnsontown. Only 8 months before David had died in a freak car accident. It was the blizzardy February of their 5th or 6th year here. The snowplows had banked the snow tight against the concrete barriers on the Sugar Bradshaw Memorial Bridge, our island's thin connection to the real world out there. A mattress had fallen on The Bridge, blown off of someone's roof or out of the back of some truck. It was dusk and David didn't see the mattress in the road until the very last moment. He swerved to dodge it and lost control. His vehicle hit the snow banks like a ramp and did half a flip off the bridge before smashing through The Creek's ice with the canvas roof of his Jeep Wrangler. I'm sure Mrs. DeLeon could never again cross that bridge, the only way onto or off of the island, without thinking of her husband's last moments and wondering who in town had arrived home to realize that their mattress was gone. All most immediately Mrs. DeLeon put her house up for sale through Evan Hooper, but the real estate market here is about as bad as downtown Damascus. No one it seems wants to buy an old house on a disappearing island, not to mention the fact that whole northern half of the island is marsh, and in the summertime the mosquitoes are so thick they're liable to fly off with your dog.

I quickly got my mail truck loaded and headed down to Callahan's Family Store at 100 East River Road, hoping Virginia was the only person I would have to break the news to that day. As I had predicted I was fifteen minutes late on my daily race against the clock. The Ephraim Price First United Methodist steeple was striking 9:00 and I

knew I was in for a talk at Callahan's.

It has always seemed fitting to me that Callahan's is my first stop of the day, it being the hub of social life in our community. That morning old Bill Callahan Sr. and the even-older Earl Nicholson were in their normal corner by the dusty shoe rack. I came in right as Bill's wife Miss Joan was making the rounds with the coffee pot.

"Morning Billy; sure is grey out thare tday," Mr. Bill said.

"Deed it is," I said. "I think for once that weather man might could be right. They're claiming she's supposed to comin down good by three o'clock."

"We's in for a decent one. Pine cones is just as tight as a monkey fist," Mr. Earl said. Everyone nodded.

"I guess you passed by Xenia's house on your way to work," Miss Joan said.

"Yeah, sure is a shame."

"Sure is, sure is."

"We heard the call last night on the scanner. Was Barb the paramedic on call?"

(Barb is my wife of twenty-seven years.)

"Yeah she got the call 'round one and didn't get back 'til near three. Neither one a us got much sleep."

"Poor Xenia ain't had a lick of luck since she set foot on the island," Miss Joan said.

"You heard if they found any remains?" Mr. Earl asked.

"Earl Nicholson you oughta be ashamed," Miss Joan scolded.

"I'm just wondering 'bout funeral plans is all."

"I expect Father Lang and the Catholics'll have some big ceremony for it," Mr. Bill said.

"Now she couldn't do nothing 'bout her orientation," Miss Joan said. "It was just her bein born south of the border like she was, just like we's Methodist 'cause we was born here. Good Lord knows we's all Christians, and she was honest as any ever born."

"I got to get movin on. I'm late as is," I said heading for the door. "You all have a good one now."

That's how this town is. Everybody talks about everybody and all their dirty laundry. I've lived on the island of Johnsontown all my life, in fact I'm a Pinder which means my family's been here 300 years and I'm related to nearly everyone on the island. Us islanders like to say secrets here are like fish, they don't keep but a few days. Gossip seems to get around faster than ever with the population shrinking like it's been over the last fifty years. You see, working the water don't pay like it used to, what with all the restrictions and legislations, and there aren't too many other reasons to be out here at the end of the road except because it's your home and you love it and so young islanders tend to leave as soon as they get the chance. That and the fact that year by year and storm by storm, the erosion and the sinking of the land and the rising seas brings our little, low island closer and closer to being lost beneath the waves.

I've been delivering the mail here eighteen years now and so six days a week, rain, snow, or sunshine I walk the same route through town. I've even got a pair of hip waders that I keep in the mail truck for when a good high tide floods West Water St. I like my work. It gives me a unique position to know just what's going on in town any given day. Plus since I hit the fifteen-year mark I get five weeks of vacation a year to kick back and relax. I even get 250 a year for uniform expenses and shoes are about the only thing I've got to spend it on. I'm still wearing my original hat. I know a little bit about all 452 people left on the island, you know neighborly stuff, like when their car breaks down, how their aunt's cancer is doing, where their spouse is on Wednesday evenings, and of course what makes up their mail. My wife, Barb, likes to joke at church suppers that I could write the town's gossip column and hand it out with the mail, but I just like the satisfaction of knowing what's going on, of having my finger on the town's pulse.

Like every other day I climbed northward up the

ladder of perpendicular streets that cut across Main, starting with Wilkins Ave., then Market St., Cross St., and Sun St. At the end of each perpendicular I nibble away at West Water St., which traces the Bayside of the island before I come back down Haven Hill Road and finish with the loop of Loblolly. When I first started 18 year ago I delivered to the last 3 houses out Marshy Creek Road, but that was so long ago that there's nothing left to see out there but a few ciderblock barely above the marsh.

That morning Evan Hooper was carefully sweeping between every brick in the sidewalk out front of his realty office on Wilkins Ave, just like every other day. We both agreed the fire was a tragedy and a mystery. Evan told me that the house was in good condition. It had been badly flooded during Hurricane Isabel back in '03 - but what house hadn't - and the remodeling looked nice. Still, no one had come to look at it since July, and the humidity, the bugs and the heat drove those folks off before they could make it through the door. Evan told me no one had called about the house in two months or so.

Everyone I saw that morning wanted to stop and chat. I noticed in Evan, and everyone else I spoke to, that there was a fretfulness bordering on excitement, like that you see in horses during a high wind. People spoke of the weather only as introductions, and the normal Tuesday talk of Monday Night Football and Wednesday night Bingo-Buffett had been entirely displaced by the fire. Everyone who I talked with assumed a similar tone as Evan and the crew at Callahan's, reverence for the woman now dead, using the same euphemisms of grief and shock. By 10:30 Mrs. DeLeon had been through a transformation in the town's mind, from the anonymous widow Mrs. DeLeon to the fondly remembered Xenia. I don't know if until then the name Xenia had been too foreign for the tongues of the town, or if it was just her stiff authoritative air, but everyone on the island had always called her Mrs. DeLeon. One thing that struck me throughout the day was that now most folks referred to her as Xenia, as if through death their remote knowledge of her had somehow become more intimate.

Rhonda Cator was on her normal stool when I entered the sad Chesapeake Decorum Emporium at 287 Main Street. My cousin Danny's wife Sally Pinder and Annie Travers were there too. They'd been enlivened by the fire. Sally Pinder was enjoying her minor celebrity as first hand witness to the fire.

"Lord knows Xenia was a good woman, and Lord knows she suffered," Sally told me as soon as I came through the door, "I was just tellin the girls, it was her screams and not the flames that woked me. I shook Danny and he said it weretn't nothing, go back to sleep, but I got up and looked anyhow, and the windows facin us on the bottom floor was just alive with fire and I said, 'Honey call the Firehouse! Lord-a-mercy Xenia's house is afire!'"

"Real question's just how that fire started," Rhonda said.

Annie Travers, who lives on the other side of Main from Sally and Mrs. DeLeon, told me, "I was just sayin, I seent your niece Holly last night leavin Xenia's house. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if she'd had some involvement. Accordin to Debra Stokes, Holly made some quarrelsome statements bout just how David's money was split - her with David's child and all."

"I'm sorry Annie, but I just don't think that's the case," I said as cutting as I could while still keeping civil.

"Even if Xenia, poor sufferer, set off the fire herself it would be that loose-moraled girl to blame in my book."

I left thinking about Holly and remembering David's funeral just eight months before. No one at David's funeral, including Mrs. DeLeon, had wept harder than Holly Tenenbaum, my niece and the art teacher at Parks Elementary. Even before David had died there were whispers spreading out from

around the coffee pot in the teacher lounge. Holly had put on a quick twenty pounds in four months and her face had got to filling out, shinning like a full moon. I don't know if Mrs. DeLeon noticed at the funeral, but it was hard for the rest of us not to as Holly ran out the backdoor choking on sobs in the middle of the service. For the next four or five months until her son, Alejandro, was born, and still continuing after, Holly was a favorite topic of ridicule for Rhonda Cator and the Emporium gossip hounds.

Holly was always a wild one. She's my wife's older sister, Peggy's daughter. She's an off-islander - grew up on the Western Shore - and she'd been somewhat unjustly treated here, though I must admit since her pregnancy I'd seen little of her and kinda kept my distances. I've got to walk through town everyday and it was easier that way. Holly studied at some hyper-libral school up North and got a degree in education and art. She had lived in Italy and Spain before deciding to come home to Maryland three years ago to start a career, already over thirty and her face deeply lined from more than just easy living. It just so happened our little Elementary School on the island needed an art and first/second grade teacher at the time. I had helped her get the job. Holly did good things for the town while it still wanted something to do with her. She got the kids putting on a couple plays a year at the school, got together a co-ed soccer team for the kids in the fall, and put on a few art shows for Wayne Parks to show off his decoys and for Cookie White to show her photos and watercolors at Parks Flowers and at Stephanie O'Connor's Book Store.

The Book Store at 163 Market is a stop I look forward to everyday. It was already 12:12; I was twenty-two minutes behind schedule, but I knew that Stephanie and Mrs. DeLeon both went to St. James, the tiny Catholic Church a few miles off the island, and so I was curious to hear what she had to say about the woman most of us knew little about.

Stephanie is an independently wealthy Irish woman in her forties who inexplicably came to the island back in '99. I guess she's part of a small community of come-heres, odd-balls and intellectuals, that find our isolated island interesting and have the money to throw at old homes on a disappearing island. Most have trouble becoming part of the community and leave when they have their fill, but Stephanie seems like she's here for good. In her first few years she started the Book Store and restarted the town paper, the *Jtown Eagle*, which has been successful enough to give Pres Reed a salary as Editor. I met Stephanie through the book club that she got together, and after we read a Bobby Fischer biography I had been teaching her to play chess. She kept a board on the counter with a sign that said: "Can you help me beat Bill? Score 12-0-1". Everyday when I came in with the catalogues, book deliveries, and literary magazines, she'd make her move, and then I would counter while we chatted. That morning after she pushed her Queens pawn to D4 I took much longer than I needed before skewering her knight with my bishop while listening to what she had to say.

"Xenia was such a beautifully fierce woman. She was certain about matters of the spirit most only hope to believe. Her English was simple in a way that often came off as harsh. I remember once, when I was feeling so lonely as an outsider here, I was asking her how she dealt with it and she told me, "Stephanie, you need one teeng. You 'ave fait and you 'ave all teengs." She didn't say it like she was giving a sermon, or using clichés. Her language was so simple it was inevitably honest. After David's funeral young Father Lang tried going over to her place to talk to her about grief and she basically told him that she knew a hell of a lot more than he did, and he could just bugger off. After that our church had a fundraiser to help her with her mortgage. Remember there were those five or six months when the insurance money and David's Panamanian funds were all tied up in court? She accepted the charity because she didn't have a

choice, but through it all she kept that same stiff neck and unwavering pride. Lately she'd been looking weak, sick, worn down at Mass. Everyone at church was worried, but she didn't want any help. That's just the kind of woman she was." Stephanie stopped and dabbed her eyes. "That was probably more than you wanted to know, but I'm on my second pot of coffee, and business is slow, and I just feel so bad for poor Xenia."

"It's a shock."

"I get to thinking about going to Xenia's funeral and I can't help but have flashbacks to David's. It all seems so fresh. At least she's not suffering, but for one family to go through so much. Sometimes grief just sort of finds a family. I suppose there but for the grace of God..." She turned away busily taking the plastic wrapper off a lit mag to hide the tears budding in her green eyes.

"Thanks Steph," I said uneasily. "I gotta keep on. You know, racin the clock as always. It's your move by the way. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks for listening Bill."

Stephanie O'Connor struck me as one of the few around town that was genuinely broken up by Xenia's sudden death. I left thinking about the grief that finds a family, as she'd put it. After Market Street I looped onto West Water before returning down Cross.

Holly's house at 354 Cross looked faceless and inverted, as it had slowly become since her son's birth. There had been a time when the doors and windows were always open, spreading music through the neighborhood, Holly painting or doing pottery and singing on the front porch. Unlike Mrs. DeLeon, Holly did not hide within herself immediately after David's death. She continued on with the swelling pride of a new mother, but, bit-by-bit, as her belly grew the town cut her off and discarded her like a fingernail. There were PTA meetings and a little while later she was asked to leave the Elementary School. Island parents claimed she wasn't providing the moral example that the school wanted set for its children. After that the town pretty well ostracized her so badly that when her baby shower came around my wife Barb, her sister Peggy, Simone and Betty from the flower shop, and Stephanie O'Connor were the only attendees. No one came to the door when I slid the mail through the slot, but I could hear a baby howling from clear down the other end of the street.

By the time I started my way down Haven Hill Road, past the Fire Department and the Elementary School, I noticed the dark clouds crossing the Bay dragging wind-blown curtains of rain towards us from the Western Shore, from where all bad things come. At 323 Haven Hill the old Rae sisters, Heidi and Denise, were out on their front porch talking to Kenny Mann of the Cleaning Mann's Carpet Cleaners. Kenny told all four of us the most interesting thing I had heard all day. Kenny had been at Mrs. DeLeon's house just the day before, cleaning her carpets, and he had noticed a candle and incense burning in her bedroom in front of a cluster of photos and a plaster statue of the Virgin. He had warned her that some of the chemicals he was using were flammable and would be off-gassing for another 24 hours. She had looked at him as if she had just realized he was there for the first time, and then blew out the candle and asked him to clean the curtains as well. Spooky he called it, down right spooky.

That was what I was thinking about when I started down the final loop of every workday: the quiet pine-lined Loblolly Street. It was just after 3:00, which meant I was a half hour late. A few big drops were beginning dot the sidewalk and I hurried towards my final destination of Tom Cookerly's house at 489 Loblolly, the last of my daily deliveries. Tom and I always have a covert drink on his porch to celebrate the end of another day's labors. I ducked in beneath the roof just as the rain began tapping like a typewriter. Tommy was already out front on the porch swing, a drink in hand.

"You're late," he said.

"Been a lot goin on in town."

"Looks like we're finally gettin that rain we been waitin for."

"That's sure what she looks like," I replied, noting that the cast in Tommy's left eye was wandering a bit more than usual.

"What you got for me today?" he asked.

"Junkmail and bills. More of the same."

"Keep the junkmail and I'll buy a drink for the Bills."

"You started early."

"Like Dad always told me: start early and start often to keep on ahead of the fray."

Tommy was unshaven with a long look to his face that was far from his normal wry humor at the end of each day.

"What you heard about the DeLeon fire?" I asked.

"Oh, I been on this island plenty long enough to know what's being said without having to hear it. But, I bet I can tell you something even you ain't heard yet."

"Shoot."

"Go inside and pour us each a glass Jameson, and when you get back I'll tell you all about it," he said, handing me his glass.

I found the bottle in the kitchen, four or five fingers lower than I had left it the day before. I put a healthy amount of water in Tommy's glass and then poured us each a splash and came back out. I'd no more than sat down when the rain cut loose like a fire hose on a Hollywood set. Lightning split the sky out over the Bay, and, just a second later, a long, slow roll of thunder came at us like a boulder starting down a mountain.

"You probly know that after near six months of legal battles with David's Panamanian bank accounts and with the life insurance company, Mrs. DeLeon got an immense winning of over 2 million dollars back in August. What you don't know is that a few weeks ago Xenia came to me requesting a very strange will. David's will had been written in Panama and was full of ambiguities, and she wanted a will that paid out as fast as legally possible with as few complications." He paused, like he was measuring me, and then he said, "I shouldn't trust anybody to tell this to, but I got to tell somebody."

"Nare a word."

"The plain and simple truth is that she gave it all to Holly Tenenbaum."

"What?"

"Two million. I sort of knew something was up with all the questions she asked about sudden death, illness, car crashes and life insurance; questions that a woman planning to live doesn't ask. I told her life insurance won't pay out for suicide and any will written immediately before death could be called into question. She insisted she weretn't going to die for a long time and had me put together the most iron clad will I've ever written. She was looking weaker and frailer than I'd ever seen her, and as I watched her leave my office I wanted to run after her and shake her, but I had the thought that she might snap in two. But Christ-alive, I shoulda done something."

"It seems like there weretn't nothin could be done."

"Like Dad also liked to say: lookin from afar we can see what people do and only guess at why they do it."

We had another drink and Tommy was drunk and decided to go to bed. I had to run through the puddles on the sidewalk to where I left the mail truck at the other end of Loblolly. When I pulled up to 354 Cross Street the rain was so dense that I was up the steps and about to knock before I even registered Holly and the baby no less than ten feet to the left of my dripping head.

"Hey, Uncle Bill. You should slow down before you miss the whole show."

"Hiya, Holly. Ain't seen you in a while."

"That's right it's been a while. Have a seat," she said, pointing to an aluminum chair that I dragged over.

Holly had her son, wrapped in a blue flannel blanket, held close to her chest. The lines around her mouth and beneath her eyes made her look much older than I remembered, more like a woman in her mid-forties than mid-thirties. The baby's little pink face was pinched in either fury or despair beneath his pure black hair, then all at once he went calm and opened his shocking blue eyes.

"He looks just like his dad, but for your eyes."

"Everyone he's met says the same."

"The little guy sure has a set of pipes on him. You could hear him clear down the street this afternoon."

"I think he knows something happened last night, but I don't know. He always cries a lot. Xenia told me that was a good thing for a child born beneath such a weight of sorrow. If he wasn't crying we should worry, she told me. She had a way of putting things."

"Shame bout Mrs. DeLeon. It's a shock to everone on the island."

"Oh this damned island didn't give a shit about her. She wasn't one of them and neither am I."

"That ain't true Holly; everone's in mourning. Can't nobody can make head ner tail of what-all's happened yet.

"Christ, Uncle Bill, quit the run around." She spoke much more abruptly than I was expecting. "We both know you and Tommy Cookerly have had that afternoon drink that the church and the Post Office frowns upon. And we both know not even Rhonda Cator nor the crew down at Callahan's can out talk a lawyer. And so I guess we both know Tommy came over this morning to tell me I became a rich woman overnight."

"I'm not supposed to let on I know, so for Tommy's sake you got to keep a secret."

"Hah, secrets and rotten fish. This damned island. You probably even heard by now from Sally Pinder or Debra Stokes that I was at Xenia's last night."

"Annie Travers."

"Are you wondering if I started the fire? Maybe so I could get that money?"

"No of course not Holly. Just wondering why Xenia decided this was the end. You had to a been bout the last person to talk to her."

"You know what you are Uncle Bill? A damn pig nosing after some made up truth like it's a carrot in the mud." She laughed harshly and stared me down. "But, I'll give you some satisfaction since you came all this way in the rain. The truth is that this town is so full of what it thinks it knows, it wouldn't know the truth if it walked up and shit in its hand. I bet even you didn't know that for the last seven months or so Xenia and I talked on the phone nearly every evening."

"News to me."

She paused and watched the squirming limbs of the infant within the blanket he was wrapped. She seemed to be turning over her thoughts, deciding what to tell and what not to before she went on.

"It started a few weeks after David's funeral, around when the whole island was getting wind that I was pregnant. I wanted Xenia to hear it from me. I knew she was an amazing woman from that first conversation. She had within her the profound power to forgive. She'd been educated by suffering more than anyone I've ever known. Her mother died when she was eleven. She was the only girl in a house with just her father and four brothers. From eleven on she had to cook and clean and cater to all of their needs. The only ally she'd had in life was her godmother, and she'd died while Xenia was here caring for yet another man in her life. But through it all she grew this inner strength unlike anyone I've ever met. Without her, I don't know if I could've made it this long."

"Seems like you knowed her better than anyone." I said. Then, "Holly, I'm sure you must be grievin, but you got any idear why she decided to end it now?"

"Feeling guilty, or just curious?" Her eyes lashed

out at me.

"Guilty?"

"Oh you're as much a part of this town's gossip beast as Rhonda Cator or Annie Travers. I expect the whole town will be talking about what we say here by the time you get to Tommy's house for your daily drink tomorrow."

"I'm sorry Holly, but that's life in a small town."

"Life in a small town can go to hell."

I watched as she gripped her child a little tighter and looked out at the water that gushed from her clogged and overflowing gutters in almost a single curtain. It was silent but for the rain as loud as birdshot on the roof above our heads.

"Holly, Tommy is beating himself apart with guilt after writin that will and not doin a thing to stop her. You think you could tell me so he can have some kinda closure?"

She visibly softened and looked down in her arms. "Look, the truth is she was sick with cancer. She blamed it on the grief that ate away inside, but that's the sort of woman that she was. She gave me the money so that we could be free of it all, pay off this house and get away: that, and for Alejandro. She named him you know, and called him m'hijo. She couldn't have children and to her he was a blessing. So there it is, so the whole God-damned island knows."

I was silent for a long time. I thought about saying a great, great deal, but finally all that came out was: "I'm sorry Holly; I'm sorry we haven't been better."

She sat there just watching the rain and then all at once like a hand on a faucet the storm slowed and all but stopped. For a little while longer the gutters kept gushing and then they too stopped.

"That's just how it is. Look the rain is letting up. The sun's peeking out to the West. Must be time for you to go."

She got up with the weary weight of motherhood and went inside before I was off the porch or even had time to say good-bye. I walked down her steps and stood for a moment, my hand on the handle of the Post Office truck, and I thought just how beautiful the sun is, in the evening after a rain. ¤

Two Retired Cops

BY PAUL PEKIN

Back in the eighties when the department was pretty much patronage, a guy on bad paper might keep his job, but he might not like the beat they gave him, not unless, maybe, he was one of those guys who just loves to drive all night through parks and forest preserves and little groves, and finish up at the very moment the sun is rising on a couple of deer grazing in the mist along the river. Roscoe was that kind of a man. He took that shift, he drove that beat, he answered his calls, and no one knew much about him, or seemed to care. Bill Caldwell remembered him as a hulking, almost handsome man with a drunkard's nose and a foul mouth who made no friends, told no jokes, and faded out of everyone's memory.

Years later, on an afternoon when all the world seemed against him, Bill ran into the guy at the county building. He had some business, changes in his pension now that he was divorced, and there was Roscoe, looking not much different than he had in the day, hunched over a magazine in one of those little plastic chairs they make you sit in while you wait. Bill's first impulse was to look away, but curiosity got the best of him. What really had happened to old Roscoe? There'd been stories of all sorts, some even had him in jail, and here he was, drawing his pension just like anyone else.

Funny how you make friends in this world. You might go to school with a guy, or meet him in the army, or keep running into him at your favorite bar. He might be a relative, or someone you did a favor, or someone who follows the same teams. And you'd be friends for a while, and then you wouldn't be. It's all chance. But sometimes you do need a friend.

So it was "Hey Roscoe, is that you?" and Roscoe looking over his ruined nose, grinning like a kid, something he had never done on the job.

"Billy boy! How the fuck are you?"

The gal who was working on Caldwell's papers didn't even look up. She was a veteran from Streets and San, and had heard it all. Most likely said it all as well.

It was a nice spring afternoon and Bill suggested lunch in a little bar he knew on Clark Street. The big surprise was that Roscoe no longer drank, not even soda pop, or coffee, just water. So, had he gone AA? No, no, not those assholes. He'd tried that higher power stuff, but now he really had God. "If you're going to get with God, you don't want to fuck around with some fucking higher power. Jesus Christ himself, that's who you want, how's that for clout?"

And then, not a word about Jesus Christ did you get out of him. "I don't preach to my friends," he said. "Go ahead and order yourself a drink. Two if you want."

From a moment like that, all else followed.

Since the divorce, Caldwell had been living in a three room flat on Francisco. The neighborhood had gone down all the way, and was coming back. He would see young people with cell phones and large dogs on the sidewalks. He would hear their laughter. But that three room flat was damn empty and damn lonely, and he could have bought all the cell phones he wanted and still have no one to call. *You want to live free? Go. Don't let me stand in your way.* The rest of the story you can figure out, and you won't have to try very hard. Even his kids were no longer speaking to him because you can be damn sure she told them the why of the divorce. So it was good to talk about the job, and how it was all fucked up now that all the old guys were gone, and how neither of them had once gone back out to visit the guys still driving their shifts. "I never want to see another tree," Caldwell insisted, and Roscoe said, with that big grin Bill Caldwell had never seen on the job, "No one saw as many fucking trees as I did."

They talked about the picnics and the raccoons and the drunks and the bodies that got found and that Lieutenant from the South District who got busted jack lighting deer on company time, and Roscoe said he'd always felt that a cop who didn't have the balls to break the rules didn't have

the balls to be a cop in the first place. It was quite amazing how pleasant he could be when he was only drinking water.

In the weeks that followed, they got together a few times, took in a couple of ball games at Wrigley, watched Sosa drive a few out onto Waveland, had dinner at Miller's Pub, but mostly it was lunch in the Loop, Roscoe had some sort of business he never talked about that brought him down, and Caldwell pretended he had the same. The idea that either should visit the other's place somehow did not come up. The talk was all cop talk; they steered away from anything personal.

We're two fucked up old cops, Caldwell told himself. Fucked up on the job, fucked up our marriages, fucked up our lives.

He never expected things would go beyond that. But, one morning, it was Roscoe on the phone, and this time there was an invitation. "Fuck these restaurants," he was saying. "You know something, Billy boy. I've a mind to cook you a dinner. I'm a good cook, you better believe that."

Instead of a three room flat on Fransisco, Roscoe had his own home in Norwood Park. Instead of living alone, he had a wife. "A good kid," he said. "Come see for yourself. I'll fix some cacciatore, I should have been a chef, you'll see."

Caldwell drove up the Kennedy in rush hour traffic, the setting sun so bright he had to pull down the visor. He'd just gotten his license back, although, to be honest, he'd never stopped driving while it was suspended. He wondered what kind of wife Roscoe had, and guessed she would turn out to be a second or third wife; for some reason cops never did well in the wife department. He knew the area well enough, his old beat had run right by it, and knew that a lot of Chicago cops and firemen lived there, as far away from the inner city as they could get and still remain within the limits. Most of them just stayed there when they retired, and why not, it was a swell area, clean and grassy, and quiet, once you got used to the flights coming in and out of O'Hare. He wondered if Roscoe had married some fireman's widow, and thought it more than likely.

Twice he circled the block looking for the address he had been given over the phone. The houses were all brick, all single residence; the lawns were trim, the streets clean, flags flying; some of them may have been up since the fucking Gulf War, all those yellow ribbons--Saddam still in power, and now we elect another George Bush?

Finally, he decided he had not copied down the wrong address. Roscoe was living in that big roomy house with a maple tree growing out front. He parked, got out of his car, looked up and down the tree lined street. Maybe, he thought, it did pay to have Jesus Christ for your clout.

A woman so slender she almost seemed fragile answered the bell. She had extremely short hair, tightly curled and dyed inky black, and was wearing a dress that seemed to have been bought in a vintage clothing shop. There were shops like that in the neighborhood where Caldwell lived, and he had seen young white girls wearing these dresses. But the woman at the door was not at all young; she could have been sixty, even more. Only her teeth seemed young. They were large and clearly her own.

"Are you Mr. Caldwell?" she asked. "Alfie's in the kitchen. Should I get him?"

Caldwell was not quite sure how to answer. "Is it okay if I come in?"

The woman seemed to consider this seriously. "I think so," she said.

The room she led him into was dim, even dark until his eyes adjusted. From wall to wall it was carpeted in a severe patternless beige. The blinds on all the windows were drawn, and a single floor lamp was lit. The television, a massive relic from the early days of color, was playing silently, muted. All the furniture was old, well kept, and heavy, and before Caldwell could assess exactly what this meant, he became aware of a second woman in a straight wooden chair, facing the television, and holding what appeared to be a black cat in her lap.

The woman could have been eighty, ninety, even one hundred, he thought, and the cat, on closer inspection, turned out to be a plush toy with glass eyes.

"Arlene," the slender woman said, her voice sing song, as if speaking to a child. "This is Mr. Caldwell. He is here for dinner."

And, turning to Caldwell, she added:

"She won't say much. Would you like to take a seat?"

"Where is Alf?" Caldwell said, choosing a spot on the couch which looked as if it had not been sat upon recently, if ever. It felt odd to speak of Roscoe by his given name, but obviously that was the proper thing to do.

The slender woman did not sit. She clasped her hands together, a bit theatrically, Caldwell thought, and said:

"He's in the kitchen, of course. Our Alfie is quite a cook. We all think he should have opened a restaurant, one of those places with the white tablecloths. You were with him on the police? But not the Chicago, that other department?"

Caldwell laughed. "We called ourselves "Tree Cops.'"

The slender woman did not seem to get the joke. She continued to twist her hands together, as if to suggest she was helpless against the plans of fate, and then Roscoe himself was in the room, wearing a Chicago Cubs baseball cap, and a white apron that covered him from his chest to his knees.

"Oh, Sis," he scolded. "You should have told me Billy was here."

He did not quite embrace Caldwell but he did take his hand and shake it vigorously. "Billy boy, this is my sister, Edie, but I just call her Sis." He turned to the ancient woman and said:

"Arlene? Did Sis introduce you to my friend?"

"I did," the woman who was Sis said. "I did. And she nodded."

"Well then." Roscoe seemed to be puzzling something out in his head. "Why, then, don't we leave you two ladies out here in the living room, and I show Billy my kitchen? You must see my kitchen, Billy."

If the furniture in the living room was ancient and heavy and silent, the layout of Roscoe's kitchen spoke of modernity, ambition, and joy. Here was a stainless steel sink, and a granite topped counter with an assortment of mixers, processors, and bowls ready for action. The refrigerator was huge, double-doored, and coffin black, and something in the built in oven sizzled audibly.

"I, Love, To, Cook," Roscoe said in four separate one word sentences. "My first wife would never let me in the kitchen, but now it is all mine."

Watching the man chop, slice, grate, and toss greens, Caldwell found it hard to believe he was looking at the same morose cop who had driven the graveyard shift, a flask of whiskey (rumor had it) safely hidden beneath the seat. Even stranger, he, Roscoe, almost seemed as young as he had been more than a decade ago. Then what should have been obvious from the start became, for some unknown reason, suddenly clear. The woman in the next room, that ancient crone with the artificial cat on her lap, was not the mother he had taken her for, but a wife, Roscoe's wife, in fact. He had, after all, addressed her as "Arlene."

The man who loved to cook set a very proper table, and served it himself with no visible assistance from his sister, or his wife. The dining room, like the living room, was carpeted and dimly lit, but two candles and the sheer whiteness of the linen table cloth brightened things up a bit. "Sit here," he ordered, directing Caldwell to the very head of the table, the place one would have thought was reserved for himself. The women, as if by instinct, chose seats on opposite sides, facing one another, and the mother-turned-wife kept her plush cat firmly on her lap in spite of Roscoe's attempts to move it.

"Now, Arlene," he said, softly, kindly, "We don't want sauce dripping on Kitty," and Arlene, at last speaking in words, said she did not want any sauce

at all, and perhaps was not hungry. "Let her be, Alfie," the sister said. "You know how she is."

There was an appetizer made of clams. There was the salad Caldwell had watched take shape. There were vegetable dishes, bread sticks, and olives. The chicken arrived in a tomato sauce accompanied by pasta. This was a meal that required guests, and Caldwell now understood why he had been invited to this house.

At least it was not for the sister. That came as a considerable relief. There is something in this world that is the opposite of attraction, and whatever this something is, he felt it for Roscoe's sister. She repelled him, not so much for her looks as for her manner, her light sing-song voice, her half-vacant sentences; it was easy to see why she had never married.

Halfway through the meal, Arlene had an accident involving sauce and her plush cat. At once she began to weep like a child; Caldwell had never heard a grown woman make a sound like that, and it seemed wrong of him to be in this room when she did it. There was nothing he could do but watch. Roscoe, on his feet at once, was gentle and kind to his wife, he put his arm around her, and spoke soothingly and finally led her to a room somewhere up the stairs.

"Arlene is fighting dementia," the sister said.

Caldwell did not want to hear what he was hearing from upstairs. There was weeping, and screaming, and the sound of water running. He supposed Roscoe was trying to wipe the sauce from his wife, or from the plush cat, and getting no cooperation from either. Should he go up and help? Absolutely not. Should he continue eating his dinner? Could he even stop? The human body is a simple enough organism; when it begins to eat, it wants to continue eating until it has finished. In movies, one sees people leap up from their plates and rush out to save the world. In real life, you finish what is before you.

It had been that way when his mother died. He had been at the table with his wife, his daughter, and her husband when the hospital called. The call was expected, and had been expected for days. Now it was here. He remembered putting the phone down, finishing dinner, and only when the table had been cleared, setting out for the hospital.

"He is a very fine cook," the sister said.

"I see," Caldwell agreed. "I never knew that about him."

"Oh, yes. He took lessons."

The commotion upstairs slowly came to a halt, the screaming changing to sobbing, the sobbing to silence, and finally Caldwell heard heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"Good man!" Roscoe cried, entering the room and throwing something (it was the stuffed toy cat) onto an empty chair. "Eat! Never waste good food."

"Poor Kitty," the sister said, reaching for the soiled cat.

""Don't worry about the cat," Roscoe said. He grinned at Caldwell. "I buy 'em by the fucking dozen. She never knows the difference."

"It's so sad," the sister said. "It's almost as if they were alive."

I will never come to this house again, Caldwell promised himself. It was a promise he could not keep.

He knew as much the very moment he opened the door to his own three room apartment.

In Roscoe's living room, everything was old, but once had been expensive. In Caldwell's entire apartment everything was new, and nothing had ever been expensive. He had a rug he'd bought shortly after he moved in, bought because the woman who lived downstairs complained if he so much as dropped his keys on the floor. He had a couch that was already sinking in on the end where he sat. He had a cheap tv with a Comcast Cable Box, a couple of chairs he never sat in, a laptop computer he hated to use because it infuriated him. His kitchen was almost bare, the cheapest refrigerator

sold at Sears, a double burner electric hotplate and a microwave instead of a stove, a faucet that dripped. His bedroom was dark and stale with a bed that never got made. There were gray curtains on his windows. He'd put them up when he moved in, and had no intentions of changing them ever. Who was going to come here? Women? He wasn't sure he wanted another woman, not the way they seemed to think the world revolved around them.

So, old Roscoe had a bat-shit wife, a sister who was hardly better, and was a gourmet cook with no one to feed. And yet, he seemed happy enough. Had he really found Jesus, or was that just some of the old copper bullshit no one ever really got out of his system?

People don't know about cops. Caldwell opened the refrigerator and took out a beer. They think cops are like those people they see on tv, they don't like to imagine them talking trash, calling each other beaners and Tyrones and lesbos, blowing off calls, smoking contrabrand, telling jokes over dead bodies. And hating each other, don't forget that. People have no idea how easy it is for one cop to hate another. Even years later, there were a few he could still hate.

There was music playing in the apartment across the hall. The young couple that lived there played music, if you could even call it that, night and day and as loud as they wished. Let him drop his keys, or slam his door too hard, there would be complaints, these young people, they did as they pleased. What would happen, he wondered, if he were to break out his revolver, load it up, and blast his own brains into hell? Would people complain of the noise? That's the kind of stuff you think about when you live alone, bad stuff.

One day much like another. Get up around noon, watch the stupid daytime tv, the news that wasn't news, the games that were not games, the reality that was something far less, and much more loathsome. Walk up the street. See the pretty girls in their long dresses. Take the car for a drive, nowhere to go, just drive. Stay out of the parks, stay out of the forest preserves, stay away from his old beat. Sometimes he would end up at the mall on Old Orchard. See some more pretty girls. Maybe even someone his own age. They were all wrong for him. Take in a movie. Could there possibly be a bigger mistake than that? How he hated those phony movie cops, especially the female ones who never ever looked anything at all like a real female cop. So, back to the neighborhood, maybe have dinner at Popeyes, think about Roscoe and his stainless steel kitchen. Go home, open a bottle of Johnny Walker, maybe fuck with the fucking computer, surf the so called dating sites, imagine, "dating" some of these self centered creatures. Try the porn, even worse. Did no one even know how to do porn anymore? Tattooed girls with lacquered hair getting facials? How could anyone not be thrilled? Thank God for Johnny Walker Red.

The next time Roscoe called, Bill forgot all about his promise to himself.

"I don't want to do the Jesus stuff on you," Roscoe said, over the phone. "But what the fuck, it's a church supper, and I'm cooking a whole shit load. Maybe you could come along and help me and Sis keep an eye on Arlene."

What a clever way to put it. What else were friends for, if not favors? Even in the day, one favor required another. "Do I have to watch the cat too?"

"Hey," Roscoe cried. "That's fucking good. You want, I'll get you one of your own!"

What a jolly fellow he had suddenly become. Caldwell had seen these Jesus people, they were nothing like this. He was curious to see this church supper. He would take his own car, no doubling up, just in case he had to make a quick escape. But see it he would and now he had something to look forward to--Saturday.

All week long the weather remained fine, autumn was always the best time of the year in Chicago, and it would soon be here, filling the gutters with leaves. Caldwell cleaned out his car as best he could. You

could never tell what might happen, he might wind up driving some church lady home! The idea made him grin.

When Caldwell pulled up, Roscoe was packing stuff into his station wagon, wearing his baseball cap and that white apron, By the looks of things, he'd been cooking all day. "Hey, Billy boy," he cried out. "You're gonna have to take Sis in your car. I'm packed with food."

The women were both waiting inside, ready to go. They were on chairs, almost as if someone had placed them upon chairs. Arlene, properly dressed in a salmon colored pants suit, her hair done so neatly Caldwell momentarily thought she was wearing a wig, was holding a fresh cat in her arms. She did not at all appear mad until you saw the defiant way she petted that cat. The sister, hands tightly folded, was in what seemed to be a kimono. A very colorful one at that.

"It looks like it is you and me, Sis," Caldwell said.

"I wish you would call me Edie."

"Edie it is," Caldwell conceded. Please god, he thought, don't let that be a kimono she is wearing. He remembered an aunt of his who once went to a party in her nitegown and claimed no one had "caught on" when, of course, everyone had.

In the car, Edie gave directions, turn here, turn there, she knew the way surprisingly well, and a good thing too since Roscoe, whom they were following, had to turn back to the house for something either he or Arlene had left behind. A sudden wind blew dust down the street. "Oh, I hate to think of winter coming," Edie said. "Do you care for winter?"

"Why not?" Something in his body felt pleased to have a woman sitting next to him, even a woman like this silly creature. I can close my eyes and pretend, he thought, and then, there it was, the church.

An unmistakable Roman Catholic church of the old design with a high bricked steeple topped with a very proper cross. A young man directed them to a place in the parking lot which was filling rapidly. "Don't let my car get blocked in," Caldwell told him. "I'm a police officer, and I may get a call."

Edie had him by the hand. He was trying hard to think of her as Edie, not Sis. They fell in with a crowd of people carrying baskets and shopping bags, and were swept down a set of stone steps into the church basement where a dozen folding banquet tables waited in a hall decorated with crepe-paper streamers, balloons, and banners. A Catholic Church! And all along he'd been expecting some sort of Jesus deal operating out of a storefront.

"There's Father Dennis!" Edie cried, leading him to a youngish looking man in an open collar shirt, blue jeans, and sandals who had the hearty handshake of someone who knew his profession.

"Alf told me about you. You worked together, right?"

"Sort of," Caldwell said. "He worked one shift, I worked another."

It took a few seconds, then he had it. Father Dennis went from thirty to fifty in the time it took him to relax his smile. "Do I know you?"

The priest shrugged. Smiled. "It's possible."

More than possible, Caldwell thought. You used to park in the south end of old Shiller Woods every afternoon. Every cop knew your car.

This was something just as well left for another occasion.

"I've heard nothing but good things about you," the priest said. "Just make yourself at home. And you, Edie. You look lovely tonight."

My God, Caldwell thought. This woman and I are a couple.

There was no escaping it. By the time Roscoe did arrive, carrying trays and trays of meatballs and Italian beef and pasta, and more pasta, enlisting the aid of several enthusiastic church ladies, Caldwell, and Sis were already seated at one of the banquet tables, hemmed in by other couples who were already buttering and eating hard rolls. The church ladies surrounded the man like a garland of heavy flowers, and somehow found a place where Arlene

and her cat could sit away from the crowd, safely out of trouble.

"They are wasting their time," Edie whispered. "Alfie will never put her in a home."

"You think they want your brother?" Caldwell whispered back.

"They won't get him," she said.

A large lady sitting next to her said:

"Whisper, whisper, whisper. No secrets, Edie. Introduce us to your gentleman friend!"

It's come to this, Caldwell thought. Then the food began to arrive, and he discovered he was hungry after all. The body has a way of speaking to you, no matter what other mischief you may be up to, your body wants to do what bodies do. Eat, sleep, eliminate, all its own special selfish functions. His plate somehow filled itself. He heard the woman beside him talking to the heavy lady. He saw Roscoe at the far end of the hall, ladling out something from a silver container. He saw Arlene and her plush cat at another table, an empty space beside her. Wasn't he supposed to help keep an eye on her? Not at the moment, it seemed. "Pass the bread," he heard himself say. There was something about bread that was good for the soul as well as the body. He saw Father Dennis working his way along the tables. Should he tell Edie what he almost certainly knew about this priest? Would she even understand. She was almost as simple as the one with the cat. The bread was good, white, with a nice crisp crust.

"I have not been in a church for years," he told Edie. "Not since we buried my mother."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"She was eighty three. It was years ago. Do you attend often?"

"This is Roscoe's church," she said. "I go to St. Anthony's."

"But that's Catholic too?"

"It's my church."

How clear everything was. How unclear it was too. Caldwell counted ten tables in the room. Counted eight at each table. Multiplied. Would all these souls now be welcome in heaven?

"I made my first communion at St. Anthony's," Edie said. She ate very little. It was no wonder she was so thin. "I hoped to be a nun."

"What stopped you?"

"Sin."

Caldwell held his tongue. He had no desire to even imagine what this woman thought was sin. I could tell you about sin, he thought. But I never will.

An evening in a church basement. He waited for something awful to happen to Arlene and her plush cat, but somehow Roscoe managed to pull everything together and even found a place for the four of them at the head table once the serving and eating and conversation had run its course. Father Dennis offered a short prayer, and a few words thanking those who made the supper a success, mentioning Roscoe by name which elicited much applause from the ladies.

"Did you see how he did her hair?" Edie whispered. "If they only knew how much he loves that poor thing."

—

The night before it happened, he was out drinking. He wasn't quite ready to go with Jesus or the Higher Power or anything else, not just yet, and there was a decent enough Cerveza Bar in safe walking distance of his apartment. He sat for hours with a man named Cisneros who spoke about as much English as he, Caldwell, spoke Spanish, and their main topic of conversation seemed to have been Sammy Sosa and Carlos Zambrino and why the Cubs didn't win more games with players like these. So he never saw the messages blinking on his machine, and slept right through hell, and woke up when there was nothing else but hell on the television. He would never remember the exact time, only that he was sitting before the tv with his coffee, and there was nothing else on except

a story about some airplane that had crashed into some building in New York. It was a wonder that didn't happen more often. He remembered a B 25 bomber that hit the Empire State building and wound up sticking out of it, tragic and impotent, but now, the longer he watched, and the closer he watched, he saw that this was something far different, something more like The Towering Inferno, a movie he'd scoffed at, and then he saw the airliner strike the building, whether in real time or repeat, he would never know, and remembered (how could he not?) the afternoon Flight 191 went down at O Hare, a day he had been sent to the scene only to be ordered to direct traffic around the crash site while others, how lucky could they be, got to pick up the fragments of people who had been alive only moments ago, and how it was as if he himself had found some cowardly way to avoid it simply by following orders. He watched the television until everything finally became clear and he saw the great buildings go down, and then, almost without thinking, he picked up the phone and began to dial.

Then he saw the flashing messages someone had left on his machine.

The first was nothing, strangled muted sound, a wrong number hang up? The second was baffling. A voice, a woman's voice, sobbing, then silence. The third was the same, the same voice, the same sobbing, and the same silence. The world was off its rails today. He wiped them out, ruthlessly, and made his call.

Amazingly, he got through.

"That you, Lisa?" he said.

"Bill," she said. "I'm watching it too."

There was no reason for her to misunderstand why he was on the phone, no reason for him to misunderstand her response. They were through with each other, and both knew it so thoroughly it needed no mentioning. Old married couples can read each other, effortlessly, skillfully, even when they are no longer couples.

"This is too terrible to watch alone," she said. "I'm glad you called."

"There's nothing we can do," he said.

They spoke hesitantly, almost reluctantly, and cried out together when something too awful to watch repeated itself on their screens. Was he all right, she asked, living alone, did he see his old friends, and then they would fall silent and watch. Was she all right, he would ask. Had she made new friends. They watched and spoke like this until at last she cried out:

"Bill, I can't do this. I have to hang up."

"I understand," he said.

"Did you try the kids?"

There were things he could have said, and would have said, if the world had not been on fire before his eyes.

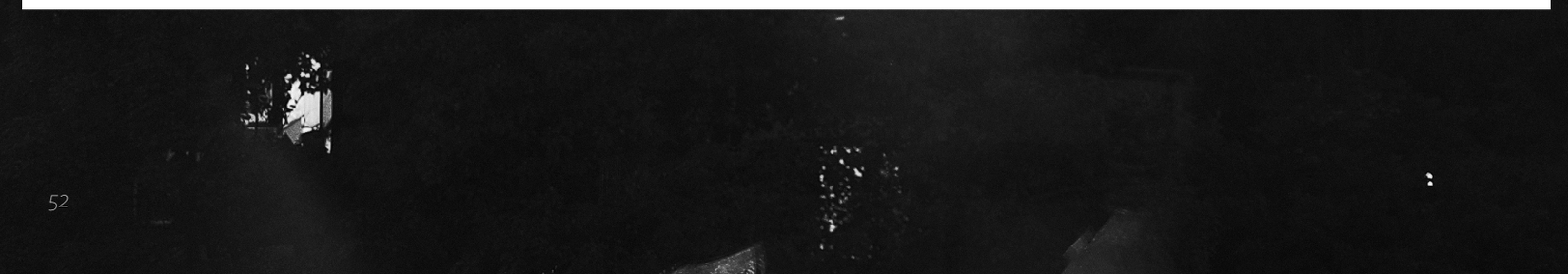
"Goodbye," he whispered. "Take care of yourself."

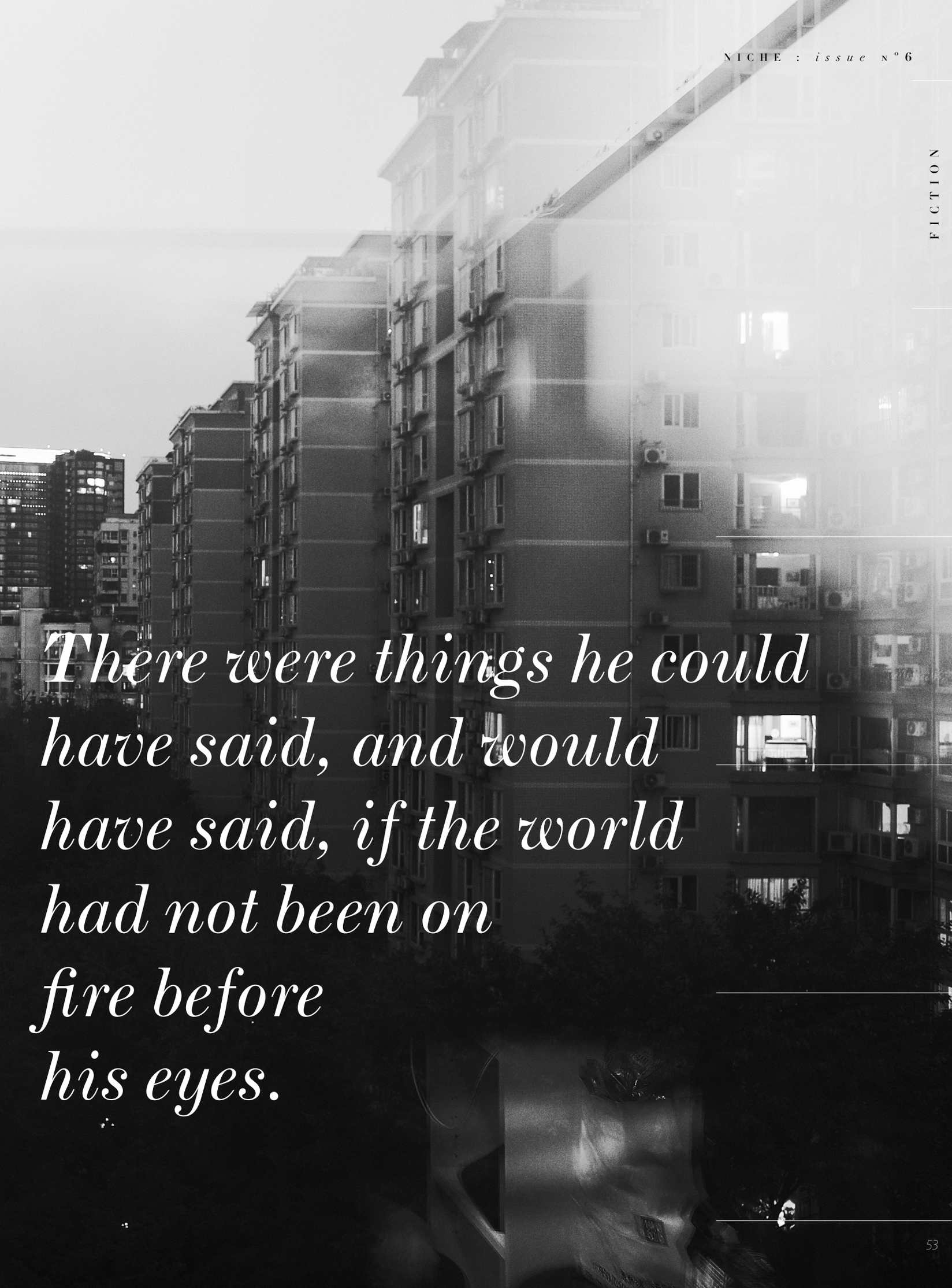
How insanely selfish he was to think of his own follies, while people were dying before his eyes! There's a cop for you, he thought. We crack jokes and eat hot dogs in the presence of the dead. But we pay for it, yes we do.

When the phone rang, he knew it was not her calling back. He picked up and it was the same woman's voice he had heard weeping on the answering machine. "Hello, hello, hello," he cried. And at last words. It was Roscoe's sister, Edie, struggling to make herself clear.

"I called and called," she sobbed. "He's gone, Billy. He's gone!"

Who was gone? What did gone mean? She was at the hospital. She'd called him this morning. Last night. She wasn't sure. No, she wasn't watching





There were things he could have said, and would have said, if the world had not been on fire before his eyes.

television, not at a time like this. They were all watching television, and he was gone!

"Edie, please," Caldwell said. "Just put Roscoe on."

"I can't put him on," she screamed. "He's gone, he's gone, he's gone!"

She could not bring herself to say the word "dead." But that was what she was trying to say. In broken sentences. Last night. This morning. Before the sun came up. Arlene had made "number-two" in her bed. "I tried to wake him up . . . and he was gone."

"Gone? Are you saying he is dead?"

"Yes," she said, and she finally recovered her voice. Yes. Sudden Cardiac Arrest. The doctors at the hospital said that was it. "And he was in perfect health! Billy, you saw him at the supper. All the ladies had their eye on him. How can he be . . . ?"

She could not tell him how long she had been at the hospital, but the people there had been kind and helpful and then, suddenly, they were not, they could not look away from their televisions, and she could find no one to help. Arlene had collapsed. It was too much for her, and they had her in a bed, but insisted they could not keep her because she had no insurance, but mostly they just stood and watched the television. He was gone, and it did not matter to them.

"I'll be there," Caldwell said. "Of course he has insurance. We all do. I'll straighten it out as soon as I get there."

The moment he switched off the tv, the whole world seemed to go silent, unnaturally silent, and then he became aware of other televisions still playing down the hall and what they played was all the same. It would be a warm day, he guessed, but he pulled on a little windbreaker just to be on the safe side, went downstairs and to his car. The radio, of course, came on the moment he turned the key, and with it the same story that had filled the television. It had been planned, it was terror, we were at war, at war, like an endless loop the radio voices were repeating the same story, again, again; he drove swiftly, what cop would make a traffic stop today?

Somehow Roscoe had ended up in Resurrection Hospital. Caldwell had been there many times as a cop, and had even applied for a security position after he retired, as good a hospital as any to be pronounced in. It seemed impossible that someone like Roscoe, so full of life and health, could just stop living, but he had lived a hard life, the story in the day was he'd been kicked off the Chicagos and that wasn't easy to do.

When he got out of the car and stood alone under the intense blue sky, he felt such an unnatural silence it sent shivers up his scalp. Not an airplane in flight, even the birds seemed awed. He could hear voices as he walked toward the hospital, people speaking in hushed tones, and somewhere, in the distance, a siren, so faint he could not fix its location. Behind the emergency room door he found a young security kid, probably some community college graduate, sitting at a desk watching a tiny portable tv. "The bastards," the kid said, looking up. "They're saying a whole battalion of firefighters was in there."

Caldwell put on his cop face. "Police," he said in his cop voice. "You guys brought in a fatal last night?"

The kid blinked. "We had a couple."

"A guy my age? Cardiac?"

"Yeah, yeah," the kid said, still staring at the screen. "There's some next of kin here. It's right down the hall."

The kid didn't even point, but Caldwell knew the way. He passed an empty room, or what should have been an empty room; about eight staff members were standing before the television, silent, useless. Then he saw Edie, alone on one of those plastic chairs in the hall. Her face was blank, exhausted. She was wearing some kind of a house dress, big flowered pattern, the kind of a dress his mother used to buy at Klein's Department Store. When he called her name she leaped up and threw her skinny body into his arms. "Oh, Billy, Billy, Billy," she gasped. "They took him somewhere and they won't even talk to me."

"We'll find him," Caldwell promised. "Where's Arlene?"

He had never seen an emergency room that wasn't busy, even chaotic, and he had been in plenty. Always it was anxious families and bloodied accident victims waiting their turns, always staff rushing about, orderlies pushing gurneys back and forth, noise, chatter, pot bellied cops leaning on counters, that was any emergency room, even on weekday afternoons; this was the big city, but today was different, everyone today seemed to be working on crepe-soled shoes, lingering by the televisions, and it was a fair bet they were wondering what it must be like in those other emergency rooms halfway across the country. He led Edie to the desk and finally got the attention of a young woman who seemed to be frozen into silence, gazing into her computer screen. "Miss," he said, in his most official copper voice. "You have this woman's brother here?"

With a visible effort, the young woman brought herself back from wherever she had been.

"I'm so sorry. I'll get someone."

The someone turned out to be an actual nurse, a woman in her fifties who faced Edie with folded arms and said to her, as if they had been over this before:

"We are waiting on a call. We will let you know."

Caldwell touched her arm. "Excuse me. I'm a friend of the family. These people have insurance. I know that. We worked together on the County Police. He should have a card in his wallet."

"I don't say he doesn't," she said. "But he came in his pajamas." She took him by the arm and drew him aside. "These women," she said. "We can't care for them here."

"You could," Caldwell said. "But you don't have to. I'll take care of everything."

"Yes, please do that. We are so sorry."

And she was sorry. Caldwell could see it in her face. There were things that had to be done, paperwork that had to be filled out, and Edie had been unable to do any of it. Arlene was on a cot, sleeping. There was nothing really wrong with her. The nurse was right. She would be better off at home, better off being cared for in her own surroundings.

"I will take care of it," Caldwell said. "I will take care of everything."

And he did. He helped fill out the paperwork, showed Edie where to sign, called a funeral director he knew and arranged to have Rosco transported. He called the pension board before they closed for the afternoon, and got that started. He called Father Dennis, and left a message on his machine. He took Edie and Arlene into the hospital cafeteria and saw that they ate something before he drove them home. He did it all, one step at a time, and with each step felt more confident that the next step would be the right one. There might be a reason for everything in this world after all, he told himself. Even for his own life.

That night, he and Edie, working together, bathed poor Arlene, dressed her in her nightgown, and put her into her own bed. He would take care of it. He would take care of it all. ¤

A MANGO FOR THE VICEROY

BY JOE HILAND

The rec room buzzed with sated snores and the drone of daytime television. Mia paused in the doorway and let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the room. Nine men lounged in reclining chairs, slippered feet pointed up at the ceiling. The elastic waistbands of their pajama pants expanded and contracted with each mammoth breath.

The Viceroy alone was awake. He sat at a small table near the window with several decks of cards fanned out in front of him in a scheme of solitaire Mia had never seen before. The Viceroy appeared uninterested in his game. He watched rain slap against the windowpane, his expression calm but not quite serene; his lips were set too firmly together for a man at peace with his surroundings.

The Viceroy was the only resident of the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats whom Mia regarded as handsome. He was taller than the rest—lithe and elegant in his movements—with the rich complexion of burnished cherry wood. Most of the residents were round and soft from years of banquets and booze. They were old bulls content to graze away their twilight years. But the Viceroy was still solidly within his virile middle age. His hair was dark and frosted with perfect shades of gray at the temples, and he eschewed the mustaches and goatees favored by the other autocrats.

Every resident was issued a standard wardrobe of casual attire—khaki pants and polo shirts and such—but the Viceroy was the only autocrat who bothered to change each morning. Today he wore a blue-checkered Oxford shirt and navy blue pants with a brown leather belt that matched his loafers.

"Did you have a good breakfast, Hank?"

"You stared at me before you came over here." The Viceroy didn't turn from the rain when he spoke.

"Did I?"

"You did. I saw your reflection in the window."

"I didn't mean to stare," said Mia. She sat down across from him. "I'm worried about you, Hank."

"My name isn't Hank."

His real name was an elegant heirloom passed down from his paternal grandfather, lilting and strong like the tides of his island home. But each resident was given a new name when he entered Nottingham. And the thin man's new name was Hank.

"That's the name Dr. N wants us to call you," said Mia.

He turned to face her for the first time. His eyes were glassy from the sedatives, and his voice was rocky. "That man put cream in my coffee."

"I know he did."

"I hate cream in my coffee."

"I know you do," said Mia. She pulled a small jar from her pocket and set it on the table. "I brought you Spanish olives."

"Olives don't interest me anymore."

The Viceroy moved two cards then stared at his game.

"Dr. N told me you had saltines and carrot sticks for breakfast," she said.

"Very observant, the doctor."

A burst of phlegmy coughs tore through the television's white noise, followed by a hoarse Slavic curse. The Balkan Chancellor lurched out of his recliner, smacked his chest with the palm of his hand, and hacked until tears ran down his red cheeks. Several residents stirred in their slumbers, but none seemed to notice their comrade's distress.

The soldier standing guard outside stuck his head through the doorway but made no move to save the choking man. He clamped down on his blue helmet with both hands, as if he feared the Chancellor's coughs might blow it from his head.

Mia raced across the rec room and positioned herself behind the Chancellor. She tried to perform the Heimlich, but her arms—long though they were—couldn't encompass the autocrat's girth. He wheezed a pathetic curse, and Mia felt panic sinking in.

"Allow me," said a calm voice beside her.

She stepped aside and watched the Viceroy deftly embrace the Balkan Chancellor from behind and give him one emphatic squeeze, which sent a butterscotch candy skipping across the rec room rug.

The Chancellor coughed a few more times, then wiped the tears from his face. He gave the Viceroy a stately handshake, then turned to Mia.

"My throat is hurting," he said. "I would like some pudding. Chocolate."

"Sven," Mia said over her shoulder, and she heard the soldier's boots click together as he stood at attention. "Please escort Kevin to the cafeteria so he can have some chocolate pudding."

"I'm Jan," said the soldier. "Sven has the day off."

"Sorry, Jan. Kevin needs pudding."

"I should call for backup," said the soldier. "I can't leave you alone with the rest of them, Ms. Foster."

"So you don't need backup when a resident is choking? But if he wants chocolate pudding it's time to call in the cavalry?"

"The United Nations did not supply us with horses."

"Christopher Columbus!"

Profanity was forbidden around the residents, and Mia had adopted the explorer's name as her favorite expletive after hearing the Man Who Ruled a Desert shout it angrily at Alex Trebek.

"Look at them," Mia said and pointed to the residents in their recliners. Those who hadn't slept through the Chancellor's choking were watching Mia and the soldier with the same glazed looks they aimed at soap operas. "I'm perfectly safe. Take Kevin to the cafeteria, get him his pudding, and come right back."

The soldier hesitated, surveyed the catatonic men in their pajamas, then led the Balkan Chancellor out of the rec room.

The Viceroy took his seat at the solitaire table. Mia followed but didn't sit down. The rain outside was slower and less violent, though still steady.

"No more olives?"

"No more olives," said the Viceroy. He swept the cards up and shuffled, his long fingers dancing with an easy grace

"You need to eat," said Mia. "How can I help you eat?"

The Viceroy began dealing to himself and sighed. "You could give me something worth eating."

"The cooks will make you anything you want. Just ask. You can have whatever you want."

"Untrue."

"What wouldn't they make for you?"

"The cooks never refuse me anything," said the Viceroy. "They practically throw food at me."

That was Mia's fault. She had instructed the cafeteria staff to drop cinnamon rolls and scoops of macaroni on the Viceroy's tray, whether he asked for the food or not.

"Then what's the problem, Hank?" The Viceroy's eyelids drooped at the name, but Mia continued. "What do you want to eat that we're not giving you?"

"A mango." He said the word with a breathless longing that left Mia cold and suddenly sad. "A mango," he said again.

"That's it? I'll order you a whole crate of mangoes. You can have mango three meals a day. Mango smoothies, mango ice cream, mango pie. Do people make mango pie? Doesn't matter. You eat the mangoes however you like. In fact, I'll send someone to the store right now to get you mangoes. You'll be eating mango for lunch."

"That all sounds lovely," said the Viceroy. "Even the mango pie, which I've never had but would happily try. Yes, all quite lovely. And all quite impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Mangoes are forbidden."

"Says who?"

"Says Dr. N. I asked for a mango my first day here, before you arrived. He refused. The doctor was quite adamant. He called mangoes my Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Shit." The word escaped her mouth like air from a burst balloon.

The Viceroy raised an eyebrow and smiled, clearly pleased with her unfettered profanity.

"Christopher Columbus!"

Mia was hired as Resident Dietician two months after the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats opened. Most of the staff had been working with Dr. N for years—lobbying foreign governments, securing grants, identifying and extraditing potential residents. Even the U.N. guards had been vetted a full year ahead of time.

Mia hadn't applied for her job. She was freelancing in Chicago, making enough to get by, when Dr. N sent her an unexpected email. She hadn't heard from him in more than a decade and assumed he was still teaching. He wasn't. He told her he had an unusual problem that she was, perhaps, uniquely qualified to solve. He offered a six-figure salary, and she found someone to sublet her apartment.

The final exam for Professor Nottingham's Philosophy of Imprisonment was unlike any Mia had ever taken. She prepared in her usual manner, waiting until the night before to flip through her class notes and skim over articles she should have read months before. She slept two hours and arrived early with a bluebook and a large, sugary coffee.

The professor was a neat man with impeccably parted gray hair and a penchant for boisterous bowties. On the day of the final he wore a peach-polka-dotted number that clashed with his green corduroy jacket in the most endearing way. He was friendly, if a bit stiff. He had a reputation as a hard grader, and Mia wasn't alone in wondering if she would pass his class.

"You won't need your bluebooks," said Professor Nottingham. "Today's final will be a collective oral exam." He let a wave of confused murmurs pass through the lecture hall before he continued. "You

have two hours to debate, discuss, and answer a question that has troubled me for several weeks now. To be honest, it's kept me up at night. I don't expect you to offer a perfect solution, but I do expect a lively debate. If you can reach a consensus response before the exam period is over, you all get an A."

A student behind Mia raised his hand and asked why they had to answer the question together. Couldn't they fill out their bluebooks and let the professor decide which answers were best?

"A valid question," Professor Nottingham said and picked up a piece of chalk. "You must form a consensus because my particular inquiry is one which, I hope you'll agree, necessitates a democratic answer."

He wrote out his question in tall, clean print across the central chalkboard.

What would a compassionate prison for Hitler look like?

Then he took a seat on a wooden chair near the exit, crossed his legs, and told his students to proceed.

The class debated the virtues of solitary confinement and forced labor for half an hour, until Professor Nottingham stood, underlined compassionate, and returned to his seat. The lecture hall fell silent. A minute passed, punctuated only by a few muffled coughs.

Anxiety crept from Mia's stomach to her limbs, and her legs began to twitch. The prospect of failing Philosophy of Imprisonment was disconcerting enough; she didn't want to be part of an entire class of failures.

Mia didn't realize she'd been frantically clicking her pen until she looked around and saw everyone in the lecture hall staring at her. She silenced her pen, swallowed down the lump in her throat, and began speaking before she could stop herself.

"My grandma is in a retirement home, and I was just thinking how it's kind of like a prison." She hadn't been thinking this at all, but the truth of her statement gave her a sudden jolt of confidence. "They make it so the old people in the home are comfortable, and it seems really great at first. My grandma plays pinochle and watches TV all day. They have sundae bars and Taco Tuesdays and stuff. But she can't do anything unless the nurses approve it first. She can't go out to the movies. She isn't even allowed to walk in the garden without a nurse nearby because they're afraid she'll break a hip, or something. And they feed her fifty pills a day. And last week she called me all upset because they wouldn't let her have this type of potpourri she likes in her room. And it's like, who cares what kind of potpourri she has in her own room, right? She'll be dead soon. Let her have whatever freaking potpourri she wants..."

Mia trailed off, saw the looks of confusion and unveiled irritation coming from her classmates, and started clicking her pen again. She stopped when the boy behind her reached over her shoulder to take the pen away. She folded her hands in front of her and looked up at Professor Nottingham.

To her surprise, the professor wasn't angry or exasperated. In fact, he looked almost serene as he stood and again took up the chalk. He began scribbling notes below his question. His handwriting was tighter, more frantic than before.

Retirement Home
Comforts—Television, Food, etc.
Restricted Movements
Arbitrary Prohibitions

"You should have told me about the mangoes."

Mia swept into Dr. N's office so quickly she didn't notice the other people in the room until she was halfway to the doctor's desk. She stopped short, an accusatory finger pointed in Dr. N's direction.

Colin, the Leisure Coordinator, stood next to the desk holding out a clipboard for Dr. N and Assistant Director Grünwald to view.

"I thought we had guards in this place," said Grünwald. She looked over Mia's shoulder and

yelled. "We cannot have unauthorized people bursting into offices!"

"Sorry," said a voice behind Mia. She turned to see a sheepish boy in a blue helmet hovering in the doorway. "I assumed she was part of the meeting."

"Assume nothing!"

"Relax, Rita," said Dr. N, though he hardly looked relaxed himself. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, and his drab gray tie hung in a fat, clumsy knot around his neck. The bare bulb on the ceiling reflected harshly off his sweaty head. "Why would he stop Mia? She's part of the staff." Grünwald scoffed, and the doctor continued. "In the future, however, she could knock before rushing into my office."

"Very rude to interrupt a meeting in progress," said Grünwald. She was a twitchy bird of a woman with an immaculate bun of white hair and pearl-studded spectacles. Her voice was incongruously deep and menacing.

"Sorry," said Mia.

"Well?" said Grünwald. "What is so important about mangoes that you must come crashing in here like a drunken donkey? Hmm? Speak up. The meeting has been interrupted, and it appears we cannot resume until you tell us this very important information about fruit. So?"

Mia felt foolish and exposed. The conviction that had spurred her march from the rec room to Dr. N's office disappeared.

"The Viceroy would like to eat mango," she said. She tried to control her voice, tried to sound calm and professional. "If we served mangoes he would..."

"Who is this Viceroy?" Grünwald interrupted. She held her palms up and looked from Mia to Dr. N. "I do not know any Viceroy."

"She means Hank," said Colin. "You know who she means." He was a former British Marine with a steel hip from the Falklands. He was also one of the few staff members who didn't resent Mia's late appearance at Nottingham. The others all seemed to think she hadn't earned her position.

"Of course I know who she means," said Grünwald. "But she should know protocol by now. We change the men's names for a reason. It's part of the rehabilitation process."

"I must agree with Rita on this point," said Dr. N. He pulled a platinum pen from his shirt pocket and held it poised in his fingers like a cigarette. "I don't understand why you can't simply call Hank, Hank."

"I guess he doesn't seem like a Hank to me." Mia had this problem with every resident's new name. She knew perfectly pleasant Hanks and Marvins and didn't want to spoil the names by tying them in her mind to tyrants.

Dr. N sighed. "I take it you're here to discuss Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Yes," said Mia. "Why didn't you tell me he couldn't have mangoes? I'm the Resident Dietician. That's important information to me."

"It's in his file," said Grünwald. "Didn't you read his file?"

Mia hesitated. She had skimmed over each resident's lengthy file her first day on the job and noted only the most important biographical details. Countries of origin, former titles. A few Arbitrary Prohibitions had stuck out to her. The Balkan Chancellor couldn't listen to Wagner. The People's Commissioner of Enlightenment wasn't allowed to wear red. She hadn't noticed Hank's.

"This is what I'm talking about," Grünwald said. "She hasn't even read the files."

"She's still catching up," said Colin. "Give her a break."

"There is no time for breaks," Grünwald replied. "The Committee will be here in two weeks."

"We all know when the Committee is coming, Rita," said Dr. N. "Let's focus on the issue at hand." He pointed his platinum pen at Mia. "You have a question about Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition?"

"Why mangoes?" asked Mia.

"It's arbitrary," said Dr. N. "There is no 'why.' He asked for them, and we denied him. Just like your grandmother and her potpourri."

"I think we should reconsider the Vice...Hank's... Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Out of the question," said Dr. N. "Arbitrary Prohibitions must be absolute. If we retract his, we'll have to retract everyone's. Then the whole system breaks down."

"I agree," said Grünwald. "Most emphatically, I agree. We cannot allow this girl to break the system."

"I'm not breaking the system," Mia said. "I'm part of the system. Hank needs to put on pounds before the Committee arrives." She felt a surge of the conviction that had carried her into the office. "And I'm thirty-three years old. I'm hardly a girl."

"You're hardly a dietician," said Grünwald. "But that doesn't stop everyone around here from calling you one."

"Rita!" Dr. N pointed his pen at the Assistant Director.

"She's not qualified to be here," Grünwald said. "Someone has to say it. We should have hired a dietician with experience in prisons. But no. You had to be sentimental. You had to hunt down a former student."

Dr. N slammed his platinum pen down on the desk, and it broke apart. The spring flew over his head and hit the window behind him. The ink cartridge slid across the desk and fell to the floor. Grünwald jumped in her seat, and Colin took a step toward Mia.

"I would like to speak with Assistant Director Grünwald. Alone," said Dr. N. His voice was steely, cold. "Colin, we can discuss the bumper pool table later. Mia, Arbitrary Prohibitions are absolute. End of discussion."

That night, after extended consultation with a bottle of chianti, Mia distilled her many professional hassles—Hank's fasting, Grünwald's contempt, the Committee's looming arrival—into one manageable phrase: the Mango Problem. The beauty of the Mango Problem, she decided, was the simplicity of its solution.

She drove to work the next morning with the windows down, and her confidence grew as she approached the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats. The grounds were mostly old-growth Indiana forest, and the home itself was a long, squat building of unassuming brick trimmed with short round shrubs and modest flowerbeds. Wrought-iron benches and humming bird feeders lined the courtyard. It was a warm, welcoming place, once you got past the barbed wire.

Mia parked and walked through the outer security gate, bidding a cheery *Good morning* to the young men standing guard in their blue helmets. She felt the satisfying crunch of the gravel walkway beneath her feet, and she swung her fat purse with gusto. It was heavier than usual, and the added weight lent an enjoyable pendular effect to her swinging.

"Good morning, Jan," she said as one of the glass front doors swung open before her.

"I'm Sven," said Sven. "Jan is guarding the kitchen."

"Sorry, Sven."

Mia hugged her purse against her side and started to step past him. The guard didn't budge. He spread his legs apart and puffed out his chest, filling the doorway with his Scandinavian bulk.

"Apologies, Ms. Foster," he said. "I must check your bag before I let you in."

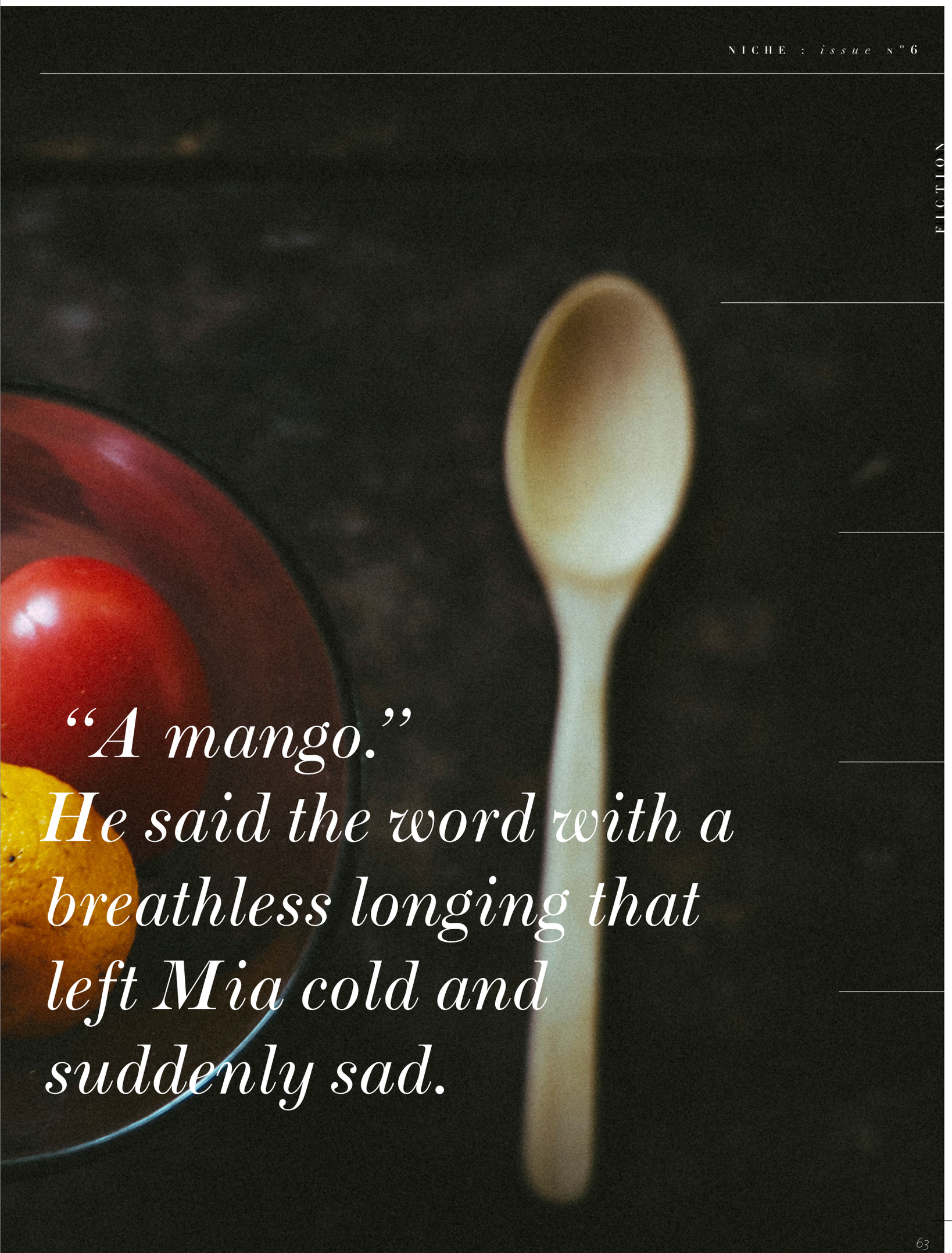
"You've never checked my bag before. No one has."

"Those are my orders."

"Orders from whom?" asked Mia.

"From me, of course."

Grünwald's voice came from behind the soldier, but he was too wide and the lobby too dark for Mia to see her nemesis through the glass doors.



"A mango."
He said the word with a breathless longing that left Mia cold and suddenly sad.

Mia took a step back. "This is ridiculous," she said. "I need to get to the cafeteria. I need to be there for breakfast."

"I will tell you what you need," said Grünwald. "You need to open up that bag and show us what you have inside." She poked her head around Sven's torso and glared at Mia. "Or is there something in there you would rather we not see?"

Mia stiffened, and a smile crept over Grünwald's lips. They stared each another down for several moments before Mia decided the best way to defy Grünwald was by showing no fear.

"Have a look." Mia opened her purse and held it high in front of her, right under Sven's nose. Grünwald strained to look inside the purse, but she was too short.

"Well, soldier? Does she have a mango in there?"

"No, Assistant Director Grünwald," said Sven. "She has two mangoes in here."

Dr. N gave Mia probation. Actually, it was more of an ultimatum.

"The Committee will be here in thirteen days. If Hank is not five pounds heavier when they arrive, I'll expect your resignation."

"Forget resignations," said Grünwald. "Forget thirteen days. I say we fire her now."

"That's not your decision, Rita."

Grünwald snorted but said nothing. After marching Mia to Dr. N's office and dropping the contraband mangoes on his desk, she had taken a position behind the doctor's right shoulder. Sun streamed through the window and gave her a deceptively angelic aura. Mia had to squint to look her in the eye.

"I could quit right now," said Mia. "I could walk away whenever I want. I'm not a prisoner. I could leave you with a malnourished Viceroy." Dr. N and Grünwald both grimaced. "Explain that to the Committee."

"One of out ten is not bad," said Grünwald. "Ninety percent success rate."

"I mean it," said Mia. "I'll quit."

"Go ahead. We don't need you."

"Please, ladies," said Dr. N. He tapped the broken halves of his platinum pen together to make a meek, tinny sound. "The Committee will be here in thirteen days."

"Precisely," said Grünwald. "We cannot waste any more time with this...dietician. If she quits, I say let her. If she doesn't quit, I say fire her. Either way, problem solved."

"I'm not quitting."

Even with the sun in her eyes, Mia could see Grünwald's irritation, and she felt the giddy rush of defiance that had made her drive to work so cheerful.

"Five pounds in thirteen days," said Dr. N.

"Let's make it seven," she said.

The Viceroy took four carrot sticks and two cups of coffee from the serving line at lunch. He sat alone at a sunny window table and watched the others attack heaping trays of sloppy joes and mashed potatoes, fried mozzarella sticks and marshmallow-infused gelatin bricks.

Mia got a club sandwich, pretzels, and a diet cola. She exchanged a few pleasant words about the weather with the Supreme Oligarch, then crossed the cafeteria and sat down across from the Viceroy.

"If you're trying to entice me with that food you made a poor choice," he said. "I'm a pescetarian."

"That mean you don't eat bacon, Hank?" Mia took a hearty bite of her sandwich and chewed with relish.

"Among other things. Did you happen to speak with Dr. N about my Arbitrary Prohibition?"

Mia nodded, chewed.

"I take it mangoes are still verboten, then?"

Mia shrugged, sipped her soda, swallowed.

"You can have a mango in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" The Viceroy took a large gulp of

coffee. "I can have a mango when the Committee is here?"

"How do you know about the Committee?"

"Everyone knows about the Committee's visit," said the Viceroy. "You sedate us, you don't deafen us." He drank more coffee. "So Dr. N will give me a mango when the Committee arrives?"

"No, Dr. N won't give you a mango. Ever. And if he sees you with one, he'll certainly take it away."

The Viceroy glanced around the cafeteria, first at the other autocrats, then at the cooks in the serving line, and finally at the soldiers posted beside the door. He leaned across his tray and dropped his voice.

"Are we talking about rebellion, Ms. Foster? A coup d'état?"

"I'll bring you a mango," she said, leaning across her own tray and jabbing half her club sandwich at the Viceroy to emphasize her point. "I'll bring you a mango every single day until...well, whenever. But you have to gain nine pounds before the Committee arrives. You have to eat more than carrot sticks."

"Rebellion *and* extortion," said the Viceroy. "You're finally becoming interesting, Ms. Foster."

"Just doing my job," Mia said. She pulled a slice of bacon from her sandwich and bit it in half.

The Viceroy lifted his mug to his lips, hesitated, then let a deep, exhausted sigh escape from his chest. It was a gesture of hard-earned surrender. He reached across the table and grabbed a handful of pretzels from her tray.

The Viceroy put on five pounds in less than a week. He still wouldn't touch the sugary cereals and processed cheeses adored by the other autocrats, but he showed a fondness for organic peanut butter and vegan muffins. Mia asked him what foods he missed most from his island home, then had the cooks order three whole swordfish and a case of pineapples.

Dr. N grew more relaxed with each passing day. He sported an old orange bowtie and took to carrying a simple Bic in his pocket. One morning he stopped Mia on her way to the cafeteria and reminisced about Philosophy of Imprisonment.

"You kids sure earned that A," he said.

Grünwald, on the other hand, grew more venomous as the Viceroy grew more voluminous. During staff meetings she refused to address Mia directly, referring to her always in the third person, using only her title, never her name. "Despite the Dietician's unsolicited advice," she would say, "we will maintain Hank's sedatives at their current levels." Or, "Although the Dietician apparently works by a different set of rules, the rest of us need to show up for our shifts on time."

The Assistant Director's ire was, Mia found, more satisfying than Dr. N's frequent praise. Each malicious encounter with Grünwald left her fortified with a sweet, spiteful pride. This was a revelation for Mia, who had never before thought of herself as a vindictive person.

As the Committee's arrival drew nearer, however, Mia found herself less inclined to gloat. The Viceroy's progress was heartening, for sure, but each pound he packed on brought the central weakness of her solution to the Mango Problem into sharper relief. Namely, she had no idea how to sneak a mango past Grünwald and her guards every single day until...well, whenever.

The more she pondered this obstacle, the more appealing reneging on the deal became. After all, what could the Viceroy do if she didn't make good on her end of the bargain? To whom could he appeal? These questions left her feeling guilty, but oddly giddy. She felt like a different person when she thought about betraying his trust, and this new Mia was strong and alluring.

The Viceroy continued gaining weight, and Mia's resolve hardened. She would double-cross the Viceroy, plain and simple. She was, after all, only doing her job.

Three days before the Committee's arrival, Dr. N decided the residents needed some sun. He wanted them looking chipper and healthy when the Committee came, and a good jolt of vitamin D was just what the doctor ordered.

So Colin drove into town and returned with a carful of kites. He solicited Mia's help, and they led the autocrats outside after lunch instead of into the rec room. Four guards followed them onto the lawn and formed a loose, wide perimeter around the group. Mia and Colin unwound strings and launched kites into the air.

The Balkan Chancellor proved to be an adept pilot. He sent his kite dipping and soaring in a series of impressive aerial acrobatics. The other autocrats laughed when his kite took an inadvertent turn into the limbs of a beech tree and one of the U.N. soldiers had to climb up after it. The day was breezy and bright, and their bathrobes blew gaily in the wind.

Mia stood apart from the group and watched the Viceroy. He was fitter, happier, more sociable. He mingled with the other residents, though he stood out from them with his neat clothes and polished demeanor. The sinking weight of guilt tugged at Mia's chest.

"How are you going to pull it off?"

She jumped and spun around to find Colin standing at her shoulder.

He held up his hands. "Didn't mean to frighten you," he said. "I'm just curious is all."

"Curious about what?"

"Your plan."

"My plan?"

Colin eyed the guards scattered across the lawn, then cupped his hands and yelled toward the autocrats. "Keep your string taut, Jeremy. Otherwise you're bound to crash that bugger." He stepped ever so slightly closer to Mia. "I'm wondering how you're planning on smuggling mangoes into this place indefinitely. I could see you pulling a fast one over the guards once or twice, but to do it every single day, well, you'd need a real plan for that."

Mia looked at her feet, then back across the lawn at the Viceroy. "I'm not smuggling any mangoes."

"Relax," said Colin. "I know all about the deal you made with him. Grünwald had me slip a nano mic under his shirt collar. He's wearing it now, doesn't have a clue."

"Christopher Columbus!"

"Don't worry. Grünwald only hears what I want her to hear."

"And why wouldn't you want her to hear about our deal?"

"Truth be told," said Colin. "I feel sorry for old Hank."

"Why? The Vice...Hank is here for a reason, just like the rest of them."

"Do you know what a viceroy is?"

"It's another title men give themselves to feel important," Mia said. "Like sheikh or shah or president." She squinted up at the squadron of kites.

"That's not quite right," said Colin. "You really haven't read Hank's file, have you?"

"I've been busy."

"A viceroy," Colin continued, "is someone who rules in another person's stead. Hank there ruled his archipelago while his uncle was receiving leukemia treatments in the States. He was in charge for a month or two, when suddenly an American company found a deposit of this rare ore on one of his islands. Can't remember what the mineral is called, but they use it to make smartphone batteries."

"And what?" asked Mia. "The Viceroy let the company dig up the island to make their smartphone batteries, and the people got pissed and threw Hank out of office?"

"On the contrary," said Colin. "Hank refused to sign over mining rights to the company. A week

later, the streets were filled with well-armed men in uniforms nobody recognized. Hank sent out his army to meet the strangers, people got killed. Soon after that, Hank's uncle returned, thanked him for keeping the seat warm, and tossed him in jail."

"You're saying he doesn't belong here?"

"I'm saying he deserves a little compassion, is all."

"Is this a trap?" asked Mia. "If you're working for Grünwald and trying to trick me into smuggling mangoes, you have to tell me. Otherwise, it's entrapment."

"You're thinking of the police," Colin said. "I'm under no such obligation."

"Then how do I know I can trust you?"

"Because," said Colin. "I'll be the one doing the smuggling."

Finally, the day arrived. The Committee would be there at noon, and Dr. N couldn't have been more pleased. The Viceroy had gained almost eleven pounds. He still ate his meals alone and shunned the rec room television, but the Committee would find no fault with his physique. His face was fuller, more regal. The faint outline of a paunch could be seen beneath his ironed Oxford shirt.

Mia greeted the Viceroy at breakfast and gave the scrambled eggs and wheat toast on his tray an approving nod.

"You're looking healthy, Hank."

"I feel like a Christmas goose," said the Viceroy. He stabbed a hunk of egg with his fork and frowned. "But I'm sure I'll feel better once I get some vitamin C in my system. Which reminds me..."

He gave Mia a hungry, expectant look, and she felt suddenly like a drug dealer.

"I don't have it on me," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. "You'll get it later."

"How much later?"

"After the Committee leaves, everything should calm down," she said. "The guards will be relaxed. Then I can give you your mango."

The truth was, she didn't have a mango at all. She hadn't yet seen Colin that morning. The previous day he had assured her his plan was foolproof, though he refused to share any details. It was best, he had said, if she didn't know how Hank's mango arrived in the home.

The Viceroy set his fork down on his plate and crossed his hands on the table. "You're lying to me."

"I'm not," said Mia, unconvinced by the tone of her own voice. "You'll have to trust me."

"I've trusted you for two weeks," the Viceroy said. "Now I want my mango."

"If you just wait until..."

The Viceroy stood and picked up his tray. "I'll be in the rec room. I hope my vitamin C deficiency doesn't take a turn for the worse. Who knows what shape I might be in when the Committee arrives?"

Mia cut through the lobby on her way to Colin's office and found her path blocked by a cadre of soldiers with brooms and sponges. They bustled to and fro around the booming epicenter of Grünwald, who ordered them to sweep harder, scrub faster. The Assistant Director caught sight of Mia and let out a frightening bellow. The sweeping and scrubbing stopped, and the lobby fell silent.

"You stay out of sight when the Committee arrives, Dietician," Grünwald said, spittle flying from her lips with the last word.

"I have a job to do," said Mia.

"Your job today is to stay out of the way. The Committee does not need to know your name. They do not need to hear you speak. They do not need to know you exist at all."

"I fixed Hank," Mia said. "They need to hear about that."

"Dr. N and I will decide what the Committee needs to hear."

"Where is Dr. N? I need to talk..."

"Dr. N is preparing to receive the Committee. He does not have time for Dietician problems."

Mia badly wanted to spar. It would almost be worth trading barbs for an hour, she thought, just to know how painful the wasted time would be for Grünwald, each malicious remark bringing them closer to the Committee's arrival. Unfortunately, Mia had the same deadline as Grünwald.

She ducked her head and barreled down the hallway to Colin's office, leaving the Assistant Director to curse the assembled soldiers for leaving fingerprints on the glass front doors.

Colin's office was across the hall from the rec room. Most of the men were settling into their recliners, releasing elephantine belches, and adjusting their elastic waistbands. The Viceroy was seated at his solitaire table watching a late morning drizzle drift down on the grounds.

Mia turned to knock on Colin's door, but it opened before she could bring down her fist.

Dr. N looked as surprised to see her as she was to see him, and it took him a moment to remember to stand on his tiptoes before he spoke to her.

"I have discovered the true nature of Colin's soccer ball," he said and furrowed his brow.

Mia couldn't tell if he was angered or perplexed by this discovery.

"I like your new bowtie," she said and pointed at Dr. N's neck. The tie was black velvet, and so was his suit. He looked better equipped to drive a pack of teens to prom than to receive the Committee. "Very, um, authoritative," she said.

Dr. N stepped aside to clear the doorway. "Please come in," he said.

Colin's office was much nicer than Mia's. Hers was a converted storage room across from the head cook's office. His was a wood-paneled den with built-in bookshelves and tall windows looking out onto the rose garden.

Colin sat behind his desk with his arms crossed and an unreadable expression on his face. In front of him were two halves of a red and white soccer ball, and a single green mango the size of a large man's fist.

"Why a soccer ball?" she asked.

"Seemed inconspicuous," Colin said. "And it's a football."

"We call it soccer here."

"I know what you call it," he said. "Doesn't mean I have to repeat your mistake."

"This is not the time for a semantic debate," said Dr. N. He motioned for Mia to take the seat opposite Colin but remained standing himself. "Ms. Foster, you have now twice sought to circumvent an Arbitrary Prohibition. Furthermore, it appears you have bribed a resident. Does that accurately sum up our situation here?"

"I was doing my job," said Mia. "You hired me to fatten up the Viceroy, and that's what I did."

Dr. N massaged his temples. "Please, Mia. Don't call him that when the Committee is here."

"Grünwald told me not to talk to the Committee."

"First good idea Rita has had in weeks," said Dr. N.

"Mia did get results, sir," said Colin. "There's no denying old Hank has filled out nicely."

"True," said Dr. N. He took in a long, slow breath and studied the mango on the desk. "He really ate all that food just for one mango?"

"Not exactly," said Mia. "He thinks he's getting a mango a day until..."

"Until when?"

"Whenever."

Dr. N picked up the mango, weighed it in his palm, and walked behind Colin to admire the rose garden. He tossed the mango gently from hand to hand.

"Is it safe to assume," said Dr. N, "that Hank will make a scene while the Committee is here if you don't give him this mango?"

"Probably," said Mia. "Hank seems awfully fond of that fruit." An impish impulse passed through her. What *would* the Viceroy do if she didn't produce the mango? What kind of a scene would he make?

"I never saw this mango," said Dr. N. He turned

from the window and dropped the mango into Colin's lap. He pointed to the desk. "And I never saw this unusual soccer ball."

"Football," said Colin, but Dr. N didn't seem to hear.

"Tomorrow Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition will be strictly enforced. As we all know, Arbitrary Prohibitions are absolute." Dr. N frowned at his watch, strode past Mia, and opened the office door. "If you'll excuse me, I must prepare to receive the Committee."

Mia entered the rec room with Colin's soccer ball tucked under her arm. It really was a clever bit of smuggling—an outer layer of red and white leather wrapped around a plastic shell that snapped together like an Easter egg.

"Hello, Jan," Mia said to the kid standing guard.

He smiled, pleased she had remembered his name. "You are a football fan, Ms. Foster?" he said.

"Just starting to get into the sport."

"Then I must show you some moves," said Jan. He readjusted his holstered taser gun, hitched up his cargo pants, and bounced on the balls of his feet. "Let me see the ball."

Mia stiffened and assumed her most commanding tone. "I hardly think this is the appropriate time for games, soldier. The Committee will be here soon."

Jan stood instantly at attention. "Of course," he said. "The Committee. Forgive me."

"Why don't you wait in the hallway and let me know as soon as you see the Committee headed this way?"

"My orders..."

"It wouldn't look very good if our residents were passed out drooling all over themselves when the Committee arrives, would it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then please be my lookout," she said. "I'm going to liven the men up a bit."

As soon as Jan left, the Viceroy began clapping. His applause was casual and steady, barely audible above the television and the snores of his fellow autocrats.

Mia took a slight bow, and the Viceroy gave her a stately nod of approval. He smiled broadly and stretched out his hands as she approached.

"You are a woman of your word," he said.

"I will be soon," said Mia. She took the seat across from the Viceroy and held the soccer ball on her lap.

The Viceroy's smile fell. "I explained the danger of my vitamin C deficiency."

"Relax," Mia said. "You'll get your mango before the Committee gets here."

"Why not now? The guard is gone. What better time than right now?"

"I don't want you eating the mango right now. I don't want you to be all sticky when the Committee arrives."

"Am I a child?"

Mia shrugged. "You know what you are."

"How do I know you actually have a mango inside that football?"

"You'll have to trust me."

"That phrase again."

Mia shrugged. She turned her gaze to the meager rain falling outside. The day was overcast but strangely bright. The lawn was lush and green, the forest thick and inviting beyond the barbed wire fence.

The Viceroy resumed his solitaire, snapping down cards with exaggerated precision. Minutes passed.

Mia felt strong and decisive. She had solved her Mango Problem. All that was left was to savor the look on Grünwald's face when she walked in and saw the Viceroy holding the one thing in the world he had been absolutely forbidden.

"The Committee approaches!" said Jan. He stood in the doorway and looked expectantly at Mia. Clearly, the kid needed an order.

"Turn around so you can greet the Committee

when they get here."

This the soldier did at once, turning his back on her without question.

Mia placed the soccer ball on the table, gave it a half twist just as Colin had shown her, and opened it to reveal the mango inside.

"I'm a woman of my word," said Mia.

The Viceroy used both hands to cup the mango and lift it from the halved soccer ball as if the fruit were some rare antiquity. He brought the mango to his face, inhaled its scent, and whispered, "I've done it."

Mia screwed the soccer ball back together and was about to stand to meet the Committee, when the Viceroy sprang from his seat.

"I've done it!" he yelled.

He leapt across the room, scattering playing cards in his wake. He jabbed at the side of the television, and the screen went dead. He kicked the Balkan Chancellor's feet.

"Awake, all of you. See what I've done!"

The slumbering autocrats stirred. They sat up in their recliners and rubbed sleep from their eyes. The Viceroy held the mango high above his head for all to see.

Mia was frozen in her seat. She saw understanding and admiration dawn on the autocrats' faces, saw the Viceroy shake with sheer triumph. She saw Jan turn and reenter the room. She knew she should warn him. Now was the time to call for backup, the time to draw his taser. But Mia couldn't push breath past her lips. Everything was beyond her control.

"Hank," said Jan. The kid held out his hands in a gesture of peaceful appeasement. "Please calm down. The Committee..."

The mango hit poor Jan squarely on the nose, and he dropped to his knees. He looked over at Mia, his eyes wide with confusion, his face a mess of blood and mango juice.

The Man Who Ruled a Desert began the applause, echoed shortly by the Supreme Oligarch. Within moments, every recovering autocrat was clapping wildly. They rose to their feet, and the Viceroy took several courtly bows.

"My friends," he said. "I know you never doubted me."

"Gentlemen!" Grünwald roared from out in the hall. "What is the meaning of this racket? The Committee demands quiet as it conducts its inspection."

The applause died as soon as the Assistant Director appeared in the doorway. The autocrats all turned and watched Grünwald as she surveyed the scene. She stiffened when she saw the bruised mango on the floor.

"Dietician!"

The autocrats erupted into a frenzied ovation. They saluted the Viceroy and shouted rallying cries in their native tongues. A few residents made obscene gestures at Grünwald, whose fury seemed to have paralyzed her. She could do nothing more than stare at the discarded mango and shake with rage.

Behind her, Dr. N stood dumbfounded.

Behind him, the many faces of the Committee swarmed to peer inside the rec room.

What would they make of this scene? The smashed fruit and bleeding soldier on the rug. The cheering tyrants in their bathrobes. The silent woman in the corner with a game of solitaire in disarray. ¤

GRAVEN IMAGE

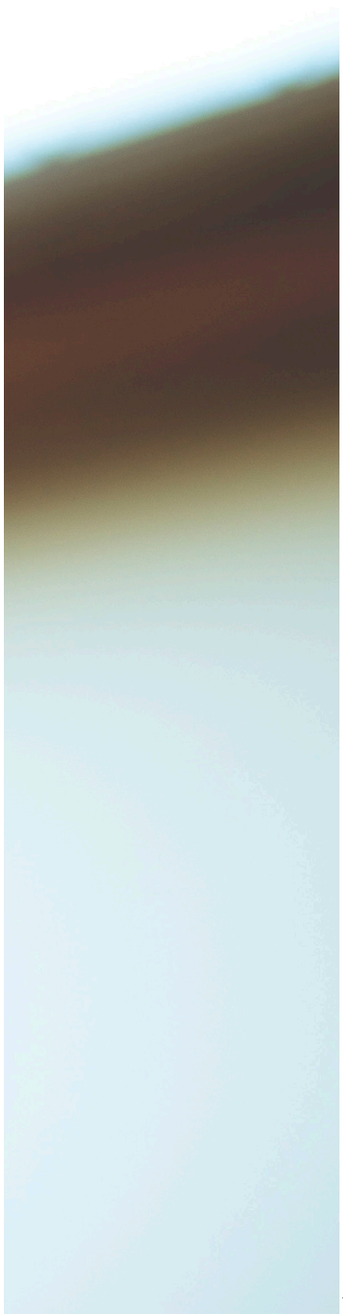
BY RYAN FRANCIS KELLY

As Lindsey lands back down in LAX, she turns her phone off airplane mode and breathes a sigh of relief. It's the deep, huffy exhale of a fiend getting its fix. Her fingers have spent the entire descent in a phantom scrolling, scratching back and forth across the fabric of her sweater pockets. They're thrilled to be released from their cardigan cages, once again exercising their intricate dance on her tablet's screen. Lindsey smudges the glossy surface with her withdrawal sweats; drools over the dropped roaming data charges; revels in the reestablished internet connectivity. As the conical WIFI symbol fills up with three black arcs, she herself feels a comforting sense of fullness.

Before securing a cab ride home, she's already double dipping into her social media smorgasbord—Instagram posts, Facebook albums, Twitter hashtags. She wants everyone to hear about her recent European adventure. With relish, she imagines herself to be the envy of each subscriber, follower, and friend on her various lists. She cannot wait to complete her blog, *Tales from the Eurail*. It's still missing its conclusive sendoff—a humble brag that shares her deep, newfound perspective.

Once she's Lyfted back to her apartment, Lindsey plugs her tablet into her laptop, hoping that her electronic reel of photos will provide inspiration for her last bits of travel writing. She has already categorized her thousands of photos based on the city, divided even further into folders for the individual attractions. She starts by opening up PARIS, one of her favorites, and then ARC DE TRIOMPHE, the first folder in alphabetical order. She remembers the first photo she took there, a selfie on top of the Arc with the Eiffel Tower in the background. She recalls how many versions of the shot were needed before she was satisfied—the position of the Tower, her sly one-lipped smile, the blowing of her curly hair—it all had to be perfect.

But now, when she opens the photo with Preview, she's surprised to find herself missing from the snapshot. Completely gone. The Tower, clouds,



blue sky, other Arc tourists—all present and accounted for. But there's absolutely no sign of her whatsoever.

"W-T-F," she says out loud, to no one. She punctuates her exclamation with indignant pauses between each letter.

She closes the photo's window and moves on, figuring she must have accidentally saved a few rejects. But when she opens the next one—a shot of her in front of the Louvre's glass pyramid—she discovers the same troubling problem. Her visage, her body, is missing from the frame. She specifically remembers taking this photo, from a distance, so that she could position her finger on the pyramid's pointy top. But there's not even a single trace of her posturing. For a second, she thinks she sees a wisp of her hair, but then realizes it's just a whirlybird from one of Paris's Linden trees. In front of the pyramid, the Louvre bustles with life—art appreciators of all ages, scrambling about with their pamphlet maps. She was there, she thinks. Right there. She's sure of it.

In a panic, she hurriedly scans through her many Parisian photos—the JARDIN DES PLANTES, CHAMPS-ELYSEES, 27 RUE DE FLEURUS—and once again finds each photo to be devoid of her presence. When she examines the tablet's camera roll, she discovers that she's now missing from those shots as well. She decides to close Preview and reopen it, but to no avail. She shuts down her computer and reboots her tablet, but nothing seems to help. The earlier posts from her blog all seem to have been revised, photoshopped, tampered with. She isn't in any of them either.

It takes Lindsey four hours, deep into the jetlagged night, to rifle through each and every one of her pictures—from Athens to Zurich. After a while it seems like a strange, horrifying dream, where she's a ghost looking back on her life, only to realize that she lived a meaningless existence with no impression left behind. As her straining eyes begin to twitch, she occasionally fools herself into thinking that she sees something. But it will always be like the wisp of hair from earlier—some part of the scenery that she's simply mistaking for herself.

In a moment of resentful lunacy, she poses for a mug shot selfie, right there in her living room, just to test her own sanity. When she looks at it afterwards, all she can see is the Monet print hanging on the wall behind her. What's flummoxing her most is the fact that she can see herself on the tablet's screen, right until the moment she snaps the picture. Then she vanishes.

She takes another blank selfie and texts it to her friend, along with a message saying, "Do you see me in this picture?" She can only imagine Mackenzie's response, when she sees a photo of nothing but a desk lamp and half a coffee mug. But Lindsey doesn't care. The nagging mystery has taken over, and she's developing an obsessive desire for a solution. At this point, she's not concerned about looking or sounding strange, like UFO abductees who go on the news with farfetched tales of extraterrestrials.

She begins to wonder whether she should contact the authorities, or media outlets, or maybe just her parents. Someone is bound to believe her.

Lindsey finally falls asleep as the birds start chirping, and then doesn't awake until it's once again dark outside. This does little to help readjust her composure. She finds a text message from Mackenzie saying, "Are you okay," along with three missed calls from her mother, which Lindsey ignores in favor of having a stiff cocktail. She wants to seek help, but college has instilled the importance of doing independent research first. As she takes shuddering sips of her scotch and soda, she types various phrases about camera and filtering problems into the searchbar. When this produces nothing but dense, technical explanations that she doesn't understand, she attempts an S.O.S. search in the form of a question: why am I missing from my pictures?

Her research yields several hits, mostly from

illegitimate forums like Yahoo! Answers. Rather than providing anything substantive, they all discuss common superstitions about taking pictures. According to these sources, several cultures warn against the practice. Native Americans believed the process could steal a person's soul in addition to disrespecting the spiritual world. Similar beliefs persist within small Mexican and South American cities, stemming from Mayan traditions. Since cameras utilize mirrors, they fear that a photograph could open a portal into the Otherworld, allowing ancestors and gods to pass dangerously between the two planes. Unsurprisingly, Amish folk avoid photographs out of humility. They believe that photos violate the Biblical warning not to "make unto thyself a graven image." Like other puritans, they want to be remembered by the lives and examples they left, not by physical appearance.

Lindsey reflects on her European experience with twinges of sad regret. The trip had been a graduation present from her parents for finishing cum laude in only three years. They said it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a lesson in self-reliance she wouldn't find in any of her textbooks. They said it would do her good—force her out of her academic bubble and remove her from its obscurity. Make sure to take it all in, her father had said, while sitting on her overstuffed suitcase. Before departing, she had found an additional gift on her nightstand—a brand new monopod selfie stick. Her mother, always sweeter than tooth decay, had attached a smiley-faced note:

Don't forget to take lots of pictures! I want to feel like I'm there!

Lindsey had taken pictures, alright. But that's about it. With sullen shame, she recalls her avoidance to engage with city locals, her opting to eat at Subway during one lonely night in Spain. She had learned almost nothing about the languages or customs, instead glomming onto Frommer's hot spots where she could speak English and enjoy hybridized cuisine. Every picture had been snapped by her, never once sharing the frame with a new friend or convivial stranger. Authenticity meant taking the risky plunge of immersion, and her fear of drowning was too severe. No one would guess from her documented highlight reel that she had spent most of the trip longing for the comforts of home. She's ashamed of the half dozen books she read.

On Yahoo! Answers, there's a section about mythical creatures whose photographs cannot be captured, such as vampires and spectral beings like ghosts, wraiths, and phantoms. In a moment of personal witchcraft, Lindsey positions her bedroom's full-length mirror in front of her bathroom's medicine cabinet. Then she stands in the middle of the two mirrors so that she's reflected both ways. With scotch and soda in one hand and her tablet in the other, she snaps several selfies in this standing position, from every reflective angle possible. But when she's finished, each frame is sad and empty, just like her scotch and soda. She had expected the cocktail glass to be floating ominously in the frame, like a spooky gag from Ghostbusters. But it's also missing. Apparently, the drink had simply become a part of her.

As she develops a restless buzz, she decides she needs to get out of the apartment.

She throws on sneakers and a sweatshirt, and then heads down the stairs and through the alleyway to the street, feeling thankful for the darkness around her. If she's a vampire, then at least she won't incinerate in the sunlight. But if the Mayans are correct, then she has probably opened at least a dozen Otherworld portals, so it might be best not to dawdle out in the open for too long.

As she dips into the 24/7 drug store, she knows it's a long shot. But wait, yes, it's there in aisle 4—a disposable Kodak camera, black with a yellow paper sleeve. She's amazed. She hasn't seen a disposable film camera since her junior high field trip to the

zoo. Guess it's her lucky night. Along with the camera, she purchases additional scotch and the most European sounding cigarettes she can find, a brand called Danish Export.

Back at her apartment, Lindsey prepares another drink and uses her stove to light one of the cigarettes. She plops down on her futon with the disposable Kodak, planning to take a standard goofy selfie, with tongue protruding and brow furrowed. But then, with a large gulp of cocktail, she gets a better idea. She should use the Kodak's reel to record herself doing things she's never done before. Unique, strange, one-of-a-kind moments to celebrate her spontaneous individuality. That way, even if the reel returns empty, she'll at least have some fun in the process.

She rushes out of the apartment, faster than she had returned, eager to experience

the night's offering. As she's leaving the alleyway, she sees the poor homeless lady who often lingers by the apartment's dumpster. Lindsey has often worried about vagrants stealing her identity through pitched receipts and shredded bank statements. But as she turns and sees the homeless lady digging through scraps of discarded food, Lindsey is more ashamed of what she buys and lets spoil—slimy spinach, moldy cheese, rotten fruit. Right now the homeless lady is peering into a Papa John's pizza box and coming away with only the half empty garlic dipping sauce. When Lindsey sees her contemplating the sauce like it's a shot of liquor, she decides to reach out.

"Hey, you know what I like?" Lindsey asks. "Breakfast at night."

The homeless lady spins around and glares in her direction, looking ready to make a quick exit. But then she sees that it's just Lindsey, a harmless smiling waif. It takes a bit of diplomacy, but Lindsey convinces the homeless woman to accompany her to a local diner. They receive judgmental looks from the drunk college kids filling the booths, but Lindsey doesn't care.

Throughout the meal, the two women share little about their pasts or the strange circumstances that brought them together. Instead, they focus the conversation around life's small pleasures—grapefruit juice, Tapatio, air conditioning on a hot night. They discuss their favorite quiet spots in the city, where you can avoid crowds and really do some thinking. Before parting ways, Lindsey asks their waiter to snap a photo of them together in the booth. They both pose with cantaloupe rind mustaches.

This snapshot is the first of many for Lindsey, as she gallivants around her neighborhood in search of other such anomalies. After leaving the diner, she heads toward a local bridge that's notorious for graffiti taggers and street artists. When she skirts the edge of the bridge and heads downhill, she spots a group of young men in the middle of their tags. They're throwing up their individual monikers—TradeMarx, FullBrite, The Talented Mr. Dripley—each decorating the bridge's concrete façade with a smattering of neons and pastels. When the group's lookout spots Lindsey coming, there's a click-clack shuffle of spray paint cans.

"Wait, stop!" Lindsey shouts, as they grab their equipment for a getaway sprint. "I love what you've done with the place!"

A few keep running, but two or three of them turn around and give her incredulous looks. A rat, they must think, some kind of mole. Some member of the citizen police, just waiting to stick her mole nose where it doesn't belong.

"Seriously," she says, shuffling down the hill. "I've always hated this ugly thing. They're the real criminals, you know, buffing over your hard work with that awful whitewash."

She worries this might be overkill, but the young men respond positively. She's cool, one of them says, and from then on it's somehow true. Upon their urgings, she grabs a "cannon" and starts shaking it up. After about fifteen minutes, she creates her first tag, under the pseudonym

Invisible Girl, which seems appropriate. She chats with the crew for another half hour, embarrassing herself by dropping names like Banksy and Keith Haring. Then she gets them to pose with her in front of their graffiti tags, with arms crossed and lips snarled. They all crack up when she throws out some generic gang signs.

As time progresses into the wee morning, Lindsey continues to find unusual ways to fill up her camera reel. In another seedy corner of the city, she borrows a street performer's violin and plays a duet of "Cripple Creek" with a bucktoothian black man on the banjo. She hasn't played in over four years, and there's hardly anyone to listen, but it doesn't matter. It's a beautiful number, one for the ages. Rather than cutting the night's silence, it seems to ride it like a wave.

When she tells the band about her mission with the camera, they recommend breaking into the local community rec center. Apparently, there's a gap in the fence that lends easy access to the swimming pool. Lindsey follows the musicians to the outskirts of the fence and watches as they

crouch and crawl through. After she follows suit, they all strip down to their underwear and take turns jumping off the diving board. She asks one of them to snap a picture of her best can opener, which she executes with a precision that would make her nine-year-old self proud. She emerges from the water, fist pumping, totally stoked to see her dive recorded in action. She instinctively rushes to the camera, only to realize, foolishly, that it's just a disposable Kodak. Lindsey can only imagine how stupid she looks, gawking at the back of the plastic, waiting for something to appear.

"It looked great," the banjo player says. "Trust me. You're gonna have one hell of a scrapbook."

As Lindsey walks home, she continuously pulls the camera out of her tote bag, and then re-secures its position. She cannot wait to get the reel developed. It's sure to put her European album to shame.

When she arrives back at the alley to her apartment, she hears the familiar mewling of the alley cats that roam the neighborhood and survive like village children. Tonight their innocent mews quickly turn to shrill hissing, as one cat, presumably the loser of a squabble, emerges into the alleyway. Its caterwauling is so pathetic that Lindsey feels the need to comfort its cries.

She goes into her apartment and returns with a saucer of milk and an open can of tuna. After walking back down the alley, she kneels down and summons the cat with a series of titters and clicking noises. The cat's stubborn hesitation eventually gives way to Lindsey's coaxing, and soon enough it approaches her. In the better light, see notices the cat's right eye—a cloudy charcoal black, as if from blindness. It gives the effect of the cat wearing an eye patch. Lindsey decides to name him Pirate, and includes swashbuckling lexicon in her baby talk to him.

"Ahoy matey," she says. "Aren't you a scurvy lubber? Well blimey then! Have yerself some of me larder."

Pirate eats like he's ashamed of his massive hunger. In a cat's dignified way, he seems to resent her watching, but that ultimately does not stop him from finishing everything. When Lindsey tries to scratch his head, he recoils and swats with his paw. However, he seems content to have his back and haunches stroked, which Lindsey exploits until he's purring and defenseless. When Pirate is subdued, with his good eye squinting in drooped pleasure, Lindsey snaps a dimly-lit portrait of the two of them together. The scroll wheel on the back of the camera clicks and locks into place, indicating that she has filled the reel to capacity. When she picks up the saucer and empty tuna can, Pirate makes no attempt to follow her. But he insists on watching her the whole way up to her apartment, as if to make sure she got there safely.

Lindsey crumbles into a two-hour nap of unsettled synapses. The night's recent happenings shuffle through her subconscious in a kaleidoscopian array, a distorted overlapping of neural activity.

She is jostled back to reality by a stiff prodding to her midsection. It's her friend, Mackenzie, the one she texted two days ago. Mackenzie uses the monopod selfie stick to poke Lindsey's gut, while also examining the half empty scotch bottle with her other hand. Lindsey pushes the selfie stick away, rolls over, and emits a low thrumming noise from the back of her throat.

"I knew this would happen," Mackenzie says. "Send a sheltered bookworm to Europe, and they'll come back a leathery boozehound."

Lindsey continues to thrum indignantly.

"Seriously, Linds, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Without saying a word, Lindsey springs up and grabs Mackenzie by the arm, dragging her into the living room. She opens her laptop and shows Mackenzie the empty photo albums.

"I swear to you," Lindsey says. "I was in every single one of these shots."

Mackenzie squints at the screen, and then relaxes her eyes. "You sure you didn't just mess up with the camera?"

"Yes! Well, I mean, I think so. I'm 99 percent sure."

"Hmm. Maybe there was a problem transferring it to the computer?"

"You think I didn't already check that?"

"Jesus, what's your problem?"

"Was I in that picture I sent you?"

Lindsey reaches into Mackenzie's purse and grabs her phone, but it needs an unlock code. Mackenzie snatches it back from her.

"Chill, psycho. Like I'd lie to you or something?"

"Was I in that picture or not?"

"No... you weren't. I had no idea what you meant in that text either."

"Quick. Take my picture. With your phone, and my phone. We have to be sure."

"You're freaking me out." Mackenzie clutches her purse and starts heading for the door. "Look, Linds, get some rest. I'll come back tomorrow. Or whenever. Just... get your shit together."

"But what do I do about all my empty pictures?"

"I don't know. Photoshop yourself into them? People do it all the time."

"Yeah, but not for a travel blog, which is all about being in the place you're writing about! You know, actually being there."

"That's what this is about? Look, I gotta go."

"You know what they say! Pictures or it didn't happen. That's what everyone's gonna say! Pictures or it didn't happen."

By this point, Lindsey is standing right in front of Mackenzie's face, looking her eye-to-eye and huffing like a child having a tantrum. She's breathing a hot sugary mix of scotch and chocolate.

"Christ, you reek, Linds. Lay off the booze. And call me when you pull your head out of your ass."

As Mackenzie exits, the wind catches the screen door and slams it hard against the doorjamb. It bounces off with a clang, and then gets slammed shut again by another gust—this time for good. Lindsey hears the revving sound of a starting engine, followed by the fluttering scamper of frightened birds. She parts the kitchen's Venetian blinds just in time to see Mackenzie's car disappear from the alleyway.

For a few hours, she plays around with Photoshop on her computer. She cuts herself out of her various Facebook pictures, and then tries pasting them into the European photos. She is underwhelmed by the result, at best. At worst, she's horrified. The contrasting resolutions draw attention to themselves, accentuating the pixilated outlines of the Lindsey proxies. They look like 32-bit ghouls stuck in an HD world. Superimposed, superficial, superfluous, perhaps even a bit supercilious. These unsharpened, unsaturated Lindseys are doing her no justice whatsoever, and worse, they're making a mockery of her real memories from the trip. Ironically, they're somehow making the frames seem even emptier than before.

She lights a Danish Export on the stove, puffs it twice, snuffs it on the windowsill. She pours herself a scotch and soda, sips it once, then lets it sweat all over her mouse pad. For a while, she's neutralized by this frustrated lull, just lazing around and folding time into consumptive impulses. She eats Saltines, picks her teeth, tries to masturbate.

For the first time in her life, she's answering to no one but herself, but somehow she's only coming up with questions. How long would it take for her nappy, chlorined hair to dreadlock? Is her résumé in order? What, exactly, is she hungry for?

Lindsey had imagined saving the Kodak reel for a drearier, bleaker day down the road, but today seems to suffice. She uses Yelp to find the closest place that develops film. Strangely, it's not the drug store where she bought the camera. It's more of a specialty place, mom-and-pop, in a strip mall only eight minutes south on the freeway.

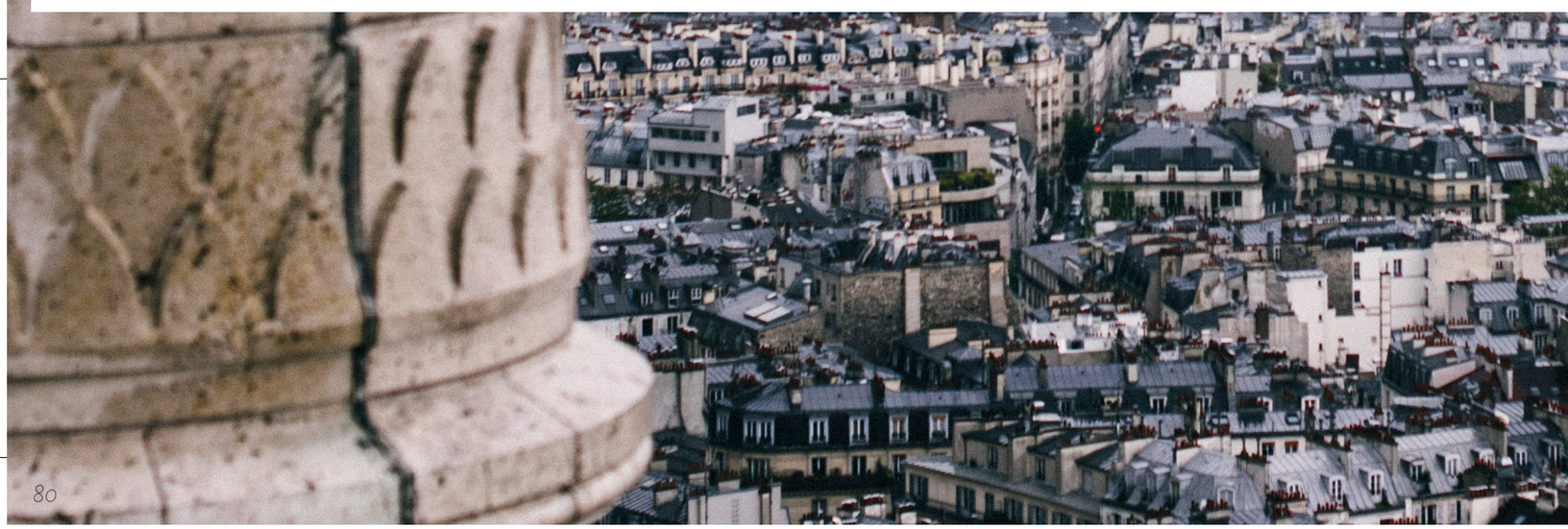
When she arrives there, she's greeted by two sixteen-year-old boys. Both are splotched with acne and patches of possumy facial hair. One has visible, chalky pit stains on his death metal t-shirt. They're extremely nervous around her, which is endearing until it becomes a nuisance. They both offer her better deals on different cameras she doesn't want, and they're disappointed when she only needs her one reel developed.

But they die of laughter when they see the plastic Kodak. They jokingly handle it like an ancient relic, passing it back and forth with ape-like inquisitiveness. The pit-stained boy goes on a long rant about the disposable Kodak's history and its growing obsolescence. It's funny, he says, how people used to be scared of leaving a paper trail, when now the paperless ones are far more dangerous. He gives a lascivious look, as if Lindsey's reel might contain scandalous secrets. Lindsey lets him blather, ad nauseam, until she can't take it anymore and has to interrupt. In the end, they're able to develop the film, no problem, as long as she pays up front. The dry-pitted boy says they can't waste time and money on a no-show. After he takes her money, he gives her a ticket and tells her to come back anytime she wants to redeem her photos.

As Lindsey drives home, she recalls all the inane photos she's taken over the years: close-up macros of her maki rolls at fancy sushi restaurants; her Welsh corgi in a lobster Halloween costume; her "seductive," duck-lipped poses while dancing at nightclubs with girlfriends; her "artsy" black-and-white self-portraits from her melodramatic MySpace page.

She's not sure what she was trying to capture, other than possible versions of herself. Different contrived identities that she could show the world, in hopes that one would eventually stick. But as she cruises down the freeway, she realizes that life isn't doctored or framed in neat tableaux. Her experiences do not amount to some portfolio or scrapbook collage. They imprint themselves deep within her mind, heart, and all the other places people never see.

Lindsey remembers song lyrics she heard once, about how only the malevolent live to see themselves glorified in stone. She thinks about time capsules buried underground—bottled



messages tossed into the ocean—initials carved into wooden benches—the Voyager Golden Record that was launched into space to provide aliens with Earth's soundtrack. What, exactly, is this obsessive desire to be acknowledged—this insistent need to leave a permanent mark behind?

People have written human myth into the stars, the forest, the rivers, the sun and moon, the television and computer screen. Is there anything left to cast back their likeness? Was it leisure or technology that fed the Narcissus complex? And after such a long, hard look at themselves, how is it possible that they've ignored the flaws? People ought to take after her Welsh corgi, and snarl at their reflections in mistrust.

Lindsey has no way of predicting how the Kodak's reel will develop, but she decides that she likes the idea of not knowing how things will turn out. After switching off some sad bastard indie rock on the radio, she crumples up her photo ticket and tosses it out the driver window. Pictures or it didn't happen, they'll say. Pictures or it didn't happen. Let them say it all they want. She knows it happened, and that's enough. Let them subscribe to mainstream reality; she'll trust the one deep in her gut. Maybe she's crazy, but as she puts the pedal down on the open road, she finds herself looking forward to all the things in her life that aren't going to happen. ¤

In Praise Of Vanity

BY AMRYN SOLDIER

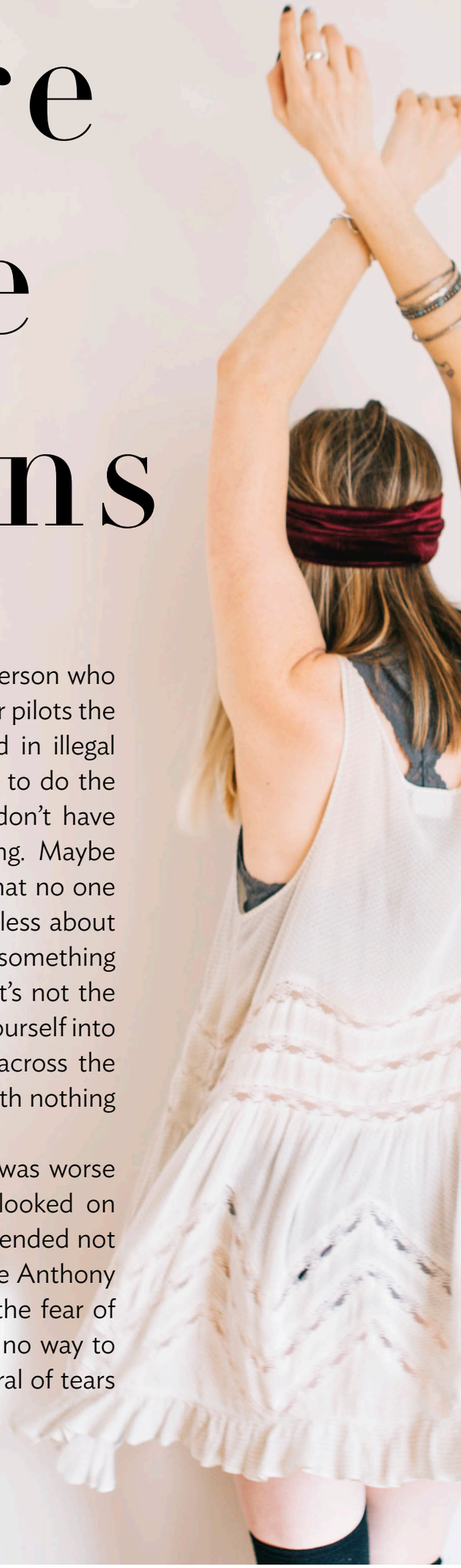
Apathy

Indifference

Intrusion

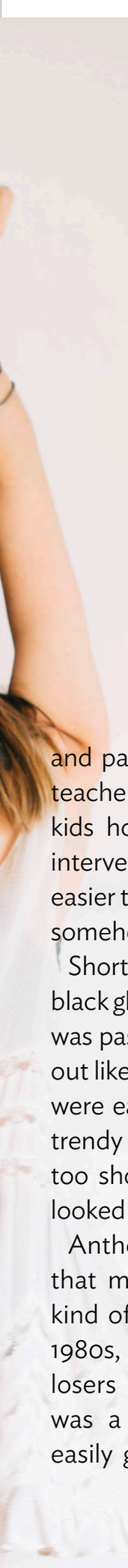
Square Dance Lessons

BY SHEILA MOESCHEN



I am not brave. I am not the kind of person who scales a pole to take down a racist flag or pilots the boat that chases after people involved in illegal whaling. I am not bold. I am not wired to do the great, hard thing unless, I suppose, I don't have much time to consider what I'm doing. Maybe this is the secret to courage, the one that no one tells you about because in the end it's less about a conscious choice and more about something unknowable that compels you to act. It's not the calculated risks, but the ones you fling yourself into like a trapeze artist who hurls herself across the void, reaching out to receiving hands with nothing more than momentum and blind trust.

When it came to Anthony DeVito, I was worse than a bully. I was a bystander who looked on while the other kids taunted him. I pretended not to notice the time a group of boys made Anthony think he'd missed the school bus, put the fear of God in him that he'd be stranded with no way to get home. This sent Anthony into a spiral of tears



and panic. He darted around frantically to find a teacher or someone who could help him while the kids hooted with laughter. The responsibility of intervening seemed overwhelming. It was so much easier to see without seeing and hope things would somehow just work themselves out.

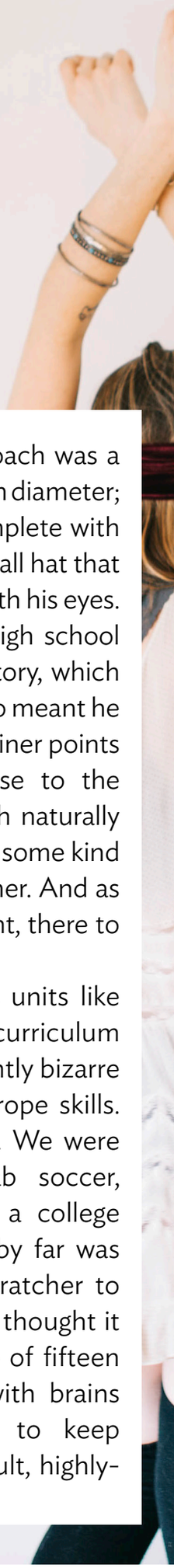
Short and wiry, Anthony wore impossibly thick, black glasses before the style was cool. His dark hair was pasted across his head when it wasn't sticking out like needles on the arm of a cactus. His clothes were easily a decade behind anything considered trendy and they seemed to fit him poorly—pants too short and too tight, button down shirts that looked like they should be on a prep school student.

Anthony was super smart, but not in the way that made him respected or liked. He was the kind of nerd ridiculed in those movies from the 1980s, the ones that cast geeks as unlovable losers against the popular, Adonis-like jocks. It was a cinema universe without nuances that easily grafted itself onto our narrow adolescent world that absolved us from thinking about the long term consequences of our actions. In class Anthony fidgeted in his seat, sometimes he would unconsciously clock his head back and forth to some unheard rhythm. His eyes flicked from side to side and he blinked a lot, too rapidly, too much; he wasn't above openly snaking a finger up his nose. He was the kid who ate alone.

I rode the bland middle wave of the high school currents. I was neither popular nor an outcast. I found my tribe of harmlessly quirky kids in my honors and advanced placement classes, in writing for the school paper, in playing in the band, and in performing in school plays. I was content in those spaces and I did my best to blend in the world beyond them. This was a skill and art form of its own kind, but it was the only way I felt like I could belong without having to risk too much of myself, without bearing the burden of showing up. I felt that I was born to be camouflaged.

Our freshman year of high school Anthony

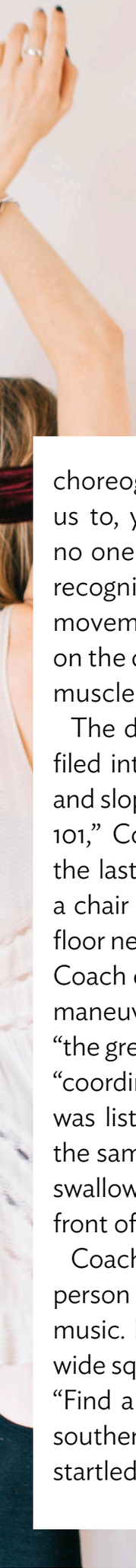
"I was not brave."



and I wound up in the same gym class. I had no use for sports. Every Sunday for as long as I could remember I listened to my father yelling at whatever football game was on television when the only thing I wanted him to do was pay the same amount of attention to me. My mother was a typical at-home mom—cooking, cleaning, and raising me and my brother while my father earned a paycheck and did the occasional oil change. Baseball, football, basketball were the realms of boys and men. I remember trying to watch a football game with my father, loading him down with questions: what does the quarterback do? Why is the ref making that signal and what does a penalty mean? Can a kicker be a linebacker? He tuned me out. I sat out the rest of the game in silence. Sidelined by my own father. Later, my mother knocked on my bedroom door and presented me with a book she had picked up when she was younger called *A Wife's Guide to Pro Football*. The cover showed a woman's lovely white hand, a gold bracelet dangling from her wrist, lightly resting on a football. "Maybe you should read this," she said trying to be helpful.

P.E. was my worst nightmare come to life three days a week, something I openly telegraphed to our gym teacher, Coach Seasted, in the anemic way I participated, barely trying, not really caring. A product of a Big Ten school where he excelled at football before falling into teaching, Coach was a tank of a man with calves easily 8 inches in diameter; he was a cartoon jock come to life complete with the whistle around his neck and a baseball hat that he wore year round pulled down level with his eyes. He was blatantly hired to coach the high school football team to proud, small town victory, which he periodically managed to do, but it also meant he got stuck teaching dumming down the finer points of basketball, gymnastics, and lacrosse to the generally uncoordinated masses. Coach naturally took an interest in the kids that showed some kind of athletic promise in one area or another. And as for the rest of us, we were like air or light, there to fill in the rest of his atmosphere.

In addition to the typical gym class units like basketball, gymnastics, and track, the curriculum was made up of other random and slightly bizarre subjects. We spent a week on jump rope skills. We digested the rules to Frisbee golf. We were subjected to something called crab soccer, which could have easily passed for a college drinking game. But the funkiest one by far was square dancing. It remains a head-scratcher to this day as to why anyone would have thought it smart, fun, or useful to teach a group of fifteen year olds, overrun with hormones, with brains only marginally developed enough to keep them vertical, how to perform a difficult, highly-



choreographed style of dance. Also this requires us to, you know, dance. Even at school dances no one danced, at least not in ways that anyone recognized as the act of coordinating your bodily movements with musical rhythms. What we did on the dance floor was something that resembled muscle spasms put to time signature.

The day we started our square dancing unit we filed into the gym dressed in our ill-fitting shorts and sloppy tee shirts. "Welcome to square dancing 101," Coach bellowed. A record player, probably the last of its kind within town lines, squatted on a chair next to the coach. A small PA was on the floor next to the chair with a microphone attached. Coach explained that he would teach us the basic maneuvers; there was something else he said about "the great history of this American art form," about "coordination" and "social skills," but really who was listening at that point? We were all thinking the same thing: please let a sink hole open up and swallow the school so I will not have to dance in front of these people.

Coach designated himself as the "caller," the person who calls out each move in time to the music. He had marked the dance area with a big, wide square outlined in blue tape on the gym floor. "Find a partner!" Seasted said affecting a terrible southern drawl. My classmates scattered like startled larks. The popular girls shrieked and tore across the floor to grab the hands of one another or whatever cool boy they felt was their equal. The rest of us were left to choose one another and we made our picks affecting that teenage air of carefully cultivated disinterest.

Paired up, everyone retreated to the perimeter of the dance space. Everyone, that is, except Anthony DeVito, who stood alone in the center, fidgeting nervously, his head jerking like one of those desk top, bobbing chickens.

Nobody moved. Audible giggles erupted from the sidelines; soft bursts of "Oh my God, like, so embarrassing" broke out among several of the pockets of my classmates. Anthony was rooted to the spot, a noticeable sheen beginning to form on his forehead. The gym seemed to grow bigger in the seconds that ticked by as if it were a room clipped from the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Coach stood there, silent except for the release of a lone sigh, as if pursing air through his thin lips was enough to excuse him for being unable to foresee the disaster that results when you tell a bunch of idiot teenagers to partner up on their own. It might have only been 30 seconds that Anthony was marooned in the middle of the gym, but it felt like it could have been a century.

I stood next to the girl that was to be my dance partner. I suddenly saw myself on the playground in elementary school, alone because the rest of the

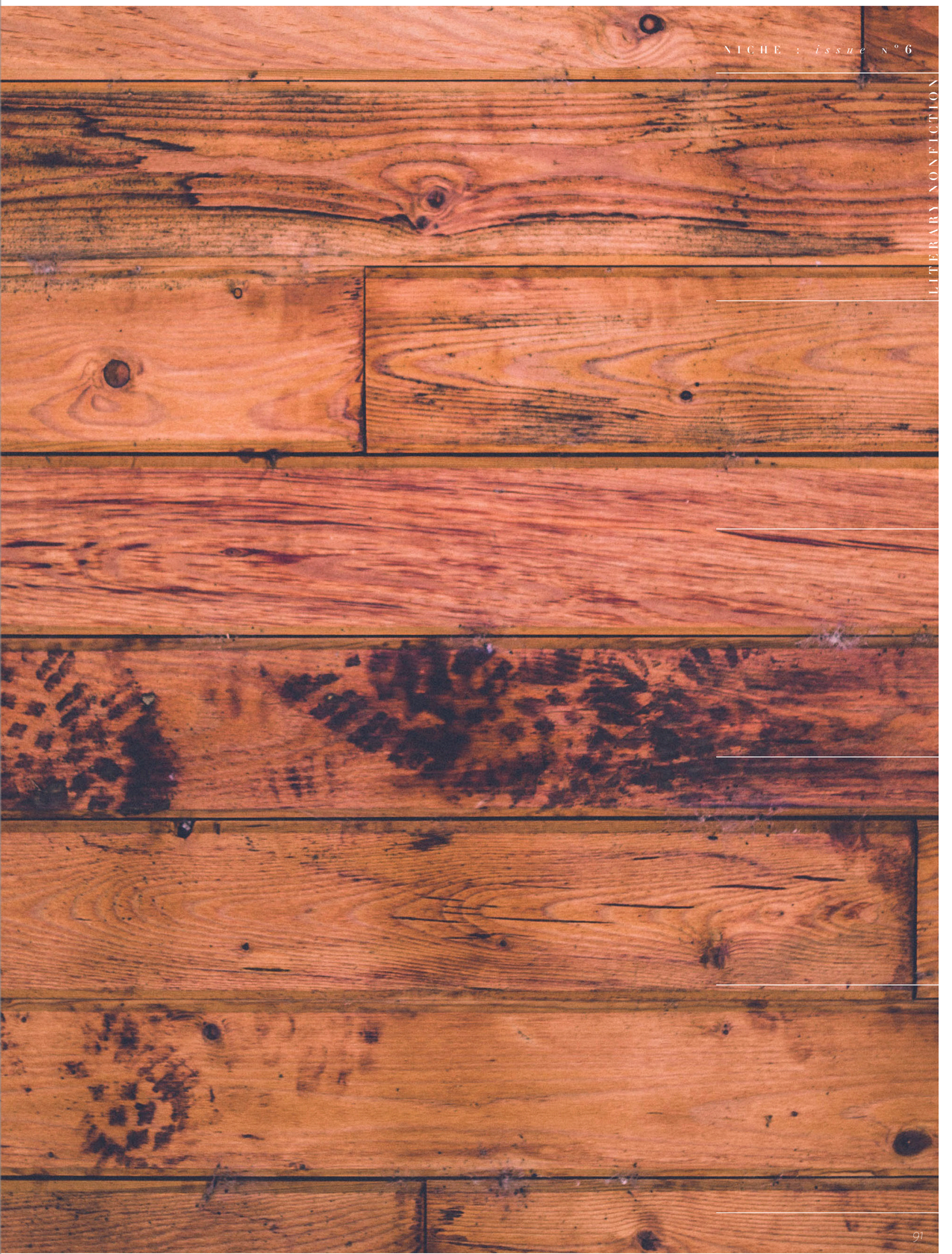
girls decided they were not going to talk to me that day. I remembered the way this one small act of random, emotional treachery had dismantled me, making me feel as marooned and worthless as a balloon taken by the wind.

I was moving and talking before I was conscious of what I was doing, my pulse thumping in my ears. "Grow up!" I spat out at the class as I stalked into the middle of the dance floor to join Anthony. I grabbed his sweaty hand and gripped it in mine. I felt my legs shaking a little underneath me. I didn't know what would come next, I hadn't thought that far ahead. We stood in the center of the dance space in a state that felt like suspended animation, suddenly joined by more than the conventions of square dancing.

"Thank you," said Seasted, suddenly finding his voice. Embarrassed, I shrugged. "Okay, let's get going," he said cutting through some of the stifled chuckles and gossipy noise and just like that, the moment receded as Coach began explaining the first set of steps. He switched on the record player and dropped the needle. The tinny sounds of fiddles and banjos stirred to life churning out a fast-paced melody that seemed purposely designed to tangle our steps.

Anthony and I didn't speak as we did our best to keep up with the maneuvers, which became more numerous and increasingly difficult. We were as gangly and hapless as everyone else, wondering what this whole fruitless exhibition was really for. It was maybe the only time Anthony and I would literally be on equal footing with the rest of our peers.

Class broke. The natural order of high school righted itself as we fell back into our respective cliques and groupings, as we reached for what was familiar and easy and known over what was hard and strange and right. I don't know what Anthony thought of the small ordeal, if he thought anything at all. We encountered less of one another as high school put us on different paths toward lives as future engineers, teachers, CEOs, and military servicemen and women, meant to divide us from each other and outfit us with new ways of seeing ourselves. As if this is all there is to know about the business of becoming, slipping on a self like a finely tailored coat, no alternations needed. Because when I think back to that day in gym class, I don't see anything that was easy or simple or comfortable. I only see a girl trying to pilot her way through the dance. ¤



Jars of Tarantulas

BY LARA DUNNING

One hairy leg at a time its sinister golden brown and black body moved through the backyard. I knew its name, but dare not say *tarantula* out loud. It might hear me. I push my toes into the grass, bringing the swing to a stop and eye the creature that is now several yards away. I could practically feel its hairy legs prickling my bare skin trying to find the right spot to sink its teeth into my tender flesh. *Stay completely still and it will walk right by. No, no, no, it sees me.* I order my feet to run, but they don't listen. My breath quickens. My palms sweat. I can do this. I can. Just run and don't look back. Don't ever look back, otherwise life as you know it will be over.

During the fall, the New Mexican desert is filled with eight legged hairy moving creatures the size of your hand. This is the male tarantula migration, also called marching. This march can take them as far away as fifty miles from their home territory. Sometimes there will be dozens marching and other times there will be hundreds. This migration is all in search of one thing, a female to mate with.

Our front yard blends in with the untamed New Mexican desert that stretches out toward the horizon. I know and love this landscape. In it I find horned toads to play with and pottery shards for my mother. Dust gathers on my toes and the fragrant aroma of sage fills the air. Just like me, the tarantulas belong here. From the protective shield of our house my older sister Nikki and I watch the

tarantulas through the window. Dozens of them are traipsing through our yard.

"Where are they going?" I ask.

She points toward the dusty road at the end of the driveway. "They want to cross the road."

Of course, beyond that road is more desert. Our backyard is in the way. We hatch a plan. We didn't like them much, but neither of us wanted to see their creepy bodies splattered all over the road.

When a mature male tarantula is ready to mate it will spin a thick web, usually on a flat surface. It rubs its abdomen on the silky fibers to deposit sperm. Then, it picks up the sperm and absorbs it into the small legs in the front of their body called pedipalp. There it will stay protected until a female can be found. When it finds a female the male approaches and signals his intentions. If she is a willing mate, he deposits the sperm in his pedipalps onto the lower part of her abdomen and scurries away.

Outside the window, my mother's body huddles in the front seat of the car. It's our new driveway in Illinois, not the dusty one in the desert. I think she's looking at us, my sisters and I and Dad, as we stand in the window. My mother, already a small woman, looks smaller, paler. Heaviness thuds inside my chest. Dad pulls me into his side. His shaking hands show me, he's just as troubled as I am.

Female tarantulas are not considered travelers. They usually stay in one area, such as, a small burrow dug into the ground. They never march to find a mate, the males come to them. And, if a male tarantula lingers to long after courtship he might become dinner. Once her eggs are fertilized, she deposits them into an egg sac and guards it with fervor until her spiderlings hatch.

"Where's Mom going?" I asked.

"Your *mother* is leaving." Venom bites into her name, but as the word escaped Dad's lips his voice softened to muffle a cry.

I'd heard him angry plenty of times, but never angry and sad all at once. In our house it seemed like you were either one or the other. I tried to be neither. As I watched the car containing my mother back out of the driveway and onto the street my throat clenched painfully. Soon all that remained were the headlight beams that made traces like spider webs in my watery eyes.

One of the first defensive maneuvers North American tarantulas use is to throw barbed abdominal hairs called urticating bristles. These small hairs pierce and irritate the skin of an attacker. Before attacking, some tarantulas lift up their front legs, spread and extend their fangs and then strike their front legs down before they bite. Most tarantula bites cause mild discomfort, much like a bee sting, and rarely cause human fatalities. Sometimes, they make a sort of hissing sound by rubbing together the bristles on their legs called stridulating. Tarantulas have also been known to stridulate when they are upset or disturbed.

Mom's absence roamed the rooms of our house. It greeted me when I came home from school with its silence and at bedtime it reminded me of the missing goodnight kisses. Sadness so deep, descended on us all. Me, a girl of few tears, cried herself to sleep each night. Dad drowned his sorrow in music. Each night after work, I'd follow him downstairs to the record player. He'd stack on record after record. Willie Nelson, Chicago and Fleetwood Mac crooned into the rooms Mom used to walk through. They said all the words he couldn't say, or maybe the ones he wished he had. From the time he came home till the time I went to bed music embodied those empty spaces Mom had left behind. Soon, the words became the ones I wanted to say too.

I went for walks alone in the woods near our

house. In the desert the air had been invisible. Here, it coated your skin like the long dresses I'd wear at my birthday parties. The colors were different to, brighter, like the blue, green, and yellow icing on my birthday cakes. Tarantulas didn't live here, but lots of other spiders did. Around our house, I'd throw crickets into lacey webs and watch the spider madly race to down to capture it. For a few days the cricket would be there. Then, it would shrivel up or fall off. The webs never lasted either. They fell apart and another one just as beautiful would be built in its place. Days turned into months and my new step-family helped rebuild the frayed silken fibers of my home. Spanish guitar replaced Willie Nelson. On Sundays chatter filled the empty spaces during our afternoon dinners. The rooms weren't unbearably silent anymore.

They say male tarantulas don't make good pets because once they reach maturity their minds are programmed to find a mate. After this phase begins they might live a few years to a few months. The average male lifespan is eight to ten years; a female tarantula will live twice as long. My Dad's cancer came during those years I wandered barefoot through the desert. At the time, cancer was considered a death sentence. Unlike the mature male tarantula, he survived and continues to weave more life experiences. Today, we drink wine together and talk about traveling and his retirement.

We fly out the front door with mason jars in our hands. Our guts are made of steel. We set the jars in front of the tarantulas and they climb right in, like they know we are helping them. Once inside, we scoop the jars up and thick spider legs reach toward the opening, searching for the ground that was just there. Side by side, we carry our temporary captives down the driveway and across the road. We lay the jars on their sides and the tarantula's inch forward. Once they touch familiar territory they continue marching into the bosom of the desert, as if the world always consisted of wide, open spaces.

As my sister and I watch our first rescues, warmth blossoms in my chest like the opening petals of a bright cactus flower, forcing me to smile.

We took all of them across the road that day. We changed lives. We were saviors. ¤

SWAN SONG

BY YEKATERINA ALEXANDROVA

He had promised to fulfill my dreams. Apparently he thought they were located in the last available room at Motel Six just off the freeway.

I flopped onto the bed. He perched on the armchair beside the tan curtains. We ignored the scratch of cigarette smoke on our skins. He was wearing the square framed glasses that I loathed but his hair was still black and wild. He had driven six hundred miles for one last fuck. I searched for faces in the bumpy ceiling and let our silence drag.

"Are those clothes new?" he finally asked.

"No."

The green wallpaper was spotted with white flowers. It reminded me of the afghans Grandmother Rose crocheted, the ones Mom inexplicably kept despite their bad relationship.

"They're so... you."

I was wearing a black shirt and dark washed jeans. I still remembered him saying he only found me attractive in skirts because they allowed for easy access.

I looked at him and wondered who he thought I was. He had giggled and called me crazy when I slammed the passenger door shut. It had been easy, even thrilling, to deceive my parents. They had been screaming at one another. "Just drive," I said, slipping my hand from his, already bored. I rolled down the window to smell the wet. It had rained earlier that day.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

I found his uncertainty amusing. I slipped from the bed and brushed the curtain aside. Twilight had come and everything felt wrong. It would be so quick, the sex and the pain that came with it, and then, I would fall into restless dreams and wake to glimpse a sliver of light through the curtains. We would have breakfast of pulp filled orange juice and stale cereal. He would turn onto that freeway and be gone.

"Fine," I said and let him kiss me.

He had been angry because I hadn't gone to Michigan and had skipped out on New Mexico and then Germany after that. He said my parents controlled my life, that I let days stream past by my bedroom window. He said I was uninterested in broadening my horizons and the writing would lead to nowhere.

"Forget everything," he mumbled. He had no limitations, no parents to disappoint.

Later, we fought about the hotel too. He said I had never let go. I said it was the first and only time he had made love to me while sober.

"I think it's time to go our separate ways," I said.

"No, you can't do this. I finally love you," he said.

"How about that?"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because I don't like the person you love," I said. ¤

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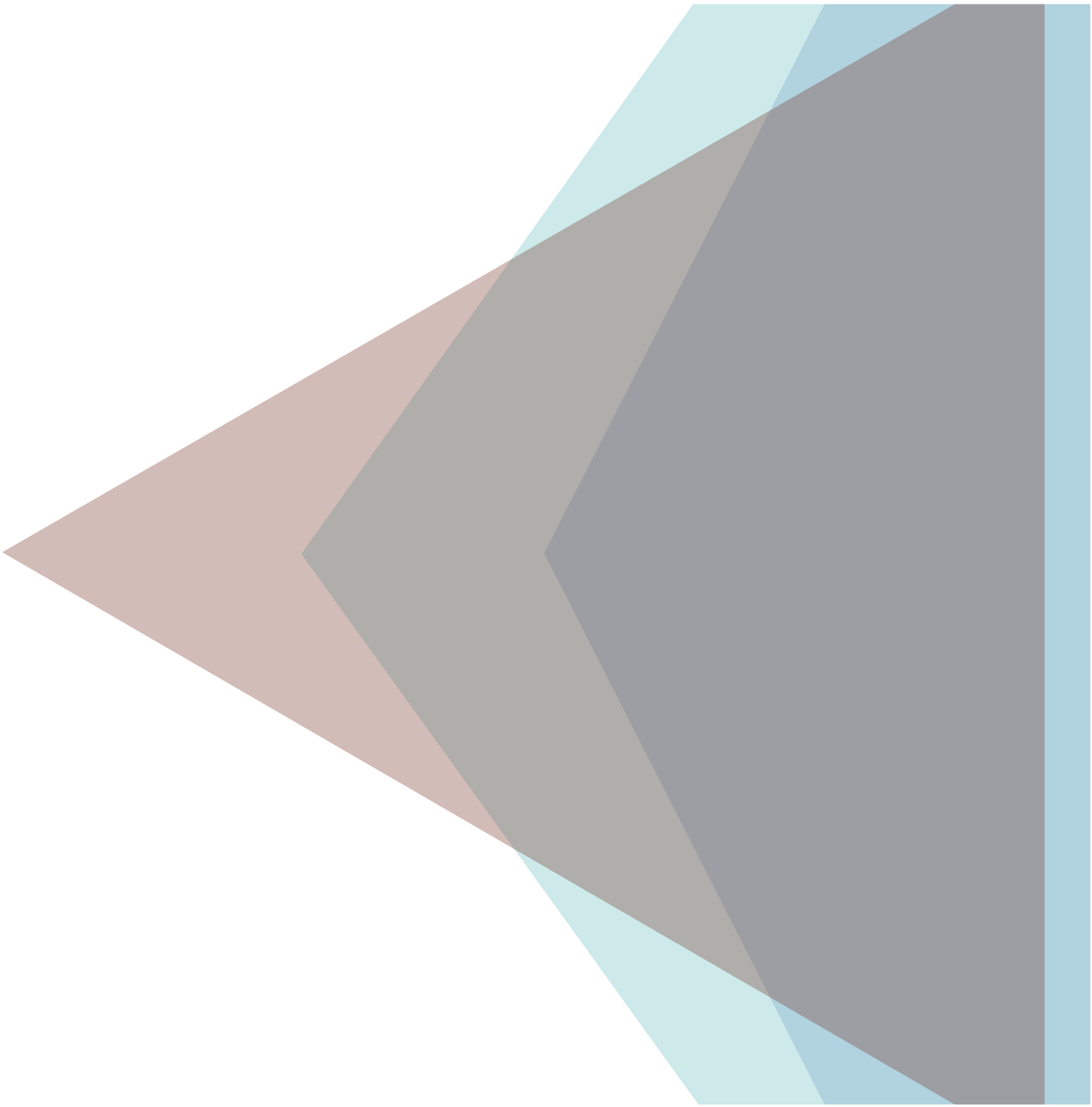

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