



Black  
Cats

on

Blue

Blankets

## Chapter 1

I'm going to tell you a story, if that's all right with you. It's a story about a family. Mother. Father. Brother and sister. All together just before summer. Driving down the rain-washed streets of Port Townsend, WA. It's Sunday morning, 1992.

Is this a true story?

Is that what you want to hear? The truth?

No. I just want to know if this story really happened.

The story is happening now. It started when we started. Can you see Ray at the wheel? And Kay, her arm outstretched through the passenger window, feeling the air outside? The boy sits up front between them, and the girl, not wanting to be excluded, sits in the middle seat of the back row. A textbook is laid out over her skinny, little lap.

I can see them.

Good. That's very good. This is Ray and Kay. They first met at a restaurant where they both worked as waiters. Ray couldn't grasp how a beauty like Kay could ever love a loser like him, but that's a hard thing to grasp, you know? It's sometimes impossible to see yourself as a person deserving of love. You ask yourself, "Why would anyone ever love *me*?" And you fall short of an answer.

What about you? Can you see how a person could ever honestly, *seriously* choose to love you?

I am capable of giving my love to others and this allows me to accept the love that is given to me through others.

Well, that sounds very healthy of you. Congratulations. The family is on their way to church. They drive by freshly painted homes with front gardens. Past awnings covered in flowers. Fresh air. Ivy grows. Ferns and blackberries. They drive through this town and the air ... is so fresh—with all that green! You'd just want to take one big breath right there! FRESH AIR! Can you smell it!?

The car sits at a light. A small, red dot surrounded by a yellow rectangle. A light morning mist extends the dot into fine beams. It glows beneath the dark metal pole. They are the only car on the road. Ray has his blinker on, waiting for a left turn.

## Chapter 2

The boy steps out and onto the wet asphalt of the church parking lot. A blank face under chocolate hair. His eyes scan the environment from a perspective so close to the ground. He's in this world that we've all forgotten. The low world. Car doors slam. Engines idle. Laughter breaks. Indistinct speech is all around. The boy grabs his mother's hand.

Strangers pour out of their cars. They walk briskly. The crowd flows together, pulled into a current that bottlenecks at the steps, then expands, whirling out like an eddy before the altar.

With all things, there is order. At least, that's what people like to think. Father walks first, leading the way. Sister tries to keep up. Mother's in the back, keeping them all in sight, making sure the littlest one feels safe by her side. One by one, they dip their fingers into a bath of holy water at the entrance.

Kay removes her hand from the boy's. When it returns, he feels something peculiar. He caresses her fingertips, looking for something. Mommy dipped her hand into the water, but her fingers ...

“Your fingers are dry.”

Wavy locks drop into the frame of this boy's life as Kay bends forward. She lifts him, bringing him up from below, into the safe world at her breast.

“What's that, my darling?”

Face to face, Kay is radiant. She looks at her young boy with an eagerness to listen. The boy repeats himself.

“Your fingers are dry.”

“Oh, I don't want to ruin my makeup.” Kay smiles.

“You're wearing makeup?”

“Yes, sweetie. I wear makeup.”

The boy looks closely at his mother's face. He wonders which part is really her and which isn't.

“Your father wears makeup too.” Kay winks at the boy.

“Daddy wears makeup?”

“Shhh. Oh. Keep your voice down, sweetie. We're in church.”

Ray walks through the aisle and finds a pew tucked safely in the middle. He takes a seat and the girl follows, making sure to sit close to her father. Kay lags behind with the boy.

“Why does Daddy wear makeup?”

“It's time to be quiet now.”

Kay sets the boy down on the pew next to his sister and takes her seat at the end, positioning herself consciously as the barrier between her family and the outside world. She's like this, a shield of love. As if it's her that contains the rest of the family. She imagines a form of herself, arms long and flowing out, stretching endlessly to hold them all in.

The old man in robes at the altar begins to speak, a confusing

mumble to the boy who can barely glimpse over the heads of the strange people in the pews before him. The boy sees this world, the one beyond the limit. The one hidden from view. He sees it always. The unknown, that darkness, seems to want his light. It calls out for it. But what will be revealed when he obliges?

The boy's curious gaze traces the seams in the polished wood of the pew, which sits taller than he does. He feels as though he's in a trench. Always, the boy is fascinated with that interesting mechanism that allows a padded bar to swing down from the pew before him, but this morning it's something else that captures his attention. His mother's purse.

The boy looks up at Kay. Her long, wild, dark hair. Soft eyes. Pointy nose. He studies her face. She seems to be feeling intensely whatever it is that gray-haired man is saying. Her focus is distant and he feels unseen.

The boy reaches a hand quietly into his mother's purse. What's this thing that he's found? It's square and black. A funny smell. He opens it up. And what does he see? What does he find in this new part of the unknown? His own reflection.

Underneath his face, which he pays no more mind to, are four lustrous colors. The colors of lips and nipples; of his sister's eyelids when she turns them inside out; of the dried rose petals in his mother's potpourri; of the skin on the inside of his mouth. The feeling is pleasant. So smooth. He wants to dig his fingers in, but restrains himself.

He looks back at his reflection.

Why does the father wear makeup?

Well, if you know that he's wearing makeup, I suppose it's better to explain why exactly, rather than just leaving it at that. That's how Ray feels, anyway. And it's a funny thing to be caught on that spectrum, between wanting others to know nothing and wanting them to know everything.

Ray was in an accident at a young age. A quick little mistake that any kid could have made, but one that he doesn't *ever* like to talk

about. He wears a prosthetic eyebrow over scar tissue. The right one, as he sees it in the mirror when gluing it on each morning.

But let's get back to the boy. Since we've left, he's taken the makeup on his fingers and smeared it wildly around his tightly closed eyes. The boy looks back into the mirror, eager to see his transformation. Like Mommy and Daddy now, with makeup on. But the face that looks back at him is not a face he likes. He sees not his reflection, but a mimic. Something staring through the glass.

The boy freezes. What has happened? He doesn't know. Has he changed? His own panicked eyes seem to taunt him. Is he now this horror he sees in the mirror? This ghoul? His soul swells up. Please let it be undone! Please! His vision blurs with tears. He wants it to go away! He wants to change back!

The little girl, sitting up straight and trying hard to pay attention (though she can never really understand what that priest is trying to say) hears a soft whimper next to her. She looks over to find her brother playing with her mother's expensive compact! He shouldn't be playing with that. She knows this, but he doesn't. What a chore.

Just when she's about to alert her mother to this transgression, the boy begins to sob. She can't believe it, what a scaredy-cat! She nudges her father and motions for his attention.

Ray looks over and sees his son.

“Scared of his own reflection. Now that's a new low.”

Ray isn't proud to see his son at such a high level of wimpiness, putting on makeup and then scaring himself. He sighs and shakes his head, a display for his daughter's amusement. He looks back to the girl and chuckles quietly with her.

The girl peers up at her handsome father, with his prickly face and mustache that tickles her cheek when he kisses her. Small, frameless glasses that seem to hide his eyes even though she can see right through the lenses.

Her father's brown hair is a shade lighter than the rest of the

family's, but his skinny frame and awkward limbs are just like hers. She enjoys a secret bond with her father. One that is surely understood by both parties. They are on one side, looking at the other two. How silly her little brother is, scared of everything. And her mother never notices what's right in front of her.

Finally, Kay looks over. Last to the party, it seems. How heartless of these two to be laughing at her poor baby boy when he cries! She sweeps him up into her arms as he bursts into tears.

“What's wrong, my love?”

The boy brings the compact up to check his reflection in the mirror. Deep tears, mixed red with pigment, flow down his cheeks.

And the boy cries out for all to hear, “I’M CRYING BLOOD!”

The priest stops his sermon. He looks over the crowd and sees this young boy crying in his mother's arms. His congregation looks back at him, waiting for an answer.

“Is anyone else here today experiencing stigmata?” the priest asks dryly.

A wave of laughter breaks the tension.

“Please, raise a bleeding hand if you are.”

A loud, comfortable laugh. The priest feels success in diverting them all through the awkward moment. He then feels he should get back to it, but he can't remember his place. He thinks about the distraction. How these dramatic, attention-grabbing events seem to always pester and derail—

“You know, this reminds me—and this is something I've been told *not* to say, but I've said it once and I'll say it again—that this *sensationalism* we see on the news, that's right, I'm talking about Reverend James Bruse and his crying statues that we've all surely seen by now on CNN or Fox or whatever it is you watch. Wherever he goes, the Virgin Mary bleeds from her eyes. Now, I'm not saying one thing or the other about that, but ... what I'm saying is, and I know this makes me sound old, maybe you'll think I'm out of touch, but I do believe that TV will rot your brain. And

before it does that, it'll rot your soul! I want to talk about this story we're being fed. It draws from a well that runs deep within us. A desire for proof. Something observable. Proof of God—now that's an oxymoron. Faith. That's what all this is.” The priest gestures for emphasis. “A *faith!* And faith is that which exists in the presence of doubt. It's that which overcomes doubt. Faith without doubt is like fire without fuel. Like an Olympic hurdler without the hurdle. And so, you see our search for proof is misguided. And it's being misguided purposefully by the media! Why? For ratings! It's sensational. It's distracting. You can't look away. And you can't overcome TV when you're watching it, so just do yourself a favor and turn it off.”

The priest seems to have caught that train of thought that eluded him earlier. Or is this a new thing?

“Please open to John 4:12.”

### Chapter 3

What's in John 4:12?

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

### Chapter 4

Ray drops the family off at their apartment. His brown station wagon sits under the long carport, pulled in haphazardly over numbered slots. Kay gets the boy out from the back seat while the girl skips ahead.

“Don't forget the you-know-what.”

“I won't.”



Ray drives to 3466 Mountain Crest Dr.

It's a silly name for a property nearly at sea level. Parking his car at the curb, he takes a glance down the street. The house sits on a small hill in the neighborhood, which allows for a view of the water as you walk up the steps. From there you can see down to a little visage in the distance, between a small dark cottage and a patch of evergreens.

The ocean view is really more of a blue dot, from a specific angle on the steps. It isn't an exciting neighborhood, but it's friendly and well maintained. As Ray thinks through his honest feelings, he prepares a slightly altered version alongside them. One more favorable to the house. And this is the version he speaks of as he walks through the vacant home with his clients, though they seem to grow weary of his relentless commentary.

“Uh-huh ... Wow.”

The young woman seems to have registered his words. He doesn't understand why it feels insincere. There's something odd about everything with these folks. And the way they talk to each other makes Ray feel uncomfortable.

He follows behind, waiting to be needed.

“Babe.” The young woman looks over to her boyfriend. His eyes lock with hers. They seem to understand each other just from this glance. “You feel that?”

“Yeah,” the boyfriend says.

Ray peeks around, trying to catch what it is they're talking about. He looks up for a vent. They continue their tour like this. Bits and pieces. Non-verbal. Vague statements and affirmations of open questions.

On the steps as they leave the house, Ray turns back to speak, timing it just right to stop them at that special spot with the blue dot. He hopes to wrap things up with something positive, but as he opens his mouth the boyfriend notices the house number, which, apparently, is important.

“Babe, the house number.”

“Mmm.”

“Do you see it?”

“Mhmm.”

The two look sick, like the house number has some foul odor only they can smell. The boyfriend with his dyed black hair spiked up. The young woman with her devilish choker and blue eyeshadow. It looks to Ray like they're playing some game of dress-up.

Ray doesn't want to venture any further into their territory, that weird land they hail from.

“Something wrong with the house number?” He couldn't resist.

“Bad aura.”

The young woman states this plainly. As if it were a normal thing to say about a house number. As if she fully expected Ray to just nod along like, *Oh, yes, of course, a bad aura from the house number.*

“I've got a guy for that.”

The couple roll their eyes. He can never tell with these people. Don't they get that he's joking?

## Chapter 1

Don't you mean Chapter 5?

The chapters go to 4, then reset.

What? Why?

Does it matter to you?

It's weird, that's all.

Do you wish me to change it?

No ... it's ok, I guess.

Will you allow me to continue in this way?

Yes. Ok.

## Chapter 2

Kay lays her materials out on the dining table. Large and round. Deep-stained wood. A sturdy single pedestal. The table sits by the window, the window looks out to a grassy area, and the grassy area is where her kids play, just before the steps that lead up to the carport. This is her station. She faces the window now, but she can turn back to peek into the kitchen, or over her shoulder to the living room—and, by a careful network of mirrors, she can even peer around the corner, into the hallway, down to the bedrooms and bathroom.

All her ingredients are laid out before her, prepared and ready to be mixed. Creation at her fingertips. Her glue gun plugged in and heating up. Her delicate lace baggies waiting to be filled. She brings a bowl of black tea to her nose and closes her eyes. She hears her children giggle through the screen of the open window.

Her children. How wonderful. All they need is a stick and some grass. She closes her eyes again as she smells a bowl of orris root, but this time a different sound wanders in through the window, one that plagues her ears. Like a tear in fabric, it's the low snickering of teenagers. Laughing about something. Laughing *at* something. She gets up from the table and walks to the window. Around a brick planter, not too far from her kids, stands a circle of teenagers.

The one with the bleached blonde hair and oversized white tee looks back at her. The rest of the group follows his gaze. He raises his brow and lifts a hand. This is not a wave—not a friendly gesture. He's mocking her. The others around him laugh as Kay

calls out to her children, “Kids, come inside now. It's time to come in.”

But her children disobey. Instead of coming inside, they walk to the window, where Kay stands on the other side of the glass.

“I don't want to come inside.”

“Listen to your mother.”

“But there's nothing to do inside.”

The boy chimes in, “I wanna play outside! I don't wanna go inside!” For some reason he runs in a circle around his older sister.

The teens continue to snicker and look over. Kay tries to ignore them.

“Come inside, you can watch TV. Come on, now.”

“I don't want to watch TV!”

“I don't wanna watch TV!” The boy doesn't fully understand what he's saying, only that he's an echo for his dear sister, the righteous voice of his best interests.

“Yeah, *we* don't wanna watch TV!” The girl stands tall with a pretense of solidarity, knowing full well her supporter is only a mindless sycophant. Something more like an arm of her intention. Just her dumb little brother, a will under her command.

The teens are talking loudly. What about? Something horrible, Kay is sure. She just wants them inside! “I'll let you watch *The Simpsons!*”

The girl and boy drop their jaws, eyes open wide. They look at each other with glee, barely able to believe what they were able to leverage through bad behavior. They run inside the house. Kay looks back. That teen with the bleached hair smiles at her. She closes the curtains.

The children dance in through the front door as Kay turns on the TV. “Simpsons! Simpsons!” they chant together.

Kay pretends to look disappointed, shocked, as she fiddles with the remote. “Oh no! *The Simpsons* aren't on yet!”

But the kids have settled on the blue striped couch. Already their eyes are locked on the dazzling images. Their smiles fade with the bad news, but however much they were let down, they're lifted right back up by ... what's this? Some sort of adventurous duck? A sound comes from the window.

Kay looks away from her kids, who are completely absorbed in the cartoon. She hears the sound again. She walks over.

As she pulls the curtain aside, a wild face jumps out, shaking and contorting. Kay screams and laughter erupts. The boy with the bleached hair looks back at his friends with a smile of devious satisfaction.

“What's wrong, Mommy?” the girl asks.

Kay snaps the curtain shut.

“What happened? What'd you see?” the boy asks.

“Oh, nothing. It was ... a cat. It scared me. That's all.”

“A cat?” The boy gets up. “There's a cat?”

“No, it's gone now. It jumped out from the bushes and ran away.”

The boy keeps walking toward the window, wanting to see for himself, but she catches him at her legs and walks him back to the couch.

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Kay stands before a large pot on the stove. The sun, lower in the sky, shines through the kitchen window above the sink. The counters are covered. Kay always feels she could use more space. She looks through a drawer. Where do these things go? Why don't they stay put?

“Mom.”

Kay hears this, but it doesn't completely register. She keeps

digging.

“Mom, come see.”

Kay returns to the pot with her wooden spoon. “What's that, honey?”

“Come see!”

“Come see what?” Kay is managing many things at once.

“Come see!”

Kay turns, trying not to show her exasperation. “Come see *what?*”

“I cleaned my room!”

“Oh, good!”

“Come see!”

Kay sighs and obliges, following the girl out of the kitchen and toward her bedroom down the hall, but as they walk, Kay catches a peculiar sight. Something seen through the open bathroom door. Action figures set up around the toilet. Their weapons at the ready, pointing toward the bowl, prepared for battle.

The girl leads on, but Kay veers off. She pushes on the bathroom door to find the boy squatting down, trying to balance his Superman figure on the linoleum.

“Hey, cutie-pie. Whatcha doin'?”

The boy doesn't look up, just explains the situation. “I heard noises in the toilet. I think something wants to come out.”

“Noises from the toilet?”

“Voices.”

“*Oh, no.*”

“My guys will protect us. All my guys, they have their weapons, so if something comes out they'll shoot it.”

The girl finds herself alone in her newly cleaned room. She had swung her arms out as she entered, but when she turned around, she saw nothing but an empty door frame. How could her mother have gotten lost along such a simple path?

“You're my little protector!”

“MOOOM!”

Kay snaps around. “What?” And just then, she hears something from the kitchen. That boiling sound, that overflowing sound. Ah, the lid! Kay rushes back into the kitchen.

“Mom ...”

The doorbell rings. The girl looks at her feet.

Hushed whispers at the door. The boy steps out from the bathroom and stands next to the girl. They look toward the entrance. All they can see is their mother's rear. The rest of the view is blocked by their tall, pine entertainment center.

“Who's there?” the boy calls out, but the whispers continue.

“Who's there, Mommy?” the boy asks again.

Kay's head pops back into view. “It's just Daddy.”

“Daddy?”

“Why didn't he just come in?” the girl asks. “Why did he ring the bell?”

“The door was locked.”

“The door was locked? Why was the door locked?” The girl comes out into the living room.

Kay walks from the entrance toward the kids, to a closet in the hall. She opens it up and removes a clean, white bath towel.

“Why are you getting a towel?” the girl asks, sitting on the couch.

“Uh, Daddy dropped his briefcase in the mud. He doesn't want to get mud in the house.” Kay returns to the entrance and holds the

towel to the crack in the door.

“Daddy dropped his briefcase in the mud?” the boy asks, walking out.

Kay doesn't answer.

“Daddy dropped his briefcase in the mud?” the boy asks again.

Ray enters quickly. He's holding a rectangular form underneath the white towel. He looks up at the girl as he passes.

The girl smiles. She knows now what this is. Her father can do that. Just a look and she understands it all. Ray opens the closet next to the bathroom and puts the towel-wrapped object on the floor, then shuts the door.

“I don't want anyone opening this closet, ok?” He wags his finger at both his kids, but his voice is clearly directed at the boy.

“Daddy doesn't want to get mud all over the house,” Kay adds.

The girl smiles wide, in on it now.

Ray and Kay walk into the kitchen. The boy walks toward the closet.

“Don't. Dad said.”

“I just want to see.” The boy gets closer.

“You're going to get mud all over the house.”

“No, I won't. I just want to look.” The boy reaches out his hand.

“There's a monster in there!”

The boy stops.

“That's the real reason. They didn't want to scare you, so they said it was because of the mud, but it's really because of the monster.”

The boy stands frozen, arm hanging.

“They don't want you to open the door because if you do, the



monster will get out!”

The boy's hand recoils, but stops halfway. He thinks. He reaches back out and places his palm flat against the door. His other hand, too, now presses. He positions his feet into a firm stance, preparing to withstand a force from within. He pushes with the full weight of his little body. He wants to run, but he can't! He must stay. For how long? He doesn't know. He can't leave. He must keep the monster inside! He must keep the door closed!

Kay walks out from the kitchen with a stack of plates and sees her boy shaking in front of the closet. She sets the plates down gently on the table, then walks over to her boy and reaches to pick him up.

“No!” the boy screams, and kicks her away.

“Sweetie, sweetie! What's wrong?”

She touches his back. He quivers. Kay slows. Patiently, she speaks to her boy. “Tell me, my love, why are you pushing on the closet door?”

“I have to stop the monster!”

Kay looks sharply over at her daughter. The girl rolls her eyes and gets off the couch. She was only trying to help.

“Oh, I see. Don't worry, my darling. Mommy knows just what to do.”

Kay leaves for a moment. The boy doesn't break his focus. She returns with a padded chair and a wooden bowl of potpourri, then kneels next to the boy. As he looks up at her there, beneath the hallway light—on her knees, but still towering high—she appears to him as like a mountain to which he is the valley. In her shadow, he sees a creature of God, sent to him, made *for* him. Her love has a force, and this force is no little thing.

“Mommy is going to cast a magic spell, ok? It will purify this space and protect us. Can you help Mommy do that?”

The boy thinks seriously, staring off into the carpet for a moment.

He nods his head.

“Ok, sweetie. Thank you. First we must put this chair against the closet door. Can you help Mommy, now?”

Together they guide the chair, slowly, to rest against the door. Kay places the bowl of dried herbs, petals, roots, and spices onto the seat. She pinches a small amount between her fingertips. She raises the dry mixture up high. The boy follows her motions. He sees the power illuminated in her hand. He sees its glowing magic.

Kay sprinkles the ingredients from her fingertips and chants, “Hocus-pocus, dominocus.” As the last bits of potpourri fall, she closes her eyes in meditation. “Ok.” She looks at her boy. “We don't need to worry anymore.”

The boy wipes his nose.

“Come on, let's eat dinner.

—

“Your last day as a five-year-old!” Kay tucks her boy under the covers, where he lies in complete innocence, staring up at her with all the trust in the world. The lights have already been turned out. Bath taken, teeth brushed, pajamas put on, and now finally tucked in. “Someday you're gonna be all grown up.” Kay feels her heart swelling. She doesn't want to cry. It would confuse the boy.

“You're gonna be all grown up. Big and strong. And you won't need your mommy anymore.”

“I'll need you, Mommy.”

Kay cries.

“My sweetie.” She kisses his forehead, always softly but tonight even more so.

Kay walks back into her bedroom, where Ray is sitting on a chair in the corner, taking off his socks. A long mirror hangs on the inside of the bedroom door. Kay moves the door to a specific angle. She sits on her side of the bed, the side closest to her kids, and checks the standing mirror next to Ray. The network allows

her sight to bounce off the standing mirror, into the hanging mirror, and down through the hall.

“Ray.”

Ray snaps his sock off and whips it into the laundry basket. He looks up to see his wife's expression, an expression that says it all. He can see the whole conversation laid out clearly before him. He knows how it will go, and so he doesn't have *that* conversation. Instead he reacts to his own imagination.

“I'm sorry, ok? I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.” Always, Ray gestures wildly as he speaks.

“Oh, it's ok. But I believe in you.”

“I'm just not—I don't know. I didn't do it! If I could've, I would've.” Ray holds his hand out, palm open, as if to display his point like an object beside him.

“It's ok. Really.” Kay advances toward him as he continues to argue through his own thoughts.

“You know I'm trying.”

“I know. It's just that ... you set a date. And I didn't want that date to pass without us talking about it. But that's ok.”

Ray feels that if he hears his wife say it's ok one more time, he'll ... do nothing.

## Chapter 4

Kay wakes in darkness. Why is she awake? She tries to remember. She looks over at the red-lighted numbers on the digital alarm clock. Not morning yet. She looks up to the popcorn ceiling, thinking. She checks the standing mirror to view the hall. The closet door is open, her potpourri spilled.

Can I ask you a question?

Sure.

Have you ever imagined having sex with your mother?

What? No!

Would you if I asked you to?

*No!*

Ha.

Kay sits up. Did the boy open the closet?

I'm sorry, why did you just ask me that question?

Whispers.

Whispers?

Alien whispers! Kay hears them. Inside the house! "Ray," she chokes out. "Ray." But he doesn't wake. Something falls in the living room. "Ray." Her voice is like a little squeak. "Ray!" She grabs his wrist under the covers. "Someone's in the house!"

Ray leaps up!

Hello?

"Ray!" Kay shouts after Ray as he runs out of the bedroom. She hears the front door slam, running steps off the porch.

Silence.

"Aww ..." Ray's voice is calm. Kay steps out of the room. "No ..." Ray is standing alone, in the dark, in his underwear. She flips the light. Her green lamp is lying on the floor, knocked off the end table. Ray turns around and shoots his hand toward the entertainment center, "They took the VCR!"

Kay looks back at the open closet door.

Ray follows her attention. "No." He runs to the closet.

Kay arrives at his side. There, on the closet floor, is nothing but a

white towel.

Kay looks up at her husband. “They took the Nintendo.”

## Chapter 1

This is a park in the early '90s, I'm not sure if you can imagine it. Trimmed green grass. Curving sidewalks sometimes stained wet by sprinklers and turned a deeper gray. Brown cement benches where boxed lunches are shared and pinatas are stuffed. It would be ordinary to find a styrofoam dart, all alone, with its bright yellow shaft and blue rubber nub. You'd know some kid would be along soon enough to find it and reload. It's here we find a group of children running around trees, skipping over flower patches and chasing each other between rows of ligustrum hedges—the green and white leaves like some wonderful backdrop to their little lives.

The boy runs in this group. And so does the girl. It's the boy's sixth birthday party and they've had it after school. He got to invite all his tiny friends. The girl got to invite a friend too. And there they all are, playing together, and here we are, on the boy—and the boy is alone, standing in the shade of a tree, looking at his friends as they circle around him. He's planning his attack. The boy is it!

He's a fast runner, but he finds it hard to predict how his friends might elude his touch. He runs to where they are when he sees them, but by the time he's there they're always somewhere else! It's a very challenging game, mentally. And he furrows his brow in focus, intent on improving his methods.

He sees a large bush behind one of his friends. An idea forms. If he runs straight at his friend, his friend will have nowhere to go. No, wait. His friend could run in two directions, left or right. But maybe that was still a good plan? Limiting the options? Better for his victim to have only two routes of escape than a broad array.

The boy sprints toward his target, top speed, hands aerodynamically flat as he chops through the air with each leap.

The plan seems to be working. His friend doesn't know which way to turn. Running away is easy, but trying to choose between two equal options can be confusing. The added intellectual labor works like a mental ambush, and it's enough to let the boy gain ground.

The friend jumps to the side at the last second, dodging completely out of the boy's way. This is entirely unexpected. By the boy's calculation, his outwardly stretched arms were to land on his friend at just that moment—he was relying on this anticipated impact to help him slow, and finish with a balanced step. Now, instead, he finds himself falling. And is he falling freely onto soft grass? No. And why not? Because of that very same thing he had sought to use to his advantage. What he thought was playing in his favor. The bush. What a blunder!

Kay sits on a folding lawn chair brought from home, just a step away from the bench covered with ketchup-stained white paper plates and half-eaten hotdogs. A superhero-themed birthday cake waits with its sticky seal still unbroken. An assortment of brightly wrapped gifts. Gift bags. Mothers' purses. Potato salad. A box of plastic utensils. And the star of it all, which has become some topic of great debate among the parents: an opened case of bottled waters.

The boy lifts himself up from the dark soil beneath the bush. He's not sure if he's hurt. The situation was so dramatic, he needs a moment to recalibrate. He stands on his feet and looks down at his body, trying to assess what has happened. He sees that the fabric around the knees of his pants has become damp and brown—not a problem. His hands feel dirty. He landed on his hands—he stuck them out to shield himself, he remembers. He brings them up and sees that they are covered in soil. He flips them over to inspect his palms. What's this? Beneath a clump of dirt? Something's not right. A translucent white fray. A deep color.

“I just don't think anyone—not anyone in their right mind, I mean”—Ray points around at the group of parents, singling out those that go against him—“is gonna *buy* water. I mean, *water*? It's basically free!”

The boy pushes aside the dirt to get a clearer view. Yep. It's just as he feared. Blood. Worse than that, he can now see inside his own

hand! A terrible soft pink is revealed under the familiar outside layer, scraped off by ...

The boy scans the dirt and sees a sprinkler head previously hidden to him. He imagines his hand flying forcefully into this object. He can see how its sharp plastic edge would have cut through him. He can't stand the thought, yet he can't steer his mind from it. He stares into this cavern of himself, consumed by its horror. Then he regains control. He remembers what to do. The instructions for this situation are there, programmed into him. He turns and looks across the horizon. His mother! The boy begins to run.

Kay feels something stir as she watches Ray make his case. A shift in the air. She looks to where her children are playing. Where's the boy? Striped green collared shirt. There! She sees him! He's running to her, arms up. Kay rises and rushes to him. Their paths collide, back from a broken union. Kay holds the boy in her arms, takes him to the table, and grabs a bottled water.

The panic the boy had felt only a moment ago has changed. He still feels agitated, but it's different now that he's in his mother's arms. These dark emotions no longer attack his soul. Instead they are offered up for purification. Displayed outwardly so that they might be seen and soothed. As Kay pours a cleansing water over his hand, the boy winces, and this wince is received by grace. Acknowledged with a kiss and a coo. Kay blows on his clean skin to dry it. The boy doesn't like how all this attention is being drawn to the last thing he wants to think about, but he remains strong with the knowledge that his mother will guide him through it, to the end.

Ray walks over as Kay finishes applying the bandage. She sets the boy down and scoots him off with a little rub on the back and a pat to the rump. The boy is back in the game.

"See, Ray. It's convenient," Kay contests.

Ray immediately flails his arms out, erupting in response. "I'm not saying it's not convenient! Put anything in a bottle and it can be convenient."

"Well, so you admit that it *is* convenient."

“But all that plastic being wasted? Every time a person wants a drink of water, they’re gonna throw away a whole plastic bottle?”

Some support from the crowd of parents. “Yeah,” and “That’s right.”

“But what if we didn’t have that bottle here? What would I have done?”

“There’s a drinking fountain right over there!” Ray thrusts his hand out in front of him, extending it out so maximally that his shoulder is lifted up to his ear. The crowd follows Ray’s gesture to see a beautifully flowing stream of water, catching light like crystals from the sun. A line of kids waits for this rejuvenating replenishment. The gift of which none can live without.

“What if there was no fountain? Or if it were too far away?”

“I’ve got a sports bottle filled with water in the car.”

“Well,” Kay resigns to her singular position, “it’s convenient. People like convenient.”

—

Candles blown out and cake passed around, the crowd of invitees stands in passive viewing as the boy opens his presents. A dark-skinned Korean child with a puffy, black, unzipped jacket stands next to the boy, watching him open the gift he helped his parents choose. He’s so excited that he’s almost climbing onto the boy, jumping up and down next to him. The boy’s focus is narrow. He wants to know what will be revealed when he tears through the wrapping.

He fears a bad gift, recalling the year before, when his aunt had placed his irregularly shaped present inside an old box, the sides of which displayed a product for women’s hair. He had cried when he opened it, but found, just a moment later, that a beautiful castle lamp was waiting inside.

An evil face looks up at the boy. It holds an expression of pain frozen in time. A grimace of physical anguish caused by a metal contraption drilled into its skull. Its naked body is bright red with



terrible bumps, something pushing against its skin from the inside. Somehow, through the eyes, the boy can see that this doll is deriving a perverted pleasure from its brutal existence. Thrilled in its plastic encasement. Waiting to burst out!

“Vac-Man!” the Korean child screams, and takes the toy from the boy. Other parents laugh. The boy doesn’t seem to mind.

“Vac-Man is Stretch Armstrong’s nemesis.” Marc, Ray’s older brother, always seems to know the stupidest shit. “You can suck the air out of him.”

“Do you own this toy?” Ray asks, genuinely concerned.

“No ... I just think it’s cool.” Marc shrugs.

The Korean child has opened the gift for the boy and is teaching him how to use it. He takes a pump and sticks it into a socket at the doll’s temple. Then he sucks the air from its head. The skin on the doll shrinks with each pump, until the balls inside look ready to pop out. The child pulls at the doll's limbs, stretching it to nightmarish proportions, then holds it up for the boy. “See?”

“Here, why don’t you open Daddy’s present? Now, I’ve got another big surprise for you later, ok? This is just your present for the party, got it?” The boy nods. Ray hands his son a little bag and the boy quickly removes a new set of Superman pajamas! Just like the real thing! They even come with an attachable red cape! He wants to put them on so badly, but knows he can’t get naked in front of everyone. He wiggles in his seat not knowing how to express his joy!

Marc grabs Ray stiffly by the arm and drags him outside the circle.

“What?” Ray huffs.

“You said you were getting him a Nintendo!”

“Well, change of plans.”

“Change of plans? But I got him Zelda! You didn’t think to tell me?”

“Zelda? What’s Zelda?”

“It’s a game! For the Nintendo!”

Ray looks back at the table. The boy reaches for something small and square. Marc runs over as the boy lifts it in his hands.

“Don’t open that!”

The boy looks up, but continues his motions. He slides a finger between a flap in the wrapping. Marc flusters.

“There’s a spider on it!”

The boy’s shoulders shoot up to his neck. He shrieks as he tosses the gift onto a plate of potato salad. The other children whisper affirmations of the boy’s quick reaction.

Marc lifts the present, pinching carefully at the corner, and wipes it with a napkin.

“Uhh, don’t worry. I’ll make sure it’s safe.” Marc storms back to Ray. “Now I don’t have a gift for him!”

“We were burgled, ok?”

“What?” Marc’s eyes open up wide under the red bill of his cap. Any anger he had before is gone. “Terri!” Marc calls out to his wife and motions her over with a frantic hand, “Get over here!” Terri rushes to him.

## Chapter 2

Kay wakes in darkness.

She can’t breathe.

She can’t move.

### Chapter 3

What happened to Kay?

Well, you know, it's something that happens to people. People that have been violated.

She's traumatized?

Kay doesn't know what's happening to her and neither do we. But she wakes in the night, each night after the incident, and she can't describe the feeling. She doesn't know what it is. She doesn't know what to say. And so she just says ...

"I'm having trouble sleeping."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"I think I'd like to take the kids and stay with Marc and Terri for a few days."

"No. Nuh-uh."

"They offered."

"Come on, Kay. Don't do this."

"Ray ... I don't feel safe. I don't feel safe here anymore."

"We're fine. It was just some kids."

"You're not listening."

"I am listening! We're fine!"

"I'm not fine."

"Just give it some time."

"That's all I've been doing—giving it time! You said we were gonna be out of this apartment. You said we were gonna have a house! You said you'd have your own business!"

“I said I was sorry!”

“I want to move.”

“What!?”

“Ray. I want to move. I can’t stay here anymore. And I’ve given it so much time.”

“Well, we can’t. We can’t just *move*. We can’t afford it.”

“But we’ve been saving.”

“I’m not making enough.”

“Because you’re giving more than half your commission to Roger! That was the plan, remember? You’d go out on your own. Make more.”

“I told you, I can’t! Not now.” Ray stands from the dining table.

“We can borrow money from Marc.”

“No.”

“Ray, he’s always offering!”

“*No.*”

“But, Ray, he’s got all that money and you know he wants—”

“Fine. Fine! Go with Marc, then!” Ray steps away from the table. “You’d rather have it all, right!? Rather have it all. Well,” he spins around and waves his hands, “*NEWSFLASH*, Kay! You married a dud!”

“It’s not about that!”

“So you think it’s true!?”

“YOU think it’s true!”

“Fine. Go. Take the kids. I gotta get to work.”

Ray grabs his wide-bottom, spill-proof, ceramic, gift-shop “Don’t

talk to me until I've had my coffee" Garfield mug, and heads out the door.

—

"All right, everybody. Announcement. Come on. Everyone. Phil. Stuart. Shut up." Roger claps his hands at the front of the room. Ray looks around from the back of the crowd. "All right, listen up. We all got our investments, and we all got our clients and their investments, and we gotta think long term here. We're not in it for the quick buck. We're here to build wealth. That's what we do. But I know some of you have been talking about that quick buck, and look here, buddy, that's not gonna happen. And if it does, you can be sure as shit you'll be out on your ass faster—well, it'll be fast, you can bet your ass on that."

"Roger, what the hell are you talking about?" asks Abram.

"What am I talking about? I'll tell you what the hell I'm talking about. The goddamn Marina condos! And their goddamn developers who refuse to play ball!"

A few supportive claps from around the office. Ray tries to pinpoint who's clapping, but he can't.

"After all we tried to do to work with them, they went ahead and did what we all told 'em not to. Now they come back and ask *us* for help! No goddamn—not a chance!"

Ray claps once. No one else does.

"This whole development is bringing down property value. It already has. And it'll continue to do so if we don't do something about it. We tried to tell 'em! We tried! But they wouldn't listen. Look, we got our clients to protect, we got our own investments to protect—hell, we got our *views* to protect! That's the bottom line! NO WORKING WITH THE MARINA."

Roger returns to his office and slams the door.

"Who would want to buy a condo, anyway?" Ray asks Abram.

"Oh, people will buy anything."

“But a condo? What’s the point? It’s not even really yours.”

“Ever hear of eminent domain?”

“I mean, isn’t the reason a person buys a house in the first place because they want to get away from everyone else? That’s how I sell them, anyway. Show ’em the boat, sell ’em the anchor.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ray leans on Abram’s desk. “People think having their own home is gonna be this great adventure, you know? But they just end up getting moored. So you show them a boat, but what you’re really selling them is an anchor.”

“Jeez, Ray. That’s grim. Maybe that’s why you’re not selling.”

“I’m selling.”

“Sure, Ray.” Abram swivels back to his desk and continues filling out a paper form.

## Chapter 4

The boy sits on Kay’s lap, playing with his Superman action figure. The edge of the table is transformed into the side of a large building. Superman is lifting with his great strength, keeping it from toppling.

“I really think you should give it a chance. Look, I’ve got you here—I’m not gonna lie, I did envision a sort of trap when Terri told me you were coming.”

“Oh, Marc.”

“But please let me explain. Please. It’s good and I know I can change your mind. Will you at least entertain me?”

“I already told you. You’ve tried this before.”

“But look, I’ve got this, and I think maybe, just maybe, it’ll allow you to see things in a different light. If you give it a try.”

Kay sighs. “Oh, ok.”

Marc hands Kay a large book. She looks at the cover. Some poorly drawn rabbits. *Life in Hell*, by Matt Groening.

“I know you don’t like letting your kids watch *The Simpsons*, and I get that—you’ve got a duty to protect their little eyes—but Ray says you won’t even let him watch it and I just gotta say, like, there’s more to it. It’s good! It’s really good! And there’s a cool humor there and I think it all might become a little clearer if you get to know the artist behind the show.”

Kay opens the book and flips through the pages. She doesn’t like that Marc is insinuating her dislike of *The Simpsons* comes from a dim view. As if she can’t see clearly.

“Just try reading a few. And keep an open mind.”

Kay falls arbitrarily onto a page in the middle. She spreads the cover wide to get a clear view, and she makes sure to show Marc how *clear* her view is so that he won’t accuse her of not giving it a proper chance when she eventually tells him what she thinks.

She reads the title of the comic, “The Los Angeles Way of Death,” and immediately rolls her eyes. She doesn’t like this and she doesn’t like that she’s being made to do this. Her gaze flies past the typical gruesome and vulgar humor Marc enjoys in the same way that he enjoys all things sick and twisted. She lands on the last two frames.



“Oh, I don’t like this!” Kay closes the book and tosses it down.

“Well,” Marc pulls the book to his side of the table and sits back in his chair, “*I think it’s funny.*” He lets out a sigh and gives Kay a defeated smile, one that admits only to losing the battle, not the war. He looks over at the boy, flying his Superman figure through the air. “Hey, why don’t we rent a movie? Huh, bud? We can get whatever you want!”

The boy smiles wide and turns to his mom for approval.

“I mean, as long as it’s ok with your mommy.” Marc looks up at Kay. Honest mistake.

—

Kay wakes in morning light, snuggled up in a white down comforter with pink sheets, her children around her, limbs cast out, tangled in each other. She lies in stillness, shedding a figurative tear over this beautiful moment of peace having to be disrupted by something as coarse as a full bladder.

The pain she feels is acute, but she doesn’t want to get up. She doesn’t want to leave this warm, sleepy hollow. She tries to isolate the pain in her mind. Put it in a box. Hide the box. For a moment, she can forget. The pain subsides. She takes a deep breath and tries to savor the relief like a tightrope walk of willed ignorance. Nope. She has to pee.

Kay peels away the soft, sticky limbs of her children and gets out of bed.



She walks down the wide hallway, across the octagonal, red terracotta tile with little blue accents that Marc had laid in last year. The home is still, somehow slower than the rest of the world. Soft light pours in from the many windows.

Kay stops at the end of the hallway as it meets the open concept, and takes in a large yawn. She looks around at the oversized TV on display at the center of the sunken living room, surrounded by long black speakers, encased in a cool gray entertainment center that displays framed pictures of Marc and Terri—of them in Colorado with colored beanies atop their heads; on a boat during an Alaskan tour; together at a bar with all their college friends—and toys. Oh, the toys. They make Kay uncomfortable. How could a grown man see fit to decorate his home with toys? Still in their boxes. Sitting there like some monument to juvenility.

Kay walks to the kitchen, following the smell of coffee. There's Marc—an early riser, it seems—completely ready for work. He's not drinking coffee, just sitting at the bar in his kitchen with a newspaper in his hand.

“Do I smell coffee?” Kay asks Marc as he looks up from the paper. He jumps off his stool and grabs her a mug, selecting one, blue and curvy, from the cupboard where others of the set wait to be needed.

“I thought you might like some.” Marc grabs the pot and fills her cup. “Cream? Sugar?”

“Do you have half-and-half?”

Marc darts to the fridge. Kay feels something's off. Should she be drinking coffee? Oh, her bladder!

“I'll be right back.” Kay skips down the hall.

She plunks herself down and squirts out a stream of warm urine. It sprays forcefully from her urethral opening, splattering against the inside of the toilet bowl.

Ok.

What?

Nice description.

Oh ... are you one of *those* people? Do you cover your ears when you hear the word *VA-GI-NA*?

No, but you can just say she pees.

This is an intimate moment with Kay. It's important to know her, genitalia and all. She rolls up a wad of toilet paper, less than she's used to at home with her cheap tissue, and reaches between her legs. She starts at the top and wipes down, the way her mother taught her, the way she taught her little girl. Pretty soon she'll be having to explain her daughter's reproductive organs to her. Why she feels pleasure when she rubs her crotch across a surface. What Mommy and Daddy did to create her. She sees her daughter inspecting it in the bath, stretching apart her labia, craning her neck for a peek inside.

The counter in the bathroom is long, with the entire wall above it covered in mirrored panels. She feels she can take her time here. In a crystal bowl on the counter, she sees decorative glass gems, black and blue. She wonders if they serve a purpose. She pumps a glob of liquid hand soap out from a sturdy ceramic dispenser next to one marked on its front with 'Lotion,' in some curvy, elegant script. The smell that rises to her nose as she lathers the soap around her hands is mature. A refined scent. She'll have to ask Terri what it is.

She returns to the kitchen, but Marc is gone. She hears him at the foyer and walks over, finding him as he puts on his sneakers at a bench by their double doors.

"I gotta get going. *Mi casa es su casa.*"

"Thank you, Ray. *Marc, I mean.*"

"Awww," Marc tilts his head joyfully to the side. "Always on your mind, eh?"

"Oh, just habit, I think."

"When I get home, maybe tonight you and I can talk some more about what's going on?"

“Sounds good. And thank you so much for this.”

“It’s what it’s all for,” Marc says as he stands and opens the door.

“I mean that.”

—

Ray is vibrating. On a nervous edge. He wobbles his leg and taps a hand on his knee. Sitting in the office he’s sent many of his clients to, on the chair they must have sat in, now there himself, waiting for approval.

“I’m sorry, Ray.”

“It’s ok.” Ray holds a hand up, palm out, letting it linger, as if to say *stop with that nonsense*.

“You know, I’d have this whole application done by now if I could just use a pen and paper. Don’t know why we had to chuck out a perfectly good system.” The loan officer on the other side of the desk hunches insecurely over his computer monitor. The new setup has completely taken over his desk. He has his pointer fingers stuck out like horns of the Devil as he slowly inputs each character, copying from a form Ray filled out by hand. “No. What happened? Ah, where’d it go!?”

Ray looks away. He sees a group of fresh faces down the hall, standing around a water cooler.

“Shelly!” the loan officer shouts over his shoulder. “Ray, I’m sorry. Just need a bit of help.” He’s trying to play it cool, but Ray can see his cheeks are flushed. Shelly walks over.

“I had this form up here on the monitor and then it just disappeared!”

“Ok, take your mouse and—”

“Hold on.” A powerhouse this man was, a staple of the community, now needing a focused moment just to position his hand. “I don’t see the arrow.”

“Put your mouse on the mousepad.”

The man looks down and sees that he's pulled the mouse out too far. It's gone off the pad. Ah, this damned thing!

"Give it a little wiggle. There, you see it?" Shelly points to a spot on the monitor, somewhere hidden from Ray's perspective.

"Oh, ok. There it is."

Ray crosses his legs and looks to the corner of the room. Trying to give this man some space, trying to save him from embarrassment.

"Now, just pull it down to the bottom of the screen and there, you see that? Click there."

A sound of a single click, pushed out awkwardly. The loan officer looks back up at Ray, hoping a nice quip might come to him at this moment. Something that would relieve the tension. Unite Ray back onto his side. The side where they can together look at this cumbersome joke of corporate "innovation." But Ray's eyes aren't there to meet him. Good thing, anyway. He had nothing to say.

—

Ray calls home from a payphone in front of a grocery store, one that he doesn't regular. His thoughts turn inward as it rings. He could have called his brother's place, but he's hoping to hear his wife pick up at their apartment, her soft voice. She's back from her brief escape, returning apologetically. Or is he calling home because he knows he'll get the machine? Maybe it's easier to do it as a message. Was it romantic? He imagines himself saying, shocked, "Didn't you get my message?" Well, whatever he's doing, he's doing it now, he reasons as the answering machine plays through the family greeting.

"I got a loan, Kay. I'm doing it. I'm gonna rent an office. I'm gonna get set up, Kay, I'm doing it for you. It's all for you. I love you, so just hang tight, ok?" Ray pauses. Is that all he has to say? He was imagining something more ... triumphant. He realizes the dead airtime will be heard on the other end, revealing his slow mental process. He hangs up hurriedly, then stands at the phone thinking about what he's just done. He left a message for his wife, who he knows isn't home, and he'll be returning at the end of the

day, likely before her, to ... check his own message? Oh, God. What is he doing? He can't start his own business! He can't even make a phone call right!

No. He has to. For Kay.

—

Terri sits with the kids, around the sunken living room. She's brushing the girl's hair. The girl is sitting on the curved steps, running her fingers through the long, gray carpet weaves. The boy is lying on his belly with his Superman figure in front of the sliding doors that lead out to the backyard. The world is dark behind the glass.

Marc sits at the dining table with Kay. A yellow light hangs low above them.

"I'm sorry, Kay. That sounds really hard."

Kay pulls her chin down and holds her shoulders. She doesn't want her kids to see, if she cries. "I'll be fine. I'll get over it. I just needed a little something."

"Kay, you can stay as long as you like. We love having you guys here, you know that."

"I know, Marc. Thank you." Kay holds back a surge of emotion.

"I know." Marc reaches out and places a hand around hers. Kay looks up at him. How could she ever think anything bad about this wonderful man? "We're gonna sort this out, ok? Right now. What is it you need? Just tell me and it's done."

"It's not that simple. Ray, he ..." Kay wonders if she's overstepping some bounds. Who better to talk to about this? Who better a listener for her problems? But she feels like she's trading inside information, a transaction for her own benefit. Though, isn't this a benefit for all?

Marc sees Kay thinking and he knows what about. It's always difficult, asking for things. People have all these different rituals. He noticed this in college when he left home for the first time and

met others from around the country, some classmates even from around the world. He knows that, with all the variety there is out there, there's no culture that can do this easily. Negotiate for love. "Kay, I'm going to write a check right now for five thousand dollars."

"No, Marc."

Marc starts to rise from his chair. "I'm getting my checkbook."

Kay catches his arm. "No, Marc, you don't understand. Ray won't accept it."

Marc stops halfway out of his chair, looking back at Kay. "But I'm his older brother."

"Sit back down, Marc."

Marc settles back into his seat. "What's mine is *his*." He looks over at Terri, holding the girl up high in her arms, swinging her around as the boy chases at her feet. "And yours, and the kids, and, of course, my wife—"

"I understand, Marc." Kay looks him in the eyes. "I know." She nods her head.

Marc looks down at the table. They both sit in silence, taking an extended moment, thinking.

"Hey, there's bingo night tonight. Thursday night."

"What?"

"Bingo. Have you ever been?"

"Yeah, once or twice."

"Well, you know they have a special cash prize for triple bingo, right?" Marc raises the volume of his voice as he speaks.

"Whaddya say, Kay? How about playing some bingo?"

Terri and the kids look over at the sudden change of atmosphere, but the topic of bingo isn't enough to keep their attention.

“You want to play bingo? Right now?” Kay asks.

“I’m feeling lucky. Are you feeling lucky? Like you might win a big cash prize tonight?”

Kay’s mouth pops open. It finally clicks. She can’t believe it. What an exciting idea! Oh, but, no, she’d have to lie. She can’t do that.

“But Thursday night? Won't *The Simpsons* be on?”

Terri calls out from the living room with an exhausted breath. She’s on all fours. “I’ll tape it for you if you guys wanna go play bingo.”

“Baby, what would I do without you?”

Terri slides the children off of herself as she stands, short blond hair a mess, and considers the question. She raises both her shoulders and lifts her hands. “Die?”

—

Ray doesn’t know what to do, not really. No, he does know what to do. It’s simple, remember? He’s been planning it. With Kay. The names they came up with. Even talking about how they’d decorate the office. Kay said flowers. She said they’d make people feel welcomed.

Maybe Abram would know what to do. That guy looks like he’d know. Is that because he knows or just because he looks like he knows? How does a person look like they know? Ray wonders if he should get a new suit. Wait, a new suit? Flowers? Think, Ray! Think!

He’ll get a paper. There’ll be listings in there. Listings of offices for rent. Ray buys a paper from a machine on the sidewalk he’s been practically speed-walking down for the last ... Ray looks up. Jeez, he’s walked far. Dammit, it’ll take forever to get back to the car.

Ray opens the paper. Might as well do this now, he thinks. He opens to the classifieds and starts from the top. Dang, all that

money just to sit around in a room and do nothing? No, think like a winner, you'll be making deals, greeting new clients. Walk-ins? Would people ever just walk into his office? Ray looks around, wondering if the people he sees sharing the sidewalk, busy about their day, would ever walk into his office.

He starts to imagine it, like a cartoon. "Hello. We would like to buy a house. Can you help us?" They'd ask. "Why, yes, I can," he'd say, in his new suit, flowers everywhere. He thinks he'd better just call the first place he sees that's cheap and nearby. Stick to the plan. Let the plan take you forward.

### OFFICE - FOR RENT

LARGE OFFICE + RECEPTION. CLOSE TO FREEWAY.  
THIRD FLOOR. CALL FOR SHOWING.

Ray crosses the street to a payphone. Shoot, he doesn't have change. He looks around for a shop that might change a dollar. Vegan Cafe? They have a whole cafe to themselves now? Ray walks inside.

The atmosphere hits Ray hard, like a slingshot into another dimension. But it feels safe and the large front windows make escape feel easy. Fresh green plants in pots, a down-to-earth decor. The music he could do without, but he doesn't necessarily *not* like it. The young woman with a shaved head and nose ring—who he assumed, for some reason, would have an attitude toward him—welcomes him with an open kindness.

"Oh, I just wanna change a dollar."

"Sure! I can do that for you." The woman is spritely. She takes his dollar and changes it out with a peppy enthusiasm. Then what is she trying to accomplish with that look?

"This is a nice place. I've never seen it here."

"Oh, I just opened last month."

Ray balks, then realizes his balk was seen. Likely interpreted ... correctly. "I'm sorry, I just thought, you're so young and you look more like"—Ray manages to see ahead one step, that he was



planning to say “model,” not that he found her attractive, just that she was pretty and symmetrical, chic in a tank, great rack—“an *artist* than a business owner.”

The girl smiles, “Why not both? I like to express myself. And this business expresses a big part of me.”

“And the money?”

“It’s doing ok. Enough to stay afloat, and that’s all I need. There’s a strong vegan community here, a lot of young people, like me. Plus they make it easy for new businesses to open downtown. It’s part of a revitalization effort.”

“You mean you get a discount?”

“Yeah, basically.”

Ray looks up to think, then sees the menu and thinks about the menu instead. He’s pretty hungry, actually. “Hey, what would you recommend for a guy like me?” An adventurous spirit suddenly takes hold of Ray. “Actually, heck, give me the most vegan thing you got!”

“Um, technically everything’s the same level of vegan?”

Ray lowers his eyes and wags a finger at the young woman. “You know what I mean.” For some reason the woman blushes. Or is she angry with him?

“Ok. I think you should try our mashed peas. They’ll blow your mind.”

“Sold!”

—

“Ray, guess what!? You’re not gonna believe this. I went out to play bingo with Marc and I won! Triple bingo! I got five thousand dollars! Ray, I’m sure that’s enough with our savings—and I was thinking, that place you’ve been having trouble selling, that would be perfect! Don’t you think? It’d be easy, the seller’s your client. We could get a good deal and move quick! Just think about it, ok?”

Or just do it and don't think! Oh, Ray. Things are gonna work out, I know it."

Kay hangs up the phone and turns to Marc. "Ok, I left him a message."

—

Ray is slouched hard on the blue-striped sofa in his living room. He's staring up at the ceiling. Why didn't he answer the phone? It was right there. Sometimes he feels like he can't will his body. Five thousand dollars! That's pretty neat, but the house? That comes *later*. Business first, right? But isn't the whole point of the business to make his wife happy? And doesn't she need a new home to be happy? He's on his feet. Ok, I guess I'm standing now, he thinks.

He walks to the phone, picks it up, and dials. It's like he doesn't know what he's doing until after it's done. Like he's watching a story unfold, a story in which he is the actor. Please don't pick up.

"This is Frank!"

"Frank, hey, it's—"

"Who's a good boy? There you go."

"Frank?"

"Yeah."

"It's Ray."

"Oh, hey, Ray! Got some good news for us, I hope!"

"Uh, yes, well, actually, I've found you a buyer."

"That's fantastic! Oh, honey, Ray's found a buyer! Thank God, Ray. We're itching to set sail! So what's the offer?"

Ray didn't mean to do this slow reveal, but he thinks it might be working in his favor. He's got them excited. They're eager to leave. He knows they'd be willing to accept much lower than they were asking. Should he say he's the buyer? Or should he give a

number first and see how they react?

“Sixty thousand.”

“Oh ... Honey, sixty thousand. What do you think? Ray, what kind of buyer is this? Nice family?”

“The nicest.”

“He says it’s a nice family.” Ray hears some garbled reactions, but he can understand the tone. They’ll accept. Ah, he should have gone lower.

“Let’s do it, Ray.”

—

And just like that, everything changed. Terri and Kay helped the kids pack their rooms while Marc and Ray loaded out the furniture into a rented truck.

Ray found an office. Somehow he knew how to get a tax deal on a space downtown.

Kay worries. She shouldn’t second-guess Ray’s business judgements, but downtown? Really? It’s so crummy, and scary after dark. She fears Ray might give a bad impression to potential clients, that people will be put off by the poor location, that he made a bad choice.

## Chapter 1

Ray unlocks the door as Marc waits behind him in a light rain. He’s worried the lock will be tricky, something he’s come to associate with a bad space, but it glides right through.

They enter into a dim room. Not much light coming in through the single window. It’s not clean—somewhat depressing, actually. The last person didn’t totally clear out.

“Are you keeping this furniture?” Marc asks.

“Yeah, why not? Less money I have to spend.”

“It looks a little dated. That desk behind the door, is that where you’re going to work?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is that where you’re gonna leave it?”

Ray looks back at the desk. He can’t imagine why he’d need to change it. Worked for the last guy. “Sure.”

“Ok, great. Well, I’ve got a surprise for you, then. Stay right here, I’ll be back.” Marc pops out.

Ray walks through the door into his office. Should he move the desk? The way it’s set up now has him facing the entry. He considers the way that might make a client feel. There’s something oppressively direct about it. Like he’s the principal. Maybe if he has it to the side, it will be more egalitarian. The orientation then wouldn’t come with the weighted connotations of front and back. Things would appear fairer side-to-side.

Ray lifts one end of the desk and walks it over, rotating ninety degrees. The top drawer glides open. He goes around to close it and sees a pen inside. “Shirley’s Towing.” He tosses the pen back in and tries the drawer underneath. A lone sticky note. “Call Carl.” He tries the bottom drawer, but it sticks, only coming out halfway.

Ray gets down on his knees and reaches an arm in. He feels something there. A crumpled paper? No, it’s thick, and glossy. He bangs the side of the desk with his free hand and wiggles it loose.

Ears click. Blood surges. Ray feels his focus tunnel in cartoonish exaggeration. Round. Perky. A *pop* and *texture*. He looks at the young woman displaying them. Blond, frizzy perm. Tossed around a bit. Ray looks into her eyes. They welcome him, call *to* him. She sees Ray. She sees herself. She sees Ray seeing her see herself.

“Ok, Ray. Here it is!”

Ray shoves the magazine back into the drawer and slams it shut. He doesn't get up.

Marc places a large, apparently heavy, cardboard box onto the desk and reaches his hands inside. "This here is your new friend. Allow me to introduce you two." Marc pulls out a computer. "Amiga, Ray. Ray, Amiga."

"No, Marc," Ray pleads. "I don't know how to use that thing."

"And that's what these are for." Marc removes three sizable books:

*Windows 3.1 for Dummies*

*Mastering QuickBooks*

*Amiga 3000 User Manual*

Marc looks around. "You moved the desk. Huh. Looks better this way."

Ray stands cautiously. "I can't take this. How much did it cost?"

"This is my old setup. Just bought a new one. Figured you could use it. Though I did buy you this." Marc holds up a boxed CD ROM. "QuickBooks. Trust me, Ray. This will make things a whole lot easier."

"Easier? Are you trying to make me look stupid? I can't understand this stuff!"

"It's ok! And you don't have to read all these books. It's just a resource to have in case you get stuck."

"But a pen and paper is all I need. What am I gonna do with this?"

"It's a computer, Ray. It's like a toy. Just have fun!"

## Chapter 2

Kay stands in her garden, finally. After all these years dreaming.

Here she is. The grass has grown long. Rose bushes create a garden wall. They're unruly, the roses. Red roses. She wants to cry. It's like a fairy tale.

She drops her new wicker basket of garden tools. Seems a shame to change it in any way. So perfect as it is. Just then, Kay is struck with the most wonderful image of the space immaculate. Sun in the sky. Family picnic in their own backyard. Neighbors say hi over the little brown fence that extends out from the house and curves around the corner.

She picks up her shears. Perfection is her own motherly creation. As she cuts and prunes, she thinks of her family. Of all they'll do together. How they'll grow as the years go by. Oh, what possibilities may come to 3466 Mountain Crest Drive!

—

The boy and the girl are outside before dusk. They wanted to see the water. Their mother said ok, just take a peek and come right back. She'll take them out tomorrow.

The apartment complex suddenly conjures in the boy's mind. He sees the environment he knew before. It appears to him as an illusion by comparison. Something manufactured. Controlled. Here the road feels *real*. The plants grow wild, living in their own way and in any way they can. The tall trees seem to whisper among themselves like adults busy in their own lives. And the dark cottage coming clearer into view was going to have warm cookies inside. The boy could just feel it.

“Ok, come on. Let's go.” The girl turns to dutifully follow her mother's instructions. “Come on!” the girl grabs the boy by the hand and yanks him. He peers up at his sister as he stumbles beside her. “Oh, look! Daddy's home!”

The boy and girl run up as Ray parks his wagon on the sloped driveway. He walks around the back and crouches down, opening his arms wide to receive his children as they crash into him. Together they relish this flavor of love. The one that lets them be rough and wild with their acts of affection.

Ray picks up his girl. “Taking your little brother for a walk?”

“We saw the water!”

“The water!? I wanna see! Can you show me!?”

“Ok!”

Ray walks with the girl in his arms. His long legs give him a graceful speed that feels steady and comforting. She curls into his broad chest. The boy struggles to keep up.

They get to the end of the street. It just stops. The kids have never seen a street just stop before. They feel like they’re at the edge of the world.

They step off onto a stretch of hard sand that soon becomes covered with dark stones. The girl wants to feel them. They look so smooth. Somehow her father can sense this. He puts her down. She picks up a stone. The boy looks at the cottage. Water is pulled back into the ocean.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Toss it in!”

The girl winds up. She feels her form is perfect as she throws it out, but it doesn’t make it past the water’s edge. A small wave crashes in.

Ray picks up a stone and whips it out with a careless ease. It seems to soar endlessly. Can her father really possess such a power? To throw a stone into the middle of the ocean ...

The boy tugs at Ray’s pants. “Daddy! Can we go in the house?”

“Huh?” Ray turns from the ocean.

The boy points at the cottage. Now, having had more time with the area, he’s not completely sure the home will have cookies inside. But it’s worth a shot. Why not try?

“You like that little shack? Hey, I got an idea!” Ray picks up a piece of driftwood from the small shore. “Come on, let’s make a pile. Help Daddy gather some wood.”

The children jump to it, running around with their arms forward, picking up sticks for Daddy. The sun begins to set, somewhere beyond their view.

Ray takes large pieces of driftwood back to the edge of the beach where the sand meets the ferns that grow between evergreens. He digs the knobby wood in and pushes up large rocks. The family works in silent communion, constructing the vision between them as color fades from the environment. A deep blue sky rolls over the horizon. Black silhouettes appear on distant shores.

By the time they finish, it's too dark to see what they've built.

### Chapter 3

New Business Open Downtown

ANCHOR REALTY

Looking for new opportunity? I can help!

Buy - Sell - Invest

415 S Main St

Joe looks up from the paper and double-checks the address. Why would anyone bother advertising such a crappy place? Well, better for him. He does his calculations, sizing everything up by what he sees. This guy's gonna be easy.

He walks through the door. No reception, just an empty space. This looks more like a placeholder for a business. A bad dream of a business. Joe wonders if he's overdressed. His sharp suit, will it play in his favor?

“Hi, welcome in! How can I help you today?”

Some dope (Is something wrong with his eyebrow?) practically jumps out at him. This guy better not be a freak. God, all the conversations he's had to smile through.

“Are you the owner of this business?”



“Yessir. Just opened up last week. Of course, you can see we’re still putting the office together. This is just where the paperwork gets done, though, so ... don’t need much for that.”

For Christ’s sake.

Joe looks into the man’s office and spots a Commodore Amiga 3000 sitting on his desk. He’s misjudged him. Admit the mistake. He recalculates. Must be part of the future-forward crowd. There’s something bohemian about that culture, he’s noticed. Better play this one by ear.

“I’m Ray, it’s nice to meet you.”

The man extends his hand out so abruptly that Joe fears he’s about to be struck. He turns his slight flinch into a hearty hello, carrying the momentum through seamlessly. Big handshake. These people like it big and friendly. “The name’s Joe. Hey, I saw your ad in the paper, Anchor Realty, and well, I *am* looking for new opportunity.” Offer me a seat.

“Well, that’s great! Hey, why don’t you have a seat?”

Joe looks down at the dirty chair he’s been offered and decides against it. Maybe he can do this quickly. Change the pace. “Look, Ray, I’ll get down to it. I’m efficient with my business and I can see that you aim for that same type of efficiency.” Joe gestures broadly to frame this guy’s complete lack of competency as a choice of efficiency. “And opening downtown, that’s a creative idea. Did you get a tax break?”

“Hey, yeah. I did.”

It worked. He needs to be fueled. Needs to feel sure of his choices. “And obviously you’re tech-savvy.” Joe points at the computer. “I’m sure you’re the kind of guy who incessantly looks for ways to make *more* by doing *less*.” The man doesn’t seem to understand. No attention. Keep it simple. “Well, I’ve got just the thing for a guy like you, Ray! This is opportunity knocking at *your* door.” The man looks bored. You’re losing him, Joe. “How does nine percent commission sound?”

“Well, it sounds good.”

There was something telling about the way the man leaned in and blinked when he said that. Something ... Got it.

“I’m looking to find a dedicated salesman and, Ray, I believe that can be you. Let me show you something.” Joe hands Ray a pamphlet.

*Life at the Marina.*

“Condos? Ah, I—”

“Ray, I’m sorry to interrupt, but please, give me a *chance*.”

“All right, what’s your pitch?”

“It’s not a pitch, Ray. It’s a truth. And I’m here to help you see it. And because I’m here to tell you the truth, I want to start by clearing the air. I know. I know, Ray. People think condos are a scourge. And who can sell that, right?” Pause. Hold. He sees the man thinking. Jump to it.

“Right.”

“Let me ask you this. What would you think of a hundred-dollar pair of underwear?”

“Underwear? A hundred dollars? Well, I’d think that’s a pretty bad idea.”

“Ever heard of Agent Provocateur?” No.

“No.”

“Well, they make underwear. And they happen to have a pair of hundred-dollar underwear in their line. You wanna guess how many pairs they sold last year?” How many?

“How many?”

“Sixty thousand! The point I’m trying to make, Ray, is that what sells isn’t always what people think will sell. That’s why money is the only true measure. And as far as money goes, we measure up!” Joe hands Ray another pamphlet. “These are the figures from our development last year in La Jolla. Look, Ray. I promise you. This

is the future.”

“I don’t know.”

Of course you don’t, ya dope. “Let’s try it out. Right now. Do you have any clients that are very young or very old?”

“I got a young couple.”

“Ring them up, right now.”

“For this?”

“Ray, we just finished our model units, you can meet them down there right now. I guarantee you they’ll be interested. Can’t hurt, can it?”

“Well, what should I say?”

Joe can’t believe it! The guy is literally offering himself up to be puppeted! “Say this. Tell them you’ve got something you think they might like, something a little different. Then give them the address and ask them to meet you in half an hour.”

Ray tries to think, but he can’t—there’s too much going on. He picks up the phone.

“Hey, Ray.”

“Hi. How’d you know it was me?”

“Caller ID?”

“Oh, right. Are you free today?”

Joe taps his Omega.

“Or right now? I’ve got something I think you may be interested in.”

Joe rolls his hands.

“I mean, you’re gonna ... love it.”

“Fine. What’s the address?”

Ray looks down at the pamphlet. “726 East Marina Way.”

“All right. I’ll be there at nine.”

“Ok. See you!”

Ray looks up at Joe. Wow, this new business of his is really taking him places!

—

Oh, he shouldn’t have! Kay experiences herself think this and a sudden distance forms. She’s heard that so many times. *Oh, you shouldn’t have!* Even said it herself, but only as an expression. Just something people say in a certain moment.

*Super Vitamix Total Nutrition Center Whole Food Machine*

He really shouldn’t have! But oh, how good she feels. Just to wake up and find this gift left for her on the kitchen counter in her new home. He’s always thinking of her, even when he’s so busy with work. She opens the box and takes out the blender. But how can he afford it with everything going on?

Kay flips through the manual, trying to get a basic understanding of this new contraption, trying to think of what she has in the fridge that she could toss inside. Oh, Ray! I love you so! Maybe a banana with milk and peanut butter? Not really a health drink, but it might taste good, and she just wants to try it out.

Kay plugs it in and tosses the ingredients inside, then looks back to the manual. She closes the lid and flips the switch. Look at it go! It’s turning such a beautiful creamy color! Kay knows she’s just staring at a stupid banana getting liquified, she *knows* it’s just a silly little thing, but she feels, in that moment, that everything is right with the world.

She stops the blender and pours the drink into a tall glass. She takes a long sip. It’s ... well, who cares how it is!? Everything is wonderful! Kay wants to share this beauty with the world. She wants to display it. She looks around her expansive kitchen. She wants to fill it with people. She wants to show them what she has. A party!

Kay walks out to the backyard and starts to imagine it. A grill, a bench, an umbrella for shade, maybe some little garden gnomes, all her neighbors, new friends. She'll have to throw a party and invite the whole neighborhood!

The doorbell rings. *Her first visitor!*

---

Ray has no idea what to say. He handed the young couple pamphlets and then staked out a position in the corner. He watches them as they poke through the space.

“We won't have to mow a lawn.”

Yeah, because you won't *have* a lawn. How is that a good thing?

“And this view of the water is fantastic.”

Well, sure, it's a good view from the third floor, but who would want to feel like they're living in a hotel?

“Plus, if we buy now we can preselect counters, cabinets and carpets. Won't have to spend extra time remodeling.”

So they can charge you double what you'd pay on your own?

“But what if we need a bigger space in the future? We won't be able to add on.”

Ray chimes in. “You can buy the neighboring unit, take down the wall and expand your living space.”

The couple look at Ray. It's the first time they've looked at him like that. Like he actually said something useful.

“This is exciting. I'm excited, babe.”

“Me too.”

“It feels so clean and fresh here. Not like I'm at my mom's place.”

“Oh, hey! What if we got Jane and Casey to buy here too!?”

Jane and Casey?

“That would be bomb! We could all live together!”

Bomb must mean good.

“Ray, if we bought this place, when could we move in?”

“End of September.”

“We could have our welcome party with costumes. For Halloween!”

Ray starts to calculate his commission. Nine percent, no splits ... Jeez-Louise! That’s gonna be big!

—

“Excuse me, Linda. Just gonna answer that real quick.” Kay puts down her fork and gets up from the dining table to answer the phone.

“... What is it? ... Already? ... That’s great, Ray!”

Kay looks back at Linda and smiles wide, hoping she might be able to put together the good news based on the details of their brief conversation. Linda looks up, but keeps eating the pie.

“... Wow! That's three times what you made with Roger!”

Kay is sure Linda will pick up on that, but she just keeps eating the pie.

“... Ok ... Love you too!”

Kay sits back at the table. “Sorry about that.” She pauses a moment, then resents that Linda doesn’t ask about the phone call. “You were saying ... about your husband?”

Linda looks up from her pie. “My husband? Was I? Must be the Valium. I’ve got ’em if you want ’em.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I’ll be all right. Anyway ...” Kay tries to think of something to talk about. “I was thinking maybe I’d have a little welcome party and invite the neighborhood.”

“Well, weather’s getting hot. Perfect for a BBQ. Your kids out of school yet?”

“They finish Friday.” Kay notices Linda’s mug is empty. “Want some more coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Linda holds out her mug and Kay gets up to grab the pot. Kay is trying to focus on what’s positive as Linda looks over through the sliding doors to Kay’s backyard. “You’re gonna need some furniture if you wanna have a party.”

Linda has nice hair. It’s graceful the way she’s left some gray, but still looks like a blonde. The highlights and shorter cut give it a dynamic. It’s textured. It speaks of a keen eye placed on her look. That’s something, Kay thinks. She has nice hair.

“Well, I better get going.” Linda stands and Kay realizes she let the conversation lull. “How about you return that plate when you’re ready to invite me to the party?”

“Sounds like a great idea.”

Linda walks out the front door and down the steps. Nice woman. She walks all the way back to her house, just a few down, without knowing what she’s thinking. Feels like she doesn’t have a thought in her head even though it’s full of ’em.

She gets home, walks into her kitchen and sets her mug down on the counter. Oh, shoot! Kay’s mug. Better bring this back now, before she forgets. She grabs the mug and heads right back out the front door.

She rings Kay’s doorbell, again. Kay opens up. “Kay, I’m sorry. I took your mug.”

Kay looks down, confused.

Linda lifts her hands and lets out a sudden breath. They’re empty. “I was just holding it.”

Kay opens the door wider, giving Linda a clear view inside so that

they can both look back to the dining table where ... two mugs are still sitting. "I don't understand. Your mug is on the table."

"Oh." How could anyone know what to say in a moment like this? "Silly me." Linda turns back and stops for a second to look out at the view of the water from the steps.

So, is Linda crazy, or ...?

What? Are you still here?

No, I'm not.

You're not?

No.

Well then, where are you?

I'm over ...

... *here!*

Ha, you fucking moron.

You knew it was me.

You knew it was me this whole time and you just played along.

Yep, only me.

All along.

And you knew.

You knew and did nothing.

It was just me.

*Just* ***ME.***



## Chapter 4

So, does Kay have her party?

Yes, my friend, she does.

Does she invite the neighborhood?

That's right! You've been listening well.

And furniture? Does she buy new furniture for the backyard?

How could she not? She needed it. And with that large commission check Ray just got ...

All for the family, right?

Exactamundo.

Anyway, there they all are in Kay's backyard. Just as she had imagined it, right down to the gnomes. The crowd is a little less idyllic than what she had hoped for, but these are her neighbors, this is her *neighborhood*, and she's just so excited to have a real context for her and her family to grow within.

She only wishes some kids would have shown up. The guests are mostly empty-nesters. Just one young couple, Mexicans. The wife looks about ready to burst, with her round belly. Maybe her kids can babysit it in the future. And maybe the families with kids just didn't show up. Maybe she'll see them later on, playing in the street. Maybe the little notes she left in their mailboxes were accidentally tossed out with the junk mail.

At least everyone is having a good time. The air is busy with conversation and the smell of Ray's BBQ. Ting-ting-ting!

Marc taps the champagne flute that he brought as a gift, filled with the champagne he also brought, and opened. "Hi, everybody! I think I've managed to meet all the new faces, but in case you don't remember me, I'm Marc, Ray's older brother, and I just wanted to give him a little toast. Him and his family. I just want to say, to

that guy over there, his beautiful wife, his two awesome kids ... I'm so happy for you! You truly have it all." Marc holds his glass out and looks around, building some dramatic tension. "And what do you get for the person who has it *all*?"

Oh, no. Not another gift, Ray thinks.

"You get them *away* from it all!"

The crowd claps in a confused, sporadic way.

"That's why I got you guys a two night, all-inclusive, luxury train tour through the Rockies!"

All eyes are on Ray. They clap again, this time a little more unified. Ray lifts his spatula up like he's raising a little hand. Yep, that's me. Thank you, everybody.

Marc holds the tickets high in the air and shakes them around a little. Woo-hoo!

Kay looks over at Ray. Yes, this is something they'll be obligated to enjoy.

The little girl hears the good news. A train tour through the Rockies!? How boss is that!? She looks down at her little brother. Her jaw is wide open, her palms are turned out, her fingers are fanned wide, like all the excitement in her little body is escaping through the muscles easiest to twitch.

The little boy doesn't know exactly what's happening, but it's clear enough to him that it's something important. Why else would his uncle be waving his hand around like that and his sister be making that face?

The kids run to Marc.

"Thank you so much, Marc!" Kay says, walking over.

"You guys deserve to get away. And don't worry about the kids. Terri and I can't wait to have them."

What did his uncle just say? This can't be right. His parents are *going away*!? Mommy! Don't leave me! I don't want to live with

Auntie and Uncle! I want to live with you!

“Mooom! We’re not coming too!?” The girl stomps her foot. The boy begins to cry.

Why is his uncle smiling at him like that!? Doesn’t he know how awful this is? Wait a minute. Rich uncle Marc. The new house. He must have traded! Because he doesn’t have any kids and he wants to have kids of his own, so he’s taking us away from Mommy and Daddy—but why, Mommy? Why did you trade us? Don’t you know how much we love you? Don’t you know how much we *need* you!?

“Oh, stop your crying.” Ray picks the boy up. “I’ll calm him down.” Ray leaves Kay to sort out the details with Marc and Terri as he escapes back into the house.

“But I wanna come too!”

Terri bends over and speaks with the girl. “Don’t worry, you and your brother are gonna have a lot of fun with us. Your parents aren’t the only ones getting gifts. You just gotta wait a little for yours.”

The girl can’t deny that it’s a fair deal. She really wants to go on the fun-sounding train ride, but she knows Terri and Marc have a lot of money and a cool house ... Yeah, ok. Works for her.

The girl skips back inside to find her father.

“Well, hey there, little one!” He looks somewhat like her father with his glasses and mustache.

“I’m not little. I’m ten!” The girl rolls her eyes. Who is this guy, anyway?

“Oh, I’m sorry. Excuse me, young missus.”

Does he *not* understand how patronizing he’s being?

“I guess you wouldn’t be interested in this box of toys and books I brought for you and your brother.”

Well, maybe it’s ok. The girl wonders what’s in the box. “Can I

see?”

The man holds the box close to his belly and bends forward to give the girl a peek inside. She walks up and stands on her tippy toes. Is that a *Polly Pocket!*?

The girl reaches in quickly and grabs it. The compact, teal, plastic case is shaped like a flower and the brand name is imprinted in gold script on the front. A pair of hearts sits underneath, one empty, one full. It feels so official. She opens it up.

A water park! *Cool!* Up top is a little apartment. A dining table with yellow chairs under a painting of dolphins. A white tiled shower. A giant clown with a big red nose, his massive mouth open wide enough to fit Polly inside. And a pink water slide from the apartment down into the pool below where Polly can play in the water, jump off a diving board, lounge in a floatie or chill in the jacuzzi! Wait, where’s Polly?

“Where’s Polly?” she asks the strange man.

“Who?”

“Polly Pocket!”

“Oh, she’s not in there? Maybe she’s in the box. Here, I’ll just set this down with you.”

She digs around frantically for a moment, then stands back up. Better enlist her brother for this sort of grunt work. Where did he and Dad go, anyway?

The girl walks through the living room to the long, angled hallway that runs through the middle of their house and sees Ray banging on her brother's bedroom door.

“Open up! *Right now!*”

“What’s wrong, Daddy?”

“Your brother locked himself in his room.”

Ray heads to the closet and gets a screwdriver.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna have to take the lock off.”

The boy can’t move. He wants to open the door for Daddy, but all that pounding terrifies him. And what will Daddy do once he’s inside? Is this how it ends? He thought his father loved him. Now it’s clear he can’t wait to get rid of him. He understands that his parents already made the deal. They got the house, they owe a debt. Should he offer himself up? He wants his parents to be happy. If his parents will be happier without him, maybe he should just go. The boy imagines Jesus. A solemn grace. A pain-laden kindness. Self-sacrifice.

“Hey, go distract your mother would you? I don’t want her to get worried.”

The girl loves getting little tasks like this from her father. She runs down the hall, then stops at the sliding doors. She sets her eyes on her mother, who’s already distracted enough talking to Terri. Better stay here. Like a guard. Her mother will not come inside. Not on her watch.

A single tear rolls down the boy’s cheek as he lets go of the love that he’s known, everything that he took for granted. He walks toward the door and reaches a hand to the knob, imagining that a giant sack will be placed quickly over him once the door is opened. It’s not bravery at this point, it’s just acceptance.

As he’s about to turn the knob, he sees one of the screws fall out. Oh, how crude! He steps back from the door. How heartless! Just give him a minute! A minute to say goodbye. The boy looks around his room. Goodbye, Lego City. Goodbye, Hot Wheels. Goodbye, Superman bedspread.

He hears the knob fall onto the floor of his room and doesn’t even bother to turn around. He senses his father barge in, forceful hands reaching underneath, lifting him up, up, and away ...

“Uh, hi, Mom,” the girl says.

“Hi, sweetie,” Kay says casually as she heads for the door, intending to go back in for some more ice.

“You can’t come inside.” The girl extends her limbs out, a starfish shaped blockade in the frame of the sliding doors.

Kay understands this immediately as a clear sign that something is wrong. She pushes past the girl and storms into the hallway to find Ray just standing there. Boy in his arms. A soulless calm on his face. Oh. He didn’t take the news well, but it looks like Ray is taking care of it. Kay turns back to the kitchen for the ice.

The boy bursts into tears. He thought he could handle it, but he can’t! A dagger through the heart! The way his mother just looked at him like that. A dead look. Emotionless. Just to make sure he had been captured, and nothing more. He buries his face into his father’s chest. He knows his father doesn’t love him anymore, but he still loves his father. He wants comfort from him even if it’s not real.

“Kay, there you are. Hey, I just gave your girl a box of old toys and books I brought from home. Thought your kids might like ’em.”

“Thank you, Ralph. That’s so considerate!”

“Oh, well, I just left them on the floor over there. Hope you guys enjoy it all.”

Kay walks over to the box and looks inside. How nice of Ralph! She pulls out a book and reads the cover.

*The Monster at the End of This Book*

Grover! The boy loves Grover! Oh, Sesame Street is such a wonderful show. Kay takes the book back to the hall to show her boy. He must be feeling sad about having to stay with Marc and Terri. She’s sad too. Even if it’s just for a couple nights. She never wants to be apart from her babies.

“Look what I found!”

The boy sees his mother approaching from the end of the hall. His hands are shaking. He wants her love so badly. He’ll do anything!

“Grover!” Kay holds the book up for her boy to see. “I know

you're upset, but it's only for a couple nights, ok, honey-pie? You'll have so much fun with your auntie and uncle! And I promise you I'll be home soon and we'll read this book together when I get back."

The boy stares silently, working something out inside.

"Oh, darling," she runs her fingers through his dark hair.

When they get back!? *Rejoice!* Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, God!

—

Ray and Kay step onto the train. A girl flies by. She wears jean overalls and a cream shirt with a smart, tortoise-shell headband over her dirty-blond hair. She chases her older brother, a rascalion. He's taken something of hers, by the look of it. They run up to their parents, who are lounging with their littlest one in a wide open seating area at the front of the car. Light from the large windows bathes them all in a soft afternoon glory.

"Oh, see! We could have brought the kids!"

Ray doesn't understand why they would need to regret anything more, anything additional. Isn't the whole trip regrettable enough? He wishes his wife would just play along and try to get through it, like he's doing. Why does she insist on taking every opportunity to make things worse?

"Would you just try to have a little fun?" Oops. "I mean, hey, it's ok. What I mean is that, yeah, I miss the kiddos too, and ... it's gonna take some *effort* for us, but we'll get there. Pretty soon we'll be relaxing." Nailed it.

"But I told you we should bring the kids!"

"What's done is done, so—"

"Oh, we should have brought them with us." She looks over at the family. Happy as pie. The young husband and wife looking like they jumped right out of a catalog, just sharing a conversation like it's no big deal. The mother bouncing the toddler on her knee,

lifting her tiny arms up into the air. It probably feels like she's on a rollercoaster! A wild ride. She's so cute, with that fluffy white lace dress, and her bulky diaper poking out through the bottom.

"Let's just find our cabin."

They walk through the long, beautiful cars. It's not like any train they've known before. Modern comfort. Classic design. A palette of deep greens and wooden browns, dusty blues and clean grays. And look at those lovely viewing windows! They curve so wonderfully up the sides, forming into skylights. It's like the windows themselves are something to marvel at. Pity they won't be able to enjoy any of it.

Ray sets the duffle bags down in their compartment. At least they'll be comfortable. "Maybe we should get something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"How about a drink?"

"Oh, no, thank you."

So it's going to be one of those trips. Ray the entertainer. She's not going to do any work. Just complain. "Let's go find a spot by one of those big windows."

Kay doesn't even bother to respond.

They find a free table in one of the cars. A newspaper left there triggers thoughts about work. Everything he's left behind. How can anyone relax on vacation? What if Jane and Casey are ready to start looking? They call. No answer. Call again. He sees them getting frustrated. *If he's not going to show us respect, then we'll just find another agent!* Maybe he needs someone to hang around the office. Answer phones when he's not around. God, more work that he has to do. Just focus on the job at hand. Keeping Kay happy. Huh. Isn't it all the same thing?

Kay sits down at the table across from Ray and looks out the window silently. She's holding back sadness, Ray can tell. Maybe this is her trying, he thinks. Maybe it's not as easy for her. Maybe it's taking all the strength she has, just to sit right there. But, come



on! After all he does for her? She can't at least *pretend* to be in a good mood!?

He'll just give her a little time to settle. He opens up the paper—Dan Quayle can't spell “potato”!? This is the vice president we're talking about. Guy should know how to spell “potato.” But it does kinda make sense. Ray imagines he could have made the same mistake. It seems phonetic. To get that “oh” sound. But, golly, how embarrassing that would be. Papers writing articles about your mistake. Everyone knowing how stupid you really are. The thought sends a shiver down Ray's spine.

Ray looks up and wonders if he should mention the article to his wife, a topic to jumpstart discussion, but he hesitates. The subject could work against him. To laugh at the folly of another opens up a sort of vulnerability. He looks for another article.

*Man Is Convicted in Drug Agent's Torture Death*

*The brother-in-law of a former Mexican president was convicted today by a federal court jury in the 1985 kidnapping and torture death of a United States drug agent ...*

Aw, fuck it. Ray tosses the paper down and looks out the window. The train begins to move.

—

“Merry Christmas!” A young couple in fancy clothing pushes a pram through a park on a snowy winter morning, passing by another young couple doing just the same.

The other couple, dressed in blacks and reds, looks back without response. They push their stroller along a bumpy path, taking no care to give their child a smooth ride. The man looks familiar, the boy thinks.

At the top of a small bridge, the couple stops and looks over into the dark water flowing below. The man and woman turn to each other. Conviction on their faces. They lift the carriage together and toss it over.

The seat of the carriage, where the baby rests, floats down the

river. The child is unseen, locked behind a curtain. Floating away, floating down. Down into the sewer.

“Sam Hamm, imagine having that name,” Terri whispers to Marc.

“Hi, I’m Sam Hamm, from Amsterdam, thank you, ma’am,” Marc whispers back. They giggle together.

Who’s Sam Hamm? The girl wonders if she’s already missed some part of the plot and looks back to the projection screen.

The music is intoxicating to the boy. He almost can’t stand it, all the excitement it’s producing inside him. He wriggles in his seat and reaches over to grab some popcorn, but his sister is hogging it.

Penguins! In the sewer? Is the baby going to be raised by penguins? The boy thinks it wouldn’t be so bad to be thrown off a bridge like that if he could end up with a nice family of penguins.

—

To think about how far away she’ll be. How far she already is. Every moment trapped on this train takes her further from everything she loves and holds dear. She looks at Ray.

What does she want now? Ray wonders. Not even an hour into their trip and he feels exhausted. He sees ahead, how he’ll have to keep up the facade without end, without space. He just wants to get off this damn train. He wants to grab a beer. He wants to drink a beer on the curb outside a convenience store. Warm air. Summer evening sky over the treetops.

Kay sighs and looks back out the window. Maybe it’s like Ray says. They’ll be relaxing in no time. But she can’t believe it, not truly. She turns back to Ray.

Ray sees the pleading look in her eyes. An idea forms. “Hey.”

Kay’s face lights up. “Yes?”

“Let’s get off the train.”

“What?”

“Let’s just get off! At the next stop!”

“Why?”

“Who cares!” Ray realizes it might be better to frame this as a decision he’s making solely for his wife’s benefit. Money in the bank. “I know you don’t want to be so far away from the kids, so how about we just get off at the next stop? We can check into a motel, just hang out. Maybe relax for real? And we’ll just be a cab ride away from home. Plus no one will know the better! Marc and Terri will think we’re enjoying our gift. How about it?”

Oh, Ray. Wonderful Ray! All that he does, all that he gives, and he can still be so romantic!

—

The boy runs into the lobby of the theater. He’s filled with a new energy, one that he’s never quite felt before. The tone of it all. The experience. The ride! He starts punching and kicking the air. “I’m *Batman!*” he says in the lowest voice he can muster. “I’M BAAATMAAAN!” he screams with his arms out like he’s dragging a big cape behind him.

The little girl runs after him, her fingers up and out like little claws. She prances around, doing awkward hip swings with each step. She stops in front of her brother and rubs a hand down her thigh, raising the other in the air like a big, sexy stretch. “Meeeoow!”

The boy plows into her, way too hard. She’s knocked out of character, then gets back into it. “You stupid corn dog! You stupid corn dog!” she shouts over and over, chasing him around the lobby.

Marc and Terri love it. They can’t get enough of these kids.

“I wanna watch another movie!” The girl runs up to Marc and Terri. “Please!”

“Sure! If that’s what you want!”

The girl is in heaven!

---

They know it's bad. They know it's devious. And they know that's what makes it so exciting! Ray and Kay stand with their duffel bags at the doors, waiting for them to open. Looking around like they're going to get caught, like someone might tell them they can't get off. The doors open.

---

"Ok, kids. You can get whatever you like here! It's all free because your uncle works for Blockbuster." The boy runs off and Terri follows after him.

The girl looks up at Marc. "You do?"

"Yeah! Well, not at a place like this. I work at a corporate office."

"But I thought you did computers. Aren't you a computer person?"

"That's right! I'm a programmer."

"But"—the girl can't put it together—"why does Blockbuster need computers?"

"Good question." Marc and the girl stroll down the aisle in conversation. "Not a lot of people know this, but the founder of Blockbuster, the man who owns and operates it, is a computer scientist. And that's why Blockbuster is so successful. That's why we crush the competition. That's why we win every time. We have technology on our side."

The girl loves this treatment. Spoiled like a child, but spoken to like an adult.

"Oh."

She looks up at her uncle. He never bends over to talk to her. A little thing, but so refreshing. She feels an elevation in his presence.

The boy runs back with a VHS copy of *Batman* and holds it up for Marc.

“But we just saw *Batman!*”

“We saw *Batman Returns!*” interjects the girl.

“Ohhh, little smartie pants over here!” The girl blushes. “Ok, we can get this. But why don’t we look around for a little longer. We can get more than one movie. You guys can get anything in here!”

The boy runs over to a rack of toys. Everything is *Batman*. *Batman* action figures. *Batman* posters. Even a *Batman* outfit with a cape, mask and utility belt! He wants it all!

—

Ray and Kay are walking fast. Walking nowhere. But it feels so good! They look at each other. They smile.

—

“Baby, come on. I’m getting *hungry*.” Marc and the boy wait awkwardly in the corner of the tween boutique, not knowing quite what to do with themselves. “Are you guys almost done?”

“We’re done when we’re done.” Terri states this plainly, as a fact, without turning or even pausing her actions. “Put out your wrist,” she says to the girl, who obliges just as soon as she hears the command. Wack! Terri slaps down a cheetah-print bracelet, then leans in close. “Men.” She looks to the side and the girl follows, seeing Marc back dutifully in his corner. “You just have to remind them who’s in charge.”

—

A young man with a pimply face and an apparent good nature jumps off his stool behind the small counter as Ray and Kay walk inside. “How can I help you folks?”

“Is there a jacuzzi here?” Kay asks shyly.

“Why, yes, there is!” The young man points, with his licorice, out through the window of the reception area, to where a modest pool and jacuzzi rest unused.

Kay turns to Ray and puts a hand on his chest. He giggles.

Kay turns to Ray and puts a hand on his chest. He giggles.

“We’ll take a room for two nights.”

“Two nights?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?” Ray asks, suddenly out of his dreamy chill.

“Oh, no. Not at all. Just that most of our visitors stay for either a single night or weeks at a time. Not a lot of sights to see around here, so ...”

“Oh, we didn’t come for the sights,” Kay says, wrapping her arm around Ray’s.

The young man puts down his Twizzler and hands Ray a clipboard. “Just fill that out and it’ll be forty dollars.”

The dull act of filling out a form has never looked so pleasant, so lovely, as it does here in the TV-lit reception area of this small motel in the middle of who-cares-where. Unwilling to part with each other, Kay holds the clipboard in her right hand as Ray fills it out with his left. Seeing both their names next to each other just feels so right. They almost regret having to give the form back.

“I think I got it. Did you two just elope?”

“Elope!?” Ray shouts. He looks back at Kay. They laugh and laugh.

“We’ve been married for almost a decade!” Kay manages to explain when she gains her breath.

The young man smiles. How cool, to have that love, he thinks.

“We’re supposed to be on this train tour. It goes through the Rockies.”

“Oh, yeah, I know that one. What happened?”

“Well ...” Kay looks at Ray. How should she explain it? “We just decided to get off!” Kay throws up her hands.

“I see. That’s real adventure. That’s *spontaneity*.” The young man spreads his hands out with the last word, like he’s speaking the name of some great celebrity worthy of extra emphasis.

—

“And on the other half of that, we want ...” Marc can’t remember. He looks over at Terri, who turns her palms out and shrugs her shoulders like *Why would you think I know?*

“Olives!” the girl shouts.

“Olives on the other half. And throw in some breadsticks and ...” Marc looks back around like *Anything else I’ve failed to mention that any of you fine people might like to add?*

“Coke!” the boy tosses out.

“We can’t have Coke, it’s almost dark!” The girl stops. “Wait, can we have Coke?”

“WHO WANTS TO STAY UP LATE TONIGHT!?” Marc shouts this out like some sportscaster at a wrestling match. He leans back on the couch and lifts his legs up, kicking them around in excitement. The kids go nuts.

“And a two liter of Coke, please!” Marc says in a nasaly voice, sitting up straight with a finger twirled out like some poindexter. The kids can’t get enough. Uncle is so entertaining and fun.

Marc finishes the call. “Ok, kids. Pizza will be here soon, let’s wait until it gets here to watch the movie, ok?”

The kids nod, but you can see they’re struggling internally with the thought of having to wait.

“So, why don’t you guys go play a little outside until then. You’re auntie and I want to snuggle on the couch and rest a little.” Marc looks up and smiles at Terri. She sticks her hand out and waves the kids off toward the sliding doors to the backyard.

“Go on. You heard your uncle!” She walks over and sinks into Marc’s arms on the couch as he turns on the TV. They give each

other a quick kiss.

“Ew! Gross!”

The kids run outside. Marc and Terri watch TV.

---

The little girl we saw before with the tortoise-shell headband stands bored, with her hands hanging from the bottom lip of one of the large viewing windows. It's just the same over and over. Trees. Rocks. Trees. Rocks. She turns around and falls with her back against the glass. This trip sucks, she thinks.

She looks back at her family. Her father is holding her brother's toy up high as her brother tries his hardest to jump and reach it. Ope. Too slow! Her mother sits there staring at the girl's little sister. Her sister, who thinks it's some kind of accomplishment just to put one foot in front of the other.

She looks down to the other end of the car, down the wide path between mostly empty booth seats. A lone man, bald and plain, sits staring out the window in empty contemplation. This is so lame, she thinks.

She walks down the aisle, staring down at her feet in protest of the view, until she gets to the next car. She looks up slowly, preparing for disappointment. Wait a minute. Cash register? Snacks? *Cookies!* The girl looks up to a wall display. At the top left, a little box, “Mom's Best.” A card placed next to the item, “\$2.57.” They look so good!

She jams her hands into her pockets and turns them out, but the count is low. Just a couple quarters, a nickel and a penny. She runs back to the previous car.

“Mommy! Can I have money!?”

The mother turns from her position in her chair, up high. “Hey, sweetie. Whaddya need money for?”

“Cookies!” the girl jumps up and down. The train rocks lightly.



“Cookies!?” The mother pretends to be shocked. “What kind of mother would I be if I let my little girl have dessert before dinner?”

The girl smiles deviously. “A very *good* mother.”

“A good mother! You little stinker! Come here! I’ll show you a good mother!” The mother reaches out a pale hand, white fingers with long red nails, and pinches the girl on the side of her belly.

The girl lets out a big laugh as she twists and squirms.

“Hee-Hee-AHHH-HA-HA!”

But as soon as the tickle is done, her mother turns her attention back to the little sister.

“*Please!*”

“Ma-ma.” Her little sister raises her hands up in the air, notifying that she wants to be lifted.

“MOM!”

“If you behave yourself at dinner, I’ll consider it.”

“BUT I WANT THEM NOW!” The girl pounds her foot down hard and forms her hands into angry fists.

The mother turns around with a clear sternness. “*AFTER* DINNER.”

The girl huffs and turns around, once again looking down. Stupid rules, she thinks.

She lets her feet walk her forward, zigzagging aimlessly back down the path between booths. She stops at the man. She looks at his suit. His coffee. His watch. She looks back to the car door. She walks through.

She leans sheepishly on the wall before the snackbar. Stupid Mom. Stupid sister. Stupid family! She just wants cookies. Is that such a crazy thing? She stares at the image on the side of the box. Goey chocolate chip. Golden brown cookie. She feels that if she desires it hard enough that the cookies might just come to her. Finding

their own way. Heeding her call. She stands up straight. She focuses. She pushes her hands down at her sides.

Cookies. Cookies.

## Cookies.

And the cookies fly to her.

—

A blurry form below troubled water. A moment of calm. An ambient hum of jacuzzi bubbles. Ray surfaces. Kay covers her mouth.

“What?” Ray wipes the water from his eyes.

“Oh.” Kay can’t bear to say.

Ray lifts his brow in confusion, but the glue has loosened underwater, allowing his prosthetic eyebrow to slide up. His confused gesture looks extreme, lifted to unnatural heights.

Kay can’t control her laughter. “Ahhh-oh-haha-Ray.”

Ray looks up like he’s trying to see his own eyebrow. Kay keeps laughing.

“Aw, I don’t care how I look!” He grabs Kay by the waist and brings her close to him. “As long as I’m here with you.”

Kay looks so beautiful there in the jacuzzi light, glowing from underneath. The moment is illuminated in an unusual way. Everything feels new. But old. Like if a memory could be happening now. He feels her soft skin, and by her touch he can sense the single desire that swells between them. How racy it is to be there in their underwear. Caution to the wind! Ray pulls Kay in for a slow kiss.

—

*We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news!*

“Aw, man!” Marc sits up. He and Terri were just getting into their show.

*“Tragedy on the Rocks”*

*“A gruesome train crash. Only one survivor found, the conductor, who tested a blood alcohol level of 2.7%.”*

“Ray,” Marc whispers.

*“Firefighters, rescue teams and volunteers are sorting through the rubble, doing all they can, searching for those, if any, left alive.”*

“Ray.” Marc’s breathing becomes erratic.

*“Many are wondering how the conductor could have had an intoxication level so high and go by unnoticed. And many more wonder why he appears to be the only one spared on what was supposed to be a scenic tour through the Rocky Mountains.”*

“RAAAY!”

The kids turn from their game outside.

—

“More wine, my dear?” Ray lifts his eyebrow up again. It’s the same joke, but it keeps striking that chord that makes Kay feel so giddy and, well, intoxicated.

“Sure.” Kay reaches for her empty glass sitting on the tile around the edge of the water. Ray starts to pour—

“I think you guys better come see this!”

“Shit!” Ray jumps and spills wine into the jacuzzi. “You snuck up on me!”

The young man doesn’t look apologetic. “Just follow me.”

Whatever’s bothering him must be of serious concern. Ray and Kay look over at each other, then get out of the jacuzzi.

They follow the young man with their dripping wet bodies across

the cement surface, under the stairs and into the small box where the young man works. At the desk is a pile of snacks and a steaming Cup O' Noodles with wooden chopsticks. He reaches to the small, purple TV sitting on a ledge to the side and turns up the volume.

—

“It’s all my fault!”

“No, Marc. Don’t say that!”

“I bought him the tickets!”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Why, Ray, why did this happen? Tell me!”

The doorbell rings.

Marc grabs his wife. He looks at her with a seriousness you’d never have thought he was capable of showing. “We have to raise the kids. We have to. Promise me. Promise me we’ll raise the kids!”

“I promise, Marc!” Terri throws her arms around her husband. The kids open the sliding doors.

“What’s happening?”

*“Knock-knock. Pizza’s here!”*

“GO BACK OUTSIDE!” Terri jumps up and pushes the kids out, locking the door behind them and shutting the blinds.

They run over to the kitchen window for a peek inside, but it’s too high.

“Here.” The girl laces her fingers and forms a step at her knee. “I’ll lift you up. You can see what’s happening.”

The boy puts his hands on the wall for stabilization and steps onto his sister’s knee. He climbs up and reaches the window.

“We’ll raise the kids as our own,” Terri says as she combs her hand through Marc’s hair and stares deeply into his eyes.

The boy begins to cry. The doorbell rings, a few times in impatient succession. “*Hey! Pizza’s here!*”

The girl puts the boy down. “Ok, my turn. I wanna see.” But all the boy can do is cry. She pushes him forward and steps onto his back. He’s on all fours, sobbing his heart out as his sister stands on him for a look through the window.

She sees them lying on the couch. Why aren’t they answering the door? What’s going on? The phone rings.

Marc and Terri perk up quickly, then turn to each other. It rings again. Marc runs over to the phone, but hesitates. What news will come to him from the other end?

He picks up. It looks like every strand of tension that ever existed in Marc’s body is suddenly released. “Ray! Ray! Ray!” He falls to his knees. “Thank God!” He turns to Terri. “They’re ok! They weren’t on the train!”

That’s it, the girl has seen enough. She demands to know what’s going on. She jumps off her brother, marches over to the sliding doors and begins pounding. Her brother follows, barely able to move, but too afraid to be left alone.

Terri opens the blinds, unlocks the doors and lets the kids inside. They don’t know what’s wrong, but they can feel it. They see Marc looking at them from the phone. They run to him.

“Here, your mommy wants to say hello.” Marc wipes tears from his eyes and hands the phone to the boy.

“Baby, are you there?” He hears his mother’s voice.

“Mommy, don’t ever leave me again.”

The boy stands in the kitchen watching his sister make them both peanut butter sandwiches. He can't wait to be as big as his sister. Then he can make his own sandwiches. And he won't make them with just peanut butter, he'll make them with grape jelly too. His sister likes it plain. And smooth. Oh, the changes he'll make when he's big.

He stands there with his arms hanging patiently under his cape, looking up at his sister through the eye holes of his dark hood. He fidgets with his utility belt, wondering if the real Batman might have some quick mechanism for making PB&Js. He imagines shooting a hook out from his belt. Something that would grab the sandwich from the counter and bring it back to him.

"Quit touching yourself!" the girl shouts. "Here!" She hands him the peanut butter sandwich. He likes it better when his mommy makes it. Clean and even, sliced into triangles. The girl grabs her sandwich from the counter. "Come on, let's go." She runs out the front door and the boy follows, moving fast, trying to get some lift for his cape.

They run down the steps of their home, down the dirty asphalt path, and down to the end, where the street just stops. They run with their peanut butter sandwiches until they're safe inside their driftwood shack, now decorated with little trinkets—bottle caps, pretty rocks, marbles, blocks, candy wrappers and the boy's old Superman figure, left out in the cold. They eat their sandwiches as they look out at the ocean.

"Ok, Captain Jeremy. You finish your lunch and then I want you to finish your work. You have to collect ten seashells. We have to have shells to pay for Gracie's new braces." The girl lifts a dirty doll with matted hair.

—

Kay walks her basket of clean laundry into the girl's room and sets it down on her double-wide bed with white sheets. She opens the top drawer of the girl's messy dresser. Cassettes out of their cases, scattered around. Dolls with missing heads. A plastic tray of fake nails with some of the sticky applicators carelessly dropped around the carpet.

She packs the rolled socks and folded underwear neatly into her daughter's drawer. She probably thinks a little fairy does this when she's not around. What's this!? A spilled bottle of nail polish! Oh, it's all over her Ramona book! Kay clicks her tongue and shakes her head, then takes a moment to look around the room, to fully experience its disarray.

Finished with the laundry, Kay walks into the kitchen, thinking of making a little snack. No! Peanut butter on the counter. Dirty utensils. Bread left open. Crumbs everywhere. The lid of the jar just lying on the tile floor. That's *it!*

Kay looks around for the kids and finds the front door left wide open. She's fuming. She marches down the steps and walks toward the end of the street, but as she nears she sees a large, black truck, lifted over muddy tires. It's parked in front of the cottage. She slows her step. What's going on there? A man with short, orange hair is pounding on the cottage door.

"Cat!" He bangs furiously. "Cat! Are you in there!? You better not be! CAT!" *Bang-bang-bang!* The man looks over at Kay. She stops. He walks quickly toward her. Kay doesn't know what's happening. "Hey!" He looks directly at her. "You!" He points a finger out. Kay takes a step back and the man halts at a safe distance. "Does Cat live here?"

"Cat?" Kay manages to squeeze out.

"Oh, don't play dumb with me! You know her!"

"I don't know who you're talking about."

The man sails his hand back toward the cottage. "You're saying you don't know who lives here!? Why are you walking over here, then!?"

"I came to check on my kids."

The man turns around and sees there's more to the end of the street than just the cottage. He looks back at Kay. There's an apology on his face. Kay sees the trouble in his eyes, but his anger returns. "Well, if you see Cat, tell her Bret came by, and that he knows she's here!" The man looks like he wants to say more, but

he just turns around, hops into his truck and speeds down the block.

Oh my, Kay thinks. She continues down to the end of the street, looking over to the cottage that had never before captured her interest. A curtain quickly shuts. Better just leave it alone. What was I doing?

She arrives at her kids' little shack and peeks down, but it's empty. Where have they gone?

"I'm BATMAN!" The boy jumps out from behind a tree and the girl runs out giggling beside him.

"We got you, Mommy!"

How could Kay ever be mad at these two wonderful creatures of light? She shakes her head, forgiving them completely of all their transgressions. "Mommy just wanted to check on you."

"Play with us!" The girl grabs her mother's hand, but Kay pulls away.

"No, I've got work to do."

"Please!"

But Kay walks back. She can't just leave the bread open. The peanut butter without its lid. The crumbs on the counter.

## Chapter 2

A summer sleepover. How fun. Kay at least tried to give all the girls a healthy dinner, but they ate around the vegetables. Oh, well. Let them have their good times. Let them eat marshmallows straight from the bag. Let them sprinkle gummies over their rocky road. Let them run around with freezer pops and eat sleeves of cookies. Kay cleans as the party goes along, keeping an eye on things, reining in events before catastrophe—just a distant presence of love and care.



The boy wants to join in on the fun, but the girls don't feel the same. In fact, the boy observes a barrier around their friendship. The way they interact, like each picks up what the other puts down. One big network of quickly moving energy. The boy wants to understand this. He hangs out from a satellite distance, behind the counter, under the table, *in the shadows*.

At the end of the night, the girls lay their sleeping bags around the living room floor and Kay brings out more blankets and pillows to make things extra cozy. The girl is prepared for just this moment. "I'll be right back. I've got something fun." The girl skips off to her room and returns with a book and flashlight. "Who wants to read scary stories?" The girls flutter with excitement. The boy, hiding behind the arm of the sofa, wonders what he's gotten himself into.

The girl flips a switch and the room goes dark. The boy freezes in terror. A spotlight appears. He peeks around the corner and sees his sister holding the flashlight directly under her chin. He's sucked into the theatrics of it. As his sister turns the flashlight over to illuminate the pages of her book, the boy feels that he's heading deep into an experience, one that offers no escape. The girl begins to read.

### *The Big Meal*

*There once was an old woman who lived alone in a little house in the forest. A house with a brick chimney and a straw roof.*

"Brittney! Stop it."

"Move over!"

"Will you guys be quiet!? I'm trying to read!"

*The woman was lonely by herself. Though she had many little tasks to keep herself occupied. Cooking and cleaning, of course. Foraging for nuts and berries. Let's see, sewing, weaving, reading, gardening. Oh, and sometimes, on occasion, she'd travel into town for supplies.*

"This isn't scary."

“Hold on, it gets scarier.”

“You read it?”

“Yes. Quiet now.”

*Oh, how the woman longed for company!*

“Hahaha!”

“Stop laughing!”

“Shut up!”

*On terrible nights, when she just couldn't bear the loneliness, she'd practice magic.*

“Ooo!”

*It was just some small thing a kooky old aunt had taught her when she was a child. Really more of a silly game than anything supernatural. She'd gather roots and herbs, mud and soot, lizards' tails and crows' beaks.*

“Ew!”

*Water from a pond with the reflection of a full moon, blood from a finger pricked by a thorn bush on an autumn equinox—things like that. Sometimes even her own hair, saliva, nails or other excrements were used for her spells.*

“What's excrement?”

“It means pee.”

“Gross.”

“Ok. No more interrupting. ”

*During sad, lonesome nights, she'd speak her incantations, brew her potions, perform her rituals and believe in herself. Believe in her own will. By morning, she'd feel right as rain. The magic only had one real power. The power to get her through dark times.*

*One especially bright and lovely spring day, this old woman set*

*out to make herself a nice cherry pie. She could just imagine it. Hot out of the oven. Bright red when she cut into it. She licked her lips in anticipation. She was feeling so hungry. Grabbing her little basket, with its nice white cloth laid inside, she started deep into the forest. Half a day's trip to where the cherry trees grow.*

*Along the path through the trees, which she knew all too well, she came to a small stream. But there was something there. Something this woman had never seen before. A little boy, standing by the ferns, with pure white skin and empty black eyes. One toe dipped into the stream. Naked as the day he was born.*

Nope. That's it. The boy is not sticking around for this.  
"MOOOMMYYY!"

The little girl shines her light on the figure emerging from behind the couch. The boy is illuminated with his arms up and mouth open. The room erupts in screams.

Kay rushes in, turns on the light, and sees her boy crying. "Oh, you're scaring him!"

"He's not supposed to be here!" the girl objects. "Take him out of here!"

She lifts the boy in her arms and takes him into his bedroom.

"Come on, little one. I'll tell you a bedtime story."

The boy gets under his covers as Kay brings a chair to the side of his bed.

"Oh! You know what? I never read you that Grover story that Ralph gave you! I forgot what it's called. How about that one?" Kay grabs the book from his shelf and reads the title out loud. "*The Monster at the End of This Book.*" She sits down next to the boy, tucks him in, and shows him the cover under the light of his bedside lamp. "Starring lovable, furry old Grover. *Hello, everybody!*" Kay opens the book. "What did that say? On the cover, what did that say?"

The boy looks quickly up at Kay, concerned immediately that Grover is unaware of the title of his own book.

Kay looks down and interprets excitement. She smiles. “Did that say there will be a *monster* at the end of this book?” She looks back to the boy to make sure he’s following. “It did? Oh, I am so scared of *monsters*.” Kay turns the page.

“Shhhh. Listen, I have an idea. If you do not turn *any pages*, we will never get to the end of this book. And that is good, because there is a *monster* at the end of this book. So please do not turn the page ...” Kay reads with all the emotion of the character, whispering with fear in her voice.

The boy thinks Grover’s request is reasonable.

Kay turns the page. “*You turned the page!*”

The boy is stunned. Why would she do that? Can’t she understand what Grover is trying to tell her?

“Maybe you do not understand. You see, turning pages will bring us to the end of this book, and there is a *monster* at the end of this book ... but THIS will stop you from turning the pages. See? I am tying the pages together so you cannot ...” Kay turns the page. “*You turned another page!*”

“Mommy, don’t turn the page.”

“It’s ok, sweetie. Don’t worry.”

“No, Mommy. Don’t.”

“Baby, it’s ok. It’s just a story.”

Kay continues. “You do not know what you are DOING to me! Now ... STOP TURNING PAGES!” Kay reaches out. The boy's heart pounds quickly. “It’s ok, baby. Trust me.” She grabs the page. The boy covers his eyes!

“There! I, Grover, am nailing this page to the next one so that you will not be able to turn it.”

The boy peeks through his fingers.

“And we will not get any closer to the *monster* at the end of this book.”

He sees Grover hammering and nailing with a large assortment of wooden planks behind him. Grover, you fool! He thinks. You can't stop Mommy from turning the page with that!

Kay turns another page. "All right! All right! All right! Do you know that every time you turn another page ... you not only get us closer to the *monster* at the end of this book, but you also make a terrible mess!? THIS will stop you from turning pages. A heavy, thick, solid, strong BRICK WALL. I would just like to see you *try* to turn this page."

Well, now Grover is just getting cocky. Does he not know who he's talking to?

The next page shows Grover, a single arm coming out from the rubble. "Do you know that you are very strong?"

Oh, I see, the boy thinks. Grover's just playing a game with me.

"The next page is the end of this book, and there is a *monster* at the end of this book. Oh, I am so SCARED! Please do not turn the page! Please! Please! Please!"

The boy looks up to his mother. He trusts her. She turns the page.

"Well, look at that! This is the end of the book, and the only one here is *me*. I, lovable, furry old Grover, am the monster at the end of this book. And you were so scared!"

The boy can't believe it! Grover calling *him* scared!? Well, he was, a little—but he knew it was going to be ok.

"THE END. I told you and told you there was nothing to be afraid of."

### Chapter 3

Kay wakes in darkness.

Her gaze darts instinctively to the corner of the room to check her

line of sight down the hall. But she sees only Ray's chair. That's right. New home. Kay gains her bearings.

From out her bedroom door, she hears a rustling. Oh, what are those girls up to now? What time is it, anyway? She looks at the clock. It's past midnight. They better not still be playing. Kay sits up, pulls the blankets back, and steps into her slippers.

As she walks out, she laments not having her old system of mirrors. The layout of the house had made it impossible. Too many odd angles. Too many blind corners. Maybe she should give it another go. Buy more mirrors. A noise from the kitchen. Ray steps out.

"Hey, honey!"

"Oh, quiet down!" Kay whispers.

Ray pulls his hands up quickly over his mouth.

"You're back so late. Where have you been!?"

Ray walks down the hall to speak with Kay closely. "I was at the Vegan Cafe."

"What were you doing there for so long!?"

"I'm sorry, honey."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Just a little."

"Ray."

"They had an open mic night. You know I've been trying to build a presence in that community. It's business."

"You stayed out drinking all night for business?"

"Well, I don't know. I just ended up having a really good time!"

"Ray! *Quiet!*"

Ray stoops over and whispers, "I had a good time."

“Well, good for you.”

Ray looks disappointed. “I’m tired. I’m gonna get to bed.” He walks past his wife and into the bedroom.

Kay can’t understand how Ray could spend all night drinking downtown, miss his daughter’s big sleepover, leave *her* to manage everything, and still expect that she’d applaud him for having a good time. Ugh, better check on the girls while she’s still up.

Kay walks to the end of the hall and pokes her head into the living room. All is well. She turns to check the kitchen and sees on her metal table near the fridge, illuminated by soft moonlight pouring in through the window, a large crystal bowl filled with red apples. What’s this? She walks over.

Kay picks up an apple, then leans down to inspect the bowl. The crystal has such a beautiful cut and design. It looks expensive. Kay is entirely wrapped in this moment. So drawn in that she doesn’t think to question where it came from. Oh! Ray!

Suddenly she feels so bad about herself. Chastising Ray for staying out late. He’s a grown man, not a child. And she knows that he’s doing it all for the family. Working hard to leverage those vegans. All the while planning to leave her this beautiful crystal bowl. A little surprise for the woman he loves. She can’t believe it. She can’t believe that she’s married to such a wonderful man. How can she be so lucky?

Kay walks down the hall and finds Ray fast asleep. She crawls back under the covers and holds his hand until she can be with him again in dreamland.

## Chapter 4

“We’re playing a game. It’s called How Many Kids Can We Punch in the Stomach?”

The girl takes her brother’s hand and lines up the fastest path to

the front door.

“Do you wanna know how to play?” the big one on the bike says.

“If you say no, we’ll punch you in the stomach,” the small one says, walking up to them.

The boy feels it’s nice that these neighborhood kids are inviting them to play a game. But it doesn’t sound very fun. Plus the rules are confusing.

“Oh, yeah? Well, we’re playing a game too. It’s called How Many Ugly Kids Live in Your Neighborhood? Let’s see. One. Two.”

“More like four!” the small one says. The girl laughs.

The big one gets off his bike and throws it down on the street. He walks to the boy and grabs his arm.

“Let him go!” The girl grabs the big boy’s hand and tries to pull him away, but she’s not strong enough. The small one just walks over and punches her little brother in the stomach.

“Seven!” the big boy shouts.

The boy doesn’t understand what’s happening. It hurts so much. He can’t breathe. It’s like his lungs took a time-out. They won’t work. Won’t fill up again. Some game this is!

The big one gets on his bike and rides away with the small one chasing after. The girl lifts the boy into her arms. He wraps his legs around her. She carries him back to the house.

—

Ray comes home to find Kay standing in the living room, smiling at him as he walks in through the front door. Waiting there before a large, new TV. Holding a solemn, thankful look in her eyes. What can he do but smile back?

Sure, he’s made more money in his last three deals than he made from six months working with Roger, but he just wishes Kay would stop spending. Maybe he can talk to Marc and then Marc can talk to Terri. It must be her that’s taking Kay out shopping,



after all. A bad influence when it comes to money. He wants to feel at least like he's getting ahead. A rainy day fund. That's what he needs. Because rainy days were sure to come.

Ray sits on his blue-striped couch and kicks off his shoes. Work ain't done yet, old boy, he thinks. He opens up the Amiga 3000 user's manual.

*There are two buttons on the mouse. The left mouse button is called the selection button; the right button is called the menu button. These terms are explained later in this section.*

*Here's how to clean the mouse:*



- *With your thumbs, firmly turn the ball cover to the open position. With the mouse upside down, lift off the cover.*



- *Put your hand over the opening, turn the mouse right side up, and catch the ball.*

Ray feels a special moment of pride. He never thought it would be like this. The idea of someone else, another working-class stiff, looking up at him and saying, “Ok, boss.” Jeez, he’s not a boss. Might take some time getting used to that.

He opens up the paper, reviews his own ad, and slowly drifts off into imagination. He sees some other soul opening the same print, crossing their fingers before sifting through the classifieds. They find Ray’s ad and circle it with a red pen, maybe even jotting something positive at the side like, “Sounds perfect!” or “Call first!” Ray looks at his phone. The door opens.

A girl walks into the office. Ray stands and heads to the reception. The girl extends her hand.

“Hello, sir. My name is Rebecca Flynn.”

Ray gives it a shake. She looks barely out of high school. What’s this about?

“I’m here to inquire about the open position you have for a new secretary.”

“How old are you?”

“Should age matter if I can do the job well?”

Ray doesn’t want to be cruel. “How should I put this.” He rubs his jaw, thinking of a gentle way to let her down. “Age is something that will allow me to trust that you *can* do the job well. Maturity is important.”

“So, as long as I can display maturity and give you something to trust, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Ray can’t hire this girl. It’d be like babysitting. He looks at Rebecca, hoping she might just see it on his face. She doesn’t budge.

Isn’t she going to say anything? She’s just standing there, waiting for him to dispute her.

Ray sighs. “Ok, why don’t you have a seat in my office.” Rebecca takes her seat, Ray his. “So, do you have any experience?” Rebecca hands Ray a handwritten resume. “These are all high school clubs! How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Sixteen! You’re still in school!”

“Incorrect.”

“So you dropped out?”

“On the contrary.”

Ray leans in. “Are you playing some kind of game with me?”

“No.”

What’s with this chick? Ray thinks. Maybe he should get through it quickly, then he can show her the door and she can feel like she’s had her chance. “Ok, why don’t you just tell me why you think I should hire you.”

“I graduated high school early and with honors. I’m a special person. Gifted. I’m *smart*. And not only that, I’m eager. I love to learn and I’m good at learning. I’m positive I can learn how to do anything you need me to do. And I’ll be seventeen in October.”

Ray changes his mind. Better to not drag this out. “Look, I’m sorry, sweetie. I really am. But I just can’t hire a sixteen year old. I can’t.” Ray stands.

Rebecca looks down—then looks right back up. “You’ve judged me without knowing me. You know that?” she snaps.

Jeez, now she’s got an attitude? “Well, I’m judging what I see now. I mean, you’re sure quick with that tone. And you say you’re smart, but how’s speaking to me like that gonna get you hired?”

Rebecca’s lips wiggle around in a failed attempt to contain her words. “So, you’re saying I’m stupid?”

“Well, no. I’m not saying *that*.”

“But you implied it, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“You did. You questioned my assertion and implied its opposite.”

What is this, the debate team? “Well ...” Ray considers he might be at a disadvantage—he was never on the debate team. “What I *implied* was that your action, that single action, wasn’t smart.”

“Do you know what you’ll find in the dictionary if you look up the word ‘stupidity’?”

Ray’s not going to fall for this one again. “Uh, I don’t know, a picture of *me*?”

“No.” Rebecca gives Ray a concerned look. “You’ll find it defined as an act that goes against one’s interests.”

“Huh?”

“So, you’re supposing to know my interests, then? If you can judge my actions?”

Ray’s had enough of this. “Well, I can only *suppose* that you were *interested* in getting *this job!*”

“I have more than one interest.” Rebecca stands. “And more than I want this job, I want to maintain my dignity. You, *sir*, have tried to rob me of that.”

Rebecca storms out of the office. Ray lets out a long laugh. Rob her of her dignity? Give me a break. She’s sixteen, what dignity does she have? Ray sighs. This hiring process may be more difficult than he imagined.

—

“Nana! Nana, come quick!”

“What is it?”

“Come quick!”

“Ok, Kayla. Hold on.” Laura takes off her reading glasses and sets them on the table by her daybed. She lays down her bible.

“Come on, Nana!” Kayla runs over and grabs her nana’s hand.

“I’m coming. I’m coming.” Kayla pulls like she’s lifting her nana out of bed. Laura rises, with some slow theatrics, to give Kayla the impression she’s actually helping her. “Upsy-daisy!”

“Nana!” Kayla giggles. Her tiny hand takes Laura to the coffee table in the living room where she has crayons scattered around drawing paper and a juice box. There, in the middle, is a picture of Laura and Kayla holding hands under a rainbow. “I LOVE YOU GRANDMA!” is written in careful multicolor across the bottom.

Oh, God, how it breaks her heart! This sweet little child, who’s had to face so much—more than any child should ever have to. Laura holds her hands up over her mouth. “Ohhh!”

Kayla squirms proudly. Her nana likes it!

“I’m going to hang this on the fridge right now! It’s so beautiful!” Laura lifts the picture delicately and walks to the kitchen, Kayla at her heels.

She grabs an unused magnet, a smiling watermelon, and posts the drawing to the spot that no one can miss. Laura bends forward to give Kayla a little kiss, but Kayla too quickly wraps her arms around Laura’s neck. She lets out a quick whimper.

Kayla jumps back. “Are you ok, Nana?”

Laura stays a moment, hunched over, then catches her breath. She stands up straight. “I’m fine, dear. I’m fine.”

She watches Kayla run back to the coffee table to start a new drawing. This is it, she thinks. Time to quit her crying. Time to end this pity party. She’s got Kayla to look after. Charlie would understand. There’s just no time for grief. Not in this life.

Laura grabs the paper from the kitchen counter and walks over to the couch. She sits next to Kayla and pets her small head. What is there to think about? What could possibly be deliberated? She’ll

do anything for this little angel. She opens up the paper and turns to the classifieds.

She stops. She closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath. *Dear Lord, I know I've been asking for so much lately, but there's still more that I need. I need a job, Lord. Please guide me through this.* Laura opens her eyes. And what does she see? What does the Good Lord provide for her? A secretary at a real estate agency. Laura lets out a little laugh.

“What is it, Nana?”

“Oh, nothing.” Laura looks to the light outside her window. She’s only ever had one job in her life. A secretary at a real estate agency. It’s the only work she knows how to do. “Thank you, Lord,” she whispers.

Laura picks up the phone, then hesitates. Oh, but what if things have changed since her time? What if they do things differently now? 1992. Almost to the millennium. A new office wouldn’t want a relic like her. No, Laura. You can do this. You have the skills. Laura dials the phone.

“Anchor Realty, this is Ray speaking.”

“Well, hello, Ray. My name is Laura. I’m calling about this ad I found in the paper. For a new secretary?”

“Oh, great!”

Laura breathes a sigh of relief. He’s glad that she called. That’s all the encouragement she needed. “I would like to apply for the position.”

“Ok, well, uh ... Do you have any experience with work like this?”

“Actually, I do. Quite a lot, in fact.”

“Really? That’s perfect! When can you come into the office for an interview?”

Laura looks over at Kayla. “I suppose any time would be ok with

me.”

“Well, it’s still early. Would you be able to come in today?”

She knew she’d have to take her to daycare, she just wasn’t prepared to do it so soon. “Yes.” She looks at her clock above the entertainment center. “How does eleven thirty sound?”

“Sounds great.”

“Then I look forward to meeting you, Ray. I’ll see you at eleven thirty.”

“See you then.”

Laura hangs up the phone. She’ll let Kayla draw just a little longer.

## Chapter 2

The boy doesn’t understand this pain, but he feels that’s all he can really do, try to understand it. Why would his own head be hurting him? His head? That’s him! Why would *him* hurt *him*? He’s on his knees pushing his face into the side of his mattress with his hands over his ears, trying to block out the world.

What did the pain want? Other pain was clear. It had a message. And he felt it was at least on his side. It told him not to do things he shouldn’t do. Don’t touch the potato Mommy just took out of the oven. Don’t kick your foot into the leg of the coffee table. Don’t make your sister angry. But this? It was just hurting for no reason! He moves his hands over his eyes and pushes his palms in until he sees fuzzy patterns in the darkness.

The boy takes a deep breath. This pain is above him, has control over him. He has no choice but to bow down to it. What do you want, pain? He asks. Suddenly, he’s given a vision. A response. He sees it clearly there in that dark world where he communes with his own suffering. He sees a bowl of Cocoa Puffs. Cocoa

Puffs? That's what you want?

The boy stands up. Oh, the light hurts. He feels slightly nauseous. How could Cocoa Puffs be the solution? His mommy was always telling him which foods were good and which were bad. Broccoli, good. Ice cream, bad. And so on. Cocoa Puffs was definitely on the bad list. He looks back into his head. Empty. Well, the message was clear. He walks to the kitchen.

The boy climbs onto the counter and removes a bowl and box of Cocoa Puffs from the cupboards. He climbs back down and takes his materials to the kitchen floor. It's so hard to focus, but he knows he must do what the pain says. He pours the Cocoa Puffs into the bowl. Some of the balls fly around the floor, under the fridge and the stove. He pulls the milk out and sets it down to remove the cap. It's so hard to maneuver. At least he's able to get *most* of what he pours into the bowl.

Last step. The boy grabs a spoon from a drawer by the sink. His head is throbbing. He can feel his heart beat in his neck. His reality seems skewered, tarnished. He takes a bite of Cocoa Puffs and checks his condition. Status unchanged.

He keeps eating. Some part of him seems to be getting what it wants, he can feel it. Something deep within saying YES. He continues shoveling the puffy balls and sweet milk into his mouth. The crunchiness is so awful at first, but as he makes his way through the bowl it gets easier and easier. By the time he's done, his headache is gone!

The boy runs out to the backyard where his mother is working on her garden, her large shears snipping and pruning. He wants to tell her about his discovery, his method of recovery, but was it a good idea to do so? He thinks about the kitchen floor. The mess. That's the kind of thing Mommy *doesn't* like to hear about.

"Hey, baby. What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Come to help your mommy in the garden?"

The boy turns and runs into the house. "Nothing!" he calls back as



he escapes.

He steps into the kitchen. Daddy's home. Oh, no! He won't be able to clean the mess up in time. He's going to get in trouble!

"You make yourself a little snack?" Ray looks down at the empty bowl on the kitchen floor surrounded by spilled milk and damp cocoa balls.

"Um ..."

"Good for you!"

Daddy's not mad?

Ray lifts the boy in his arms. "You're a big boy now. Making your own cereal."

"The Cocoa Puffs made my head stop hurting!"

"They did? That's great!" Ray walks with his boy to the backyard to greet Kay.

"Hey, what are you doing home?"

"I found a secretary!"

"You did? Oh, that's great!"

"She's perfect!"

Oh, no, the boy thinks. Boring talk. He squirms around in his father's arms until he's set back down on the grass. Hey! A roly poly!

His parents continue exchanging uninteresting words, with a tone that drones overhead as the boy lies on his stomach and takes a peek at the little creature. They're *so* funny. The boy can't get enough of them. What a silly little body. And the way they just curl up when he pokes them. Like they're trying to pretend they're not there. Like, *nobody's home, please go away!*

He feels his mother's arms lifting him, but he doesn't want to be taken from his entertainment. He wiggles a little in protest, but

gives up quickly.

“Come on, baby. Mommy’s gonna make us some lunch.” Kay walks back inside and sees the mess on the kitchen floor. She puts the boy down. “Did you do this?”

The boy doesn’t know what to say. He thought it was a good thing. An idea that had been validated just moments ago by Daddy. He looks to his father.

“It’s ok, honey. I’ll clean it up,” Ray says. He grabs some paper towels and hands a few to the boy. “Come on. Big boys have to learn how to clean up after themselves.”

The boy moves around dutifully, doing his best to be a big boy.

“Anyway, I’m not really set up for a secretary yet.” Ray hunches over to gather puffs and sop up milk. “I told her I’d get her a desk and a filing cabinet and that she could start next week, so I was wondering if you’d wanna help me do a little furniture shopping?” Ray tosses the spent towels into the empty bowl and looks over at Kay.

“Sounds fun!”

### Chapter 3

Kay finds a red dress in her closet. What does he expect me to do with this? She thinks. They don’t ever go out. Is he planning to take her somewhere? Oh, she hopes not. All the gifts. It’s too much. She doesn’t need all this. How can she communicate that to Ray without sounding unappreciative?

Another thought occurs to her. She looks at the clock. 8pm and he’s still not home from work. No. That would never happen. What is she even thinking? But why does he feel the need to buy me all these things?

I pushed him to buy the house, she thinks, but that was for the

family. And it was a good thing I pushed him to go out on his own, because look at him now! He's doing so well with those condos. The whole family is doing better than ever.

She fears that Ray might think he has to earn her love. She pulls the dress out. Well, might as well try it on. Kay pulls down her loose jeans and slips out of her tank. She steps into the red dress and looks at herself in the standing mirror near her side of the bed, closest to the door. Could Ray have bought her such a perfect dress? How could he have found something that worked so well for her?

“Hey, honey. Looking good.”

“Oh!” Kay jumps and turns around to find Ray leaning against the doorframe of the bedroom. “Have you been watching me?”

“I just saw you putting that on and I stopped for a second.”

Kay is too thrown to know what to say. She was in the middle of formulating a tactical response to the gift. She wasn't yet sure in which direction she was going to take it. “How was work? Did things go well with Laura's first day?”

“She didn't show up.”

“What? Did she call?”

Ray shakes his head.

“How odd.” Kay feels so awkward standing there in the dress. She decides to just take it off. Ray watches. She thinks maybe she should do it in a sexy way? Maybe? She looks over her shoulder. Ray looks confused. Never mind. She hangs the dress up.

“Well, I was just going to shower. There's a casserole in the fridge.”

—

Kay wakes in darkness. She can't breathe. She can't move. Wait, new home. Safe home. She looks around the room. Weird. Why did that happen again? She rolls over and stares into her mirror. It

only shows the wall outside her bedroom door, but the habit of it still comforts her. That's strange. She sees something moving in the shadows.

Half of her must still be dreaming. She continues to stare through her mirror at the shadow in the hall. The way it seems to morph reminds her of her old childhood bedroom. She'd stare up at the dark silhouettes of evergreens rustling outside her window. She'd see forms in the patterns that the black branches would sketch upon the blue night sky. Faces of people she knew. Storybook characters. It would help her drift off into sleep.

Oh, why did she have to turn her brain on? Now she's aware enough to know that she has to pee. Fine. Kay quietly slips out from under the covers and starts down the hall.

Suddenly Kay feels there's a presence inside the house. Something there with her in the darkness. Some evil force, bent on her demise. Even after all these years, the nighttime still gives her the willies. She walks into the bathroom and turns on the light.

She pees.

## Chapter 4

Kay finds a diamond necklace on her bedroom dresser. This is too much. This has to stop. It's reckless spending! A receipt left in the lid of the box? Oh, I'm sure he didn't mean to leave that there. Should she look?

Nine hundred dollars! That's not ok! Oh, what's happening? Why all the gifts?

Maybe money has changed Ray. She wonders. It could be like a compulsion. She's seen those things on TV, people with odd addictions. But she could just imagine telling *that* to Maury. *Please help me, Maury. My husband is addicted to showering me with affection!* Boos from the audience.

She's trying to delay the thought of having to return it, which is what she'll have to do. Have a talk with Ray, carefully, and then return the necklace. Not that she wants to keep it, it's just that, well, who doesn't dread confrontation?

And what a difficult thing to navigate. The Blue Willow dining set. The TV upgrade. The delicate lace throw pillows. She thinks back to all his items of love, there've been so many. And she's loved them all, so what is she supposed to say?

Things like this, you just have to start it and try to make sure it ends up in the right place. She closes the box and takes the necklace into the dining room where her brown pedestal table sits at the end of the kitchen, surrounded by bay windows. Ray is sitting and eating a banana.

"Ray. We have to return this."

"What is it?"

Kay holds the box out to Ray.

"What's inside?"

"The necklace, Ray. I know, I'm sorry. I opened it and I love it, but ..." Kay sits at the table. Ray takes another bite of his banana. "It's too expensive. I think it's best to return it."

"Well, if that's what you wanna do."

Ray's not making this easy for her. She wants to open up, share feelings. But Ray is offering her nothing. "Ray, I think we should talk about this. I don't need all this *stuff* to be happy."

"Great. Works for me."

She doesn't understand his tone. "You're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

Kay sighs. "Ok, Ray. I'm taking the car and I'm going to return this."

In her bedroom, she looks through her closet. Maybe she should

wear something nice. She fixes her hair in the bathroom mirror and heads out the door.

—

Kay walks into an expansive jewelry store at the end of a shopping strip by the water. The many large windows invite a happy daylight into the space. Views of the ocean make it feel free and breezy. Kay looks into the dazzling cases. How beautiful it all is! Oh, maybe someday. Kay walks up to a pretty woman behind the counter.

“Hi, my husband bought this for me as a gift, but—well, it’s just not for me, so I’d like to return it.”

“Your husband, *right*. We can return it as long as it’s not damaged.” The pretty woman reaches out her hand for the box. Kay pulls it away.

“What? I told you my husband bought this for me.”

“Oh.” The pretty woman’s expression turns serious, then apologetic. “It’s fine. I’m sorry. I can return that for you, no problem.”

A manager walks over. “Was there a problem with your purchase?”

“It was a gift. I just don’t want it, that’s all.” Kay places the box on the counter.

The manager looks at the pretty woman. The pretty woman shakes her head as a message not to push.

“Oh ... I see. Well, I’ll leave you to it.” The manager tries to leave, but Kay calls after.

“Why do I feel like I’m being treated like a liar? You don’t believe that my *husband* bought this for me? What are you trying to imply?”

“You were in here yesterday. I don’t know what this is all about.”

“What?”

The pretty woman rolls her eyes.

“I did *not* purchase this.”

The two women behind the counter look at each other and smirk.

They’re treating her like some crazy person. Well, she is not crazy! She doesn’t know what’s going on, but she doesn’t like being treated like this. “I’m sure you’re mistaking me for some other woman.”

“You were wearing that exact dress,” the pretty woman says.

“We talked for half an hour. About your husband’s business. About your kids. You’re telling us *we’re* confused?” The manager leans in. “What’s going on, Kay?”

Kay steps back. She looks around the store. She feels she’s losing her bearings just standing there. She turns around. A security camera. Pointing straight at her. Kay turns back to the women. “Show me the footage.” She points up at the camera.

“Come on.”

“*Show me.*”

The two women take a long look at Kay, then each other. The manager disappears for a moment into the back room, then comes back out with a VHS. She sticks it into a small black TV-VCR behind the counter. The tape shows the women opening up the store. The manager fast forwards. The video scrambles through the day. A black-and-white blur. Wild lines zigging and zagging through the middle. The tape stops.

That’s her dark hair. That’s her dress. That’s her shape. Her form. The women look at the paused image. They look back up to Kay. No, it has to be someone else. With the same dress. That’s possible. And it’s blurry. More than one woman could have that dress. Kay steps back from the counter. Lots of women have hair like hers. She walks back faster, her distance from the register like a measure of the preposterousness of the situation. That simply *can’t* be her. She reaches the door.

“What about the necklace!” The pretty woman holds up the diamond necklace left on the counter.

Kay runs out of the store.

## Chapter 1

“Well, look at you.”

“Abram!” Ray skips out to the reception. “What are you doing here?”

“I just had to see it for myself. A little birdie told me you’ve been doing quite well here.” He walks over to the new reception desk and lifts a fresh rose from a bouquet sitting in a vase. “Selling lots of condos?”

“Uh, yeah. Well, I’m just doing what I can to stay afloat.”

“I’m not judging. I think it’s great. Roger’s lost his touch, you know. Him and all his old cronies that run the big firms.” Abram looks into Ray’s office. Simple. Efficient. And since when does Ray know how to use a computer? “This is a nice little business you’ve built.”

Ray knows better than to push the point with Abram. “Thanks.”

“Your secretary out?”

“Oh, um, no. The woman I hired—well, she flaked.” Ray doesn’t like admitting this. As comfortable as he feels around Abram, there’s an air of competition, and he hates losing points.

Abram takes the last bit of the office in, then turns to Ray. “How about I come work for you?”

Ray lifts his eyebrows and sticks out his neck. “You wanna work for me?”

“Yeah. Why not?”



“Well, I don’t know.”

“You’d offer me a bigger split, I’m sure.”

“But that would be kinda weird. Taking part of your commission. I’m not your boss.”

“Ray, you’ve earned it. You see that, right?”

“I’ve just been getting lucky.”

“That’s always part of it. But look, Ray, let’s say I come over here and work for you. A fifty-fifty split. I get in on some of these condos. Help you advertise. Every leader needs a right-hand man.”

Abram’s always been a solid agent. A little younger and only in the business for a year–half as long as Ray. Thick black hair over olive skin, always dressed like a catalog model–and that atmosphere he carries with him, like he’s got all the answers, but he’ll never give them away.

“Why don’t I give you a moment to look into that box you have, that box of all the reasons why you’d say no. I’ll let you see that it’s empty. Go on. Look inside.”

Goddamn, Ray thinks, now that’s the kind of thing I need to be doing–using metaphors to manipulate an outcome. “There’s a lock on the box.”

“Oh, no.”

“I think it’ll open up if I get some food in me.” Ray points to his head. “Gotta feed the machine. You hungry?”

“Yeah, sure. I am.”

Ray grabs his keys and motions Abram toward the door. Ray locks up and pats Abram on the back. “You like vegan food?”

“*You* like vegan food?”

—

A creature in her house. She saw it. She definitely saw it. It moved

in the shadows. Jumped out from the kitchen, ran past the hallway, and is now in the living room. Kay stands in a frozen posture, back pushed up against the hallway wall, fingers curled in, hands drawn beneath her chin.

She needs to know what's happening to her. She peels herself off the wall and steps down the hallway. She gets to the end and turns on the light to the kitchen. Empty.

She flips the switch for the living room. The couch, the TV, the end tables, the standing lights in the corners. Nothing. She walks into the room. On the coffee table. That wasn't there when she went to bed. A Super Nintendo, boxed in supreme newness.

Kay turns and starts down the hallway. She just wants to go back to sleep. Climb under the covers. Pull them up over her head. Oh, but she can't leave it there! She grabs a black garbage bag from under the kitchen sink and shoves the Nintendo inside. She walks out her sliding doors, tosses the bag in the bin beside the house, and crawls back into bed.

—

The next day passes as a blur. She puts herself on autopilot to avoid dealing with the stress. All the chores, all the responsibilities, they serve a new purpose. A facade to hide her troubles. Her daily routine is like a structure that she can recede into. She's not there. Not really. Not really humming as she cooks for her children. Not really smiling when she says good night.

“So now Abram wants to work with me and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, but I feel like if I just keep saying yes to things that, well, it'll work out, because that's kinda how things have been going so far. Like, everything I do just keeps working! It's weird, really, but even with everything, new things keep coming. I feel like the choices keep stacking, you know? Ah, I don't know. So, anyway, whaddya think? Should I hire Rebecca? It could be good to have a smart person in the office. And I kinda need someone now if Abram's gonna start with me. I don't know how to do any of that stuff.” Ray turns over in bed and looks at his wife. “What should I do?”

“I think you should ... do ... what you think is right.” Kay can’t focus. Oh, she wants to shout. What should he do? What should *she* do?

“Well, honestly, I feel kinda bad.” Ray rolls back over to stare at the ceiling as he shares his inner world with Kay. “I mean, maybe I wasn’t nice. She said I judged her without knowing her and ... she was right. I *did* do that. And she *was* smart. You don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

Kay can barely understand Ray. So, he has to hire a new secretary? It all seems so small. She wishes he could just see it. Why can’t he just *see* it!? “I don’t think that’s a bad idea.”

“Really?” Ray turns to confirm this.

Kay manages to look at Ray. “No. Yes. It’s a good idea. I’m sorry, I’m a little tired. Can we turn off the light?”

Ray switches off the bedside lamp and continues thinking in the darkness. It could be kind of fun. Maybe Rebecca will be like one of those whiz kids he hears about. Inventing new things at young ages. What if she discovers some new real estate thing, like, I don’t know, a real estate thing that would be good and make lots of money fast. What would that be? Ray tries to imagine it, but he can’t.

—

She’ll take Ray to work. He’ll have Abram there if they need to go out. She can drop the kids off with Terri and then get the mirrors. She just needs a focused afternoon. Just some time to herself.

She gets the kids ready and stuffs them into the car. She shouldn’t have snapped at them about their shoes. She just wishes they wouldn’t be difficult. Oh, hurry up, Ray. Kay starts the car and lets it idle, staring through the driver’s side window, waiting for the front door to open. Ray walks out with a muffin.

—

“Daddy, can we come to work with you instead of staying with Terri?” the girl asks as they pull up to Ray’s office.

“Not today, but that’s a good idea.” Ray hops out of the car, then opens the backseat. “Another time, ok? I promise.” He leans over and gives both his children a little kiss. “You two be good for your auntie. Don’t cause her any trouble.”

—

“Mom, can we—”

“Just be quiet!” Kay looks in the rearview mirror at her children. It’s not their fault. “I’m sorry. Mommy has a headache. She needs you to be quiet.”

—

Kay pulls into the driveway. Terri is sitting on her porch, reading a book and drinking lemonade. Kay hates her. Oh, she doesn’t hate her. Terri walks over to the car.

“Ok, kids. Go on! I gotta get going!” Kay rolls down her window. “Thank you so much, Terri!”

“No problem. Do you wanna come inside for a bit?”

“No, I’m sorry.” Kay puts the car in reverse. “I have to go. Thank you. I’ll be back soon.” Kay pulls out of the driveway. The kids run into the house with Terri.

—

Kay pushes her cart around the living room department. She places mirror after mirror into the basket. Mirrors of all shapes and sizes. Ovals, squares, rectangles and stars. Some with large decorative frames. Some wooden. Some shining gold. She can’t think. She just needs mirrors.

—

She throws the nail down and collapses into a ball on the kitchen floor. She can’t do it. She can’t get it to work! She’s hung up every mirror, moved them around in every configuration, hammered all over the walls trying to get the angles right, but she can’t get a line of sight! All the mirrors, they only reflect herself!

---

As Kay nears the end of the street, she starts to run. She can't wait another minute. She runs across the smooth stones, behind the trees, reaches the water and cries. She cries and cries. What's happening to her?

She turns to find the little shack where her kids play. She just wants to be a kid again. She wants someone to take care of her. Someone to hold her tightly. She sits in front of the shack and scoots back, trying to fit inside. She weeps so hard that she struggles to breathe.

"Are you all right?"

Approaching carefully, across the smooth stones, is the most beautiful woman Kay has ever seen.

"I'm sorry." The woman points awkwardly back to the dark cottage. "I heard crying." She tucks a long strand of braided black hair behind her ear and takes another step forward. "I just wanted to make sure you're ok."

She's like an angel, Kay thinks. "What? Oh, I'm ok. Yes." Kay closes her eyes tightly to secure her emotions. "I'm fine."

The woman waits a bit, then walks to a piece of driftwood near the shack and sits down. "Did something happen?" She looks seriously over at Kay. "Did something happen *to you*?"

"Oh, no." Kay shakes her head vigorously. "It's not anything like that. No. Everything's fine."

"Ok."

"I just needed to get out of the house." Kay glances back to the ocean. "It's nothing. Really."

"That's ok. You don't have to say anything."

Kay looks the woman's body over. She knows it isn't the time for this, but she can't believe how gorgeous she is. She's never seen someone so perfect. "You're so pretty." Oh, did she say that out

loud!?

The woman laughs. "I'm Cat."

Kay looks back at the cottage, remembering the black truck.

"About that, I'm sorry. I wanted to come out and apologize, I really did. But, ah—I'm trying to keep a low profile."

"Boy trouble?"

"It's ... complicated." Cat looks out at the water.

"Oh." Kay shares the distant ocean gaze.

"So"—Cat looks slowly over at Kay, she turns her palms out and raises her eyebrows—"are you gonna tell me your name? Or is that a secret too?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! My name is Kay."

"It's nice to meet you, Kay. You know, I think I could actually use a friend with a secret."

"You could?"

"Yeah."

"Oh," Kay thinks. "Why?"

"Um," Cat smiles. "Makes things more *balanced*?" Cat's voice is so soothing to Kay, like hearing familiarity itself. "As long as we both have secrets, it's like we don't have to share, but we don't have to lie."

"We'll be *secret sisters*!" Oh, it's so embarrassing to have blurted that out, but Kay feels an instant kinship.

"Secret sisters. I like that! But how about this? If you ever feel like telling me what's up, you go right ahead, ok?"

"Same to you."

"Deal."

## Chapter 2

“All right, Ray. Check it out!”

“What are we doing here?” Ray unlocks his seatbelt from the passenger side of Abram’s little red Mazda hatchback.

“Come on.” Abram hops out and onto the dealership lot. Ray follows. “I don’t wanna see anymore of this wife dropping you off at work so she can take the car baloney, you’re a business owner!” Abram stops at a new car and brings his hands together. “You need one car for your wife.” He motions to the car. “And one car for you. That’s it! End of story.”

“I’m not just gonna buy a car.”

Abram continues to lead Ray down a row of shiny cars. A salesman on the lot perks up. “Why not? You’ve been closing deals left and right, you must be rolling in dough.”

“No, this is—I’d have to talk to my wife.”

Abram stops abruptly. “You’re gonna let your wife tell you yes or no? Ray, your family needs two cars, you can’t have your wife dropping you off like it’s your first day at school.”

Ray looks down.

“Look, Ray.” Abram puts a hand on his shoulder. “You *need* a guy like me. You’re not gonna do this kind of stuff on your own. I can see that. You’re making money! You’re doing well! But you’re still thinking like old Ray. And this, buying a new car, this is a business decision. You need the car for work. That means it’s entirely within *your* domain. This is your decision.”

Abram walks up to a powder blue convertible, top down, white interior. “Now *this* is what you need.”

Something else catches Ray’s eye. It looks stable. Secure.

“Is this more your speed? Looks nice.”

“Top of its class!” the salesman chimes in.

“Can we take a look inside?”

“Hop right in.”

Abram opens the driver’s side door and motions for Ray. “After you.”

Ray steps up and into the Ford Explorer. Tan leather interiors, dark black accents on the wheel and dash. Air conditioning, power windows, airbags.

“I’ll be right back with the key. We’ll take her for a spin.”

Abram hops into the passenger seat. “Pretty sweet.”

“If I get a new car it’s not just gonna be for me, it’s gonna be for my whole family.” Ray turns to look over the spacious interior. He imagines his kids, growing over the years. What adventures might he take them on? What fun family treasures could be packed inside this roomy vehicle?

“All right, family man. That’s fair.”

The salesman hops into the back seat and hands Ray the keys. He starts the engine. It feels so clean. So well designed. He would never have thought anything bad about his station wagon, but turning that key—he can’t go back to it now. Ray pulls out of the lot.

He’s never been so high above the road before. The elevation feels ... clear. His mind is calm, his thoughts more peaceful. He takes a right turn.

“A big vehicle, but entirely under your control. Very easy to handle.”

Ray doesn’t want to drive back. He just wants to keep driving. Just drive and drive and never stop. The salesman doesn’t bother speaking up again until they’re back on the lot.



“Shall I get the paperwork started?” The salesman confidently heads to his office, but Ray isn’t sold just yet.

“I don’t know. I want to make sure it’s good for my family.”

“What’s there to deliberate? This here’s a Ford.” He kicks the back wheel. “Equipped with Firestone tires. Two biggest, most trusted names in the American automotive industry. It’s a safe car for you and your family.”

Suddenly Ray is filled with the most wonderful enthusiasm. He *can* afford this car. He *is* doing well with his business. So why not? Why not enjoy it a little!? And Abram’s right. He can’t have Kay dropping him off. She needs her own car. Ray looks at Abram.

Abram looks at the salesman. “Hey, buddy. Cool your jets, ok? Who do you think you’re dealing with here? Let’s talk numbers.”

### Chapter 3

The boy doesn’t really understand what he’s doing. Isn’t that strange, to be attracted to something, to have it grab your complete attention, and to have no idea about that which pulls you in?

“Your boobs are really big,” the girl says.

Rebecca folds her arms.

“Hey! That’s not the kind of thing we say to people we just met!” Ray walks over to the girl and kneels down. “You promised if I let you come to work with me you’d behave yourself, remember?”

The girl nods.

Ray looks up at Rebecca. “I’m sorry, Becky.”

“It’s Rebecca.”

Ray slaps his forehead as he stands. “Right, sorry. I said it once

and now it's stuck. Rebecca, Rebecca, Rebecca.”

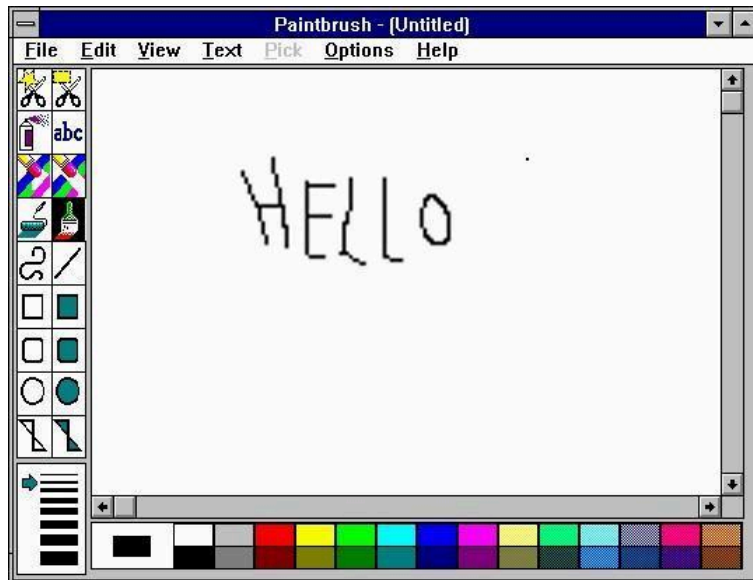
“Do you have to practice?” Rebecca looks down at the boy. Ew, he won't stop staring at her chest. Is it just always like that with men? Rebecca sits back at her desk and slouches.

“Daddy, is that your computer!?” the girl runs over to the Amiga in Ray's office.

“It sure is. You wanna play with it?” Ray takes his seat and lifts his little girl onto his lap.



He holds her hand over the mouse and guides the cursor around the screen.



---

Kay sits at her metal kitchen table, staring at the fridge. Her stomach rumbles, but she just can't get herself to eat. It seems wrong. But how stupid just to be sitting there at the table, hungry.

Maybe she can invite Cat over? She doesn't like to be in the house alone. Ray seems to think it was some nice thing, giving her the morning to herself. She'll invite Cat over for lunch. She wants to see her again.

But she just keeps sitting at the table. No decision can possibly be made. Such a looming presence—nothing makes sense anymore. How can she be sure of anything she thinks?

---

“Fuck!” Abram clasps a hand quickly over his eye.

The boy stands before him. He was just playing with a rubber band he found in front of the man's desk.

“Hey, watch your mouth!” Rebecca shouts from her desk opposite Abram, the boy between them.

“He shot a rubber band in my eye!” Abram stands. Ray walks out of his office looking exhausted.

“Ok, kids, I think it's time we go home.”

“But I don't wanna leave!” The girl is having too much fun on the computer.

“Nah, it's time to eat lunch. And this was just for the morning, you know that.” Ray takes a twenty from his wallet and hands it to Rebecca. “Here, you and Abram grab something to eat. Thanks for putting up with these two.”

Abram rubs his eye.

“You're such a baby.” Rebecca takes the twenty and waits by the door.

“Daddy, can I make lunch today?”

“Hey, look at that!” Ray looks over to Rebecca and Abram. “One day in the office and she’s all grown up!”

The girl giggles.

Ray guides his kids out the front door. “What are you gonna make for us?”

“Uh ... macaroni and cheese!”

“Mac and cheese! Yummy!”

The door closes.

Rebecca looks over at Abram. She holds the twenty up for him to see. “*I’m* choosing.”

—

Kay lies in bed listening to happy family noises coming from down the hall. The clinking of pans and utensils. The gentle guidance in Ray's voice. The brittle excitement of her little girl. She told them she has a headache.

“Ok, now toss the butter in.”

The girl grabs the butter with her fingers and tosses it onto the soft, pale macaroni.

“And open the cheese packet—here, I’ll open it for you.” Ray hands the opened packet of powdered cheese and hands it to his girl. “And last step, add the milk.”

The girl grabs the measuring cup filled with the exact amount she needs and pours it into the pan. It all looks so strange like that, like a swamp. “Daddy, it looks gross.”

“Don’t worry. You’re doing everything right.” He hands her a wooden spoon. “Now you just gotta mix it up.”

The girl stirs the ingredients together and as she does, she sees them transform before her eyes into the creamy macaroni she knows and loves. “Daddy!” She looks up at her father. She feels like a wizard. “Look how orange it is!”

“Yeah! You’re a great chef!” He lifts her in his arms and kisses her wildly around her neck and cheeks. The girl can’t stand how much it tickles. She drops the spoon, and some of the bright sauce splatters around the kitchen. “Ok, let’s eat!”

—

“So, queen of the lunchtime options, where—”

“No.”

“What?”

“Just no.”

“No to what?”

“Whatever it is you're doing.”

“Boy, do you have a stick up your ass.”

“We’re getting fried chicken. You’re not going to sway me.”

“Christ, ok. Fried chicken. I love fried chicken.”

Rebecca walks quickly down the sidewalk. It doesn’t please her to be cruel, but she’s not a sucker. She knows that with men like this, if you give them an inch, they’ll take a mile.

“Just trying to make conversation, get to know you, but fuck me, right?”

“Right.”

“My God.” Abram lets out an awkward laugh—does he actually like this? “You got a family? Brothers? Sisters? Boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Yes to what?”

“What about you?”

“Me? Yeah, of course. I’ve got two older sisters. Mom and Dad moved to Montana a few years back. And I’m single.”

“You’ve got two sisters and this is how you talk to women?”

“Because I know the truth.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“Girls ain’t sugar and spice and everything nice.”

Rebecca stops at the door of Ezell’s. “What are we, then?”

Abram opens it up for her. “Scumbags, darling. Just like the rest of us.”

—

Ray can’t wait to hop back into his Explorer. He’ll take any excuse he can get. He walks quietly down the hall and gently pushes open the bedroom door. “You need me to pick anything up for you?” he whispers to his wife.

“No, I’m fine.” Kay rolls over and puts a pillow over her head.

“Ok, feel better.” Ray practically skips out the front door.

Ah, there it is. The beautiful white paint job. Pristine. He jumps in and pulls out. Where could he go? Maybe he can just cruise around for a bit. He doesn’t need an excuse. He’s the master of his life. He’ll drive wherever he wants.

Ray turns down a residential street. Cute neighborhood. He looks at all the homes. Hey, that one’s got a sign out front. For Sale by Owner. He pulls up to the curb and hops out. He feels like he can do anything.

*Ding-dong!* Ray looks around the facade, he figures the numbers. The door opens. “Good afternoon. I saw your sign. Is this a good time to talk?”

The woman’s scornful expression changes quickly. “Yes! Great! Why don’t you come inside?”

Ray steps in. Looks even better. An older home, but meticulously maintained. “It’s beautiful! Why would you wanna sell such a great place?”

The woman looks excited. “We’re moving out of state. My husband found a new job.”

Ray calculates urgency. “Can you show me around?”

The woman takes Ray around the rooms. The layout, the neighborhood, the distance to shopping centers, freeways, grocery stores. Ray is working it all out as he walks through and draws information from the woman. “What does your husband do?”

“He’s an accountant.”

Shoot. Might be a hard conversion. The house wouldn’t be too easy to sell, but it has many attractive qualities. Not the kind of place where you’d want to settle down, but just the kind of place where you’d want to stay for a bit while you save up money. “I’ll give you forty-six thousand. We can sign the paperwork today. You can take your time moving out.”

—

Ray parks in front of the Vegan Cafe and hurries inside, hoping Rebecca and Abram might be there. He feels so good. He wants to tell everybody how *good* he feels.

“Hey, Ray!”

“Naomi!” Ray heads over to the counter. Naomi’s hair looks freshly buzzed. Oh, I guess she’s committed to that look, he thinks. “Is that a new piercing?”

“Yeah, I just got three more done.” She pulls her lip down and shows Ray the ring. “But I can’t show you the other two.”

“Why not?” Ray asks innocently.

“You have to buy me dinner first.”

“Oh!” Ray blushes. “Hey, did Rebecca and Abram come by?”

“Ray, my man. How’s it hanging?” a young man with blond hair parted over shaved sides calls out from down the bar.

“Hey, Dave!”

“You’re looking *up* today!”

“I just bought a house!”

“What? Don’t you already have a house?” Naomi asks.

“I’m gonna rent this one out.”

“Where’s it located?” Dave asks.

“Off Vander, by the Quick Stop. Beautiful little two-bedroom.”

“What are you gonna rent it for?”

“Uh ... I don’t know. Why? Are you looking?”

“Could be. My aunt’s thinking of selling. I’m living with her now, so I’ll need a new place when she does. Gonna move in with my girlfriend.”

“Does *she* know that?” Naomi asks.

Ray pulls a business card out and slides it over to Dave. He hands him a pen. “Write your aunt’s number down. I’ll help her out.”

“Thanks, Ray.” He uncaps the pen.

Ray turns back to Naomi. She leans forward with her elbows on the counter. God, what a knockout. He feels so lucky to be surrounded by such amazing and interesting people. His life just keeps expanding, getting bigger and better each day. “Did you see my new ride?”

“No.”

“Come on! Let me show you!” Naomi steps out from behind the counter and follows Ray.

—

Kay watches TV in the living room while her family eats the pizza she ordered.

“You’re not gonna have a slice?” Ray calls out from the dining table.



Kay doesn't respond. She just wants to be in her TV show, completely. She wants to crawl inside the box. Disappear. She senses something building. Wheels turning. She can feel it deep within. She knows. Something will happen tonight.

—

Ray stands in his garden at dusk. A late-summer sun. The sky glows with its last bits of the day just before the children are off to bed. Now they play around the rose bushes. It's funny how it's worked out. All this time, it's like he didn't even see what he had. *Here. This. Everything.* He closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath.

—

Kay walks out of her bedroom in the middle of the night. She can hear that thing in her home. She's going to confront it.

She steps down the dark hallway. She sees the shadow! It jumps off the shelf with her Blue Willow and flies under the dining room table. She peeks out from behind the wall and peers under the table. Glowing eyes stare back at her! No! She needs Ray! She needs her husband! She can't do this alone!

She runs back into the bedroom and shakes Ray. "Wake up!"

"Huh? Honey, what's wrong?"

She doesn't care anymore. Maybe she *is* crazy. She just needs someone else to see it. "You need to help me. There's something. Something inside the house. I saw it under the table."

"Ok. I'll check it out."

Ray stands and casually walks out to the dining room. He flips on the light. A black shadow darts from under the table, into the living room.

"Shit!"

"Ray!"

Ray flips on the lights. "Oh! She's pregnant!" He keeps his

distance from the frightened cat. The black fur over its distended stomach rises and falls with quick breaths. “She must have snuck in to give birth!”

“Daddy, what’s going on?” The little girl has woken. She walks out of her bedroom.

“A mommy cat came into the house. That’s good luck!”

“Mommy!” The boy runs up to Kay, but she steps back.

“No, Ray. Get it out. I don’t want it in here.”

“We can’t just kick her to the curb! Poor girl’s just looking for a safe place for her babies.”

“Kittens!?” the little girl shouts.

“Ray, please.”

“Go get some blankets from the closet, we’ll make her a little nest!”

The girl runs off. The boy heads into the kitchen and takes milk out of the fridge.

“RAY!”

Ray turns to Kay. The little girl runs back into the living room and makes a nice little pile.

“Get the cat out!”

“Come on, Kay! We won’t keep the kittens. We’ll give them away.”

“I’ll give the kitty some milk.” The boy walks the large gallon jug into the living room.

“It’s exciting. The kids will love it! It’ll be magical. Trust me.”

“Ray ...” Kay sinks back.

Ray pours the milk into a little saucer and lays it by the blankets. The pregnant cat walks to the nest and takes a lick of the milk.

“She’s not feral, see? Not afraid of people. It’ll be fine.”

“Ray, I don’t like this!”

“What’s the problem?”

Kay turns back into the bedroom. She can’t watch. She hears her family expressing giddy excitement from the living room. “Daddy, look!” she hears her girl shout. “Stay back, let her do her thing.” Oh, Kay can’t bear it. “Gross! Daddy!” “Well, honey, it’s the miracle of life, that’s just how it looks.” She hears her boy jumping up and down with excitement. “Is she done?” “No, not yet.”

Kay creeps back out to the living room. “Ray, I don’t think this is a good idea.” But Ray doesn’t turn around. “Ray.”

“Daddy, look! Another one!”

“Please, Ray.” Her voice is weak. She leans against the wall for support. “Please.” She stares at the backs of her family as they crouch around the scene.

## Chapter 4

“Kittens!” The big boy throws down his bike and runs over to the cardboard box, the small boy at his tail.

“You can’t have any!” the girl shouts.

“Awww!” The big boy reaches into the box and lifts a fluffy gray ball into his hands. “Luke! Look at this one!”

“I said you can’t have any!” The girl stands from the steps, next to her brother. “The kittens are for nice people only!”

The big boy’s shoulders relax. He looks down at the kitten. “I’m Thomas.”

“I don’t care.”

“Can we *please* have one!”

“Please!” Luke says.

“What are you gonna do with it?”

“Just keep it. We’ll protect it. We’ll give it food and water every day. I promise. We’ll take good care of it—won’t we, Luke?”

Luke nods his head.

“Apologize to my brother.”

“For what?” Thomas asks.

“You don’t even remember!?! You punched him in the stomach!”

“Oh.” Thomas puts the kitten back into the box. Luke reaches down to grab it again, but Thomas punches him in the arm and points over to the boy.

Luke looks up at Thomas, then walks over to the steps and faces the boy. “I’m sorry I punched you.”

The boy forgives him.

“Both of you!” the girl demands.

Thomas walks over to the boy. He kneels down in front of him. “I’m sorry. This is Luke, my brother. And I’m Thomas. We live a few blocks away, and I swear to God I’ll take good care of this cat and protect it with my life. Luke, swear to God.” Thomas smacks Luke.

“I swear to God.”

“Ok, that means if anything bad happens to it, you’re both going to go to *Hell*.”

Thomas and Luke look at each other. They nod with serious agreement, then turn back to the girl. “Does that mean we can have one?”

The girl walks over to the box. “Fine.”

Thomas and Luke jump up and run over.

“Which one do you want?”

“Randall!” Thomas shouts. He picks the little gray ball he held before.

“Randall?”

Thomas and Luke roll on the grass, playing with Randall. They’re so happy.

## Chapter 1

Joe pops a bottle of champagne by a large window of The Marina’s penthouse suite. He pours three glasses. “To my right-hand man, and my right-hand man’s right hand man!”

Abram lifts his glass. “To right hands!”

The group takes a drink.

Abram looks around the immaculate space. “Damn, this is gorgeous, Joe. How come you never brought us up here before?”

“Because this here’s *my* job, boys.” Joe straightens his tie and lifts his brow.

What does that mean? Ray thinks.

“Something tells me this champagne’s not for us.” Abram seems to understand.

“It’s for *all* of us!” Joe walks to the kitchen and sets the bottle on the island. “I did just sell the penthouse, though, so it’s a bit for me—but I got something for you two as well.” Joe lifts an envelope from the counter and holds it up for Ray and Abram.

“Did we win a prize?” Abram asks sarcastically, causing Joe to chuckle as he steps toward them.

Ray feels like there's a game being played, but he can't hit the marks, can't follow the cues. He hasn't said a word since the champagne popped.

Joe walks up to Abram and hands him a ticket. "There's a real estate seminar in La Jolla, and I'm sending you both down."

"Why do you want us to go to a real estate seminar?" Of all the things he could have said, he picked the dullest. Nothing wry or quick about it.

"Good question, Ray." Joe points at Abram, "See? *He* knows to question the motive of a gift." Joe leans in. "And he doesn't waste *time*."

Abram shakes his head and stares at the floor.

"Look, I came up here for two jobs. One, get some idiots to sell the condos." Joe takes an extended beat to really pound it in. "And two, to sell the penthouse. And I just sold the penthouse."

"And that means we go to San Diego?" Abram holds up his ticket.

Ray walks over and grabs his ticket from Joe. "This is for next Saturday? But Abram and I have a fishing trip planned."

Abram looks embarrassed. "We can go Friday."

Joe looks at the two mockingly. "You finished arranging your little play date?"

"We'll hammer out the details on our own time, thank you. So, Joe, does this mean you're leaving us?"

Oh, is that what's happening? Ray thinks.

"Alas, I shall return from whence I came." Joe twirls his hand up in the air. "Good luck in the future. I'm sure you boys will continue to do very well here. I hope to see you again at the seminar."

"What do you care about seeing *me* again?"

"Haven't I told you, Abram? I'm in love with you. Madly in love."

“All right, all right. Well, a free trip to San Diego.” Abram looks up at Ray.

“Where are we gonna stay?” Ray’s just trying to wrap his head around things.

“I can set you up with a room at the hotel.”

“Can you get us a private night with Shamu?”

“Maybe. If you sell the rest of these units, I’ll pull some strings. Anyway, I’m sorry to say, but it’s time for you two to fuck off. My flight leaves at two.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Ray extends his hand. Joe walks up and shakes it.

Ray and Abram head out of the penthouse and step into the elevator for the lobby.

“Nice going.”

Dammit, Ray thinks. He doesn’t even know what he did wrong.

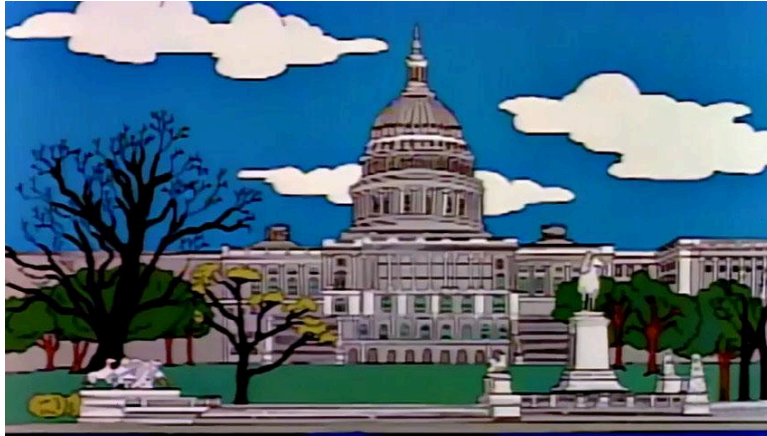
“What?”

“The hotel. I’m sure he wouldn’t have offered if you hadn’t asked.”

“Oh.”

“And sorry I didn’t pick up on it when you mentioned the fishing trip. I guess a guy like Joe has always got more candy in his pockets.”

—



*Congressman, this is Springfield National Forest.*



*Now, basically, what we wanna do is ... cut her down.*





*As you can see in our artist's rendition, it's full of old growth just aging and festering away.*



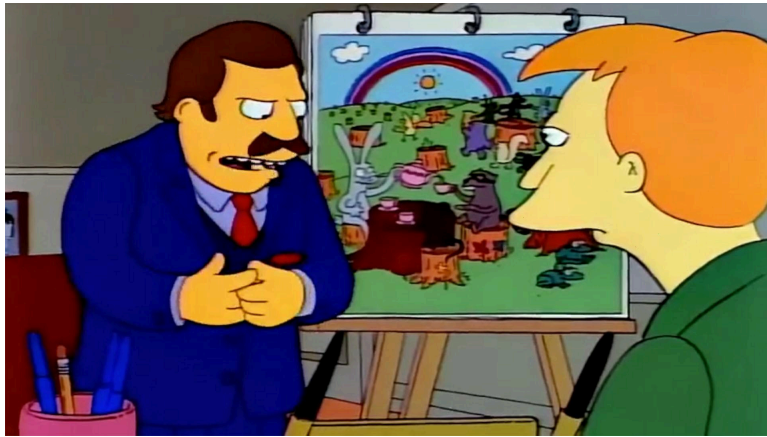
*In comes our logging company to clear out the clutter.*



*It's all part of nature's, you know, cycle.*



*Well, Jerry, you're a whale of a lobbyist, and I'd like to give you a logging permit, I would, but this isn't like burying toxic waste. People are gonna notice those trees are gone.*



*Ah, congressman. This is where it gets awkward. I never know quite how to put this ...*



*I just want to—*



*Offer me a bribe?*



*Hahahaha!*



*\*BUZZ\**

*Ah, what is it?*



*It's that little girl from Springfield who wrote the essay. Could be a good photo op.*

*Sure, fine.*



*So, where do we—*

*Tut-tut-tut. I've got a little place that I use for these matters. Call me tonight.*



*Well, hi there! You must be Lisa Simpson.*

*Hello, sir.*



*Lisa, you're a doer. And who knows, maybe someday you'll be a congressman or a senator. We have quite a few women senators, you know.*

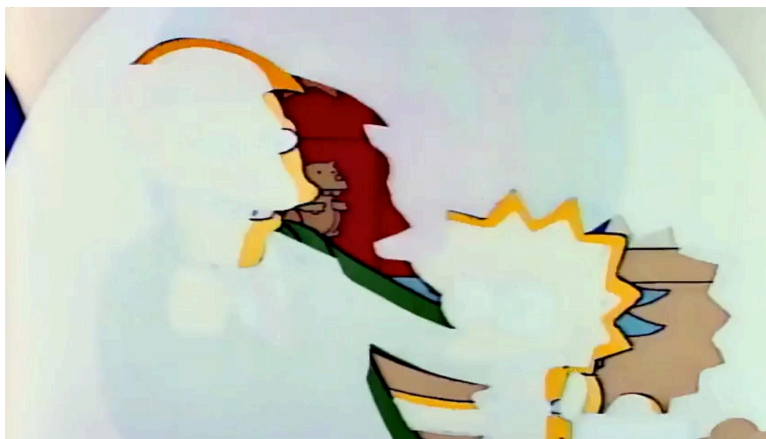
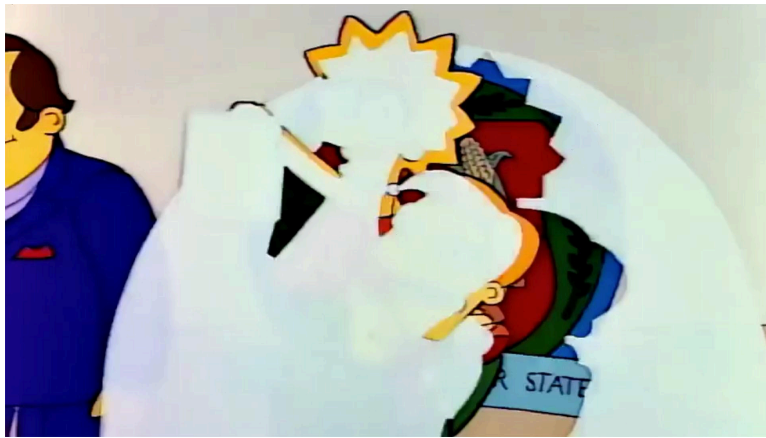


*Only two. I checked.*



*You're a sharp one.*

*Well, how about a few pictures?*





*Tot shot always plays in the sticks.*



*Aw, isn't that nice? Now THERE'S a politician who cares.*





*If I ever vote, it'll be for him.*



“I told you no Simpsons!” Kay lifts the remote and switches off the TV. The little girl shrinks into the couch with the boy. “And you let your little brother watch it with you!? What kind of older sister are you!? I lay down for ten minutes and this is what you do!?”

“Mommy, it’s funny!”

“I said no Simpsons and you disobeyed!” Kay steps forward and grabs the girl’s hand.

“Let go!”

Kay yanks the girl towards her and smacks her butt.

“Go to your rooms! Both of you are grounded for the rest of the night!”

“But Daddy said he’s gonna take us to the park to catch nightcrawlers!”

The girl looks devastated, tears in her eyes. Oh, what is Kay doing? She can’t concentrate. “Fine!” Kay stares at her children for a moment, then decides just to go back into the bedroom and lie down.

—

Kay wakes from her nap and looks at the alarm clock. Almost ten, is Ray still not home? She thinks of her kids. She was too hard on them. She walks out to the living room and finds her boy asleep on the blue striped couch, her girl sitting next to him reading a book.

“You still waiting up to get worms with Daddy?”

The girl nods her sleepy, little head.

“It looks like your brother didn’t make it.” She looks her boy over, cuddled up cozy on the sofa.

Ray’s powerful headlights shine through the bay windows. Door slams. Kay walks to the front to make sure he doesn’t make too much noise.

Ray walks into the living room and whispers to his girl, “You ready to go?”

The girl jumps up and grabs an empty coffee tin off the table. She nudges the boy, but he doesn’t wake. Ray tries to pull him up, but the boy crawls back to the couch. “Looks like it’s just you and me. You got the flashlights?”

The girl lifts her backpack. “Yes, Daddy.”

“All right, let’s go catch some nightcrawlers!”

Ray opens the door and the girl runs outside.

Kay lifts the boy in her arms and takes him to his bedroom. She places him softly under the covers and tucks him in.

She walks to the bathroom and stares into the medicine cabinet as

she brushes her teeth. A noise from the kitchen. What? Already? Kay holds her toothbrush and creeps down the hall.

There's food all over the metal table. The refrigerator door is wide open. There's something digging around inside. The door slams.

"Hey, Mommy! How about giving me a little motor boat ride?"

The boy rushes up to Kay and jumps at her, shoving his face into her breasts. Kay screams.

"Ah, loosen up!" The boy walks back to the table and opens a jar of mayonnaise. He sticks his hand inside and pulls a thick glob into his mouth. "I love this stuff!" The boy shakes the mayonnaise over a plate of pie, then gobbles it up. He opens a bottle of chocolate syrup and squirts it into his mouth. He looks up at Kay. "What? You're not hungry? Then how about helping me wash this down?" The boy raises his hands up and squeezes the air. "Come on, Kay, give your baby some milk!" The boy takes a big bite from a celery stick. *Crunch!* He chews it around slowly. "Hmm, I *like* this, but I don't *love* it." The boy motions to a chair with the celery. "Have a seat, Kay. Come on. Join me."

"Leave me alone."

"Oh? Is that what you want?"

"I want you to leave me and my family alone!"

"Ok, if that's what you want—I'll let the boss know."

The boy closes his eyes and drops his head into a plate of mashed potatoes.

## Chapter 2

A soft morning sunlight tickles the boy's cheeks. He rolls over and stretches his arms. He remembers having the strangest dream. He was at a carnival at night, but all the rides were closed. The park was empty except for an old man sitting by himself. He was

crying. “What’s wrong?” the boy asked. *Nobody wants to go on my rides anymore.* He looked so sad. “I’ll go on one of your rides.” The boy can’t remember what happened after that.

His stomach churns. Oh, it hurts. He crawls out of bed and heads to the bathroom. He takes off his pajama bottoms and sits on the toilet, but the poop won’t come out. He squeezes and pushes. Clenches his fists. *Plunk!*

He grabs a big wad of toilet paper and wipes his bottom. He looks at the paper. It’s clean! What? Didn’t poop come out? He gets another wad and wipes again. Nothing! Clean poop? Can that happen? He gets off the toilet and looks into the bowl. The poop looks like a golf ball. Just a little chunk that fell out of him. He flushes the toilet and watches it drain. What a mystery.

He walks down the hall and opens the door to his parents’ room. Daddy’s gone. Mommy’s still asleep. Why is she always sleeping now?

He walks into the living room and sits on the couch.

His sister skips out. “Want some breakfast?”

“Ok!”

The girl heads off to the kitchen and returns with a plate. She sets it down on the boy’s lap. It’s covered with worms! He quickly throws the plate away, sending worms across the room.

“What did you do!?” The girl swings her hands up to tug at her hair. She didn’t think the prank through. “We gotta clean it up before Mom sees!” The girl crouches down and starts picking up worms. “Come on! Help me!”

The boy runs back to his bedroom.

—

“Anchor Realty, this is Rebecca speaking.”

“Is Ray there?”

“Hi, Kay. No, he and Abram went fishing about a half hour ago.

Do you want me to leave him a message?"

"Just tell him to call me as soon as he can."

Kay hangs up. She feels ... nothing. She walks to the front door.

"Mommy, where are you going?" the girl asks.

She walks down the steps and slowly makes her way to the end of the street. She knocks on the cottage door. She hears the TV turned up loud inside. The curtains rustle. The door opens a crack, and Cat carefully steps through without giving Kay a peek inside.

"Hey, are you ok?"

Tears fall from Kay's eyes as she shakes her head.

Cat puts her arm around Kay's shoulder. "Oh ...". She rubs her back. "Let's go talk by the water."

Kay looks down at the wet stones. A gentle wave crashes in. "There's something bad in my house."

"Something bad. Ok." Cat nods and furrows her brow. "Can you get it out?"

"Oh!" Kay lifts her hands up over her face. "Maybe, but I'm so scared!"

"It's ok." Cat walks up and rubs Kay's shoulders.

Kay wrings her hands and stares into them as she speaks. "Do you believe in evil spirits?" She doesn't want to see Cat's reaction.

"Well, no, not personally. But my mom does. And my mom is a very smart, strong woman."

"But"—Kay looks up at Cat—"I really believe ... that there's an evil spirit in my house. I know how it sounds!" Kay steps away.

"Hey, that's not true. You don't know how it sounds to me. I ..."  
Cat looks back at her cottage. "Actually, I think I've got something that can help. Wait here."

Cat disappears into her cottage for a moment. Something that could help? Kay thinks. What could possibly help?

Cat returns with a dark iron object and hands it to Kay. “Here, I want you to have this.”

“Is this a door knocker?”

“My mom made it.” Cat suddenly rolls her eyes. “Or at least that’s what she told us and I just believed it as a kid, but now I’m thinking, like, did she *smelt* iron?” Cat takes a moment and laughs softly to herself. “Anyway, she said she made it to protect us. That she imbued it with a special power to ward off dark spirits.”

“I can’t take this!” Kay presents the door knocker to Cat, but she pushes it back.

“No, listen. My mom believes in spirits. I mean really *believes*. And she’s very serious about this stuff. I think it might really be able to help. And honestly, me giving this away ...” Cat takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. “This is something for me as well. Something I need to do.” She holds Kay’s hand around the door knocker, squeezes it tightly, then lets go. “Put it on your door. It will protect you.”

Kay looks down. The dark iron forms a simple circle. Some odd embellishments and unknown symbols. Well, she’ll take all the help she can get.

### Chapter 3

Jeez, that was some sendoff. Just a good luck, have fun, and don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out. What’s Kay got to worry about, anyway? He’s the one putting everything on the line. But, ok, he *is* currently on his way to San Diego. That’s not so tough. Kids are tough. I bet it’s pretty hard looking after them all day. Maybe he should give her a break. He gets breaks, after all.

“Next!”

Ray steps up and checks his bag. He manages to walk all the way to the gate without losing track of his thought. Maybe there's more that he needs to be giving her. He always thought work was such a nightmare. It was bad, but it was his *half*. Now everything's different. Work feels ... fun. The energy in his office, it's like magic. There's such an easy flow to everything. It would be unfair not to admit that. He should do more with Kay and more with the kids. He should do his fair share.

"Ray's in the house! Raise the roof!"

"I'm in the house *and* I'm the roof? How would that work?"

Abram looks severely disappointed. "No-raise." Abram lifts his arms up, "*RAISE.*"

"I'm just fucking with you." Ray slaps Abram's arm.

"So, let's get the most important question out of the way right now. *SeaWorld*. Are we going?"

"Sure!"

—

Ray looks out from the window seat as the plane cruises along the coast. Abram actually *prefers* the aisle, can you believe that? Probably to better harass the stewardess. Boy, what a hoot, and how compatible?

Look at those puffy white clouds. He feels like a child. He remembers dreaming of flying. Standing in his backyard at night, he'd lift up his arms up and close his eyes. He'd see himself soaring across the night stars. He tries to see this moment through that childhood dream. A gift to a former version of himself. A way to say he hasn't forgotten.

—

And there's that screeching of the wheels, the touchdown. Ray's heard that noise more times in movies than in real life, but the effect is apparently spot-on. Already, through the windows, Ray can see that he's been successfully transported into some amazing

paradise. Even the tarmac looks different, brighter, more fun.

—

“The honeymoon suite?” Abram steps back from the counter and speaks somewhat covertly with Ray. “Fucking, Joe! Can you believe this? Gets one room for the two of us—and a *honeymoon suite*?”

The hotel receptionist calls out enthusiastically, “The room comes with a generous gift basket and a jacuzzi with a view of the water.”

Ray and Abram look quickly to check each other's reaction.

“Jacuzzi?” Abram says, taking a step forward.

—

Ray stands on the balcony, looking out over the shore. How different the coast looks so close to the equator. It's the furthest thing from dreary.

Abram leans back in his chair at a table by the bed, reviewing some materials about the seminar that he found in the lobby.

—

Suddenly it all feels a little scary. The room is filled with people sharing conversation and sitting at tables before the stage. Are they expected to mingle? Ah, how did he not see this coming? He feels so awkward. He looks down to Abram and finds him scanning the room for talent. There looks to be quite a lot. Shoot, Abram's gonna leave him.

“Hey, Ray. Things like this, sometimes it's easier to fly solo, you know what I mean? I'll find you before it starts. Save me a seat.” Abram disappears into the crowd.

No use pretending he wants to talk to people. Ray finds an empty table, far from the stage. He pulls out two chairs, puts a business card down on one, and sits on the other. What is he supposed to do now?



He can't just sit there staring. He *can* and *wants to*, but how would that look? Like he just flipped some switch. Powered down. So robotic and sad. Just sitting there. Not moving or doing anything. No, he can't do that. He has to think of something else.

"Excuse me. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Oh. Not at all."

The woman sits down at the round table, giving a couple chairs of distance between them.

"You're not gonna wanna sit there. You'll be craning your neck the whole talk."

The woman looks over her shoulder at the stage. "Oh, you're right." She looks at where she could sit for a better view. "I suppose I should move." The woman gets up and walks the long way around the table to a seat just one chair away from Ray.

"So, do you come to these kinds of things often?" Ray can't think of anything better to ask.

"No, this is the first."

"Yeah, me too. Are you from San Diego?"

"Yes. You're not?"

"No. I'm from a place you've probably never heard of off the coast of Washington."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. I've been to Seattle. It's so peaceful."

"Hey, Ray, buddy." Abram pats Ray's back. "This is Tess." Ray looks at the approachable young blonde. "This is Ray, my business partner." Abram looks carefully at Ray. "And this is?"

The woman puts her hand on her chest and looks up at Abram. "I'm Meribelle." She looks back at Ray.

"Ok, Ray, Tess, Meribelle and Abram! Now we all know each other." Abram pulls a seat out for Tess, then sits left of Ray. Abram and Tess continue with some topic they were on

previously. Ray glances at Meribelle.

“Ok, ok! How’s everyone doing!?” A strikingly handsome man walks to the front of the stage. He’s wearing a headset mic. “If everyone could please take their seats, I’d like to introduce you all to this wonderful seminar. The guest speakers, of course, are what brought you all out, but there’s many more people to thank. A lot of people worked very hard to make this happen, and while you all are finding your seats I’d like to first start with a thank you to the Hyatt staff and the catering team that will be setting up here, in just a bit, with a fantastic buffet for you all.” Excitement from the audience. “And thanks to our sponsors who you can speak with before you leave. That’s them staking out those tables in the back. I’ll talk more about them later. And lastly, I’d like to thank all of you for coming out and doing such a fun thing with us! Thank you! Without you, none of this would be possible, so why don’t you all just give yourselves a big round of applause. For making this all happen! Go on and give yourselves some applause!”

That’s a way bigger response than Ray would have expected. The room erupts. Ray is the last one clapping.

—

Abram sits on a short wall next to the busy sidewalk. Young women walk in bikinis, too many to focus on just one. Ray leans against a rail. They look out over the sand. An ocean breeze. They squint their eyes. Just hanging out at the La Jolla Cove.

“Ray, you know who you are?”

“Who am I?”

“No, I mean. Do you know who you *are*?”

Know who I am? Ray thinks. How would that work? “Well, I don’t know. I just *am*.”

“Yeah. *Yeah*. I want that. To just ... be.”

What the hell? “Abram, you’re *being* right now.”

“Nah, I’m not.”

Ray turns to lean his back against the rail. The glare of the low sun on the water is overwhelming. A woman in a highlighter-yellow thong bikini walks by. It takes everything in him not to stare. Well, he does stare, but as little as humanly possible.

“You know what that was? That was just like a modern day cracking of the whip.”

“The seminar?”

“Yeah, the *seminar*—what a crock of shit.”

Ray doesn’t understand. Was he supposed to not like the seminar? It was ok.

“I think I’m gonna walk around for a bit by myself. I just gotta clear my head.” Abram jumps off the wall.

Ray immediately thinks of the jacuzzi back at the hotel. “Yeah, sure—if that’s what you wanna do.”

Abram pulls a card out of his pocket and gives it a long look. “Tess’s number.” He flips it around in his hands. “Think I should call her?” Abram looks up at Ray. He’s really asking.

Advice? He can’t give advice! He looks down the sidewalk lined with shops. It’s hard to focus with the bright sun illuminating every little thing. “You said you needed to clear your head, right? So why don’t you go clear it and maybe the answer will come to you.”

Abram gives Ray a smile, a real one, and nods his head. He pats Ray’s arm and steps away, picking up speed, falling into the groove of his own step as he disappears into the flow of the world.

Ok. Jacuzzi time.

Ray’s head feels tired. Like there’s some resource in there that’s run dry. The bright world is harder to take in. Not like the soft world back home. He walks to the hotel, the whole time trying to keep his focus narrow. He just wants to take a break from looking.

By the time he’s in the suite, all his energy is gone. He moves

efficiently, driven by a singular purpose. Doesn't need trunks if he's alone. He slips his clothes off and steps, naked, into the jacuzzi, bubbles on, sun setting.

God, it's so boring. So empty. He looks over to a missing presence. All that excitement around getting a taste of freedom, and the only thing he can do is think about how he'll relate the experience when he gets back home. When he returns to Kay.

## Chapter 4

9pm.

Kay wakes with this whisper, *9pm*.

She hears it in her head. Over and over. She drops Ray off at the airport. She sees the number everywhere. She feels the number. There's something going on. Something new. She's feeling something new.

There's a knowledge inside her. Like a box left unopened. She's being drawn to it. She senses its power as she nears. Through this, she can understand that tonight, at 9pm, she will meet the Devil.

More terrifying than this is the realization that she is most likely wrong. She still feels the clarity of sanity. She understands that people don't typically wake in the morning to find a scheduled face-to-face with the Prince of Darkness on their calendar. But she can *feel* it. How can one explain the sort of truth that's felt?

Anyway, she's probably crazy. She'll probably end up in some institution, taken from her family, banging her head on walls where others trapped in their own personal nightmare echo her agony. Either way, she feels a presence of finality in the day, and that gives her calm. Tonight she'll have her answer.

Of course, she'll have to leave the kids with Terri. Can't have them at the house when she loses her mind.

“I don’t know. It’s not really a good time for us.”

“I’m sorry to push this on you, I really am, but it’s very important. I’ll tell them to stay quiet and go right to bed. It’s just for the night.”

“Ok. If you really need it.”

“Thank you. And I want to say ... you and Marc mean the world to me. Terri, I love you like a sister.”

“Is something wrong? Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, it’s just that there’s never really a good time to say something like that, so why not say it now? No point in waiting for that moment when it’s not awkward. I appreciate you and all that you do. And I feel lucky to have so much love shared between our families.”

“Thank you, Kay.”

She takes her kids to play by the water all morning. Then out for a scoop at the drugstore. Why not stop at the park and run around for a bit? Get cozy on the couch, just hanging out, talking, laughing, snuggling. And let’s all work in the kitchen to make a nice dinner.

The kids very respectfully listen to Kay’s instructions to go to bed early and give Terri and Marc a quiet night. They pack their backpacks. Toothbrushes and PJs. Batman figure and stuffed rabbit. Snacks and books.

They drive over peacefully as the sun begins to set. The girl sits in the front seat. The boy in the middle of the back. Kay drives with her hand on her daughter, smiling over to her at every red light. She watches the boy in her rearview mirror, in his own world, flying his little figure through the air.

A terrible form is in her kitchen. It stands there, waiting for her to speak. What is there to say? Leave! Leave and never return!

“I heard you wanted to speak with me?”

“I want you to leave my family alone. Leave this house.”

“Ok.” It waits.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, not much.”

“Tell me.”

“I want you to run a bath. Nice and hot. Take rose petals from your garden and toss them over the water. Find a picture of your family and carry it with you into the tub, just as you are now. Submerge completely under the water and close your eyes.”

Kay is alone in the kitchen. No! That's it!? Oh, that's not at all what she expected! She thought they would at least speak about what's going on. That some kind of understanding would be reached. He wants me to take a bath? Why?

What should she do? She can't just do what he says, can she? That would be wrong. But take a bath? She can't justify the risk of refusing to do something so trivial. And if she was expecting a negotiation, that's what she got.

Kay turns the water on, then crouches down and feels the temperature as it spills into the tub. Is there any other option? She feels she must be clever, but how can one be clever in a situation so black and white? While the bath is running, she goes to her garden.

As she gathers petals and places them into her wicker basket, she looks within that box of dormant knowledge. She feels this must be like a spell. But what kind? What will it do?

She sets the basket of petals on the toilet and goes into her room for a photo. She studies them all, remembering the emotions she felt, the memory of the flash. As she looks across these images, she sees her own reflection—a little mirror, on her dresser, in a frame that's about the same size as the photo of her family standing beneath the carport of their old apartment.

What a stupid thing. Kay removes the photo from its frame and

places it over the mirror. Is this allowed? She walks into the bathroom. Well, I'm doing everything he asked. He didn't say *no mirrors*. I'm not breaking the agreement.

Kay sprinkles the petals onto the bathwater and steps inside with her long, floral-print dress. She holds the photo, with its hidden mirror, over her chest, goes underwater, and closes her eyes.

### Sight Spell

Kay is *in* darkness. The world no longer has material form. She stands, but she stands on nothing. She sees only her own body illuminated in a world without light. She's dry. She holds the framed photo of her family.

Appearing from the darkness is a vision, many visions, *all* the visions of Kay's life. Everything that she is. Everything that she has been. Her memories surround her as if she were the spectacle at the center of an amphitheater, the subject of their interests.

A tension builds. A wave about to crash. The visions move. This way and that. Kay covers her head and the mirror cracks. So too does this world. A fissure of light and dark, the two can't resolve. Where the black and white clash, Kay sees jagged lines of blue and gold. Gold fading into black. Blue lifting into light. Black recedes, smaller and smaller. Kay follows it as it shrinks. Until all that's left is a tiny little speck.

Kay looks and sees a funny sight, the only other thing in this world of white. A nice old woman watching TV. The woman looks so relaxed. Just hanging out in front of the tube. The burnt-orange recliner she rests in looks so cozy. That big wooden TV, so inviting.

Kay walks toward the woman. Maybe she'll know what's going on. Oh, but she doesn't want to disturb her. Kay steps quietly, trying to not be a pest. As she approaches, the woman turns her head. She stares at Kay just like she stared at the TV.

“AAAH!” The woman suddenly throws her hands up. “Who are you!? What are you doing here!?”

Oh, no. Kay *is* bothering her. She feels so bad. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” She steps forward, wanting the woman to be able to read her face, to see her good intentions.

“How did you get in here? That shouldn’t be possible.”

“I didn’t mean to barge in. I’m not sure where I am exactly. I didn’t come here on purpose.”

“Well, what were you trying to do?”

“I can—”

“Shhh! Wait! Shut up, it's back on.” The woman turns back to the TV.





*A baby.*

*I know.*



*Do you really want it, Michael?*



*I do.*



*Me too.*



*God, I'm sorry.*



*I don't know why I thought I couldn't talk to you. It was just such a shock.*



*And then with everything you said, all our plans ...*



*Plans are made to be broken.*



*God, I love you.*



*And you are gonna be the best dad!*





*Ok, now, if it's a boy—no Jrs, ok?*



*But I love the name Michael.*

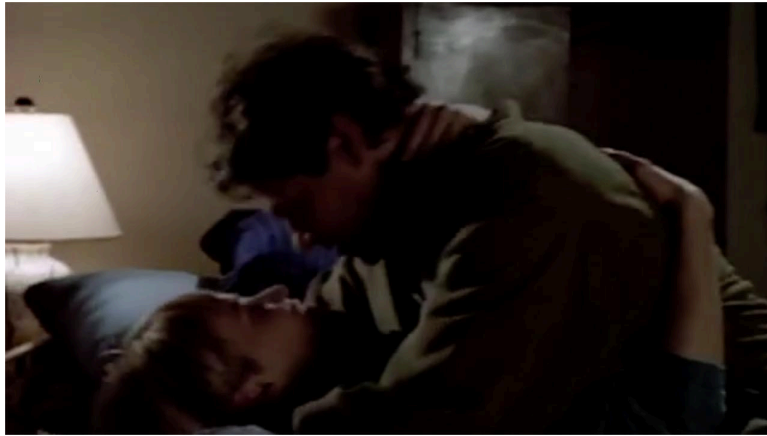


*Mmm, we'll talk.*

*Yeah, we got plenty of time.*



*About eight months.*



*Mom.*



*Dad!*



*So, call me a wimp. Go ahead. I don't care. But I can tell you one thing—I don't need to risk my life to prove anything anymore.*



*Life's the adventure, not death.*





*So, that's it.*



*You know, for a valley boy, you can be surprisingly cool.*



*So, you like it?*



*Yeah, it's great.*



*At last! She approves!*



*Thanks.*



*So, what do you have lined up for next week?*

*Next week?*



*Your next column.*



*It's still seven days away, do I look worried?*



*Goodnight, Billy.*



*Night, Alison.*



*Today I saw a young man meet fatherhood head on ... and survive.*



*Move over, Doogie Howser.*





*Hot breakfast idea: Smucker's peach preserves on cereal.*

The woman turns back to Kay. "So what did you say you were doing here?"

"I didn't say. Actually, I don't know."

The TV fades from the world.

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry. It looks like it's time for me to go to bed." The woman stands from her recliner as it vanishes. She looks at Kay with shrugged shoulders and raises her hands like it's out of her control. She's dressed in her nightgown and walks to a bed that appears as she steps to it. "Don't think you're supposed to be in here. I'm sure you'll find your way out by morning." The woman's large glasses disappear from her face and she crawls into bed. "Good luck." The woman falls asleep.

Shucks. What has she gotten herself into? She walks back to the black speck, the only other thing in this white space. It's just floating there, mid-air. Kay leans in. She sees a blur of blue and gold around it, like a trick of the eye. She hears a buzzing.

She turns her head to listen. The buzz seems to fluctuate, but it's too faint. Kay sighs. Well, not much she can do now. She returns to the woman.

She sits on the floor at the side of the bed and leans her head

against the mattress. She'll have to wait for the woman to wake up. She's feeling pretty sleepy, actually. Might as well rest her eyes.

### Chapter 400,336,282.3

“Hey! Are you still here? Well, I suppose you don't have to leave in a hurry. Weird that you stayed, that's all. I guess I *could* use the company. By the way, you're gonna wanna watch your head.”

The woman gets up from her bed and, as she does, it vanishes. Kay falls to the floor.

“I told you to watch it.” The woman walks to the chair that appears before her. She sits down and starts watching TV. “Oh.” She turns around. “I'm sorry.” She stands up and walks back to Kay. “Weird to not do that. So, are you gonna tell me what you're doing here?”

“Where am I?”

“You haven't figured it out? You're in the fracture realm. *My* fracture realm, to be exact. As far as I know, that shouldn't be possible. You must have been playing with some powerful magic.”

“Magic?”

“Oh.” The woman changes her stance. “I get it. You don't know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Kay.”

“Your name is *Kay*? Now that's odd.”

“Why's that?”

“You’re a witch, Kay.”

“What?”

“Ah, so it’s true. You didn’t know.”

“I’m not a witch.”

The woman shakes her head and clicks her tongue, then looks back to her orange recliner. She sits down. “Well, come on. I can’t just be standing forever.”

Kay walks over and sits on the floor next to the woman's chair.

“So, Kay, why don’t you tell me what happened.”

“Well, I was in the kitchen with the Devil—”

“The Devil!” the woman jumps out of her chair. “Oh, no! Did you bring anything in here?”

Kay looks over to her photo.

“What’s that?”

“Just a photo of my family.”

“Anything else come in here with you?”

“There’s a little black dot.”

“Show me where it is!” The woman calms herself and looks at Kay. “Please.”

Kay takes her to the black dot. The woman inspects it.

“Well, I don't know what *that* is.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m May.”

“May?”

“Rhymes have powerful magic to them. I wonder if that has



something to do with you being here.”

“So ... you’re telling me I’m a *witch*? What does that mean?”

“Oh, it’s not much. Not really. A lot of people don’t know. Who knows when it was lost in your line. Could have been any number of reasons.”

“Am I magic?”

“Uh, well, *you* aren’t.” May walks with Kay back to the recliner. “Witches are attractors. They attract things. Things both light and dark. Magic is the force that flows when we use our ability in a directed way.” May sits in her chair. “Kay, I’ve got good news and bad news. The bad news is, there’s nothing I can do to get you out of here. The good news is, we have a TV. So it won’t be that bad.”

## Chapter 1

“Gracie, I love you. You’re my favorite. I love you more than all the moons and all the stars and the sun and the Earth. I love you so much that I want to explode.” The girl wiggles her doll. *Thank you, Mommy, I love you too.* “What do you want to do today?” *Uh, I want to eat gummy worms!* “Oh, I’m sorry! I don’t have any gummy worms!” *Wah, wah, wah! I want gummy worms.* “Ok, Gracie. But if you want gummy worms, you’re going to have to study for your test.” *But I don’t want to study!* The girl pulls the doll close and points a finger out. “Gracie? You *have* to study. It’s good for you.” *Ok.*

The girl bounces her doll as if she were walking across the floor of the driftwood shack. She folds its legs so it can sit on the dirt in the corner. “Good, Gracie. I’m very proud of you.” The girl looks out at the water. “I’m going to let you study.”

The girl holds her arms around her knees. She watches the waves crash.

Maybe she can ask to be dropped off at Lacey’s. Lacey’s mom

would probably say it's ok, she always does. But what is she going to do over there? Lacey will just sit on her bed and play with her gerbil while she talks about boys she likes.

A buzzing, the girl hears it. Someone on their bike is nearing the end of the street, coming closer to her driftwood shack. She curls herself inside and hides.

Through the cracks in the wall, and through the trees outside them, she sees a form throw down its bike, walk across the stones and stop at the water.

He picks up a stone and throws it out. Then another, this time shouting as he throws. He continues in a fury, stone after stone. Screams turn to cries.

He turns to head back, but sees the girl. Oh, his face in that moment. The girl can see the pain in his eyes. He runs to his bike and speeds away.

What could have caused him such anguish? Well, whatever it was, she thinks, Thomas is a meanie, so he probably deserves it.

—

He knew when he took this mission, there'd be risks. Big risks. Not the kind of risks any average Joe could handle. That's why they reached out to him, Captain Jeremy, to inspect the strange noises coming from the caverns around their moon base. The boy places an imaginary space helmet over his head and mounts his plastic tricycle.

He patrols the backyard, rolling slowly over the bright grass, looking carefully inside the rose bushes for aliens. He rides all along the garden wall until he gets to the little brown fence where the backyard meets the front of their corner lot. It's quiet. A little *too* quiet.

With his finger pointed out and his thumb stuck up over an otherwise closed fist, the boy whips around! *Pew-pew-pew!* An alien! Right behind him! The boy steps on it.

As he cycles toward the porch, he reflects on his actions ...

Running? Captain Jeremy doesn't *run*. The boy stands and, by lifting the tricycle beneath him, slowly turns on the grass. This is it. Time to fight. This is your job. This is what you were put here for! "Captain Jeremy!"

The boy pedals back toward the row of roses and shoots, but a larger form appears beyond the line. A black silhouette against the sun. The figure grows as it approaches.

"Hey, kid!"

The boy stops.

"Is your sister here?"

The boy doesn't know what to say.

"You speak English? Go get your sister. I wanna talk to her."

The boy decides he doesn't like Thomas, but feels he can't deny an honest request for communication. He pedals back to the porch.

"You better be getting your sister!"

The boy runs inside the house, down the hall and opens his sister's bedroom door. She's dancing by herself, jumping around in front of her bed, singing along with the music from her cassette player.

"Don't break my heart!" She shoves a fist into the air. "My achy-breaky heart!" She swings her butt to the side and elbows the air. "I just don't think you understand." She twirls around and sees her brother. "You're supposed to knock!" She marches over to the boy, pushes him out of the room and slams the door.

"Thomas is here!"

The girl swings the door open. "What?"

"Thomas said get you." The boy points, and the girl follows his finger. He runs back outside and the girl follows. She sees Thomas and steps cautiously to the fence. The boy stands behind, watching from a distance.

"What do you want?" the girl asks.

“You better not tell anyone you saw me crying.”

“I wasn’t going to.” The girl puts a hand on her hip. “But *now* I am.”

“You better not! *Or else.*”

The girl rolls her eyes. “Or else what?”

“Or else I’ll kill you.”

The girl takes a step back. She looks Thomas up and down. “If you kill me, then that means I told the truth and that means I die happy! So, ha!” The girl walks away.

Thomas flusters. “Wait!” He puts his hands on the fence. “Please!”

The girl didn’t expect to hear that word. She stops and turns back, but sees someone different. Like a face beneath the mask, she thinks. Thomas looks down.

Even if he’s sad, it doesn’t give him the right to be mean. The girl decides to be nice, but not subservient. “Ok. I’ll promise not to say anything.” Thomas breathes a sigh of relief. “IF you tell me what happened.”

“Get in here right now!” Kay comes storming over. She grabs the girl’s arm and yanks her back to the house. “You’re in big trouble!”

The girl looks back to the fence. Thomas is gone.

“What is this!?” Kay pushes the girl in front of the coffee table.

“What?” The girl doesn’t see anything.

Kay steps up and forces the girl’s head forward, holding her at the neck, to place her nose right in front of a small grouping of magenta spots.

“I’m sorry, Mommy!”

“I told you to be careful with that nail polish! I told you, and now look! Look what you did to my table!”

The girl tears up. She doesn't understand—it was an accident. “I didn't know! I'm sorry!”

“Sorry isn't good enough! If I find a single drop of your nail polish anywhere in this house, I won't let you use it again for an entire year!”

“But Mom!”

“No buts! Now go to your room and no music!”

She runs to her room, tears in her eyes, and slams the door.

“What are you looking at?”

The boy doesn't understand the question.

“I don't want anyone bothering me! I'm doing a mask!” Kay declares for all to hear, then walks into her bedroom and closes the door behind her.

The boy walks over to the coffee table. What happened? He wonders. He looks closely. He sees his sister's nail polish on the stained wood. Uh-oh. Sister got in big trouble for that.

He thinks back to his mother's rage. She was *really* angry. His sister messed up the table. He'd better not mess up anything of Mommy's or she's going to get very, very upset. Noted, he thinks. He walks to his bedroom.

He takes his Batman figure and loads a plastic hook into a cannon strapped to the figure's back. He stands the doll at the crack between the wall and his sliding closet door. *We have to see inside the cave. There's a bad guy in the cave and we have to—the bad guy, he stole a baby—we have to help the baby. Come on! Come on, Robin! Let's go!* The boy hops his doll up onto the golden metal track of the closet door. *Oh no! It's the bad guy!* The boy presses a little button and the gray plastic hook flies into darkness.

Where'd it go? He looks into his closet. He visualizes the trajectory. It must have flown behind his chest. He puts the Batman figure down and slides his hand behind, trying to feel for the hook. Ouch!

Ah! He pushes his skin up around the splinter on the tip of his pointer finger. He brings it close to his eyes. He sees the long sliver disappearing underneath.

He runs down the hall and into his mother's room—but a monster shoots up in her bed! It looks like his mom, but has a green face! The boy shrieks!

“Ahhh-haha!” Kay throws her head back and laughs. The boy whimpers at the door. She puts her arms out like a zombie.

“Mommy, stop!”

Kay laughs again. She opens her eyes wide and stares at him vacantly. She stands out of bed. “Uhhh ...”

The boy runs to his room. Kay's laughter echoes down the hall. He hides in his closet. He cowers in the darkness. He tries to control his breathing. He listens carefully.

It's just his mommy, he knows that, but it's still scary. What if Mommy really was a monster? Then he'd have to run away. He'd have to escape. How would he escape? He'd step out of the closet, run down the hall, open the front door and ... Where would he go? He'd go into the forest. He'd learn to hunt. And fish. He'd make little traps and also have a bow and arrow. He'd gather fruits, nuts and berries.

He'd have a hat, like Davy Crockett, and a loin cloth, like Mogli. He'd get big and strong surviving alone. Until one day he finds the forest people. But the forest people reject him, an outsider. But then one day the forest people come to him. They need his help because he's big and strong.

He wouldn't even remind them that they rejected him earlier, because it's not about that. It's just about doing the right thing. He'll fight for them. He'll be their champion. They take him to talk to the wise old man.

*“Florence Featherman, we've brought you here because our lives are in danger. For, you see, our poor village is being attacked by the savage Gorbitrites.” As the old man utters their name, the forest people quiver.*

*The Gorbtrites. Of course. Florence Featherman knew they'd be back one day. "I will defend your village from the Gorbtrites."*

*The forest people erupt with cheer. A young woman brings a chest full of diamonds, rubies and gold coins.*

### Chapter 3,646.007

“Ok. So. There are two forces that flow through all things: a light force, and a dark force. This isn't physics, it's not contained within that paradigm, but that's not to say the two won't one day be reconciled. Science could never be complete without it. Anyway, these two forces, these are the forces that compose what we call magic. And, learning this as an adult, I think it might be helpful if we don't use that word, because the layman's understanding of it is so far removed from what it actually is. So how about for now we just call it 'the force,' ok? So we use the force—wait a minute, that's just *Star Wars*. Ok, fine! Let's say magic! But don't think of it the way you thought of it before. Wipe the slate clean. Can you do that?”

Kay nods her head.

“Great. Witches, because we are attractors of light and dark, can learn to manipulate these forces. Witches like you, those that don't know they're witches, will end up using magic in one way or another. Nothing big. You can't do much without an education or a basic understanding of witchcraft. So here it is, the two forces are *balanced*. That's the law that gives us our power. Well, there's some debate on that, but we can examine it later. Since the two, light and dark, are balanced, we can toy with imbalance to manipulate the corrective force. Every spell has a cost. When a witch doesn't know this, a witch like you, the corrective force comes about in a natural way. Maybe you get that promotion you were hoping for but you lose your interest in the performing arts. You might think you're so busy with work, or you know, like you're putting away childish things, whatever it is, you'll make some explanation for it, but the real reason is that the force of

balance is at work. Now, witches and regular folk, it's really a spectrum. There's nothing that's absolutely different about us, but for most people the power that they have inside them is so small that nothing could be done with it. Oh, and only women are witches—not that men can't be attractors. There's just something about men that makes them, I don't know—they just can't see it. But when they *can* ... oh, boy. Watch out. Wizards can be very powerful. Very rare, but when they pop up, they always make history." May looks off into the white expanse. "Where was I?"

"Witches manipulate the corrective forces of balance, made of light and dark, to create magic."

"Yes. Oh, wow! You're a good listener!" May rubs her chin. "I mean, *really* good." She leans forward for a closer look at Kay. "Actually, I think there's something off about you."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"You see? Like that?"

"Am I doing something wrong?"

"Exactly! You're not." May gives Kay a careful stare. "Say something mean to me."

"Something mean? Why would I do that?"

"Just try it."

"I couldn't possibly think of anything mean to say about you."

"Sure you can!"

"But you're wonderful! You're kind and smart. I'm so appreciative to have you here with me."

"You really can't say anything bad?"

Kay shakes her head.

May scratches her chin. "So, most witches, their power isn't so strong. They'll do little things here and there, maybe break a plate to get their tomatoes to grow or tutor their neighbor to give



someone a cold. Basic spells are very simple. That's really it for the life of the average witch. Which is what I am, by the way. Could never do any advanced magic, not that I would if I could. Too much trouble. Though every witch is curious ... to test their power."

"If you teach me to control it, maybe I can find a way out of here."

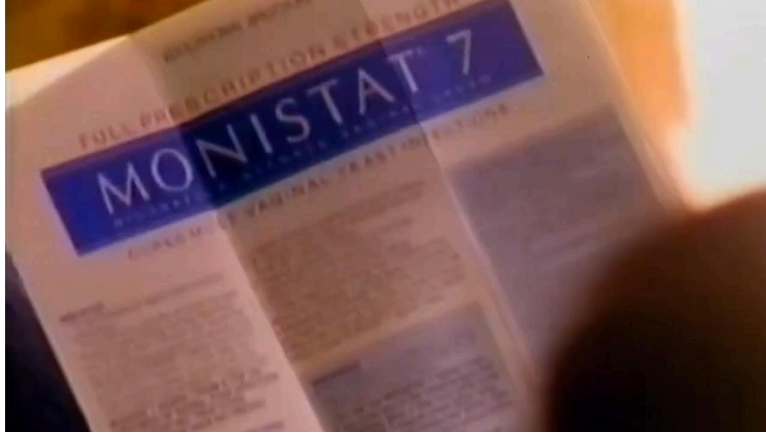
"I'll teach you, but first let's get something straight. I have my programs, and these programs I can not miss. Understand? If I miss one episode, I won't know what's going on in the next. I hate that. So grab the mirror. I'm going to give you your first lesson, but we might have to do most of it during the commercial breaks."

Kay takes the photo of her family from the frame and looks at it for a moment before setting it beside her. She cradles the mirror in her lap, next to May's orange recliner. "Ok, I'm ready."

"A lot of what a witch can do is free. Sort of neutral. Little tricks that don't cause an imbalance, or they cause such a small imbalance that nothing special needs to be done. We call it *turning*. Now, a mirror is a very powerful item. That is to say it has a great potential for magic, more than a fork would—not that a fork isn't powerful. Anyway, a mirror can be turned. But before we do that, you're going to have to fix it. To fix this broken mirror, you'll have to destroy the photo of your family."

"No!"

"You should consider yourself lucky to have these items in here! I'm going to watch my show and while I do that, I want you to, very simply, think about the mirror and the photo. Think about how much you want to mend the mirror and how much you don't want to destroy the photo. It'll be hard to do this. Harder than you think. To really focus. To really feel. And that's what you're going to have to do. You know this kind of thing does require time. Like I said, you need an education. For now, just feel. Feel everything you can. And we'll worry about the next step later."



*Only Monistat 7 has a nurse answering our 800 number.*



*In case a woman has a question and needs to talk to someone.*

“So, how’s that going? You been feeling anything new? Anything interesting?”

“I mended the mirror.”

“You what!?” May spins around in her chair to Kay, who’s sitting on the floor patiently beside her. “Let me see that.”

Kay hands May the mirror.

“You mended it? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Oh ... this ... I don’t know what to do with this. That should have taken you longer.” May hands the mirror back to Kay and

stares at the TV.



*Somebody got us Post Raisin Bran.*



*It's premium.*

“Yeah, that should have taken you a *lot* longer.” She turns back to Kay. “Let me see the photograph.”



*What's premium?*

Kay hands the intact photo of her family to May. May screams.

“I didn’t need to destroy it. Isn’t that a good thing?” Kay asks.



*It means it's special like us.*

May brings a hand up to her mouth and appears to put something inside. She turns back to the TV, then seems to spit something out.



*Look at this premium flake.*

“I used to chew sunflower seeds.” May glances back, “A nervous habit. Still helps to mime it.” She brings another imaginary seed up and chomps down.

“The things you’ve told me ... I feel like I already knew them!”

“Ok! Enough for now. I need to think.”



*(Applause from the audience)*



*To a child, each day is a fresh new page full of adventures and new challenges.*



*To an adult, you punch in, you punch out, and you go to bed.*



*(Laughter from the audience)*



*Now, try to remember when you were a child and you had just discovered the phenomenon of your shadow.*



*Saget: Hold it, there's that flat guy again, all dressed in black.*



*Saget: Huh, he's hooked to my feet and I haven't been able to shake him.*



*Saget: He seems to be attached to my shoes.*



*Saget: Maybe I could unhook him.*



*Saget: Oh, darn. He does everything I do.*





*Saget: Maybe I'll be safe on the slide.*



*Saget: Good. Looks like he's gone.*



*Saget: I'll just stay here for the rest of my life.*

## Chapter 2

The curtains are so barely blue they look like ash. The cabin is dark apart from the spotlights that various passengers have turned on and directed at their laps. Ray looks to the window and sees only the ghostlike reflection of his own open book. Abram has his light off. He's occupied internally, tapping a foot here, biting a nail there—an inconsistent fidgeting that recedes into sedated staring. Everyone in the cabin is either asleep or dreaming. Ray brings his wrist up and checks his watch: 8:15pm.

“Hey, when was the last time you were on a plane?”

Abram continues biting his nail and at first doesn't hear Ray. He then halts his action and looks over. “What?” His face scrunches up.

“Before San Diego. When was the last time you flew somewhere?”

“Oh.” Abram stares off for a moment—the plane hits an air pocket and rumbles softly. “Six years ago.”

“Where'd you go?”

“Australia.”

Abram brings his finger back up and resumes chewing. Ray wants to know more, but the conversation wasn't welcomed. He tries to look out his window, but again only sees glare over darkness.

“Can you let me out?”

Abram stands. Ray exits the row and walks down the aisle, behind the curtain and into the bathroom. He doesn't need to pee, but that's ok. Sometimes you can just go to the bathroom, he thinks. No one has to know.

It's unusual, the bathroom, and that's enough to stimulate Ray out of boredom for the moment. His life feels comparatively more interesting. Well, he'd better try to pee. Might look weird if he has to go again shortly after this. Like, *what's he doing in there going twice in such a small amount of time?* Ray unzips and takes himself out through the hole of his boxers without undoing his belt. Oh, something does come out. Just a little tickle.

Ray shakes his dick and scoots it back into his pants. His penis recedes into darkness, secured behind its layers—its barriers. He pumps some soap and washes his hands, then dries them with a paper towel.

He takes his time on the return. A relish of the last free moment before the end of his odyssey. When he gets back to his row, it's like Abram doesn't even notice. Jeez, what's on his mind?

Ray leans forward. “Mission accomplished.”

Abram looks up, pauses, then stands abruptly. Ray takes his seat, but Abram walks down to the bathroom. Dang, Ray hates when people do that, use the toilet right after him. He can’t help but imagine that person processing a lingering presence. That’s why he always makes sure to give others the courtesy, not taking it—not unless it’s absolutely *necessary*—right after someone’s just finished. I guess there’s no expecting others to do the same.

Ray looks back down to his book:

*Jensen was not fond of women. He was neutral on prayer, skeptical of free speech, sympathetic to tax protestors, indifferent to Indians, afraid of Blacks, tough on pornographers, soft on criminals, and fairly consistent in his protection of the environment.*

---

It’s very exciting to be exiting the plane. The trip seems to have ended, but Ray knows there’s still the matter of getting out of the airport and the long drive to the house. He reaches inside his carry-on bag and removes the Shamu doll he got for his girl. He can’t wait to see his family waiting to greet him at the gate. He feels sorry for Abram, who will have no one to welcome him home.

Passengers pick up speed as they walk through the jetway. There’s a palpable blend of enthusiasm and fatigue. Ray keeps a quick pace, looking out for familiar faces. Kids running up to him, hugs and warmth—where are they?

“All right, Ray, I’ll see you at the office.” Abram heads off to the garage to find his Mazda.

Ray doesn’t see his family. He imagines a likely scenario. One of the kids needed to use the restroom. He visualizes the event. *But Daddy’s gonna be here any minute. Can’t you hold it for just a little longer?* Kay would give in after some insistence. *Ok, but let’s be quick.* If that’s what happened, or something like that, then Ray should just stay put so he doesn’t miss them when they return.

Maybe he should get all their gifts ready. Then he can meet them with a grand hello. But that would be awkward, holding everything in his arms. Might look like he's dumping junk onto them. He'll keep Shamu out. A symbol of San Diego. A signifier of the fact that he remembers his family when he's not around. He stands confidently as passengers from his flight clear the area.

What if something happened to them? What if that old station wagon broke down? What if they got into an accident? Ray starts to pace nervously. He has no way of knowing. Maybe they're just running late. Well, all he can do is stay put for now.

Time goes by. Ray feels a bit embarrassed just standing there, like a fool. But that was the plan, and he doesn't know how else to proceed. Kay said she and the kids would meet him at the gate. The only thing he can think of doing now is calling home. But of course they'd already be gone and nobody would answer.

Ray decides to find a payphone anyway. He sees that familiar black box with its shiny aluminum plate, white and blue information cards behind clear plastic, small red square in the top left corner giving three-step instructions on how to wait, listen for the dial tone, and then deposit coins. Ray slides a quarter into the slot and inputs his number.

"Hello?"

"Kay!?"

"Oh, hi, Ray!"

"Kay ..."

"Oh, *shit*. Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. I don't know how, I just ... I got so caught up."

"It's ok."

"I'll be right there. We're leaving right now."

Ray sighs away from the receiver. That's at least another hour and a half wait. He looks at his watch. He won't be home until midnight. "All right ... see you in a bit."

“Can you come out to the street so I can just pull up and have you hop in?”

“Fine.” The kids will probably fall asleep in the car. So much for the grand reunion. He hangs up.

No, this doesn't feel right. Not at all. He gives one last thought to his prior expectation, imagining his children running up to him. He answers questions about his trip and listens to stories about what they got up to while he was away. His vision of it scatters with a final whisper of sarcastic self pity. *Daddy's back!*

What's normal to do in an airport? If Ray walks with purpose, people will think he's doing what he should be doing. He walks briskly, pretending to have his focus fixed on some distant destination. Really, and inconspicuously, he scans the environment, trying to find some bit of possible entertainment. What's he gonna do for the next hour and a half?

He spots an escalator. It disappears somewhere down below. He thinks it's kinda like a ride. He makes his decision and walks to it confidently, giving the air that it's just his natural next step—all part of the plan—but as he approaches he finds that the long escalator only carries up from below. A dauntingly long stairway runs beside it. Welcome to the top, but fuck you on the way down. Shoot, if he stops there and turns around, it'll expose him.

The steps seem endless. They're grungy and tedious. He enters into a garage dimly lit by sparse lights. He hears footsteps echo from the distance. The exaggerated auditory signals, amplified by the cavernous space, make him feel calm. To know the position of others without sight.

But what's he gonna do in the garage? He'll go back up the escalator. Yes, he'll partake in that small thrill of having a big machine glide him up what would otherwise require an awful amount of effort. When he gets to the top, back to where he started, he'll act like he made some mistake. Maybe he'll look up and be like oh, not *this* escalator—silly me. Or pat his pockets like he forgot something. Ray rises to unfamiliar faces going about their own business. No one to perform for.

Dammit, this really sucks. Ray gives up his pride and starts walking around like a tourist. He's looking at all the cracks and beams, craning his neck around like he might stop and take a picture. He's mining for excitement. He feels like a junkie, but wouldn't it be weird to give up? To just resign to boredom? A vending machine, perfect.

His dollar bill is wrinkled, so he takes a minute to straighten it out. Gonna get this right the first try. Ray enters his code and watches a bag of Funyuns slide forward and drop into the chute. He opens them up and takes a bite.

Naturally, a saunter develops. He tosses Funyuns into his mouth as he walks around, observing his surroundings shamelessly. Airports are actually pretty interesting, if you think about it. Wasn't too long ago that commercial flights became a thing, like, a possibility for humans. What would people do before? I guess ride horses. No, that's too far back. But still, they've come a long way as a society. Not people like Ray. Other people. Special people that make things happen.

A man in a light tweed jacket stands next to a rolling suitcase. Those things look so convenient—a suitcase with *wheels*. The man's belly protrudes out. It looks to Ray like he's pushing it. How come Ray's belly never does that? It seems more manly to have a gut. His is nonexistent. Hell, at times his ribs stick out further than his stomach does. The man looks important. Reluctantly so. Like he's assumed all the responsibility that's ever come his way. Not a warrior. Not an angry man. Just someone who does his job with focus and minimal complaint.

—

Abram returns to a dark and empty apartment. He tosses his keys into a glass bowl on a table by the door and pauses before turning on the light. He hesitates to reveal how lonely he is. He feels tempted to keep that part hidden. He flips the switch, leans back against the door, and looks around his living room.

Sometimes he feels he can't take the emptiness. Now is one of those times. Getting more frequent. Closer together. He walks over to the sofa, falls onto the cushions, and looks back to the front

door.

What is there even to do in this world? Get married. Have kids. He thinks about Tess. Their night together in La Jolla. He felt a connection. Did she? Could something like that be possible for him?

He leans back and stares up at the ceiling. How would that play out? He and Tess, working together in real estate. They'd buy a house and have a kid or two. Maybe three. Yeah, he'd like *three*. Tess said she'd teach him to surf if he ever came back. He imagines his family all riding along the same wave, arms outstretched under the yellow sun, gliding across the crystal-blue water.

Who's he kidding? He'll never have that life. It's not *for* him. It's for other people. Real people. She'll meet a nice guy. A guy who isn't afraid. A man who she will truly love. Abram can't be that man. He feels he's some sort of monster. Not a real person. Somehow invalid both as a concept and physical object. Sure, people *like* him, he can trick anyone into that.

He imagines the surfing family in a snowglobe. He puts the globe down on a shelf in his mind, where other snowy visages of lost dreams sit in memoriam. He doesn't want to think about this anymore. It's making him so depressed. Maybe he'll kill himself. Yeah, maybe he'll just do that. He reaches a hand down his pants.

*Come in.*

Rebecca walks in through the front door. He needs the distraction now. On her knees, he puts his cock in her mouth. He pets her head. He doesn't care. He pulls her pigtails down and thrusts himself up inside. He can't connect with his sexual energy. He's feeling too sad. He ramps up the intensity of his imagined actions. The sex becomes more degrading. More humiliating. The things he does to poor little Rebecca ... Well, it's still not enough to get him hard. Fuck this.

He gets up off the couch for real and heads to the kitchen. He opens the fridge. Just a couple of beers left. That's not enough to do the trick. He wants to forget. He wants that pause button. Back



to the door, he grabs his keys from the glass bowl and exits.

### Chapter 3

The transparent pencil case with the purple top and clear bottom looks best. The girl brings it close to her face. How do they make it see-through like that? The walls are foggy and textured. It seems to glow from within. Not like her boring pencil case back home, with its simple opaque color.

“You already have a pencil case.”

“Can I get this one? Please!”

“Fine.” Kay holds up a list of the kids' school supplies. “Who wants to play a game?”

“I do!” The kids jump around.

“I’m going to read an item off the list. Then I’m going to count to ten. You have to choose your item and put it in the cart before I say ten. If you fail, then I’m going to have to pick it for you.” The kids look excited. “Ok, are you ready? Remember, now, when I say the item, you have to find it really fast and put it in the cart. Do you understand?” The kids nod. Kay holds up the paper and announces the first item: “Glue stick.”

The kids jump forward and each put a glue stick into the cart before Kay can reach the count of four. “*Wow!* That was really fast! Ok, next is ...” Kay pauses to get them focused. “Three folders.” The kids run over to a wall of folders with a wide variety of designs, images, and entertainment tie-ins. They pull folder after folder, comparing and compiling. Kay reaches ten. “Ok, that’s it! Neither of you put any folders in the cart, so now I’m going to have to choose for you.”

“But *Mom*, we need more time!”

“Those were the rules. Here, you can use these three.” She pulls a

Wrestling, Sports Car and Space themed folder out and tosses them in the cart.

“No, Mommy! Please!”

Kay rolls her eyes. “Here.” She hands the girl the list. “You get all these and help your brother.” Kay walks off and calls back, “And you’d better be finished when I return.”

The girl looks to the wall of folders. Lisa Frank, of course. She has to get one of those. *Care Bears!* Oh, but fifth grade seems too old for Care Bears. She should get something more mature. She walks up to a plain, yellow folder. Ok, that’s two. Suddenly the girl is lost. She doesn’t know what to choose for her third folder.

The first choice had seemed so natural. She saw it and she wanted it. But the yellow folder threw her off. It’s like she doesn’t know what she wants, now that she’s aware that what she wants defines who she is and how she’s seen. What kind of folder *should* she want?

The girl looks back into the cart at the folder with wrestlers on it. Could she be a girl who likes that? She thinks wrestling is so dumb, but it could be precisely because she *isn’t* mature that she feels that way. She wants to have mature desires. She holds the folder up and looks at Hulk Hogan.

This is too confusing. She’ll just get three yellow folders and then she won’t have to worry about anything anymore. The girl places the ones her mom chose back onto the wall and then puts three yellow folders into the cart. She doesn’t want them. Not really. But she can’t deal with the stress of the questions.

“Did you get your folders?” The girl walks over to her brother and sees that he has a large pile. “You can only get three.”

She wants to get this done quickly now. She looks at the list. Pencils and erasers. She’ll get some plain packs, two of each.

Are you my mother? The baby duckling looks up at the large, white moon. She walks toward it, but can't close the gap. Is that you? She looks back to her nest and recounts the departure from her broken shell. She moves forward and enters into a patch of long grass in the dark field. She looks up at the moon, a bright face behind towering blades. Mother? Her little webbed feet flap through the mud.

Why is my mother running from me? The duckling can't get any closer. No matter how far she travels, her mommy is always at a distance. Oh, she's so sad. She's hungry. And she's scared. Scared without her mommy. Where *is* her mommy?

"Quack!" the duckling calls out. "Quack! Quack!" She waddles through the brush, running until she reaches a large rock. Are you my mother? "Quack!" The rock doesn't respond.

She hears something in the distance. Strange noises getting closer. She stands by the rock and looks out through the grass. A glowing pair of yellow eyes. Mom?

"Randall! No!" Thomas runs up in front of his kitten, who's now at a curious hunter stage of maturity. "No, Randall." His gray fur glimmers under Thomas's hand as he's petted.

"A baby duck!" Luke exclaims.

"Randall, this is your friend, ok?" Thomas points at the duckling. "*Friend.*"

The duckling jumps up to the kitten. It feels its warmth—its softness!

"Luke! Look!"

"It thinks Randall's its mommy!"

The boys laugh, with their flashlights on the scene, as the duckling chases after the confused kitten in the clearing.

"Ok, lil' ducky, you can join us if you want. We'll call you—"

“I wanna name him!” Luke shouts out. “You got to name Randall. I want to name the baby duck.”

Thomas nods his head. “That’s fair.” He puts his arm around Luke. “What do you want to name him?”

Luke thinks carefully. “I want to name him ... *Sam*.”

“Ok.” Thomas crouches. “You wanna come home with us, Sam?” He looks back at Luke. “Come on! Let’s go!”

The group heads through the field, each one putting in work to stay together. Like a solid unit, they make their way through the grass, up the small hill by the gate, around the old lady’s boat, and into that wooded area with the special tree that holds their home. It’s through their bonds, their shared stories, their love and circumstance, that Thomas, Randall, Luke and Sam all sit together on the floor of this treehouse. A candle is lit, Santa on the tin, it smells like peppermint.

Thomas looks for something he can use to make a nest. There’s a lot of junk lying around. Items they’ve found exploring. All these things, but nothing cozy. “We have to go back home to get a towel for Sam. He needs a bed. And food.”

Luke continues staring down. Sam dances in the candlelight.

“You have to come too.”

“I’ll keep watch. Make sure he’s ok.”

“You can’t be scared.” Thomas socks Luke’s shoulder lightly. “I told you. Don’t be a chicken. Let’s go.”

Luke smiles at the duckling, then gives her a little kiss.

—

Through the side door, the TV is heard. They open it just a crack, at first. They listen. The TV blares, but nobody talks back. No wild muttering. He must have passed out. The boys walk very quietly into the house. There isn’t an easy way into their rooms. They have to pass around a corner that’s completely exposed to

their father's view from his big chair by the TV. Thomas peeks out and sees a cigarette burning with a long line of ash. He looks back at Luke and nods.

The boys tiptoe into Thomas's bedroom. Thomas grabs his sweater.

"What about the towel?" Luke whispers.

"Dad will notice the towel, but I can tell him I left my sweater at school. Do you have any food in your room?"

"I have some crackers."

"Go get them."

Luke looks back to the door, but doesn't leave.

"Go."

—

"Each of you starts with three stars." Mrs. Fletcher walks over to a colorful board at the front of the classroom.

The girl looks for her name and sees three shiny red stars next to it.

"Do your homework for a week and you get a star."

She can do that. She always does her homework.

Mrs. Fletcher looks out across the classroom. "Get an A on a test ..."

The teacher locks eyes with the girl—is that because she sees potential?

"... and you get a star."

The girl had already made up her mind to do well this year. She's confident that she can earn many stars.

"*And ...*" Mrs. Fletcher shows a warm smile.

The girl is on the edge of her seat.

“... for the students that go above and beyond, not just with their coursework, but with their attitude toward learning”—Mrs. Fletcher raises her hands out to the children—“and their attitude toward their peers—these students will be awarded *special* stars.”

The girl imagines herself getting so many stars, they can't fit on the board.

“Now, at the end of each month, whichever student has earned the most stars *in that month* will get to choose a prize from my desk.”

The girl looks to the desk. Candy, toys, art supplies, books! Oh, wow!

“Listen carefully, that means that even if you don't have very many stars, you can still win a prize if in that month you *gained* the most stars.”

The girl looks to her left. All the other students are looking around too. This is the competition.

“At the end of the semester, the five students with the most stars will get to have a pizza party, with a movie and ice cream, instead of class!”

The students look around again, this time with a more joyous solidarity, each imagining themselves at the top, wondering what other four might join them.

Thomas walks in through the door. His dirty, brown hair is pushed forward, and he's wearing a big pair of curvy black sunglasses. He tries not to make a spectacle of himself, just makes a beeline to an available seat in the back middle.

“Excuse me, young man. Hold it right there.”

Thomas stops, but doesn't turn around.

“You're late to class.”

Thomas doesn't move.

“Young man? What is the reason for your tardiness?”

Thomas looks at the teacher and shrugs.

“No sunglasses in class.”

Thomas just stands there.

“Did you hear what I said? I shouldn’t have to stop class just for you.”

“Then keep teaching.” Thomas walks to his seat and takes it.

“Excuse me? You ... listen here, this is *my* classroom, and in *my* classroom you will show me respect!”

All the children have eyes on him. He looks back from behind his shades. “Respect this.” Thomas flips Ms. Fletcher off.

The class falls silent, but the girl lets out a big laugh. Oh, no! She brings a hand up over her mouth. How could that have happened!?

“I suppose you think this is funny!”

The girl is stunned—is she in trouble? She can’t speak.

“You wouldn’t think it was very funny if I took away one of your stars, would you?”

No, not the stars! “But I didn’t do anything!” the girl shouts.

“I can’t believe it! Two troublemakers in the first ten minutes! We will have a *proper* start to this school year.” The teacher walks to the board and removes one star from each of their rows. “I won’t allow this type of disrespectful behavior!”

The girl rises from her seat. “But that’s not fair!”

“Enough!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“I’ve had it! Principal’s office! Both of you!”

The girl looks back at Thomas. Oh, her blood is boiling. Look

what he's done!

“*Now!*”

To be sent to the principal's office on the first day of school—what a nightmare! She walks quickly ahead of Thomas, down the long hall. Of course, that jerk just *had* to be in her class! What horrible luck!

Thomas keeps his sunglasses on as the two wait silently to be seen. The girl is called in first. The principal stands and welcomes her in. He invites her to share what happened.

“Thomas put up his middle finger to Mrs. Fletcher and I didn't mean to but I laughed, and then Mrs. Fletcher said she was going to take away my stars—but that's not fair, it was Thomas's fault!”

The principal looks down at his folded hands and considers the matter carefully. A smile appears. He looks up. “Well, I suppose I can tell you.” The principal hesitates, like he's still deliberating. “But don't go telling all your little friends. Ok?”

The girl doesn't know how to react. Of course she wants to know more. She nods.

“The first day of school doesn't count. This is something that all the teachers know, and all the staff know, but we try to keep it a secret because ...” He leans back in his chair. “Well, can you imagine what would happen if all the students knew? They'd go *crazy!*” He waves his hands in the air.

The girl giggles, imagining an exaggerated scene of pandemonium. Students swinging from the rafters, tearing the school apart like monkeys.

“That's why we keep it a secret, but it's true. The first day doesn't count. And that means you can still have a *perfect* year.”

The girl feels absolved. She had felt everything was ruined, but now she understands. As long as she doesn't mess up tomorrow, things will be ok.

“Now, I'll talk to Mrs. Fletcher, but there's something I need you



to do as well.” He takes a small slip of paper out from a drawer. “I need you to talk to your parents.”

No! The nightmare isn’t over.

He hands the girl a form. “Bring this back tomorrow with their signatures. Talk about it with them just like you did here with me. Can you do that?”

The girl stares at the signature lines. A knot forms in her stomach. “Ok.”

—

All day long, the girl dreads the note. What will she say to her parents? What will they say? She’s never been sent to the principal’s office before. Her stomach hurts and the sensation is interpreted as a signal that she needs to go number two. The thought of having to do so at school only worsens the pain.

She decides it might be helpful to fortify against her uncertainty with a plan, a best course of action. She’ll be really good the rest of the day and then finish all her work really quickly after school. She’ll wait for Daddy to get home and tell her parents together. Quiet and out of sight until then.

Thomas didn’t come back to class, but she saw him when she was leaving school, still with his sunglasses on.

—

Ray lifts his girl onto his lap at the round metal table in the kitchen by the fridge.

Kay opens the dishwasher and removes a plastic cutting board.

“Ok, first day of fifth grade!” Ray gives the girl a hug and a little tickle. “How’d it go?”

The girl looks down at the form she holds beneath the table. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Kay turns from the counter.

“I have a form that you need to sign. I was sent to the principal’s office.”

“What!?” Kay steps over. “What did you do?”

“It wasn’t my fault—”

“Tell us what you did!”

“Well, hold on, Kay, let’s hear her out.” Ray holds his girl close.

“Tell us what happened.”

The girl lets out a long sigh. Better to just tell the truth. She knows what she did was wrong. “I yelled at the teacher.”

“You *yelled* at the teacher!?” Kay gets closer to the girl.

“Ok, ok.” Ray holds a hand up. “Just tell us from the beginning.”

The girl looks up at her father. Oh, he’s the only one that understands her. “A kid in my class came in late and Mrs. Fletcher started yelling at him, but he wouldn’t listen and he was being really bad and he wasn’t doing what Mrs. Fletcher said.” The girl looks at the table, too embarrassed to meet their eyes. “And then when he sat down, she said he had to give her respect, and he said *respect this* and then he put up his middle finger at her ... and then everyone got quiet, but I ... *laughed*.”

Ray laughs.

“Ray!” Kay wags a finger at her husband.

Ray straightens up. “Well, honey, that’s not something you should laugh about. You know that.”

It’s so hard to tell them, she wants to cry. “So, then Mrs. Fletcher said she was going to take away my stars because I laughed, but it wasn’t fair because I didn’t mean to. I was—I—it just came out! But that’s all I did—and she was going to take away my stars, so I told her that’s not fair and she got mad and said I was disrespectful and she took away my star and I told her that’s not fair and then she sent me to the principal’s office with Thomas!”

Kay crouches down in front of the girl on Ray’s lap. “That’s *not*

ok. I can't *believe* you would do something like this! And on your first day!"

"Well ..." Ray starts.

Kay looks sharply up at Ray.

"... sometimes a laugh just comes out. It's like a sneeze or something."

"She got sent to the principal's office. That's not ok."

"I'm not saying it's ok. I'm just saying, you know, we're trying to teach her right from wrong, aren't we? It kinda sounds like her teacher was just having problems with this other kid."

"I can't believe—you know what you're doing? You're undermining everything I'm telling her!"

"I'm not under—"

"*I'm* the one with these kids all day. *I* know what she needs. And what she needs now is a sense of authority!"

"What about having a sense of her *own* authority!?" Ray can't remember what it is he's arguing for, but he hates that Kay is treating him like this, like he can't have an opinion about what's good for his own kids "How's she going to grow up to be independent if she just blindly obeys everyone?"

"Fine! Ok! That's great!" Kay stands. "Why don't you just do it, then. You can be the parent."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means *you* can do the *parenting*. And you can cook dinner, too, while you're at it. That's right. I think maybe I'll just have a little lie-down."

"Kay, that's ridiculous!"

Ray flails his arms as he argues, making every point with an angry gesture. The girl slinks from his lap. She steps away from the table. Her parents don't notice. It's like she's not even there.

---

The girl peeks into the kitchen and sees her father standing before the stove, staring into a pot of boiling water. Laid out on the counter next to him are four styrofoam cups. A sound from the hallway. Heavy footsteps.

“Cup O’Noodles!?! You’re making them *Cup O’Noodles*?”

“Oh, what? I thought *I* was doing the parenting! What happened to that!?”

“You know that’s her favorite! You’re rewarding bad behavior!”

Ray looks at the styrofoam cups.

“Oh ... you *didn’t* know, did you?”

“*You* told me to cook dinner!”

“Well, obviously I can’t leave it to you. That was kinda my point.”

Ray waves a dismissive hand at Kay and returns to the stove. He takes the boiling water and pours it into the cups.

“What are you doing?”

Ray takes a fork from a drawer, then grabs one of the cups of noodles. He walks toward the girl.

“Do *not* give her that!”

Ray takes another step, but Kay’s twisted face stops him. “All right.” He sets the cup down on a shelf by the table. “Just have it your way, then.” Ray buries his rage. “I think you’ve made your point. I’m certainly not needed here. I’ll just go for a walk.” Ray turns to exit the kitchen, but Kay grabs his wrist. Immediately he pulls his hand back, but he does it too abruptly. All his anger surges up. The back of his hand hits the Cup O’Noodles.

Didn’t her father see her there? The boiling water flies down onto the girl. She cries out. Ray freezes.

“Look what you’ve done!” Kay runs to the girl and holds her face.

Ray can't speak.

"Just leave!" Kay rushes the girl to the bathroom. Ray hears running water. His girl crying.

God. No. He can't take it. The boy walks into the kitchen. Oh, what's wrong with him!? He looks down to his boy. Is he a bad father? Ray has to get out. He takes the boy's hand and gets his jacket by the door. Flashes of his girl's terrified face repeat in his mind.

They walk down the front steps and take a left around their corner lot. They walk up a small hill. The neighborhood is quiet. The sky is black. Ray walks slowly. The boy looks at the dark asphalt.

"What happened back there ... you don't need to worry about that, ok? That's *my* job. Understand?"

The boy continues to look at the street.

*Tuku-tuku-tuku-tuku-tuku.* A hum nears overhead. In the night sky, Ray sees a searchlight. A helicopter is flying through their neighborhood.

"Daddy, what's that?"

They stop. He looks down at his boy. "It's a police helicopter." The boy's face glows with excitement. The spotlight comes nearer. The father and son look up. The light passes over them.

## Chapter 400,562,736,994.00237

It's odd, the way time passes in this fracture realm. Kay knows she's been there for quite a while, but everything *feels* like an instant, like there's no time outside the moment. Reality feels *light* for her. They watch TV, May teaches her about witchcraft, Kay meditates on her abilities ... but there's something odd that Kay can sense. A certain absence of fullness.

Kay only wishes that she would be able to turn the mirror. May

told her it could become a window, and she desperately wants to see what's going on back home. But no matter how hard she tries—nothing. She can feel it coming, then there's a threshold and ... it's like opening up the refrigerator and forgetting what the heck you were looking for!

She knows that she must be a good student. She must be patient. May was reluctant to speak about the Devil, saying that she wanted Kay to get situated first, that they'd get to it in time. Well, that time has come. Kay does her best to hear the truth.

“It's called the fourfold path. Four turns makes a circle. It's like he's leading you down a staircase, lower and lower, until you get to the bottom. That's when he's got you. He'll find some little way to trick you into it, into thinking you've agreed to go along with him. And I'm sorry to say this, you seem like a nice woman—actually, you seem *really* nice, so I don't know why this happened to you—but you can't beat the Devil. That's not something that's possible. I'm sorry, sweetie, but it's a rule that defines his existence. He can't be beat.”

Kay looks off into the expanse. She closes her eyes. “What's on next?”

“Springer.”

“What an awful show.”

“Yeah, well ... it's what's on next.”

“How could anyone enjoy a program like that? Delighting in another's sorrow. It's horrible.” Kay shakes her head from the floor beside May's recliner.

May stares down at the bottom trim of the TV set. Kay can see when she does this. Like she doesn't want Kay to know she's not watching.

“I'm going for a walk.” Commercials play as Kay stands. She walks past the TV into the white void. She hears lots of preamble to the show. *Coming-up-nexts* and *after-thats*. Kay looks out to the emptiness. She sees the black dot. It's grown. Like a golf ball now.

*(Audience roars: Jerry! Jerry!)*

Who could be cheering like that? What heartless people, she thinks. No, she doesn't want to let it distract her.

*Hollywood, California, land of fantastic sights, expensive homes and world-famed celebrities. Millions of people say that here is where the action is.*

The spoken subject, accompanied by electric guitar, is hard to ignore. Her focus is somehow magnified by not looking.

*When day turns to night, residents and tourists alike seek a different kind of action: prostitution.*

Kay feels that if she does watch the show, she can at least give those poor working girls a loving eye. Someone in the audience who will sympathize with them. Root while others jeer.

*Hi, welcome to the show. Today we'll find out what it's like working as a high-class call girl in one of the most famous cities in the world—Hollywood. Please meet my first guest, Bambi.*

Poor Bambi. Kay imagines what she might look like. An honest girl with broken eyes. A soul desperate for love and affection.

*Bambi has been involved in the world of sex and drugs for some time. How did you get started in this thing?*

The camera jumps to Bambi.

*Well, Jerry, I've been in the Hollywood scene for quite a while, like you said. You know, it's a big party out there. There's all walks of life.*

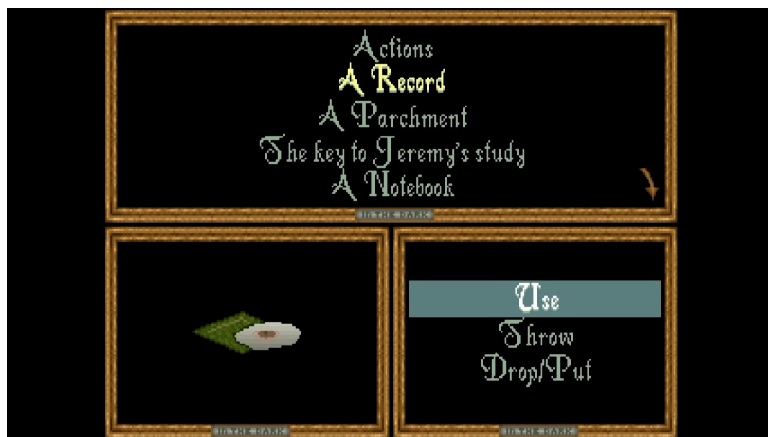
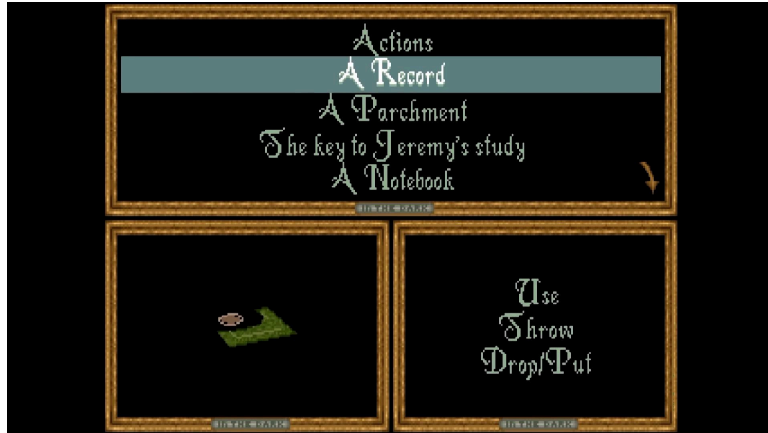
Kay falls to her knees. It's her little *girl*—all grown up!

“**HAHAHAHAHAHA!** Oh! *Hee-hee, hoot.* Ha, h<sub>u</sub>h. Ha-HA**AAA**-HA-HA! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha ... HAAA!! Snort.”

## Chapter 1



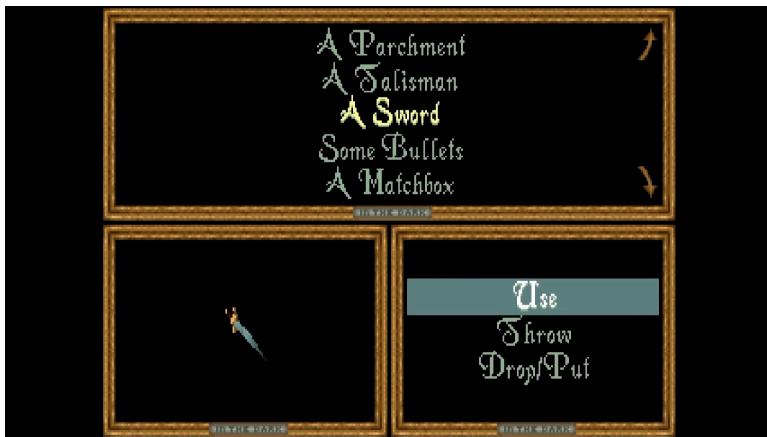


















## Chapter 2

The girl sits at a wicker desk with her homework laid out over the glass top. Her fingers run through her dark bangs. Her head rests atop her palm. She feels so drained, but she has to do her work. She has to be good. She looks over at her brother, just lazing there on the floor with Marc's Gameboy. "That's too loud."

The boy doesn't look up from his game.

"That's too loud!" She takes the eraser tip from her pencil and throws it at him. It misses. The boy keeps playing. The girl looks back at her book.



She needs to stretch her legs. Terri pulls a pitcher of lemonade out from the fridge as the girl walks into the kitchen. An empty glass sits on the counter.

“Want some lemonade?”

The girl shakes her head.

“Are you sure? You can take it back into the room if you want.”

The girl resists. She can't enjoy *anything* until she's finished with her homework.

—

Finally! She rests her pencil down and looks over at her brother. He hasn't moved an inch. Maybe she'll have that lemonade now. She walks back down the hall and sees Marc's office door open a crack. Terri told them not to bother him, that he was working on something *very* important. She peeks through. Hey! He's not working—he's just playing computer games!

The girl finds a glass of lemonade sitting on the dining room table. Terri must have poured her some. She lifts the glass and takes a big sip, anticipating a refreshing cleanse, but oh, *no*—it's awful! What's wrong with this lemonade? Not just a poor flavor, but a burning sensation ... running down into her stomach.

“That's my lemonade!” Terri hurries over and takes the glass away from the girl. “I'll pour you your own.” Terri opens the fridge.

—

Wow, their bedroom is so huge! When she has her own house, she's going to get a big bedroom just like this one, maybe even bigger. The glass door on their sound system is left open. A stack of black boxes surrounded by gigantic speakers.

She pulls a cassette from Marc's collection and looks at the cover. A man on his knees wearing a red jacket, one that ties his arms around his waist, and a mask like a hockey player. It looks so crazy. She opens the cassette, loads it into the sound system and presses play.

A loud crack breaks through the silence in the room. It seems to announce itself. The cymbals crash in unison with a cutting chord, one struck in defiance of everything that ever said it couldn't be. The sound sinks into something twisted, then returns through a hypnotic simplicity. A voice rings out, a shout, an affirmation of everything that's already been stated so clearly!

Marc runs into the room. He's in his robe. He stops the cassette and looks down at the girl like he wants to yell. Nothing comes out. He just stares. He ejects the cassette, puts it back into the case, hands it to the girl with a curt bow, and leaves.

—

Kirby's Dream Land is kind of boring. Having to suck in all the enemies is tedious. Even though the boy has his criticisms, he can't wait to get back to it. In fact, he still feels like he's very much *in* the game now. He's washing his hands in the bathroom sink—the boy knows this—but in his mind he's still in Dream Land. He feels like Kirby. The boy takes in a big breath and looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. What if he could breathe in and grow?

The boy turns off the faucet and wipes his hands on his shorts. What if he was bigger? He stares at his reflection, his chin barely making it over the countertop. I'm going to grow up one day, he thinks. He studies his features. My body will be big. He sees himself in the mirror. The concept is imagined through Gameboy graphics. An eerie, green glow forms his projected future self.

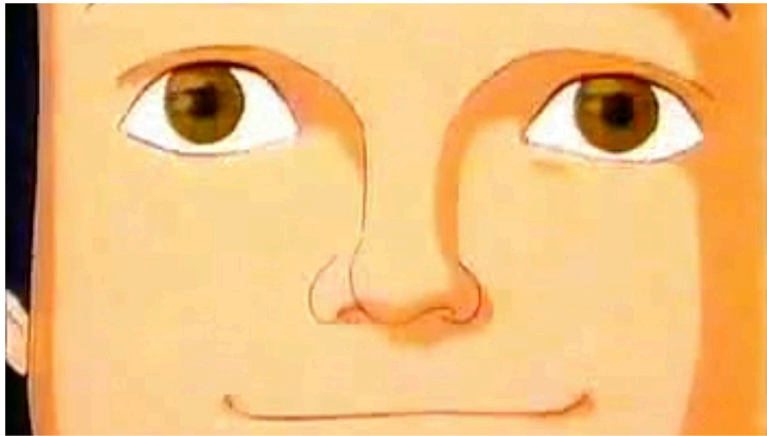
He looks to his left and sees his sister. She's wearing a pantsuit and holding a briefcase. And his parents will be old. He imagines them stooping over with canes, wrinkly skin and wispy hair. He pulls his shirt sleeve up and looks at his bicep. He flexes.

## Chapter -2

“Kay.”



*I can sense you all.*



*Hear your thoughts.*

“Kay.”

“Just ignore him.”



*Feel your feelings.*

“KAY.”

“You’ve got to learn to tune him out.”

Kay focuses on the TV.



*I can hear him ... in my head!*

“Kay!”



*You two are gonna drive us ALL nuts.*

“KAAAY!!!”

Kay spins from the TV and looks at the dark spot. “*What!?*”

“*Nothing–HAAA–hA! HAAAA!*”

Kay storms over to the darkness. May rolls her eyes.

“Now I wanna know, what’s the purpose of all this!?” Kay wags her finger at the black ball. “Why does it seem like–well, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were *trying* to upset me!”

“Uh, yeah–*doy*, that’s like, kinda my main point, I mean–*hello!?*”

May rises from her recliner.

Kay throws her hands up in disbelief. “What? You mean you’re

purposefully causing suffering? Why would you do that?”

The blue-and-gold lines around the black dot shift. “Kay.”

“What?”

“NOTHING! HAAAAH-HA-HA!”

May puts her arm around Kay and turns her to the TV.

“Wait, don’t you want to know?”

“Know what?” Kay looks back.

“Well, don’t you think it’s funny?”

“Think what’s funny?” Kay takes a small step toward the Devil. May holds her arm.

“I just think it’s kinda funny that you’ve been here all this time and you don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

## Intro to Pathing

“I always hated pathing in school.” May waves her hand in the air like she’s wiping a foggy mirror. A black splotch appears across the white sky. “But you’re going to have to learn, if you want to understand what he’s talking about.”

May traces three colorful lines that sparkle and crackle in the air above them. “This is thought.” She draws another symbol. “This is torso, and this one”—May draws the last symbol sitting at the bottom of a column—“is dick. You’ll use these to make your TTD square and then you can work out the pathing.” May flicks her wrist and the symbols shrink to one side. “Of course, now they call it HMS.” May lets out an exaggerated groan and drops her hands to her sides.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” May sighs and looks back up. “I just hate pathing.” She takes a deep breath. “So, these symbols get expressed in a shorthand form that’s easier for writing, and they look like this.” May writes three more symbols in the air, then pauses to run a hand over her forehead. “Maybe I should just teach you the updated version. But I don’t like how they do this now. Everything has to be so PC. It doesn’t make any sense. Look.” May points up, and a symbol expands to the center. “The crescent star represents the torso because those are the five points of connection. You can’t call it heart! It’s not just the *heart*, it’s the whole *torso!*”

Kay doesn’t know how to respond.

“And dick is supposed to be about what you *don’t* have, that’s why I think dick is better, but ... ok, I guess it *is* more inclusive to lesbians. Maybe I ought to just get with the times. All right. I’ll do it. I’ll teach you HMS.” May erases the board. “Heart, mind and sex. HMS. So you start with a blank table, like this.”

$$\begin{array}{c|c} {}_x\text{H}_0 & {}_o\text{H}_x \\ \hline {}_o\text{M}_x & {}_x\text{M}_o \\ \hline {}_x\text{S}_o & {}_o\text{S}_x \end{array}$$

“The forces as they exist inside an individual can be charted. Then you can pair two individuals together and work out the pathing. Our paths are largely determined by social relations, the way we pair with others. So working out the pathing is like finding the shape of a puzzle piece so that you can see where it might fit. It’s like knowing you’ll fall asleep at the end of the day. You don’t know when exactly, or how, and there’s always a possibility it won’t happen, but usually the events of the day lead you to your bed at night. Get it? You get put on a path. And if the Devil is telling the truth, and your soul *is* split, we can work out what kind of effect that will have on you and your family.”

“So.” May draws a new table on the board. “Here’s you back on Earth.”

“Wait, we’re not on Earth?”

“Uh, we’re not *not* on Earth—this place doesn’t have a location—but what I’m saying is that this representation of you, the you that’s back with your family—all your light has been mooned.”

“Mooned?”

“Ah, we don’t need to get into that. It’s like it’s gone. I don’t know how else to represent it. I’ve never actually heard of a person being *all* dark or *all* light before, so I’m just going to say that your light has been mooned so that we can do some basic interactions.”

“Ok.”

“So, two attractor children . . .” May draws more symbols and connects the letters with unique lines. “Looks like they’re each going to become light moons. Hmm.” May clicks her tongue.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you know—it happens.”

“What happens?”

“Kay, before I tell you, I need you to understand that *everyone* is subject to the light and to dark forces. Describing anyone’s life in this way is going to seem terrifying. But once you move through it, and you develop this skill, you’ll see things on a new level. Then it won’t be so bad. Ok?”

Kay nods.

“Light moons need to couple. They’ll couple with whomever they can find. And they need to couple with someone tilted dark. Now, I can’t say for sure, but the way this would usually play out is that the older one will seek coupling outside the home while the younger one couples with the dark moon parent.”

“That’s me? I’m the dark moon?”

“Yes. And a non-attractor husband—”

“Wait, what does that mean, they’ll couple?”



“Like I said about the puzzle, they’ll find someone that fits their path. See, this is why every witch aims for balance. Balance is the only real control. The two forces, they take lives in certain *directions*. And if you’re all dark back home, there’s only one direction things can go. It’s still you back on Earth. Still Kay. It’s just that, well, the way that you’ll move through things—it’s like you become a vortex. I’m sorry, I don’t really know how to get into it without explaining attractor theory. Basically, it’s like a cone.”

### Chapter 3

“When you do times eleven, it’s the same number twice, so you write it twice and that’s the answer. If I say nine times eleven”—the girl writes the equation on a piece of drawing paper in the boy’s notebook on the floor of his bedroom—“then you do nine nine. See? So it’s ninety nine.”

That’s odd, the boy thinks.

“So, ok, if I write down one. No.” The girl erases the one. “Six times eleven. There.” She pushes the notebook across the carpet to her brother. “What’s that?”

The boy lifts his pencil. Ok, let’s see. The rule is that I have to write the same number twice, so ... that’s simple. He writes sixty six.

“Good! I told you it was easy. Now, if you times by *ten*, then you add a zero to the number.”

A different rule for ten and eleven? Wow, he thinks. Multiplication must be complicated.

“So, this is easy, five times ten.” The arguing flares up. It reverberates through the walls. The children look down at the notebook in silence. It quiets to a gentler hum. “Five times ten—so you add a zero to five and that makes fifty. Here, solve this.” The girl gives the boy a problem.

“And nines, you have to hold your hands up and then you count to the finger you’re timesing by and then put it down, and the answer is the number that’s the fingers on both sides.”

*What?* Will a different rule exist for every number? That’s not at all like the math he knows.

“So nine times six, you count to six.” The girl counts to her sixth finger and puts it down—there’s a banging on some distant wall. “There are five fingers on this side and four fingers on this side, so the answer is fifty four. Five and four, see?”

This is too confusing.

“Let me teach you ones now, because those are the easiest. If you times something by one, it’s just the same number. So what’s ten times one?”

“One?”

“No, the other number. Times one is you get the same number that’s not the one. Unless it’s a one. So what’s ten times one?”

The door swings open.

—

*“Happy Birthday, you old hag!”*

Rebecca cuts the cake. She slices around the word “hag,” written in blue frosting, plates it, then hands it to Abram. “Here. A special slice for a *special* person.”

Abram takes the cake. “Come on, Rebecca. We’re just teasing.”

“So am I. You think you’re the only ones that can tease?” Rebecca carves out “Happy” and hands it to Ray. “I’ve got some news, actually.”

Ray shoves a bite of cake into his mouth.

“I wanted to tell you guys today, because you’re not allowed to be mean to me on my birthday. Understand?”

Ray and Abram look at each other. They nod and continue eating.  
“Sure.” “Yeah.”

“I got an internship at Boeing.”

---

“Oh ... hi, Linda.”

“Kay, my God, did you read the paper today?”

“No.” Kay stands at the door.

Linda pulls a copy up. “You should read this.” Linda motions inside. “Come on, take a look.”

Kay opens the door.

---

No, no, no. Shit, shit, shit. Abram shovels in a second slice.

Ray has his arm on Rebecca’s back. “We’re really going to miss you around here. Isn’t that right, Abram?”

Abram opens his mouth and takes in air, some cake flies down the wrong pipe. He coughs and walks to the cooler.

“You all right?”

“Fine.” Abram sips some water.

---

“Today is going to be a special day. Today we’re going to have a little fun.” Ms. Clancy leans forward on her stool. “Today we’re going to learn dancing!”

The children, gathered on a large, rectangular rug printed with rows of colored dots for them to sit on, don’t respond.

“So I want everyone to stand up and form a single file line by the door.”

The boy stands with the other children. He tries to line up his

shoulders with the classmate in front of him. He wants to make the line as straight as possible.

—

He should have just told him in San Diego. Now what's he going to do? It would be cruel to wait any longer, but it feels wrong to do it on the same day as Rebecca. He'll talk to him when they close up. At least then Ray can have some time to be alone afterwards.

—

The other kids are shaking their bodies around, but the boy feels some resistance to the movement, like a wall, or a chain.

“Try to hear the rhythm. Catch the beat and move to it.” Ms. Clancy walks through the crowd of students with a big smile on her face. “Very good, Samantha.”

He doesn't want to be singled out for not dancing. He'll just do what she says. He counts the tempo. Steps forward. Counts again. Steps back.

—

The girl grabs her tray from the lunch bar and looks for her friends. She takes a seat across from Lacey.

“He's coming! Act like we're talking.”

The girl tries to turn her head, but Lacey grabs her hand and laughs. Thomas walks by.

“Lacey!”

“What?”

“He got me in trouble, remember?”

“So?”

The girl can't believe it. *Rude*. She opens her boxed milk.

—

He feels sick watching Ray lock the office door. Do it, Abram, just do it now. “Ray, hey ... there’s, uh, something—do you have a minute? We need to talk.”

“Sure.” Ray puts his keys in his jacket pocket. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t want to tell you like this—I mean, it’s awkward timing, but ...”

“Just tell me.”

“Joe offered me a position in La Jolla and I’m going to take it.”

Ray blinks.

“Look, Ray, I told him no at the seminar so I didn’t bother mentioning it, but ...” Come on, Abram, he psyches himself up. Just be yourself—just be honest! “I don’t have what you have, you know? I’m just floating. I’m just *here*.” Don’t wimp out, Abram bullies himself. “Ray, you’re basically my best friend.”

—

The boy waits for the bus to take him home, but something hasn’t been sitting right. There’s a twist in his gut. He needs to figure out what’s going on. It begins to rain as the doors open and the boy steps aboard. He takes an unoccupied seat and looks through the condensation on the window. A blur of colors lead the boy off deeper into thought.

Why have a different rule for each operation and then call the whole set of rules multiplication? That doesn’t make any sense. It seems to him that math has a certain underlying quality to it. Math *should* be straightforward.

—

“Sounds like you need a drink.” Naomi lifts her brow.

“Oh, no.” Ray bats away the idea.

“Come on, Ray. You’ve had a bad day. You need a break.”

A beer *would* be nice.

“Oh! Hey, I’ve got something for you.” Naomi reaches under the counter and grabs a cassette. She offers it to Ray, “It’s that band you said you liked, remember? Just something to cheer you up.”

The artwork depicts a circle of young men with long tongues licking a rose at the center. “Wow, thank you.” There’s so much love in his life, but it’s a whirlwind. He doesn’t know how to process.

“Listen to the B-side first.”

---

“Here.” Kay hands her daughter the phone. “It’s Lacey.”

“Hello?”

“Did you see the way Thomas was looking at Meghan today?”

The girl holds her hand over the receiver and sighs.

“Do you think he *likes* her?”

---

“Don’t worry, Ray, you’ll always have me.”

Ray stares down at his beer.

“Ray ... do you know what I mean?” Naomi leans toward Ray.

“Sure,” Ray nods. “And I appreciate it.” That’s right, Ray thinks. Just stay focused on the positive. He takes a swig.

“I mean, you can always have me, Ray.”

“Thank you, Naomi.”

“Ray.” She scoots closer. “You can have me.” She slides her hand up his thigh. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

---

The atmosphere is weird. Ray stops for a second just to listen. Both his children are sitting at the table. It looks like they’ve

finished eating. Ray hears some dishes clinking in the sink. He creeps toward the table. “Hey, guys. You finished with dinner?”

The children stare vacantly.

He walks into the kitchen. Kay scrubs a pan with unnecessary intensity. “Kay.”

She whips around. “What are you going to do, Ray?”

“What?”

“You have to *sue*. That’s libel!”

“Libel? What are you talking about?”

Kay dries her hands quickly and walks past Ray. “Roger’s article! Everyone’s going to see this.”

“What?”

Kay lifts the paper from the counter and shoves it to Ray’s chest. “Read.”

### *Condos, Good or Bad?*

*I won’t waste your time with some highfalutin think-piece, let’s just get down to it. It’s the question homeowners, investors and hardworking Americans are asking; it’s the issue that may just decide the fate of bravely created communities all across this nation; and it’s the title of what I’m inviting you to consider with me now—condos, good or bad?*

*It’s said a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, but I’m sure many of you, by now, have come to associate the words “condo development” with something unsavory, to say the least. Let’s put these simple biases aside for a moment and look at the matter objectively—approach the problem in a straightforward fashion. What value, if any, do these towering constructions bring to our community?*

“Here.” Kay puts her finger down. “This paragraph.”

*It’s developments like the Marina that worship only money and*

*businesses like Anchor Realty that happily aid in their pillaging.*

---

Ray drives down the block and parks his car at the corner. It's hard to breathe. He tries to think, but he can't. There's too much. It's like too many people trying to walk through the same door. They bump their shoulders and squeeze each other out.

He closes his eyes. He's safe here. Safe in his car. It's quiet and dark. No one can see him. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the cassette. Music. He needs music.

He puts it in, B-side first, then drives. He doesn't know where he's going, but every turn leads him higher. He feels pulled upward by something natural, instinctual—a need for elevation. Ray stops his car. An empty field down below. Lights in the distance.

---

The boy lies in bed at night, but he can't sleep. Is it just an infinite list of arbitrary functions? No, there has to be more to it, he thinks. It can't *all* just be *that*. There has to be a unifying order. The boy can feel it.

## Chapter 4

Peter Pan and "Dead Girl"—these are the costumes they chose. After weeks of saying one thing and then another, this is what they settled on day-of. The girl wanted to make her own fake blood from corn syrup and dye. She put on a white T-shirt for dramatic effect, stepped into the tub, then poured the mixture all over herself. The boy borrowed some tights from his sister and wore them under his shorts, along with a half-buttoned green shirt, a felt hat, and a paper feather.

The boy runs down the steps with a Superman pillowcase in one hand and his He-Man sword in the other. He waves it in the air. *By the power of Grayskull, I HAVE THE POWER!* He feels an odd



intersection of fictional worlds. He looks around at the other kids running about in their costumes. It's like all realms have bled together. He waves his sword up again. *By the power of Grayskull, I HAVE THE POWER!*

*By the power of Grayskull, I HAVE THE POWER!*

"Stop doing that!" The girl bumps into another kid walking down from the pathway to the next house.

"Woah! I like your costume!" he says.

She looks up to a tall boy in a hockey mask with a big plastic knife.

"It's really scary! Are you Carrie?"

"No ... I'm a dead girl. What are you?"

"I'm Jason!"

"Who's Jason?"

"*Friday the 13th!* You don't know?"

"My mom doesn't let me watch those movies."

"Oh." He looks down. A smaller kid in a werewolf mask skips up behind Jason and the two run ahead.

The girl takes her brother's hand. *By the power of Grayskull—*

"I'm going to take the batteries out! Stop it!" They run to the next house. Barely any decorations, but a light on at the porch. An old woman opens the door. Scents and sounds give the girl the impression that much fun is being had inside. The woman drops a candy into each of their bags.

Naturally they follow closely behind Jason and the werewolf. The girl doesn't want them to think she's purposefully following them, because she's not. Though she never takes too long at the doors, and she makes an effort not to lag behind—but she's *not* following him.

The smaller one in the werewolf mask stops before an especially spooky home. There's a strobe light flashing on the front lawn. Stuffed clothing is spread apart to look like a person cut in half. Jason creeps forward cautiously. On the porch, in a rocking chair next to the door, is an evil gorilla.

The girl doesn't see a problem. It's just decorations. She pushes through and rings the bell. "Trick-or-treat!" She looks back at Jason, the werewolf and Peter Pan, who are all waiting behind. Will she make it out alive?

Nobody comes to the door. "Trick-or-treat!" she yells again. She waves the group over. They walk to the steps. "You guys are scaredy-cats!"

Jason lifts his mask. "I'm not scared."

What!?! It's just been *him*? This whole time!?

Just then, the evil gorilla stands from his chair. "Are you scared now?"

Oh, how the children run! They run and run, house after house, collecting candy until their pillowcases are full. They have so much fun together. It feels unreal. The girl gets a big laugh when Luke growls at some passing trick-or-treaters and howls as they run in fear. The brothers each want a turn with the boy's He-Man sword. The girl doesn't mind the sound effect so much anymore.

Who knows how the night ended. It was an exhausting adventure. They pushed themselves to their trick-or-treating limits. They dump their bags on the living room floor and gorge. The girl can't believe she actually had fun with *Thomas*, but that's just Halloween. It's a night apart from other nights. A night where everything comes out from hiding because no one is themselves.

—

The next day of school is *not* a good day. Here's what happens. First, the girl misses the bus, and her mom gets *really* upset and has to drive her to school. Then she gets dropped off right before the bell rings and when she gets to class she doesn't have time to talk, but it seems like her friends are ignoring her.

At lunch they run out of the classroom before the girl can stand from her desk. She walks to the cafeteria, grabs her tray and heads to their table, but it's empty. What's going on? She wants to look for her friends, but what if she finds them?

She squirts out two packets of ketchup then grabs a chicken nugget. She stares ahead at the stage. She imagines herself dressed as a tree. Standing in the background, absolutely still. All her friends have main roles. They enact some great adventure without her.

She dunks the nugget. Hmm, the ketchup looks weird. She takes a bite. Tastes ok. She moves her nugget back to the ketchup, but sees that there are two distinct shades of red. One just a little more vibrant. There's a sudden event—the vibrant color multiplies.

She feels a tickle above her lip. A drop falls onto her green beans. She wipes a long, red streak onto the back of her hand. Oh, no! She opens her utensil packet to remove the napkin. Blood pours onto the tray. She bunches up the tissue, plugs her nose and runs out of the cafeteria.

She pushes open the bathroom door and finds Lacey in front of the sink, face puffy and red, cheeks wet with tears, surrounded by her friends. The room is frozen. They all look at the girl.

“Wow.”

Lacey cries.

“It's ok, Lacey.”

The girl can feel the tissue under her nose becoming wet. She looks at the empty stall.

“Really? You're not going to say anything?”

“Oh, my gosh.”

“Tiffany saw you with Thomas all night.”

“Yeah.”

“And Brittney asked Thomas if he likes you.”

“And he said yes.”

“Why would you do that?”

“You knew Lacey liked him!”

Did she hear that right? “What?”

“I said why did you do that?”

“Uh ...” the girl tries to think. “He had his mask on. I didn’t know.”

Finally, Lacey speaks. She can barely get her words out through her tears. “Oh, wow, good excuse.”

“You didn’t know the *whole* night?”

“Well, I knew—”

“See!”

The blood leaks through the tissue and onto her hand. She rushes past the girls and into the stall. She rolls up a wad of toilet paper.

“Just leave me alone!” Lacey screams and runs out of the bathroom.

The girl stares into the porcelain bowl as her friends disappear. Pink water. She holds the fresh tissue at her face and cries.

## Chapter 1

“Ok! It’s a big deal—I’m sorry!” The woman walks forward and moves her hand out. “But, please, let’s just try to be civil.”

The man looks at the ceiling for a long while. He seems finished, but no, he looks up again. Ray can’t believe these two aren’t more embarrassed about their display. He looks on from the bench.

“How’s *this* for civil?” The man opens his mouth. He holds back.

He extends a hand—squeezes it into a tight fist.

“Gerald.” The woman shakes her head.

—

“Rhetorical hyperbole.” The attorney hands the paper back to Ray.

“What?”

“Look, Ray, I know Roger. He talks like an idiot, but he knows what he’s doing. This is clearly an attack, and it’s thinly veiled as some kind of impartial analysis, but the statement he makes regarding your business is what’s called ‘rhetorical hyperbole.’ Meaning it’s protected.”

Ray gives a blank stare.

“By the First Amendment.”

Still blank.

“You don’t have a case.”

Ray looks down at the paper in his lap.

“Now, I can’t give you advice on how to handle this outside the courtroom, so unless you’d be interested in paying me hourly for a frivolous lawsuit, our business here is done.” The attorney stands, but Ray doesn’t see it. “I wish you the best of luck and—” The attorney waves a hand. “Ray.”

“Yes?” Ray looks up. “Oh.” He stands.

“Don’t worry, it’s just an article.” The attorney extends his arm, showing Ray the door.

Ray walks slowly down the wheelchair ramp, the stairs being too direct an exit. Without really being aware of the journey, he finds himself back in his office, microwaving a burrito that he apparently purchased from a gas station. The microwaves beeps, but Ray doesn’t move.

An old Black man stumbles in through the front door. A tattered

black beanie sits lopsided over matted, half-gray hair. His baggy sweatshirt is covered with stains and his feet are pointed inward. His expression seems drawn up by the brow, like a character lifted into the air by the scent of pie cooling on a windowsill. “I can do work. I’m smart.” The man points to his temple and looks at Ray with sincerity. “I know Spanish. I got knowledgy. I can vacuum. Take out yo’ trash.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any work here for you.”

“I’m just trying to get somethin’ to eat. Damn. I ain’t eaten all day. HAAA-HA!”

Ray opens the microwave and rolls his burrito up in a paper towel. “Here. You can have this.”

“A burrito!?” The man takes it from Ray. “Aw, hell yeah! Yes! Hey, look at this. I got my rings. You see these?” The man brings his knuckles up to Ray, moving fluidly, like he’s entirely unencumbered. “This ring right here. *Nice*. And this one, I used to have, but I gave it to a bitch.” The man looks at Ray with an expectation of sympathy. “You got a bitch? You married?”

“Yes.” Ray leans against Rebecca’s old desk.

“Oh, you gettin’ some of this?” The man motions as if stroking a giant cock. “I get bitches all day. You want a woman? I’ll introduce you. Like a doughnut. Round. Glazed!” The man claps his hands together, then leans forward with his mouth agape. Drool spills out and onto his sweater.

“A doughnut? I’m not sure that’s a good shape.” Ray folds his arms.

The man looks concerned. “No? She got a big ol’ ass. She’ll work for you. You know these bitches do? They take it for you. In they mouth.” The man once again mimes self-pleasure, this time enacting the final moments. “Feels good!” He gives a last slow squeeze, looking directly into Ray’s eyes. “Like *milk*.”

The man stands up straight with a sudden gravity. “And I can *do* work. Any work you got for me. I love to work.”

“I’m sorry. There’s no work here.”

“You got a car?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look like you walk.”

“I used to walk.” Ray crosses his ankles. “And ride my bike.”

“You ride a bike? I had a bike in my room. I was banging this bitch. She’s like, move that bike. I’m like, *damn bitch!* And—” The man thrusts his crotch forward and opens his eyes wide. “*Bang!*” He lets the gesture hang for a moment, then leans quickly to the side with a belly full of laughter. A tear flies right out from the corner of his eye and onto the office floor.

“You wanna picture? I got a picture. It’s big. It’s mucho grande—*mucho grande?*” He looks up to check this with Ray. “Mucho grande. Yup. You want a picture? It’s this big.” The man lifts his arms and leans forward a bit.

“No, thank you.”

“Ok.” The man turns and holds his burrito up high. His other arm swings out, directing itself naturally toward a stack of folders on Abram’s old desk. “And you got your files. That’s all there. I’m just gonna leave that with you. And my brother is probably just still sleeping. And one more thing.” He spins around. “I love to work. I can *do* work. I can take out yo’ trash. I can vacuum.”

## Chapter 462.77385

Kay sits on the floor, away from the blaring TV, with the mirror in her lap. The black ball has grown, like a beanbag now. Kay tries again and again. She closes her eyes. Opens them. Closes them. Opens them.

“You’re never going to get it.”

“I’ll get it. I just have to keep trying.”

“No, that’s not—never mind. I guess you don’t want my help.”

“You’re not going to help me. You don’t help people. May told me that.”

“Bah! That’s not true! I help people do all kinds of things! And I can help you turn that mirror.”

“Shoot.” Kay puts the mirror down. “Does that mean it’s *bad*?”

“Good or bad, it’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Well ...” She looks up at the dark ball. “What can you do?”

“Firstly, I want you to know that it doesn’t please me in the slightest to say this. There’s a reason you can’t turn the mirror. And that reason is that you’re a dumb-dumb. A stupid little, fucking—I don’t know. You’re just, like, retarded or something.”

Kay stands and turns from the Devil.

“Oh, come on, Kay! I was *joking*! The truth is, Kay—wait. Kay. Let me tell you the truth. Kay. KAY!”

Kay folds her arms and looks back.

“I’ve been watching you struggle, and that’s been entertaining and all, but I’m bored of it now. You’re never going to turn that mirror. Not without my help.”

Kay rolls her eyes. She waits. “So?”

“Huh?”

“How can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Help me turn the mirror.”

“You want me to help you turn the mirror?”

“Yes. Of course.”



“Ok, it’s easy. You just have to talk to me.”

“Talk to you? But I’m talking to you right now.”

“Oh, Kay. Poor, stupid, simple, ugly Kay. You dumb bitch ...”

Kay taps her foot.

“... *this* isn’t talking. A proper conversation requires trust, wouldn’t you agree? For two people to converse honestly and openly? You might think, well, why should I trust him? But that’s ok, you don’t have to trust *me*. You only need to trust that I can do this one simple thing for you. Talk to me, Kay. Talk to me and I can help you.”

—

A loud, alternating bass spreads through the neighborhood. A seemingly endless bobbing. Kay can’t take it. Why do they have to play their music so loud? A high-pitched voice shouts out every word, an endless barrage of syllables. Can’t they play something nice?

Kay cuts off another broken stem from her rose bushes. Do they think that they own the neighborhood? They have no sense. She continues cutting, preparing the roses for winter.

The song ends—but just as quickly, it starts back up again. Or is this a new song? Kay can’t even tell. It all sounds the same. A vulgar kind of joy. Maybe she’ll go see what it is they’re doing over there.

She takes off her gloves and walks through the low gate, down the small hill of grass that leads to the sidewalk. She sees balloons peeking out over the white fence of their sprawling, yellow-brick rancher across the street.

From the sidewalk, she can see down into their backyard. There must be at least twenty people. Why do they always have such big families? What are they even celebrating? There’s no cake. No presents. There’s Ray, standing tall above the crowd, hanging out with a beer in his hand.

---

“Kay! What are you doing over there!” May calls out from behind the TV.

“Oh, I’m just talking. That’s all!”

“Uh, ok. Maybe you shouldn’t do that. Maybe you should just come back over here. How about that?” May shouts back.

The Devil gives Kay his blessing. “That’s fine. You can talk to May. And when you come back, I’ll let you see through the mirror.”

Kay skips over to May. “I think I’m going to turn the mirror!”

“Oh? How’s that?” May asks without looking away from the TV.

“Well, I was thinking. He’s not really so terrible. Maybe when all the good parts of me came in here, all the good parts of him came in too. Remember? He was just a tiny dot at first. But look at him now! I think I’ve been helping him grow his kindness. And he says he’s going to help me turn the mirror.”

May turns to look at Kay. “It’s your decision, Kay. But—and this is a big but—I would recommend you *don’t* continue talking with the Devil. Just my two cents.”

“Well, ok, but can I go talk to him real quick? I just want to see.”

“Like I said, it’s up to you.”

Kay walks back to the dark spot. She holds up the mirror and tries to look through it.

---

Kay rings the doorbell. One of the Mexicans answers. Oh, it’s the pregnant wife from her block party. Kay almost didn’t recognize her with all the lost weight. She’s holding a baby girl with—are those *pierced ears*? How awful!

The woman welcomes Kay inside. She motions toward Ray through the sliding doors. Ray turns around with a big, relaxed

grin that disappears the moment he spots Kay.

—

“That’s my hallway!” Kay shouts. “I think. Yes. It’s working! Wait, how can I change the mirror I’m seeing through?”

“Just think of it.”

She thinks of the dresser mirror in her bedroom. She sees her bed! Oh, but the room is empty.

—

Kay walks out the front door. Ray follows. He calls after, but she keeps walking. He tries to catch up, but she rushes ahead. He realizes that he’s still holding his beer. He wants to put it down, but he can’t just ditch it in the street. He slows, thinking maybe it’s best to use this time wisely.

He can say he was driving home, that’s all, and he saw the neighbor and so of course he rolled down his window to say hello, and then the neighbor invited—no, that wouldn’t work. Because then she’d ask why he parked at the neighbors. *You couldn’t have just parked two houses down?* She’d say, seeing through it.

God, she doesn’t cut him any slack. She knows how hard it’s been for him at work, but it’s like the harder things get, the harder *she* gets. To measure it would show a direct correlation between her affection and the success of his business. It’s like she’s punishing him for failing.

—

“Why can’t I see into the living room? I know I have a mirror in there. A long, oval one by the front door.”

“Are you positive you want to see?”

“Yes!”

“Ok, but your kids are in there. Are you sure you want to see your kids?”

“Of course! Oh, I can't wait!”

“And in just a second, you and Ray will be walking in through the front door. You'll get to see the whole happy family—yes, you will—but there's just one little thing I need you to do for me first.”

“What's that?”

“I need you to hear a joke.”

“A joke?”

“Yes.”

“So, you're just going to tell me a joke, and then I can see my family?”

“As soon as it's finished.”

“Ok. Tell me.”

A PANEL OF JUDGES SIT IN A ROOM AWAITING THE NEXT ACT. AUDITIONS FOR THEIR VARIETY SHOW. A MAN LOOKS AT HIS CLIPBOARD AS THE NEXT TROUPE WALKS IN. RAY, KAY, THE BOY AND THE GIRL. THEY'RE DRESSED IN CREAM OUTFITS WITH RED POLKA DOTS AND CARRY A SUITCASE OF PROPS. "OK," THE JUDGE SAYS. "LET'S SEE IT." RAY AND KAY REMOVE A PAIR OF PROP PHONES AS THE FAMILY GETS INTO FORMATION. RAY AND THE BOY ON THE RIGHT. KAY AND THE GIRL ON THE LEFT. THE CHILDREN FACE EACH OTHER. RAY AND KAY FACE AWAY, SPEAKING INTO THEIR PHONES. "YEAH, I FUCKED KAY'S TIGHT PUSSY RAW LAST NIGHT. I CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THAT JUICY ASS." "RAY'S COCK IS SO BIG. I HAD HIM INSIDE ME ALL NIGHT. COULDN'T EVEN WALK THE NEXT DAY." "I'LL PUT IT IN HER ASS IF I WANT TO. FUCK HER FACE LIKE A MELON WITH A HOLE CUT IN IT. I'VE GOT HER TRAINED." "OF COURSE I LET HIM COME INSIDE ME. HE CAN COME WHEREVER HE WANTS." THE BOY AND GIRL CONTINUE TO STARE AT EACH OTHER. THE PANEL OF JUDGES WATCH PATIENTLY. "YOU WANNA HEAR MORE? OK. I'LL TELL YOU. I TOOK HER OUT TO A FANCY RESTAURANT, YOU KNOW, SOMETHING TO GET HER NICE AND WET. SOMETHING EXPENSIVE. FUCK ALL THAT SHIT, YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING? BUT YOU GOTTA PAY. ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, YOU GOTTA PAY. I WAS ALL OVER IT. YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN ME! OH, HEY, LET ME GET YOUR CHAIR FOR YOU. ORDER WHATEVER YOU WANT. HOW ABOUT SOME DESERT!?! HAHHAHA. REALLY MAKING HER FEEL INDEBTED TO ME. YOU GOTTA GO BIG WHEN YOU WANNA DO THE SICK STUFF I LIKE TO DO." "POOR, STUPID RAY. SOMETIMES I ALMOST FEEL SORRY FOR HIM. I BET HE THINKS HE'S THE ONE IN CONTROL. ALL I HAVE TO DO IS LIE STILL FOR A FEW MOMENTS AND I'VE GOT HIM UNDER MY THUMB. IF I WANT SOMETHING REALLY BIG, I'LL JUST LOOK INTO HIS EYES WHILE I'M ON MY KNEES SUCKING HIS BALLS AND STROKING HIS SLIMY COCK. BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT. JUST TO LET HIM KNOW WHAT HE CAN GET WHEN HE GIVES." AS RAY AND KAY CHAT ON THE PROP PHONES, THE BOY AND GIRL BEGIN TO UNDRRESS. "I THREW HER AGAINST THE BED, CLIMBED UP AND FUCKED HER FACE AGAINST THE MATTRESS LIKE A MONKEY. CAME RIGHT DOWN HER SLICK THROAT." THE BOY REACHES A FINGER INTO HIS MOUTH TO LATHER IT WITH SALIVA, THEN RUBS LITTLE WET CIRCLES AROUND HIS SISTER'S CLITORIS. "OH, HOLD ON. HEY, I THINK I'LL HAVE TO CALL YOU BACK." THE GIRL SQUEEZES HER LITTLE BROTHER'S TESTICLES, PINCHING THE SACK AT THE TOP SO THEY CAN'T ESCAPE HER VICE. "I GOTTA GO. SOMETHING GOOD IS HAPPENING." RAY AND KAY HANG UP THEIR PROP PHONES AND WATCH THEIR CHILDREN PERFORM. BIG SMILES

ON THEIR FACES. RAY TAKES OFF HIS POLKA-DOT PANTS AND STARTS STROKING HIS COCK. KAY REMOVES A PAIR OF SCISSORS FROM THE SUITCASE. RAY GETS HARD. HE SPITS DOWN ON HIS HAND AND STROKES IN SLOW MOVEMENTS, SAVORING THE PLEASURE. KAY WALKS OVER TO RAY AND PULLS HIS LIP OUT UNDER HIS MUSTACHE. SHE BRINGS THE SCISSORS UP AND SNIPS. BLOOD POURS OVER HIS TEETH AND DOWN HIS CHIN. KAY TURNS TO THE GIRL. RAY SITS ON THE FLOOR, THEN LAYS BACK WITH HIS LEGS UP IN THE AIR, SPREADING THEM WIDE. KAY GRABS THE GIRL BY THE HAIR AND WALKS HER OVER TO HER FATHER. THE GIRL GETS ON HER HANDS AND KNEES AND BEGINS SUCKING HER FATHER'S COCK. HER HEAD BOBS UP AND DOWN WHILE RAY MOANS. KAY RUNS HER FINGERS THROUGH HER DAUGHTER'S HAIR, SNIPPING IT OFF WITH SCISSORS. THE GIRL'S HAIR FALLS AROUND HER FATHER'S LAP. IT STICKS TO HIS COCK. IT GETS IN HER MOUTH. KAY SNIPS UNTIL HER DAUGHTER IS NEARLY BALD, THEN PUTS HER UTENSIL DOWN AND UNITES HER FAMILY IN PRAYER. "DEAR STUPID, NONEXISTENT, IMAGINARY GOD, THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING ME THIS OPPORTUNITY TO MUTILATE MY FAMILY BEYOND ALL COMPREHENSION OF HORROR." RAY STRUGGLES TO PULL A GIANT MALLET FROM THE SUITCASE. HE CAN BARELY DRAG THE CARTOONISH IRON HEAD ACROSS THE FLOOR. THE FAMILY STEPS APART TO CLEAR A SPACE. RAY POINTS TO A SPOT IN THE MIDDLE, AND THE BOY LIES DOWN. THE MALLET LIFTS HIGH OVER RAY'S SHOULDER, THEN SLAMS DOWN ONTO THE BOY'S HEAD. IT BURSTS THROUGH HIS SKULL, SENDING PARTICLES OF BONE AND BRAIN AROUND THE ROOM AND ALL OVER THE JUDGES' FACES. QUICKLY, RAY PUSHES ASIDE THE MALLET AND CROUCHES DOWN ON TOP OF THE BOY'S SMASHED FACE. HE SCOOPS UP HIS BOY'S BRAIN AND RUBS IT OVER HIS COCK, MOVING HIS HIPS AROUND, TRYING TO GET HIS SON'S SHATTERED JAW TO TICKLE HIS BALLS AS HE MASTURBATES. KAY REMOVES SHEARS FROM THE SUITCASE AND INSTRUCTS HER LITTLE GIRL TO LIE DOWN. SHE SHOVES ONE BLADE UP HER DAUGHTER'S VAGINA AND SQUEEZES HARD TO CUT THROUGH THE TOP. SHE GETS ON HER KNEES AND FOLDS HER HAND TO REACH UP THROUGH HER DAUGHTER'S GASH. SHE FORCES THROUGH THE LAYERS OF INTESTINE AND ORGANS, SHOVING HER ARM IN FURTHER AND FURTHER, THROUGH HER DAUGHTER'S LUNGS, PAST HER HEART, UNTIL HER HAND IS ALL THE WAY INSIDE HER LITTLE GIRL'S THROAT. SHE WALKS OVER TO RAY, STILL FRANTICALLY SWEEPING UP HIS BOY'S REMAINS TO USE FOR LUBRICATION. WEARING THE GIRL LIKE A SLEEVE, KAY BRINGS HER DAUGHTER'S MOUTH DOWN TO RAY'S PENIS. SHE ACCEPTS IT IN UNTIL IT REACHES HER HAND INSIDE HER DAUGHTER. SHE

JERKS HIM OFF. HER DAUGHTER'S LIMBS WOBBLE AROUND. SHARDS OF THE BOY'S SKULL RIP THROUGH RAY'S TAUGHT SKIN AS KAY RUBS AND RUBS UNTIL RAY CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. HE COMES DOWN HIS DEAD DAUGHTER'S THROAT. HE COLLAPSES TO THE FLOOR. KAY SLIDES THE GIRL OFF HER ARM AND SITS ON RAY'S BLOODY SLIT LIP. SHE WIGGLES HER ASS AND PUSHES DOWN UNTIL SHE CAN BE SURE HER ANUS IS SECURE IN HIS MOUTH. SHE RELEASES HER BOWELS. RAY EXTENDS A HAND, TRYING TO REACH THE CASE FROM UNDERNEATH KAY. SHE PUSHES IT TOWARD HIM. HE FUMBLES AROUND BLINDLY, THEN REMOVES AN EXACTO KNIFE. HE HANDS IT TO KAY AS HE SWALLOWS WHAT SHE GIVES HIM. KAY BENDS FORWARD AND TAKES THE BLADE THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF RAY'S URETHRAL OPENING. SHE PULLS AT EACH SIDE AS SHE CUTS, FLAYING HIS DICK, STRETCHING UNTIL IT'S RIPPED FULLY IN HALF. SHE GRABS THE TWO LIMP STRIPS AND TIES THEM INTO A KNOT. KAY STANDS. SHE WALKS BEFORE THE JUDGES AND RAISES HER ARMS INTO THE AIR. RAY REMOVES A CHAINSAW FROM THE SUITCASE AND STARTS IT. HE PULLS THROUGH KAY'S TORSO UNTIL THE TOP OF HER FALLS OFF. HE GRABS THE BOTTOM PART BEFORE IT COLLAPSES AND STANDS BEHIND IT LIKE A PODIUM. HE STOPS THERE, OUT OF BREATH, PANTING. HE LOOKS OUT TO THE JUDGES. "QUITE AN INTERESTING PERFORMANCE," THE MAN SAYS. "WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?" RAY SHOVES HIS HEAD DOWN THROUGH HIS WIFE'S SEVERED BELLY. HE PUSHES IN, BITING THROUGH GUTS UNTIL HIS MOUTH REACHES HIS DEAD WIFE'S VAGINA FROM THE INSIDE. HE TAKES A DEEP BREATH THROUGH HER OPENING, VOMITS OUT SHIT AND BLOOD, RAISES HIS HANDS OUT FROM BETWEEN HER LEGS AND, WITH A GRAND FINISH, SAYS-

*"THE ARISTOCRATS!"*

“You don’t love me! You only love what I *give* you! You keep pushing for more and more. Ray, do this. Ray, do that!”

“That’s not true! I—”

“NOT TRUE? Are you kidding me!? I told you I wasn’t ready! You forced me. And now, Kay. It’s like—I feel like I’m all alone.”

“You feel like *you’re* all alone!? Do I really have to remind you of what just happened? Didn’t you just leave *me* here all alone to go party with the neighbors!?”

“Kay. I can’t do it. You don’t understand. I told you I wasn’t ready!”

“Just because you’re having trouble with your business doesn’t mean you can take it out on me and the kids!”

“Stop yelling!” The girl shouts from behind the blue-striped couch where she was *trying* to do her homework. Don’t they understand what she’s going through? Of course they don’t. They haven’t



asked.

Ray tries to calm himself. “I’m not *taking it out*—I’m just—I’m *feeling* bad! Nothing’s going right for me! And I’d hoped that you’d be there for me, but it’s like you’re miles away.”

“Don’t you try to turn this around on me!” Kay gets up in Ray’s face. “You just ditch me at home with the kids while you go and drink? It’s hard for me, too! *I’m feeling bad.*”

“I said stop yelling!” The girl throws her textbook on the living room floor and marches to her room. She slams the door. Loud music reverberates through the walls.

The boy has no idea what’s going on. He’s holding his cardboard cylinder of wooden logs. It seems like a weird time to dump them out and start playing, but he doesn’t know how else to proceed. He just stands there.

“You wanna know why I was at that party? That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Business is bad. Real bad.”

Kay looks down and scans the floor. The girl’s rock music is visibly agitating her. She pushes her hands up in her hair. “Rrr, turn that down!” Kay marches down the hall. Ray follows. “Turn that down!” Kay shouts, banging on the girl’s bedroom door. The music gets louder.

The boy thinks maybe he should just start playing. Nothing he can do about it anyway. He dumps the logs onto the carpet in the living room. He sees the space underneath the coffee table as a giant cavern. He’s going to build his home next to this landmark.

Kay bursts in through the girl’s bedroom door. “You turn it up when I tell you to turn it down?”

The girl, hand still on the knob, lowers the volume with a quick turn. “I didn’t mean to! I pushed it the wrong way!”

“Give me that tape!” Kay ejects the cassette.

“Well, come on now, Kay. Cool it.” Ray tries to de-escalate from the girl’s bedroom door.

“Where did you get this?” Kay waves the cassette.

“Give it back! It’s mine!” The girl reaches for it, but Kay pulls away.

“I didn’t buy this for you! What kind of music is this, anyway? I’m keeping this.”

“No! It’s mine!” The girl grabs the cassette and wrestles with Kay.  
“Give me back my music!”

“Kay, come on! Give her the damn tape!”

Kay lets go. The girl stumbles back.

“I hate both of you!” The girl steps out of her bedroom, runs down the hall, opens the front door and ...

Nobody chases after. She slows as she nears the end of the street, not seeing the point anymore. She gets to the shore and wraps her arms around her waist.

## Chapter 2

“Today we’re going to decide who will play the main roles in our Christmas pageant, but of course everyone will have an important part to play. You know what Mr. DeButtón always tells you—there are no small parts, only small actors. Isn’t that what Mr. DeButtón always says? Yes, Timothy?” Mrs. Fletcher points and Timothy lowers his hand.

“That’s what he says, but he never says what he means.”

“Don’t you know what it means? Brittney.”

Brittney lowers her hand. “It means the short people have to be in the front or else nobody can see them.”

“Oh, well, yes, that’s *is* true, but what Mr. DeButtón really means is that every role is important. Each one of you is like a player in a

game. A game in which every individual works together to create something bigger than themselves. So who would like to volunteer?" Mrs. Fletcher looks out across the classroom.

"Anybody?"

"What's an audition mean?"

"Please raise your hand next time. It just means you are going to read some lines from the script and if Mr. DeButtón thinks you've got what it takes, he'll assign you a role."

"Do we get extra credit?"

"What did I just say about raising hands?"

Brandon raises his hand.

"Yes, Brandon."

"Do we get extra credit?" he asks, hand still in the air.

"I don't want anyone participating in this just because they think it will earn them extra points. This should be something *you* want to do."

Brandon's hand is still up.

"Brandon, are you volunteering?"

"For what?"

"For the play, Brandon. The school is doing a play for the Christmas pageant, and Mr. DeButtón is looking for volunteers from each of the fifth grade classes to audition for main roles."

"Ok."

"Ok ... you want to volunteer?"

"Uh ..."

The girl doesn't want to be in the play, the thought of all that attention horrifies her, but she'll audition if it will get her out of this room. Seems like that's what they all want anyway. She raises

her hand.

“That’s one volunteer. Anyone else?”

Thomas raises his hand.

“That’s two.”

Lacey raises her hand.

“Very good, Lacey.”

The rest of the girl’s ex-friends raise their hands.

“Oh, wonderful!”

Brandon raises his hand.

—

Kay has a syringe filled with liquid acetaminophen, grape flavor. The boy takes it, reluctantly. He knows there’s something sweet in it. Not *all* bad. Kay tells him to lie down and she’ll be back with a thermometer to check his temperature. She tells him not to play, just be still and rest.

The boy does as his mother says. He starts to imagine a treehouse. He imagines the best treehouse ever. There’s a slide when you want to leave. And a spot at the top where you can look out over the neighborhood. Kay returns with a thermometer to check his temperature. She says it’s gone down. She invites him out to watch TV in the living room.



*The Disney Channel and the National Audubon Society proudly  
bring you ...*



*... an environmental awareness special starring Kenny Loggins.*

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“You’re walking up a hill.” Mr. DeButtón mimes large, exhausting steps, the children follow his direction. “You’re walking through a cave.” He crouches down and lifts his feet carefully, the children do the same. “There’s bats! Bats in the cave!” He waves his arms in the air. “Show me you’re afraid!”

“Now you’re sad. You’re sad now.” He walks through the children, bending forward and meeting them at their level. “Boo-hoo! You’re sad!”

The children wiggle fists on their cheeks and wah like babies.

“Good! And now you’re happy!” He stands up straight and waves a hand over his face—a smile appears. “You’re so happy now, because the bats have left!”

The children jump around in joy.

Mr. DeButtón walks out to the front of the group. “Now I’m going to hand you each a piece of paper and on that paper there will be *words*. These words mean a whole lot to a story that none of you know anything about, so don’t worry about that. Just worry about one thing—making those words yours. They’re *your* words. Ok? Got it? Everybody good?”

Mr. DeButtón looks out over a small batch of confused faces—just how he likes them. He claps his hands together. “I want everyone to stand in a line facing me. And give me just one moment, I must retrieve the printouts.” Mr. DeButtón steps off the stage toward some papers on one of the lunch tables.

The girl stays in place. She wants to see where the others from her class will go, so that she can stand on the opposite side. It seems they all have a similar plan.

Mr. DeButtón looks back as he grabs the printouts. “A *line!*” He slams the stack of papers back down on the table. “I said form a line!”

The children scramble and push. The girl manages to get to the far end, next to Brandon.

“DeButtón! You idiot.” Mr. DeButtón smacks his own forehead. “These are the wrong papers. Take five, everyone. I’ll be right back.”

Lacey and her old friends start chatting as soon as the teacher exits the room. The girl feels so alone. Brandon shifts around awkwardly next to her. “Do you like acting?” he asks.

What? Why is he talking to her? “No.”

“Me neither.”

Ok. She just has to do a bad job with the audition. Such a bad job

that there's no way Mr. DeButtón would ever dream of giving her a role. That way, she can get out of there and—hey, it's like it all could work out in the end because then they might all be in the play while she's back in class. The opposite of her original plan, but still accomplishing the same goal.

Thomas jumps off the stage. “Look, I'm mister *de-BUTT-on!*”

What is he *doing*? He's going to get them in trouble!

“Put *de-butt-on de-chair!*” Thomas sticks his butt out wide and Lacey starts to laugh. He plops his booty down onto the metal chair in front of the stage. Some of the children giggle.

“Put *de-butt-on de-pencil!*” Thomas finds a pencil lying on a bench in front of the piano.

Oh, it's making her nervous. She wishes he would stop.

Thomas walks his rump backwards and mimes shifting a gear. “*Beep, beep, beep.*” He lowers himself carefully, as if his own ass were part of some large mechanism being skillfully operated. “Get dat butt on dat pencil!”

What is even going through his head? She can't make any sense of it. The girl lets out a little snort. Thomas looks up.

“Put *de-butt-on de-piano!*” Thomas jumps onto the bench. The children on stage are all now thoroughly entertained as he struggles to find a comfortable spot for his rear. He resolves instead to wipe his end back and forth across the upright back. “Put *de-butt-on de-music.*”

The voice he's doing is so weird. Like a slow Jamaican oil man.

“Ooo, I like to put *de-butt-on de-music!* Ooo!” The girl can't help it. She starts to laugh with the other children.

“Thomas.” Mr. DeButtón simply enunciates the name. The children whip around and find their teacher standing at the entrance to the auditorium. How long has he been there? Thomas halts on the bench. Mr. DeButtón lifts a finger. “Stay where you are. All of you.” He walks swiftly through the rows of lunch

tables.

“Thomas, let me ask you something. Well, first,” Mr. DeButtón slows, “Thomas, you know that I’m a real person and that this isn’t my *first day* being alive, right?”

Thomas stays a moment, then nods.

“Ok, so the question I have for you is this.” Mr. DeButtón moves closer to Thomas on the bench. “Do you think anyone else has ever made that joke?”

Thomas scans the room.

“Thomas, I’m talking to you. Don’t worry about them. Do you think anyone’s ever made that joke before? Answer the question.”

Thomas furrows his brow. He raises his shoulders up slowly.  
“Yes?”

Mr. DeButtón looks back to the children. “Always throw away your first idea. That’s the idea everyone thinks of.” He walks to Thomas, close up and face to face. “Come on. Try me again.”

Suddenly Thomas panics. His eyes open wide and his body freezes up.

“I’m not angry. Thomas, look at me. I’m coming close to you so you can see me. Look at my face. Look at my head. Do you notice anything? Can you think of a different joke?”

Thomas looks at the rest of the group.

“That’s ok. You can look at them now. That’s your audience. And they’ve all seen how funny you are.” Mr. DeButtón addresses the children on stage. “Thomas is a funny guy! Isn’t he funny?” He lifts his palms and tries to pump the kids up a bit. “We all know how funny he is!”

“So look at me.” Mr. DeButtón stands before Thomas, who looks down at him from the bench. “What do you see?”

Mr. DeButtón leans forward and gives Thomas a sinister look—or is there another reason he’s tilting his head down like that?



Thomas's eyes light up.

"There! You see it."

Thomas lifts his arm, but hesitates.

"Go on. Don't be afraid."

Thomas reaches out and plunks his hand down on Mr. DeButtón's bald spot. "Press de-button."

"Good!" Mr. DeButtón lifts Thomas off the bench. "See that kids, if you're going to be cruel, at least be clever. And as for my name, let's just stick with DAY-boo-tahn, please."

Thomas climbs back onto the stage and stands at the end next to the girl. Mr. DeButtón hands each of the children their printout.

—

"Hey, Ray, my man, I think you need to get over here, I'm not sure. There's like, a leak? I think. In the basement. I found some water and I, uh ... I don't know anything about that stuff. I just wanted to let you know, like, I don't think it's a *good thing*? Uh, Ray? Are you there? Oh, fuck—is this the machine? Ray, this is Dave. I'm sorry, man. I found a leak and I think—"

Ray stops the tape. Why the hell did he rent to Dave and his girlfriend? Those potheads. He should have known better. Why *did* he do that? Oh, right, he thought he was going to get a client out of it—but look how that turned out, with no returned calls. Ray wonders for the millionth time if it was because of Roger's article. Oh, well. At least it's money coming in. Pocket money really, after the mortgage. Fuck, Christmas is coming up. What is he going to do for presents? Wait, the message. Ah, shit—a *leak*?

Ray picks up the phone, but then pulls the receiver away. He feels that surge of—whatever it is. Everyone gets those, right? That debilitating feeling that it's all too much? Just have to wait it out.

Ray opens his phonebook and dials Dave's number. It rings and rings. Shoot, a leak? He should probably just get over there now.

---

The boy is lying on his belly on the couch in the living room, drawing a very cool picture while his mommy vacuums and listens to the radio. He's drawing a pollywog. An older boy at school taught him how. First you draw a big circle. Then you draw a long equilateral triangle out from the circle's north and south points of bisection, toward the side of your choosing. The boy wants the face on the left. He's going to make his pollywog really fierce, and something about a left face is more confrontational.

There's a funny sound that's bothering him. It's not the music. It's not the vacuum. It's something painful to his ears. He turns to look around the room, but knocks a crayon off the sofa. What color was that? He checks the crayons he still has lying on the cushion. Where's the black? Darn it, that's the most important color. He pushes his little body up from underneath the blanket his mommy draped over him, but the pressure his hands create on the cushion causes a slope to form. All his crayons roll down into the crack.

Mommy will solve this problem. "Mommy," the boy calls out. She's vacuuming around the coffee table and doesn't hear him. Why is she frowning like that? Is she mad because of the crayons?

The boy looks at her feet. She seems to be dancing along with the music. Is she singing? Her eyes close. He sees a tear fall out. He sees it sparkle down her cheek in the yellow light from the ceiling fan. Mommy is crying? But she's the one that *stops* the crying.

The comfort that she has given him—is that expected in return? Should he be working to reciprocate this care and affection? Has he been a fool this whole time? He jumps off the couch and runs to his mommy. He rubs her knee over her long blue dress. "Mommy, it's ok."

---

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." That's easy. The girl circles *diverged*.

"And sorry I could not travel both." Ok, *travel* is the verb, but it's not past tense. She moves on to the next line.

“And be one traveler, long I stood.” *Stood*. The girl circles it quickly. Wait, why is she rushing? It doesn’t matter how fast she finishes.

“And looked down one as far as I could.” If she finishes first, then what will she do? She’ll just sit there and worry. She looks at the clock. Hurrying through the worksheet won’t make the bell ring any sooner—and the bell ringing is what she’s most worried about, so that wouldn’t even make any sense. The girl circles *looked*.

“To where it bent in the undergrowth.” She likes verbs that change in unique ways. It could have been *bended*, but it’s not. Why is that? If they had made it *bended* then it would be the same and easier for everyone.

“Then took the other, as just as fair.” What if it were *taked*, instead of *took*? The girl whispers the word to herself. She forms the sound slowly. She writes it down next to the stanzas on her paper, very lightly with her mechanical pencil, so that she can erase it later without a trace. It looks like the word *naked*, but they are pronounced differently. What if *naked* were pronounced like *taked*?

“And having perhaps the better claim.” Nothing.

“Because it was grassy and wanted wear.” Nothing.

“Though as for that the passing there.” Nothing.

“Had worn them really about the same.” The girl circles *had*, then studies *worn*. Present tense is *wear*; so that one should get circled as well—but that’s weird, two in a row?

“And both that morning equally lay.” None.

“In leaves no step had trodden black.” There’s *had* again. Is that like *had worn*? Is *trodd* a verb? If a person can trodd something black, it must be like painting or coloring. The girl isn’t sure, but she circles it anyway.

“Oh, I kept the first for another day!” None. No—the girl looks back. *Kept*. Almost missed that one. As she circles the word, a tension sinks through her—what if there’s more that she’s missed?

She returns to the beginning.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.”

---

“You’re my little teddy bear!” Kay hugs the boy on the couch. She sniffles and wipes her eyes, then gives the boy another tight squeeze.

If that’s what his mommy needs, he’ll be the best teddy bear ever. He goes limp as she pulls him closer.

---

Answer the damn door. Ray rings the bell again, several more times. He hears music from the basement.

Ray walks around the side, to the little glass window next to the grass on the bottom of the home. He crouches down and knocks with a single knuckle, thinking a sharp tone might better cut through the noise. It works. Dave pushes open the window from the inside, an acoustic guitar hanging at his chest.

“Hey, Ray!”

“Hi ... you wanna show me that leak?”

“Oh, right! Good! Yeah.” Dave strums a chord. “Right on.”

“Can you open the door?”

Dave nods enthusiastically as Ray stares down below. *He* should move first. It's going to take him longer to remove his guitar, go upstairs, and unlock the door than it will for Ray to walk ten feet to the front. It’s an odd thing, to explain that to an adult, so Ray just stands and walks back to the steps.

He looks around the neighborhood. Gloomier than he remembers. Seems like some of these homeowners aren’t putting much effort in. The door unlocks.

---

The girl scrambles out of class. It's embarrassing to let the others see her like that, but she's so afraid of what the sheet will say. At this point, running *toward* her fear is really the most practical move. It's the only thing that will make it go away.

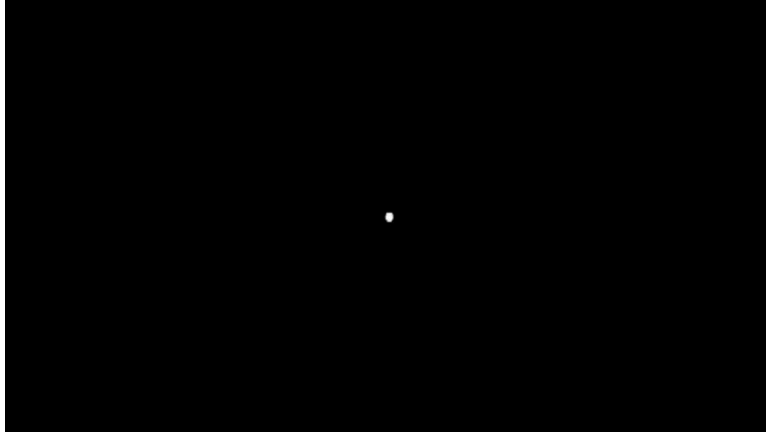
She sees it up ahead, on a clipboard hanging from the purple gate the children use to exit their school. See, things didn't go quite as planned with the audition. For some reason, when she started to read the words, with everyone there just listening, it sort of accidentally came out well. It simply felt easier for her to be that other girl who everyone wanted to hear speak.

She's hoping that it was just some delusion, that Mr. DeButtón thought her audition was awful. She slows as she nears the clipboard, hoping she doesn't find her name. She reaches out, takes the clipboard into her hands, holds her breath and—

Thomas runs up behind the girl and takes the clipboard from her. "Did you get in?" He looks down at the sheet. "You're Beth! Wow! That's like the *main* girl! You were really good." Thomas looks back to check for his own name as other children pile around him. "Oh, dang—*Mr. Bradley?* I'm gonna be the father? Weird. Yeah, I was really excited to get over here too and I think ..."

The girl walks off in a daze. Through the gate, she feels the world is skipping, sometimes two seconds forward instead of one. She finds herself sitting on the bus. She looks through the window and sees Lacey and her old friends celebrating with Thomas around the clipboard.

---



“TV’s out!” May calls back. “Kay?” She turns around in her little orange recliner. “Where are you?” She sees Kay crouched into a ball, all alone, in some impossible corner of their infinite white world.

May sighs and looks down at her lap. Without the TV, Kay’s crying is very clear.

May stands from her recliner and takes a step toward Kay before turning and walking to the Devil instead. “Look what you’ve done.” She points over at Kay. “You see what you did?”

“I was only trying to help.”

“Oh, cram it.”

“Consider it crammed.”

“I should know better than to be here talking to you.”

“Yet here you are.”

“I’m here for *her*, ok? Not me. Just lay off.”

“If that’s what you—”

“I don’t wanna hear it!” May walks over to Kay. She stops at a distance for a long while, then creeps up and rubs Kay’s back.

“Hey, now. Come on. Chin up.”

Kay lifts her head from her knees and wipes snot from her nose.

“I’m sorry. Am I bothering you?”

“Well, yeah you’re bothering me!” May puts her hand on Kay's shoulder and starts to lower herself down. It doesn’t look easy. “Ok, help. Help.” Kay quickly stands to support her. “This isn’t going to work. Just put me flat.” Kay holds May’s arms and awkwardly lays her down. “Ahhh, that’s better.”

May reaches back and, from the floor, holds Kay’s hand. She looks patiently into Kay’s eyes. “Have I told you about Kibaru?”

Kay tilts her head. “No?”

“Well, he lived a long time ago. Come on. Lie down with me. I’ll tell you a story.”

Kay does as requested.

“Kibaru was a great wizard and there are many stories told about his life, but none are more famous than the story of *Sixem Sidi*.”

Kay scoots closer to May. The two look up into the white expanse.

“He was born into a small band of traveling attractors. These communities, at the time, were all shunned by the kingdoms. Witches weren’t *well liked*. Bad reputation. Not to be trusted. But that was all just prejudice. Attractor communities were peaceful and Kibaru grew up living a joyous life. He was already fully grown, with a wife and daughter, when he unlocked his abilities. At that time there was a horrible turmoil between the kingdoms, and one clever king put aside his prejudice and asked Kibaru for help. Of course, this was a very exciting thing. For a member of our community to take up residence in the palace, to be represented like that—everyone was very happy, but there was a tragic turn of events.”

Kay gasps. “Oh, no!”

“Well, hold on. I haven’t told you yet.”

“But something bad is going to happen? I don’t want anything bad to happen to Kibaru.”

May lets out a long sigh. “Ok, well, anyway, his wife is killed.”

Kay chokes on her shock.

“Some thief slashes her throat and runs off with the jewels Kibaru had given her to commemorate their move to the palace.”

“That’s terrible!”

“The thief was caught and executed, but Kibaru was never the same. He threw himself into his work making charms for the king and completely neglected his daughter. But she was raised well, given the best education and all the comforts of the palace. Kibaru just couldn’t stand to see her face. It reminded him of all that he had lost.”

“Oh, I see. That’s sad.”

“His daughter grows up to be a beautiful young witch and she falls in love with a charming prince from a faraway land, but Kibaru isn’t even there for the wedding.”

Kay sits up. “He doesn’t go to his daughter’s wedding!?”

May tugs at her arm. “Come on, now. Just listen to the story.”

Kay lies back down. “Well, I don’t think that’s right. Kibaru should have gone to his daughter’s wedding.”

“Yes, he should have. And years go by without any exchange between the two. In these years Kibaru and the king work together to create many amazing things. This lasts until the king grows old. On his deathbed, he gives Kibaru a dying wish—to create a charm that will bring peace to the realm.”

“That’s good.”

“No. It’s not. And it wasn’t a very nice thing for the king to do, either. Charms have to be very precise. The king knew this and that’s why he hadn’t asked for it before. There are three things that are impossible to know about charms: how they will work, how long they will take to work, and how many times they can be used before they stop working. So Kibaru doesn’t want to make this, because there’s no way of knowing, with something so vague, what the charm will do to accomplish its goal—but this charm is



the dying wish of the king. So, here's what happens, a blue jay lands on Kibaru's windowsill. In that moment, he decides to make the charm, and when he uses it, there's a single instantaneous event."

"The realm achieves peace?"

"No, his daughter's husband dies. Just drops dead."

"Oh."

"So Kibaru is wracked with guilt, but something special happens. He's suddenly able to truly see his daughter. For the first time since the death of his wife. She shares his pain now. She's with him in the dark world. The world that *he* lives in. But to think that he had caused his daughter such anguish, that he had created for her the same tragedy that had marked his own life—he can't bear it. He realizes what a bad father he's been and he travels to his daughter's kingdom where she has become queen, but his daughter is furious. She refuses to see him and vows that if he ever tries to speak to her again, she'll throw herself from the cliffs. So Kibaru sets out to work on a new charm, one that will let his daughter know just how sorry he is, one that will let her *feel* his apology without words. He works very hard and makes it very powerful, because he wants to ensure she will truly understand the depth of his regret. But when he uses the charm and she feels the full weight of his sorrow, while still grieving the loss of her husband—it's too much. Her heart breaks, and she dies. Kibaru slits his wrists and, as he's dying, the blue jay returns. In this moment, he decides to use the charm on himself, and he does so right before he dies. Other witches from Kibaru's community find his charm and use it to apologize to their enemies, bringing peace to the realm for the next hundred years. And that's the story of *Sixem Sidi*, the apology charm. The longest-running charm ever made. It still works today. Of course, it doesn't do much now. If it gets through at all, the recipient will only feel a gentle reminder that you never meant to hurt them."

"Oh! Can *I* use it?"

"Yes, using charms is very easy." Suddenly the TV starts flashing.

"Help me back up! The TV's on!"

Kay stands and helps May to her feet. “All you have to do is think of the person you want to apologize to and say *Sixem Sidi*.” They walk back to the TV.

“That’s not the oldest working charm, you know,” The Devil says. “I know one that’s *much* older.”

“Well, good for you.” May sits in her recliner.



*Actually, I’m working for a company that manufactures stairs.*

*Stairs?*



*Stairs.*

*Oh, good.*



*Up or down?*



*Both.*

—

Ray speedwalks back to his office, thinking about his responsibilities. Is it his responsibility to show a grown man how to turn off a valve? He gets to his door and turns the key in the lock, but just as he's pushing through, a bumblebee flies into his face.

He jumps back and tracks the bee as it buzzes around. Those dumb things. Always looks like it's their first day flying. Like, oops, excuse me, pardon me. After bothering Ray a bit more, the bumblebee lands on the doorframe. It crawls to the corner. No, don't do *that*, Ray thinks. It crawls up—don't go in *there*. It disappears.

Ray stands before the door, thinking about what's inside. He recalls that he always sees bees in some corner or crevice. That's where they seem to like to make their nests. The bumblebee probably saw that crack in his door and thought it looked like a nice little home. He's probably very confused now, flying around inside. What would that even be like to the bee? What does a home look like to him? Well, Ray reasons, it probably looks just like how a home looks to *him*.

Ray imagines himself walking through a forest and finding a nice little cabin. He walks up and peeks through the windows, then makes his way inside. Maybe there's some other entity out there going, no, don't do *that*, don't go in *there*.

The bumblebee reappears. It crawls back out from the crack and flies away. He made it out! Good for him. Ray feels so happy, both for the bee and for the situation that resolved itself. He smiles wide and steps through the door.

Right, all the shit he has to do. He sits at his desk and wiggles his mouse to get his screensaver to go away. He made a custom one that has "Anchor Realty" bouncing around—though it never quite makes it into the exact corner and this frustrates Ray greatly. He looks over his file, makes a few adjustments and presses print.

—

"You're late."

Ray checks his watch—he's on time, *exactly*. "I'm sorry, sir. I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"Come in." The General reverses his electric wheelchair and speeds away. "So you think *you're* the man for the job," he calls back as he rides into the living room.

Ray stumbles as he steps inside. When looking down to where his shoe was going to land, he noticed the intricate woodwork of the flooring. His foot jumped back, thinking the surface was too nice to be stepped on—but then again, however nice the floor, that's what it's there for. The man invites him to sit down and Ray takes a leather chair.

“Chengdu. That’s where I’m headed. You know what they say about that city? They say don’t go there when you’re young. You’ll never want to leave. Do you like animals?”

So the test begins. You can do this, Ray. Just agree with everything. “Sure. I love animals.”

“Well, I don’t. Never cared for them. But pandas—come on now. I can’t think of a more beautiful creature. That is, other than the Chinese woman, of course. The Chinese woman is the most beautiful creature on Earth. And I’ve been stationed all over. I remember the first time I was with a Chinese woman. I was surprised she could even speak English. The look in her eye—that twinkle—I’ll never forget it. But I’m a modest man, Ray, so that’s all I’ll say about that. You might be curious, but you can forget it! That’s what’s missing here in this country today. Especially with the youth. What happened to modesty? Yes, the panda really is a beautiful creature. Chengdu is the panda capital of the world, did you know that? Beauty is what I’m after. That’s truth. And adventure. Though I suppose adventure is redundant to beauty. Subsumed by it. Don’t you agree?”

“I like pandas.” What the fuck.

“Of course you do! Who doesn’t? Yes, I have to sell. I must. And you think you can find me the right buyer? I don’t want some young investor tearing down everything I’ve loved for so long. You’re not one of those men, are you? The ones that disrespect beauty? The ones that are blinded by the dollar? Tell me that’s not you.”

He’s going to get this one straight. “Whatever kind of buyer you want, that’s the kind of buyer I’ll find.”

“I like your attitude, but I think it’s a bit bold. The kind of buyer I want, I can’t even imagine. Who could love this home better than I? I’ve got money. More money than I know what to do with. I’m not shopping around for the cheapest bid—I’ll happily pay for a job well done—I’m just looking for the right man. Is that you?”

“Me?” Is Ray being asked to grade himself? He can’t do that. “I’m biased.”

“Honest answer. Must come from an honest man. See, that’s why I’m moving to China. They still understand what a man is supposed to be over there. And what a woman is supposed to be. I’ll find myself a wife. No, my life isn’t over yet. I’m not too old for love.” He pushes himself out of his wheelchair, into his below-the-knee prosthetics. “The man is the provider. And I can be a provider. I will find a caring wife who is looking to be provided for. Yes, that’s the next chapter of my life. Though it’s a shame the way chapters work. The way you have to end one to start another. I love this home. Do you understand that, Ray? Do you understand what I mean when I say that I love this home?”

Easy. “You mean you want it to be taken care of.”

“Bingo!” the General falls back into his wheelchair. “And that means I have to find an agent who won’t just put a little number on a piece of paper to get a check, but an honest man who will do right by the home. I’d like to get to know you a bit, Ray. So I’ve got a question I thought I’d ask. I thought for a long while about what sort of question should be asked, and so please understand that though my question may sound odd, I believe it’s the right question. So, here it is. What is a home? Ray. Can you answer this question? What is a home? And please just speak from the heart. I won’t be judging poise.”

Shit. “Well ...” Ray looks up to think. “Some say that home is where the heart is.” Where is this going? “Others say that home is wherever you lay your hat.” He looks back down at the man. Is it one or the other? Both sound wrong. “I don’t think it’s either of those things.” But then what is a home? He looks across the floor. He knows what a home is, so why can’t he say? “I don’t think a home is something we can put into words, but we all know what it is. Even without words.” Oh, Ray thinks. “But one thing we can say for sure is that a home is something we always either have or are searching for.”

“Yes, Ray. That’s beautiful.” The General wheels over to a desk and pours whiskey into two glasses, one already half full. “Are you a drinker?”

It worked! “I don’t know if I’m a drinker, but I’m not a refuser of drinks.”

“Ha!” The General walks over and hands Ray his glass, then sits on the couch across from him. “Ray, I appreciate your honesty and so I’ll be honest with you.” He takes a sip from his glass. “Maybe you can surmise this already from our conversation, but I’ve got a choice to make. I want to stay in this home. This is my center. But there’s nothing left here for me. So, a choice must be made. Do I hang onto what I love, even though it’s failing to bring me joy? Or do I start a new adventure with no guarantee of a happy future? It’s not too late for me. I’m old, I’m handicapped, but so what? With all the advancements of the modern world? Nothing is stopping me. I don’t have to worry about a thing. And that’s exactly the problem! I need to find something to worry about. An odd choice to make, but still, I’m mustering up the courage to make it. What a peculiar thing, to choose to cause yourself trouble.”

---

The girl is waiting for her dad to get home to ask him for help, but it’s already bedtime and he’s still not back. It seems like a reasonable thing to ask for. She knows her dad would say yes, but it’s uncertain with her mom. Should she be patient or should she take her chances?

“Lights out.” Kay reaches through the open door and flips the switch off.

The girl lowers her book. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to talk to Mr. DeButtón.”

“About what?” Kay walks into the room.

“I don’t want to be in the play.”

“For Christmas? But everyone has to be in the pageant.”

“No. Something happened.”

“What?” Kay sits next to the girl on her bed. “What happened?”

“I got the lead role.”

“Oh! That’s great!” Kay hugs the girl tightly. “Congratulations!”

“No, I don’t want to do it!”

“Oh,” Kay sits up, “don't say that.”

“I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

“You accidentally got the lead role?”

The girl thinks she better speed things up, tell her mom the real reason. “I’m not friends with Lacey anymore.” The girl’s been bottling it up for so long, she can’t help but cry a little.

Kay clicks her tongue. “What is it now with you girls?”

The girl just wants to confess it all. She wants someone to understand. “Lacey likes Thomas and—”

“Let me guess, Thomas likes you.” Kay stands from the girl’s bed.

The girl doesn’t understand. If her mom knows the problem, why is she leaving?

“You’ll be fine. I’m sure you and Lacey will be friends again in no time.” Kay backs out of the room.

The girl sits up. “But Mom! I don’t want to be in the play!”

“You’re just feeling nervous.”

“But Mom!”

“You’re doing the play. Goodnight.” Kay shuts the door and leaves the girl in darkness. She rolls over and cries into her pillow. She feels so angry with her mother. It’s all going to be so awful!

But she knows her mother would never mean to hurt her. Maybe she should just go to sleep. Maybe things will be better tomorrow.

—

Suddenly, Ray recalls the bumblebee. I wonder what he did with



the rest of his day, he ponders. Probably buzzed around the busy sidewalk, bothering innocent pedestrians, exploring little spots. His day was probably full of adventure. He wishes they could reconnect. He feels like swapping stories. Why is that? Why would he miss a bee? It hits Ray—before the bee, when was the last time he felt happy?

“Are you even listening?”

“Of course I’m listening.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you are, with that stupid look on your face.”

“You really feel you need to pause what you’re saying to tell me I look stupid?”

“You know what? Yes. That’s how *stupid* you look.”

“I’m going to bed.” Ray switches off the bedside lamp and tucks himself deep under the covers. Goodnight, Mr. Bumblebee. I hope your day went well.

### Chapter 3

1981. Ray is alone at night. He’s walking aggressively down the sidewalk with one hand in his pocket. He’s just found out that Kay is pregnant. He’s heading to a bar.

He’s already had a few. The first one, he snuck from work. Then a tallboy from the convenience store that he drank on the walk home. And the third was when he sat on his couch and stared at the wall. That one was from his fridge.

Seems better to get out of the apartment anyway. Well, no, he reasons, the wall was working just fine, but he needs to sort out his thoughts, and in order to do that he needs to free his thoughts, and in order to do *that*, he needs beer. And that was the last beer in his fridge.

So that's how Ray found himself alone at night, walking aggressively down the sidewalk, with one hand in his pocket, on his way to a bar.

—

Ray takes a big swig and looks around. He feels like he owns the place, and that's why the sight is so jarring. "Hey, Brian."

Brian walks over.

"You guys get a new game?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"Tempest."

"What's Tempest?"

"It's a new game." Brian shows his palms. "Fuck are you asking me for?"

"Fuck you," Ray grins.

"Fuck me?" Brian points at Ray. "Fuck you."

Ray lifts his hands in the air. "Ah, ok. You win. Fuck me."

Ray jumps off his stool and walks over. The design on the side of the machine looks cool, but Atari always does that—makes the game look way better than it actually is. He looks at the screen. Woah, the graphics are actually pretty trippy.

He feels like someone else must be lucky. Such a neat-looking new game. It'll probably please a lot of other people. People that like arcade games. Ray takes another, even larger, swig. I like arcade games, he thinks.

Suddenly, Ray wonders if anyone in the bar can hear his thoughts. *Hello. I know you are listening. Look over to me now.* Ray scans the room. Nobody makes eye contact.

Of course, he also hates games. He hates them so much. He feels he has to explain it now, to the people that may be listening. He remembers when he was new to them. He couldn't believe how fun they looked. But Marc was always so much better. It seemed stupid to try. It felt like if someone said they were gonna go sweep the kitchen and you said great, me too, and got your own broom and dustpan—like, someone's already got it, you know? Marc was the star. There was no need for another.

So he thought he'd play the games that offered more than just the chance to get a high score. The ones with fantastic colors and fun music, but the other kids teased him for that. Playing the girl games. Eventually it was easier to say he didn't like playing. And that's true. He doesn't like playing. Why would anyone want to waste their time on such a stupid thing?

“Hey, Brian,” he calls back

“What?” Brian shouts.

“When did you get this?”

Brian looks up. “Uhhh.” He mouths his thoughts. “Tuesday, I think.”

Nobody has had time to master it yet. He looks at the scoreboard. It's already full of names. But those are all just people who tried it out. What's that, four days? Even the best players couldn't have played enough to get their score so high it couldn't be beat. He could get on that list. He could get his name to the top of the scoreboard.

Ray puts a quarter in. What has he done? He feels awful. It's got to be a nightmare for her. He wishes he could apologize, but he knows that's not what's needed now. Game over.

Ray deposits another quarter. Sure, if he approaches it through natural feeling, it *feels* like this is the best day of his life. But he knows that this is a bad day. This is the day that Kay gets anchored to him. He wants to cry. He's out of coins.

“Brian, change a dollar.”

Brain takes the dollar and hands Ray his quarters.

Proximity and rhyming names. That's it. If just one of those things were different, like if his name were John or Steve or something, they would have never gotten together. And then she never would have made this stupid mistake.

All the monsters are coming out from a hole at the center. Ray spins the dial and taps a button, keeping them from escaping. He's still not on the board and he's out of quarters again.

"Brian, let me get a roll." Ray holds up a ten dollar bill.

"Use the machine." Brain points to a change maker in the corner.

Ray was hoping to avoid the spectacle, but he puts his bill in anyway. Some people do look over at all those quarters flying out. Ray stuffs them into his pockets and walks back to the game.

She could have done anything. Gone anywhere. A woman like her could have had it all. And here she is now, stuck with him, because he knocked her up. What a bastard he is. To take away her potential. Someone else should be in this spot. A better man. He gets on the board. Bottom of the list.

R-A-Y.

I wonder if it's a boy or a girl? He wouldn't know what to do with a boy. How could he teach a boy how to be a man when he doesn't even know? If it's a little girl, that would be nice. As long as she takes after Kay. She'd be great. She could grow up and do all sorts of amazing things.

If he's not good enough for Kay—who would be good enough for him? The concept is hard to wrap his head around. Someone good enough for him would just be a person that makes him feel that *he's* good enough. No. This isn't someone else's battle. It's his. *His* battle. Ray deposits another quarter.

Maybe it's not a matter of the man he is now, but of the man he can become. Ray deposits another quarter.

He'll find a way to make up for his presence. He'll become his

own antidote. Ray drops his hands from the control board. The monsters radiate out from the center. They'll have to get married. He imagines Kay in a long, white wedding dress. How beautifully he imagines it, like a dream, but he could never do that to her. He'd look like a clown at the altar. Everyone would know. It would be obvious. He's trapping her. He looks at his name on the bottom of the board. He deposits another quarter.

He wishes he were a black widow spider. Then Kay would just eat him. Things would be so much simpler if his life was like a spider's. Maybe not. Maybe a spider's life is more complicated than he thinks. He'd probably be a shit spider too. Probably wouldn't be able to make a decent web or catch any flies.

Ray deposits another coin.

If he can get his name to the top of the scoreboard, he'll buy a ring.

Ray deposits another coin.

If he gets his name to the top, he'll raise a child.

Ray deposits another coin.

If he can just do this one thing ...

—

"Mommy!" the boy shouts in darkness. "Mommy!" he calls again. Oh, he feels so scared.

Kay comes rushing in. He holds her boy and rocks him gently in his bed. "Shhh, it's ok. It's ok. I'm here now."

She pulls him back and wipes the tears from his eyes. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Is that what happened? The boy thinks.

"Well, don't worry. It's all better now." She lays the boy back down and pulls the covers up.

The boy is thinking hard. He can't remember what was scaring

him ... he only remembers that he was scared. Wait. "It was a monster!"

"A monster? Oh, no."

He remembers running. He was running and running. The monster had orange hair and pink skin, shaped like a giant tooth, with small legs and long outstretched arms. But what happened? There was more. Something really terrifying.

"You just have to tell the monsters to go away. Tell them to leave you alone."

That's right, the boy thinks, he spoke with the monster. He was running for so long and then he started wondering—why was the monster chasing him?

He stopped and turned around. The monster looked shocked to see him do that. "Why are you chasing me?" the boy asked.

"I'm chasing you because you're running from me."

"Oh," the boy said. "Do you want to be my friend?"

"Be your friend." The monster repeated it slowly, like it was his first time considering such a proposition. "Ok. I'll be your friend."

But then why did the boy wake up screaming?

## Chapter 4

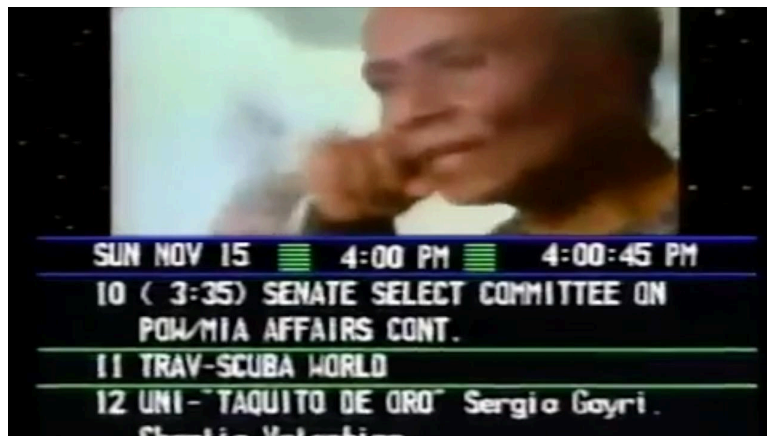
The way she's feeling is so peculiar. It's a mixture of feelings. And there's anger. It's not the strongest feeling, but it's there. And it's surging up inside her. Oh, the anger she feels now. It would be like if you had to walk to school every day, miles and miles. And you did this for years until one day your mom was like, hey, how come you don't ever use the jetpack we have in the garage? How unfair! Didn't anybody ever think to tell her? All this time, she would not have needed to worry about every little thing. She could have just been living. Just been herself.

*She feels relaxed.* It's like she didn't know what that meant until now. Everything feels easy. Is this how other people feel all the time? She wants to exist like other people. People like Thomas. Just wiggling his butt around like that. What is he *doing*?

Thomas has his arms tucked inside. He's got his elbows sticking out and he's crouched over with a comical overbite. She believes he's supposed to be a T-Rex. He bites the air and flaps his elbows from inside his sweatshirt. But she doesn't know—maybe he's just retarded. She can't stop laughing. Luke is jumping around and spanking his own butt. They get excited about something. What are they talking about? She takes another sip of her beer ...

Rewind.

## Chapter 1



*Over a hundred babies die every day.*

The girl sits on the blue-striped couch, trying to find something good to watch. What is even the point of a Sunday afternoon? Basically, from about 1, or maybe 2pm, the day was just about x-ed out. Like when the water is being pulled back into the ocean. This is the part where you have to reflect on your troubles. All the horrors of the week. Oh, God—*Monday*.



*Sometimes we know why. Sometimes we don't.*

She looks over to her printout on the sofa. She's already gone over it a million times. But what is she supposed to do? *Not* keep going over it and over it? That would be insane! She changes the channel.



*Music you love ...*

BETH: “There were six of them—Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys—and they went around town like those South American fish that strip your bones clean, stealing things and tearing things up and whamming kids ... so it was hard to get away from them. There was only one safe place.”





*Movies you share ...*

Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys. It would help to remember all the names if she had an emotional attachment to each of them. Maybe she should imagine all those kids as real people. She tries to fill them out in her mind.



*The things that make you care.*

Ugh, she wants something to distract her mind from all this. She turns to another channel.



“Unique New Nork.” Darn it.



“New Neak. *New Neak.*” Oh, why is this so hard? Slow it down.  
“Unique.” If she says it while she breathes, it’s easier. She breathes in. “Unique.” She relaxes her chest. “New York.”



Why is it taking so long to get interesting!?! She wants something

to stimulate her faster! She changes the channel.



*You can't get closer than that. Look at that.*

“Brrr. Brrr!” She feels so silly. But that’s the exercise her teacher taught her. She’s just doing her homework. “BRRR!”



*Look at that. Can you see how CUTE THAT IS!?*

“SHE sells SEA-shells by the SEA-shore.” Wait, how did she know how to do that rhythm? It just came to her. Like with the breathing. There should be a tempo.



*Come on! She's even got the chin.*

What if she tries a different beat? She-sells sea-shells by-the sea-shore. Oh, that works too! What other way could she do it?



That looks EXACTLY like *Lacey*! The girl changes the channel ...



*Now, what are these Marvel cards?*

Maybe she'd rather be listening to music.



*Well, they're like—the, um ... Marvel comic people, on cards.*

The girl turns off the TV and goes to her bedroom. She flips her cassette and presses play, then jumps onto her bed.

## Chapter 2

Monday.

10:15am—recess.

The girl is reading her Ramona book. She's actually found a nice

little spot, sitting on the concrete barrier around a bush tucked in the corner behind the first grade building. Though it's getting colder. And harder to stay warm when she's just sitting still. She looks up at the other kids, running about carefree.

Oh, no. What is he *doing*? He better not be coming over here! She looks down, back to her book. She moves her eyes along the rows of words, not reading a thing. She sees his shadow encroaching, covering her feet. She pulls them back.

"What are you reading?" Thomas asks.

"A book."

"Oh." He looks around. "Is that what those things are called?"

"What do you want?" The girl wants him to leave, but she feels guilty for being rude. "I mean, what's up?" Oh, no, she overcompensated. "You're stupid." That evened things out.

"Uhhh ..." Thomas looks at his feet for a long while, then looks up and meets the girl's eyes for half a second. "I think you're pretty."

Thomas bolts away.

The girl looks back to her book. Well, of course he thinks I'm pretty. I *am* pretty.

—

12:20—lunch.

"Can I have another brownie?" Thomas asks the lunch lady.

"No."

"That's not a very Christian sentiment."

"Not a what?"

"I'm just saying, it's not a very *Christian* sentiment."

"Christian sentiment ..." The lunch lady relaxes her shoulders and

releases a slow laugh. “I haven’t heard *that* one before. Take your brownie.” She tongs another brownie and releases it onto his tray.

The lunch lady chuckles as he walks away from the bar. He can’t believe it worked! This new tool of his is so easy to use. He sees his crush sitting alone. He’s riding a high—*go for it*, he thinks.

Let’s see, what would be funny? It would be sort of funny if he just sat down in front of her, like it was no big deal. He knows she wouldn’t want him to do that, so to not acknowledge it ... maybe that’s humorous?

He sets his tray down and sits on the bench. “Mondays ... am I right?” Oh, how Thomas *hates* himself! He meant to do it in a sarcastic way, but he froze up at the last second and it came out all wrong—just a joke about Mondays delivered with fragile sincerity.

The girl lowers her cheeseburger and looks at Thomas. She takes a bite and stares at the table as she chews. “I hate Mondays,” she says softly with a cheek full of mashed burger.

All his mojo is gone, but he’s happy to have somehow landed in her favor. Better to not risk anything more. Better to just hold onto this ground that he’s gained. He wants to write a poem. What? Did he just think he wants to write a poem? How lame!

But there’s something he wants to say about her. Something peculiar that must be described. Even the sound she makes when she scrapes her fries along the last bits of ketchup on her tray feels special to Thomas.

This is going great, he feels, as he eats his cheeseburger in silence.

—

2pm—S.S.R.

Thomas can’t take the silence anymore. He wants his crush to look over. He wants her to be thinking of him. This would be an excellent time for her to do that, he reasons.

Thomas lowers his face down into the corner of his arm and makes a loud fart noise. “Ugh, Tim, that was nasty!”

“I didn’t fart!”

“Plllp! Frrrt!” Thomas lifts his face from his arm. “It’s ok, Tim. I farted too. We’re fart brothers now.” He looks over to his crush, but it’s not enough to take her attention from her book.

“Thomas, do I need to send you outside?”

“It’s natural.”

“Excuse me?”

“Farts are natural. Right, Tim?”

“I didn’t fart!”

“Enough! No more talking.”

She still hasn’t looked over. He gives up—for now.

—

2:45pm—drama.

Lacey is doing it really over the top, but that *is* how Mr. DeButtón told her to do it, the girl thinks.

Brittney’s performance is so stale. I guess that’s why Mr. DeButtón cast her as the mother. Even though she’s doing a bad job, it still seems right for her character.

Ugh, what is she not getting? Mr. DeButtón told her a dozen times already. Besides, it’s such a cliché. Always the same story over and over. Lacey’s acting *bad* when she should be acting *lost*.

Mr. DeButtón stops Lacey. “That’s good. Very good. I love your energy. But let’s try something softer. Your first line—perfect. Your second line—let’s take it lower instead of going higher. Say it like you’re really wondering now.”

Lacey says her line again, but still does it like a brat. Figures, the girl thinks, that she doesn’t know how to *not* be a jerk.

“Ok, that was better.” Mr. DeButtón looks over his script. “Let’s



do another scene. Brandon and Thomas, let's do the scene you practiced."

Brandon reads from his script. "I don't care what everyone says, it's what they all really think. The main good thing about church is that the Herdmans aren't there, ever."

Thomas moves slowly. He crosses his arms and pauses on a quizzical look. "That's not a very Christian sentiment, it seems to me."

She likes the way Thomas does it. With authority, but still understanding the comedic element. Well, she supposes, even morons can be good at things.

—

Tuesday.

8:20-before the bell.

"Beth—more like *Bath*. Because you need to take a bath. Because you stink!"

—

11:45—history.

All that work to be buried in exactly the right way, and people just took them out? That's not fair. We should put them back. Who's in charge of this anyway? The girl raises her hand.

"Please save your questions for the end."

The girl lowers her hand and looks around the classroom. Of course Lacey is there to smile mockingly at her. She wants to remember her question for the end, so she repeats it in her mind. *Isn't it wrong to take the pharaohs from their tombs?*

A folded paper is tossed onto the girl's desk. She opens it up to find an image of herself, carefully drawn, with wavy lines emanating out from around her body. "YOU STINK" is written at the top. The thought that another person could put such an effort into hurting her feelings ... It makes the girl feel so bad, she even

feels bad for art.

Mrs. Fletcher calls on the girl, but she can't remember her question.

### Chapter 3

Why does night come so soon now? The sun should go down at bedtime, that's what makes sense. Her vision of the grass and leaves is washed with darkness. She hits her little brother with a stick in the twilight.

"Ow! Why'd you hit me?"

"Because you're dumb."

The boy scans the front lawn for a stick of his own and spots a nice one. That will hurt her real good. He runs to it, but the girl is faster. She grabs it and dual wields.

"Thank you for finding me this nice stick!"

The boy looks to the front steps, but the girl reads his mind. She moves to align herself against his path. Why does she have to be so mean? The question makes him cry.

"Dinner time!" Terri calls out from the opened front door.

The girl jumps to block her little brother from view, then turns back to her auntie. "Ok! Just give us one minute!"

"Wash your hands when you come inside!" Terri shuts the door.

The girl turns back to her brother to calm him, but sees a blur in the distance, something moving quickly toward them. At first, in the low light, she believes it's a beast, but as it comes closer she sees it's just Luke riding on the back pegs with Thomas hunched over in front. The boy and girl stand waiting for whatever it is they came for.

Thomas slides his feet on the asphalt and Luke jumps off the back. There's a long moment of silence between the four of them, then the girl turns her brother and walks to the steps.

"Do you want to play?" Thomas asks.

The girl stops and turns around. "I have to eat dinner."

"What about after?"

She furrows her brow. "But it'll be dark after."

"So?"

Oh. She never thought of it like that. Her mom always said to come in when it's dark. But he's right—so what? Just because the sun goes down doesn't mean playtime has to end. Interesting. The girl pushes her brother forward and steps through the door. "Bye!"

She walks into the dining room and sees a lovely spread of delicious food! Mashed potatoes, gravy, candied yams, pumpkin pie, whipped cream, cranberry sauce—and her mom sets down a big, juicy turkey right as she enters. She can *hear* its deliciousness. Still sizzling, hot out of the oven, with stuffing all around the plate. She rushes up to the table.

"Wash your hands!" Terri repeats.

Right. The girl grabs her brother and heads to the bathroom. She pumps some soap and turns on the faucet. As she rubs, she sees the white bubbles turn brown. Wow, was there really that much dirt on her hands? She rinses thoroughly and heads back to the table. Marc, Terri and Daddy are already sitting down. The girl glares at Terri for taking the seat next to her father, then takes the seat opposite him.

The boy sits down next to the girl, Kay next to the boy. They all stand and hold hands around the table.

"Dear Lord, thank you for this meal. Thank you for everything you've given us. You've given us this chance at life and that's fortune enough. We ask you, Lord, to continue guiding us. We pray to never fall from your glory." Marc gives a squeeze to Terri

on his left and Kay on his right. They pass the message along and the family opens their eyes. “Ok. What are we all thankful for? Who wants to go first?”

The family shifts around.

“Ok. I’ll go first. I know I say this every year, but every year I can’t think of anything I’m more thankful for. Terri, I love you.”

Terri smiles at Marc. “And Marc, you know I’ll never say I’m thankful for you, because that would just be tacky. And you know that’s not fair. Sometimes I want to be the cheesy one. But I guess I can say I’m thankful to have so little to complain about and that’s because you do *so* much to make sure of that.” Terri turns to Ray.

Ray breaks hands with Terri to pull a paper out of his pocket. He looks very serious as he holds it with one hand, keeping the other firmly around his daughter’s. He fumbles with it for a moment, then it falls, unfolding to a comical length. The family laughs—he’s taped many cards together. “I’ve got *so* much to be thankful for this year.” He pauses for a long time, then folds up his cards. He gives them a meaningful shake around the table, opting, for fear of tears, to communicate his gratitude without words. They turn to the girl.

“I’m thankful for my family and for God and for ...” The girl panics, she doesn’t know what to say. “Amen.”

“Oh, we’re not done yet.” Marc chuckles. “We’ve still got your brother and your mommy.”

The girl nudges her brother. “I’m thankful for my toys and my sister, and my mommy and daddy ...” The boy looks around the table. “And my auntie and my uncle.” The boy nods his head.

“I’m thankful to be done cooking! Let’s eat!” Kay exclaims.

Ray serves Kay, then Terri, then Marc, then the girl, then the boy. He winks at the boy reassuringly as he hands the plate back to him.

## Chapter 4

The boy is crying all alone in the driftwood shack. He doesn't know why he's crying and he's aware of that fact. As tears roll down his cheeks, he tries to assess what exactly is going on. He understands that some part of him has fallen below a threshold. He wipes his eyes, looks out at the water, then goes over it again—*what should he do?*

His sister told him to go home, but he's scared for her. Why did she go off with Thomas? Isn't he bad? Why would she go off with someone bad? He wants to protect her from bad things, but how can he do that?

He should just go home like she said. He wants to make a decision, but he can't. Maybe this *is* his decision. Maybe his decision is to stay put. Just in case. Just in case there's anything he can do to help her.

He's a sentry. That's what he is. He unfolds his arms from his knees and sits Indian-style on the dirt floor. He takes a deep breath. He will remain here. This is his decision. He stares out at the ocean.

—

The girl feels hot under her jacket with the bright sun on her head. She walks with Thomas and Luke along the shore. She looks up at the wintry sky. The birds have gone. There's an apparent stillness that seems hypocritical in the wind that blows through her hair. Over and over, she tucks it behind her ears. She wishes she had a pony in her pocket.

It feels pleasant to be walking with Thomas. More adult. Definitely more so than playing with her little brother. Even though they walk in silence, she feels a rush. She looks over at Thomas. He seems to be thinking seriously about something. She tucks her hair back behind her ears and continues over the smooth stones.

—

“You’re Kay’s little boy, aren’t you?” The Black lady approaches slowly, crouched over with a concerned smile.

The boy remains silent.

“What are you doing out here?”

The boy is resolute. He stares at the ocean.

“I heard crying and I thought maybe you were hurt. I’m Cat. I’m friends with your mommy.” She steps closer.

The boy turns her off. Don’t talk to strangers. Stay in position and protect your sister.

“Do you like cookies?”

The boy looks up.

“That’s my house.” She turns and points at the dark cottage. “I’m your neighbor. I was thinking ... I have all these cookies, but I don’t have anyone to eat them. Would you like to help me?”

“What kind?”

“Oh! Um ... let’s see. I have a few kinds. I have some chocolate chip, of course. I have some butter cookies. And I think I might have some thin mints—but I can’t guarantee it.”

The cottage isn’t so far away. He can still be a sentry. Sentries can eat cookies. The woman seems to understand his change in thought.

“How about this, I’ll be right back and I’ll bring you one of each. And then maybe we can go talk to your mommy. Maybe she’ll want a cookie too.”

—

“Do you like music?”

They are chilling at a spot along the shore, where the dirt comes up high like a miniature cliff. Luke sits atop the easy edge. Thomas and the girl stand awkwardly on the sand before him.

The girl nods her head.

“What’s your favorite band?”

The girl’s cheeks flush. “Um ...” She already knows she’s going to tell him, that’s what embarrassed her. She kept it a secret from her old friends, but it feels safe to confess here. It’s like he doesn’t count. “I like Quiet Riot.”

“*You* like Quiet Riot!” Thomas shoots his arms up into the air. Even Luke almost falls off his little ledge.

The girl is as offended as she is confused. “Yes?”

Thomas looks regretful, then shows a playful smile. “What’s your favorite song?”

The girl looks at the sand for a moment, feeling the same false dilemma, knowing she’ll tell him before she deliberates.

““Thunderbird.””

““*Thunderbird*’!?! That song’s lame!”

The girl’s already-flush cheeks effortlessly express her rage. “It’s not lame! It’s good!”

“How’d you get a tape?”

“From my uncle.”

Thomas tilts his head up. “Hey!” He looks excitedly into the girl’s eyes. “I have a boombox in my treehouse! Can you get your tape?”

“You have a treehouse?”

—

Cat knocks with her own door knocker. No. It’s not hers anymore. She reminds herself of that. Kay opens the door. “Hi, Kay! How are you?”

“Oh, hi, Cat.”

“Do you want a cookie?” Cat looks down and smiles at the boy.

“No, thank you.”

The boy runs inside.

“I’m just kidding. I heard him crying by the water, but he wouldn’t talk to me so I thought I’d bring him back to you.”

“Oh, thank you.” Kay stares blankly at Cat.

“How have you been?”

“I’ve been well. You?”

“Yeah, things are good with me too. How are the holidays going?”

“Good. Good.”

Cat nods her head.

Kay smiles.

“Well, I just thought I’d ... I’ll talk to you later.” Cat steps back.

“Don’t be afraid to drop by whenever.”

“Ok. Will do.” Kay shuts the door.

—

The children run through the neighborhood. The girl stops and pants with her hands on her knees.

“Come on!” Thomas skips forward and waves her on.

She does her best to keep up.

—

“Again!”

Kay lifts the sheet and whips it out over the bed. The boy lays on his sister’s mattress and watches the blanket from underneath, an ephemeral cave, shrinking and losing light as air escapes, until it covers his eyes and completely darkens his world. “Again!”



“Ok, one last time!” Kay flicks her wrists. The sheet rises up and sinks down over her boy.

“Please!”

“One more time, but that’s it.” Kay makes it really big. A grand finale.

The boy slides out from under the covers and grabs his rubber dinosaur. He bounces it across the carpet as his mother finishes making his sister’s bed.

*No! Please don’t eat me! I want to live!* He cuts to the chase and shoves his sister’s already headless doll inside the dinosaur’s mouth. The hollow, rubber body allows him to shove a good amount inside. So realistic, he thinks.

The girl rushes in through the door, “Mom! He’s playing with my stuff!” She yanks the doll from out of the dinosaur’s belly. “Where’s her head!?”

“Well, he wouldn’t be if you hadn’t left him all alone.” Kay doesn’t stop folding the girl’s clean shirts.

The girl decides not to push. She ejects her cassette, skips out of the room, fills a mug with cool water from the kitchen sink, gulps it down and runs back outside.

—

Ok, let’s try this again. Ray turns onto Main for the third time that day. As he nears his office, he senses the same invisible force pushing him back. He drives past. Maybe he’ll go to his old cafe.

—

Now that she sees the real thing, she understands that her expectations were silly. A literal house in the treetops is what she had imagined. Thomas walks forward, but Luke runs up ahead. The first step he takes is on the wide trunk, the second on the big branch coming out low along the ground, and the third he has to sort of climb up onto with his hands. It’s attached to the small porch of this home. He walks through the door frame.

Thomas looks back at the girl and waves his arms up.

“Ladies—wait.” He looks quickly up at Luke, who’s peeking his head through the window cutout. “Luke—*shit*—it was supposed to be ladies first.”

The girl’s cheeks burn. “You’re not supposed to say that.” She feels embarrassed for chastising him, but it sort of just came out.

Thomas looks confused. “Oh. Sorry.”

The girl looks down.

“You don’t cuss?”

The girl looks back up. She studies his face. He seems to be genuinely curious. “No.”

“Not ever?” Thomas tilts his head to the side.

“Never.”

“I dare you to cuss.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You don’t *have* to. I just thought ... maybe you might want to try it out.” He gives the girl a funny look. “There’s nobody here. You can’t get in trouble.”

The idea of commanding her own lips to do such a thing feels absurd—but she does it anyway. “Fuck.”

Luke drops his jaw and looks down at Thomas. Thomas drops his jaw and looks up at Luke.

Luke jumps down from the treehouse and takes the girl’s hand. “Ladies first!”

—

Ray crosses the street. He finds a natural stride. Oh, it feels good to be in the middle of the road, walking to his old cafe. Just what the doctor ordered.

He reaches and pulls the long brass handle on the double doors, enters into a pointless foyer, then pushes through the same pair of double doors with long brass handles.

He smiles at the familiar environment and looks around what feels like old digs—oh, shit! Ray walks quickly back through the double set of double doors.

He should have figured Roger might be there. He gets to his car and stops at the door. The moment was so quick, it didn't really register, but now he sees it more clearly. Roger and the attorney were eating lunch. Wait. Roger and the attorney were eating lunch?

He drops his keys and hits his forehead on the sideview mirror when he tries to catch them. "Goddammit!" Ray clasps his head and squats down. He stays for a moment, leaning his throbbing skull on the cool steel of his Explorer.

He recalls the attorney saying he knew Roger, but he didn't think anything of it. He read it more like the attorney knew *of* Roger, like they had some indirect relationship. But what kind of relationship entails lunch?

Ray stands and feels a momentary loss of mind. A quick darkening of vision. An imbalance that comes just as soon as it goes. He looks back to the cafe and thinks back to his meeting with the attorney. It *did* seem like the guy was strong-arming him. Showing him the door so quickly ...

Ray crosses the street.

—

*Let's get crazy*

*Right now*

*Let's get crazy (all right)*

*I want to kiss your lips, not the ones on your face ...*

The girl sits on a nice log in the middle of the treehouse. Luke sits

on a table, next to the boombox. Thomas sits on the floor. His legs are curled in, arms around his knees, back up against the wall, underneath the window that faces the ocean through evergreens.

The girl says something, but Thomas can't hear it. He signals to Luke, who lowers the volume. They both look at the girl. She doesn't speak.

"What did you say?" Luke asks the girl.

Oh, the girl regrets everything. She should have just been enjoying the music. Now she's put herself on the spot.

Thomas and Luke share a glance.

"What do you think that means ... I said."

"What does what mean?"

"He says he wants to kiss her lips, but not the ones on her face ... What do you think that means?"

"Oh." Thomas looks up in serious consideration. "I think it means, like, he wants to kiss her on her heart."

That's what she thought too! She had always wondered about that line. "Yeah! That's—"

"I think it means he wants to kiss her butt!" Luke shouts.

"Ew, Luke, that's nasty!" Thomas laughs.

The girl giggles.

—

The boy struggles with his pattern blocks, but wow, what a thrill. He *knows* he can replicate the image. He feels this ability within. It's confusing, sure, but just a matter of time. He grabs another red rhombus from the pile of tiles atop the coffee table. He lays it one way, then another, before flipping it around and successfully forming the nose of the train.

Just two pieces left. The smoke coming out of the choo-choo. He

grabs the flat, pale diamonds and arranges them over the body, but it's not like the other parts. He's unsure of whether or not he's completed the puzzle. He adjusts the puffs, but can't tell if they're in the right spot.

He stands and looks at the image he's created. Now that he thinks about it, there are tons of imperfections. In fact he sees that his duplication is infinitely different from what's printed on the reference card. It bothers him for a moment, then he feels ok about it. He grabs the two pale diamonds and moves them up higher, like the wind is carrying them away.

He wants to share this with his mommy! She said to give her a bit of time to herself, but he can't see why a short interruption would be so terrible. He runs to the bathroom and pushes through the door. She's standing naked before the mirror. The clear gloves over her hands are covered in a brown sludge and there's something odd about her hair—like it's made of mud. Of all the bizarre things he notices, it's not what he sees, but what he *smells* that's the strangest. An acute odor that stings his nostrils.

He looks at his mother's skin. It seems that some goo has dropped down onto her breasts, next to her dark nipples.

“What's going on, baby?” she asks. The shower is running. Steam fills the room.

—

“Randall's back!”

“Hey, Randall!” Luke pets the cat on the table, having just jumped in through the window.

The girl almost forgot! Looks like they've been taking good care of him. The cat leaps off the table and rubs his tail against Thomas, then approaches the girl.

“Let's play Follow the Leader!” Thomas exclaims.

“Yeah!” Luke scoots off the table.

“It's really fun, trust me! Randall always takes us on the best

adventures!”

The girl stands and Randall starts the game. He steps out and hops gracefully down the three steps. The children follow.

—

“He sees something!”

Randall slows in the field. His head dips low.

The children duck down. They smile at each other.

The cat runs forward, then leaps into the air, claspings its paws together.

The children jump up and clap their hands.

“I caught a cricket!” Thomas pulls his hands up to his mouth and pretends to put something inside. He chews it around. “Yum!”

“I caught a beetle.” Luke pretends like he’s dangling it high above his mouth. He drops it down and swallows it whole, then rubs his belly in satisfaction.

The boys look at the girl.

Oh, this is so much fun! “I caught a butterfly!” She imagines holding it apart by the wings and mimes a little bite. “Crunchy!”

“Come here!” Luke and the girl bring their catch to Thomas. He looks at the girl. “I need two butterfly wings.” The girl rips them off and hands them to Thomas. He lays his imaginary cricket down on one of the wings. “And let me get some beetle juice.” Luke hands him the beetle. Thomas squeezes it out over his creation. “One for you and one for you.” Luke and the girl accept graciously. “It’s a butterfly sandwich!”

As the girl takes a bite she laments the sun. How cruel it is, to be so low.

Randall skips ahead through the field, the children chase after.

—

The sound of an engine starting captures Randall's attention as the group walks behind a line of homes in their neighborhood. They see a white truck pull out of the driveway. Randall walks toward the home and the children unthinkingly follow.

The cat trots up without a doubt and slips through a back door left ajar. Thomas and Luke keep following, but the girl slows. "Wait, we can't go in there."

"We have to follow our leader." Thomas looks back and smiles deviously. He walks up to the door.

The girl's heart is pounding. He can't do that.

Thomas disappears through the door. Luke trails after.

"Luke, you can't go inside!" the girl shouts. "Stay here!" Luke looks back and sees that the girl is scared. She can tell he wants to go, but he walks back to the girl and keeps her company.

The girl feels physically ill. She looks around frantically, then sends a psychic message. *Come out right now!* As if by magic, Thomas and the cat run out of the house. The girl panics. She sprints for the trees. The four of them run until they are safely hidden. The girl looks down at Thomas's arms. He's taken something from the home!

"Look what I got!" Thomas says proudly.

"Woah!" Luke says with admiration.

Thomas opens his arms to reveal a six-pack of beer and a disposable camera. The girl feels her whole world is crashing down. This can't be happening--this is *illegal!*

"No, Thomas!" The girl stomps her foot.

"What?"

The girl grabs the camera and looks at the ticker. "There's only twelve pictures left!"

"So?"

“So, they already took some! You can’t take this. That’s like you’re stealing someone’s memories! You can’t do that!” The girl is breathing so rapidly, she feels like she might faint.

“But I want to take pictures of you.”

“What?”

“It’s ok, I’ll return the photos. After I get them developed.”

“No, it’s not ok!”

“Come on—*I promise.*” Thomas and Luke start back toward the treehouse. “It’ll be fun!”

Everything inside the girl is telling her to leave, right now. To go back home. But it’s a very odd thing—she doesn’t.

—

“I can’t believe you haven’t seen *Tremors.*” The General walks over and pops the VHS into his VCR. He turns on the TV and switches to channel 3, then grabs a remote off the organically shaped coffee table and sits next to Ray on the long leather sofa.

The two have formed a familiarity around whiskey and loneliness, but even so, Ray wonders if he’s breaching. The General is the smartest person he knows, and that’s exactly what he needs right now—someone smart. “Before we start the movie, can I ask you something?”

The General sits up and nods his head.

“How does a person know if ... they’re a *bad person*?”

The General’s expression loses all affection. He stands up and returns with a shadowbox of insignias and awards. He hands it to Ray. “You see that star?” He allows Ray a moment to study it. “I didn’t get that by knowing what’s good and what’s bad.” He takes the shadowbox back and tosses it onto the coffee table. “I got it by doing what needs to be done.” He’s firm. “So I ask you this, Ray, what needs to be done?”

Ray looks over at all the medals. He doesn’t even know what they



mean. “I guess I have to do some Christmas shopping.”

“Then that’s what you do.” The General lifts the remote and presses play.

Oh—*yeah*. It really is that simple! He just has to focus on Christmas. The General takes a sip from his glass. The previews start.

—

There’s something about the blonde child in this show. He speaks with an uncanny fervor. Every sentence starts with a deep breath. Each word creates bulging veins in his neck. The boy lays on the couch with his head in his mother’s lap.



*Barney, do you have a favorite bug?*



*I sure do!*



*But I'm not going to tell you what it is.*



*Aw, why not? Come on, Barney!*



*I'm not going to tell you ...*



*... because it's MUCH more fun to show you!*



*But before I show you—Lucy, will you please turn out the lights?*



—

The last bits of sun show through the westward window. The girl

closes her eyes, pulls the can up to her mouth, and takes a sip. She spits it out onto the floor of the treehouse!

Thomas and Luke laugh.

“It’s gross!”

“Yeah.” Thomas looks at Luke. “We know.”

“Why do people drink it, then?”

“You just have to drink it and then it’s like a potion. When you finish the potion, you feel happy.”

The girl looks down at the can. It reads “Lite” at the top. What does that mean? Seems good. She takes a deep breath and brings the can up. Oh, it burns. It’s so awful! But she has to finish the potion. She leans way back and brings the beer up high. The faster she gets this over with, the better. Her throat feels like it’s about to mutiny. There’s just a little bit left—ah! She brings the can down.

Thomas and Luke stand like statues before her. She brings her free arm up and wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her jacket, then releases a loud burp.

The boys start jumping up and down. They grab each other’s arms in excitement.

“What?” the girl asks.

“You’re really great!” Thomas says. “I mean—”

“You’re great at drinking!” Luke says.

“Yeah. Wow.”

“You said I had to finish the potion!”

“That was really fast.”

“It was?”

Luke and Thomas crack open their beers. Bottoms up!

“She has a robot horse and the horse has rockets on its legs—his legs *are* rockets—and his name is On-X and the glitterbots are making this big thing that’s like, it’s stopping the light so the princess can take it and Rainbow Brite has to stop her, but she gets her magic belt stolen because the princess steals it and then she uses a crystal to send her to prison and then she gets—the lizard people take her—and then all the glitterbots ...”

—

Halfway through her second beer and she can’t stop laughing. The boys run up to the window and look outside. What are they so excited about?

“It’s snowing!” Thomas runs over to the girl and grabs her hand. Luke grabs his flashlight and shines it out through the darkness.

The children, beer in hand, hop out of the treehouse. They run around trying to catch snowflakes in their mouths.

The girl looks up into the night sky and sees a full moon. A quick flash blinds her. She looks over at Thomas behind the viewfinder. He takes another picture.

“Stop!” The girl runs over to Thomas and slaps his chest softly.

“Let’s finish our beers!” Thomas leans back and chugs. Luke and the girl do the same. He collects their empty cans and runs over to a fallen tree. It takes him a few tries, but he gets them stacked into a tower. He flips the bottom of his sweatshirt out to make a pouch and gathers pine cones from the forest floor.

He runs back to the girl and hands her a cone. “Here.”

She winds up, perfect form, and throws the pine cone.

“Ow!” Luke yells. He grabs his stomach like he’s been shot, then falls over dramatically.

“You killed Luke! Oh, well. Here, try again.” He hands the girl another cone and she brings it far back behind her head. “Wait.” He lifts his arms and all his pine cones fall to the ground. He pulls the girl’s hand down lower so that it’s closer to her shoulder. “Like

this. And then when you throw it, move like this.” Thomas grabs a pine cone and shows her the motion. She moves through it with him. “Watch.” He throws his cone. It blows right through the center—a satisfying crash.

---

The girl has his large sunglasses on, posing with demure expressions for her photographer. She unzips her jacket. “Let me put your sweater on, too!” She runs over to Thomas.

Thomas takes his sweatshirt off and hands it to the girl. She gives him her jacket and he puts it on. “Hey, this is nice!”

“Thomas!” The girl struggles to fit into his sweatshirt, she can’t find the right holes and ends up sticking both her head and arm through the neck.

“Yeah! Like that! That’s good!” Thomas pulls the camera up.

“No!” The girl screams from inside the sweatshirt as she ducks back inside and tries to figure out where to put her limbs. Thomas walks over and helps her through.

She folds her arms across her chest and twists around. Thomas takes a picture. She lowers the sunglasses and looks over the top with a cool expression. *Flash!*

---

Luke is passed out on the floor next to the table. The girl sits on the log facing Thomas, who sits on a wooden crate. As they exchange slow words back and forth, the girl feels a pleasant rocking, like they’re on a seesaw.

“I’m gonna call you Lil’ Ducky.” Thomas rocks forward.

The girl brings her hand up from within the long sleeve of Thomas’s sweatshirt and laughs, almost falling backward off her log. “Lil’ Ducky!? Why?”

“You remind me of a lil’ ducky, that’s why.”

The girl falls, but not physically. A part of her drops down onto a

track. She feels pulled, or pushed—something beyond her control!

Thomas notices the change as well. His expression turns serious.

The girl leans forward. What is she *doing!*?

—

The moon is angry with her. It spins above, shining its light in a fury. It drags her onto her feet, away from Thomas's warm embrace. What's happening? She's cold. The girl looks down at Thomas on the floor next to Luke, both waking slowly as the moon pulls her away.

There's lots of yelling. An unsteady beam of light illuminates her path over the asphalt.

The girl opens her eyes. It's morning. She's in her bed. She looks down at her shoes, still on her feet.

## Chapter 1

Ray is at Toys "R" Us. He pushes his cart down an aisle of pink boxes. Soon enough, his kids will be making lists a mile long, studying the toys they find in paper catalogs with a diligence that only comes around once a year. Oh, to be young and excited about Christmas.

He thinks of his girl as he looks at all the products, still well stocked at the beginning of the month. This is his little ritual. He finds each of his children a toy, a choice from the heart, before they tell him what they want. Something catches his eye and instantly he knows. He lifts the box with both hands.

*Easy-Bake Oven, Disney Princess Edition*

He looks at the blond child model and imagines his girl instead. She'd have *so* much fun with this, he thinks.

"Look who it is."



Ray hears an antagonistic voice from the next aisle over.

“Oh, hey, Cynthia!”

“And I thought I was going to be ahead of the crowd. Are you here with John?”

“No, he’s still taking it easy after his surgery.”

“Wasn’t it just a minor thing?”

“You’re telling me. He’s getting all the mileage he can out of this one.”

The women laugh. Something about the confidence in their speech is intoxicating to Ray. They seem so sure of their words. He leans closer to the shelf.

“Can I ask you something? Did you get a wedding invitation from Clint?”

“Yes. And I know what you’re getting at. Six months.”

“Ha! I was thinking a year.”

“And did you hear about Roger? Oh, hi, Charlene!”

“Shoot, I thought I was going to be ahead of the crowd.”

“That’s what Sheila said!”

“Looks like I’m not ahead of anyone.”

“So what happened to Roger?”

“He had a heart attack.”

“Oh!”

“Some man attacked him on the street outside of Sherri’s.”

“Wait, listen, I know exactly what happened. It wasn’t just Roger. Raul was with him. You know, the lawyer? Fran’s ex. I saw him at Albertsons yesterday and he told me the whole thing. So get this, they caught the guy stalking them, *in the bushes*.”

“What?”

“He jumped right out and started making all sorts of crazy allegations about Roger and Raul working together to put him out of business.”

“My goodness.”

“Some people.”

“Well, you know Roger, once he’s lit up, there’s no stopping him. And let’s be honest, maybe no one said it, but we were all thinking the same thing, he was due any day.”

“Maybe this’ll be the wakeup call he needs.”

“He should really start watching what he eats.”

“And drinks.”

“I don’t understand, why was the guy stalking Roger?”

“Well, that article Roger wrote mentioned his business, Anchor Realty, because he’s working with the condo developers. Then he tried to sue Roger for libel—that’s how Raul factors in.”

“Everything’s a lawsuit with these people.”

“All Roger did was write what we were all thinking.”

“And, you know, the guy used to work for Roger, learned everything from him, then went off and even took another agent with him, just so he could sell condos.”

“Christ. Well, I’m definitely telling everyone I know not to do business with Anchor Realty.”

“It’s a good thing we have people like Roger in our community, fighting for *us*.”

“I really hope he’s doing well.”

“He’s fine. Already out of the hospital.”

“So is that the end of the story? Roger yelled at him and then had a

heart attack?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“What did the guy do?”

“He just ran away.”

—



*(upbeat music plays)*



*(synthetic piano accompaniment)*



*(scratch effects)*



*(melodic high notes)*



*I know this pain*



*Why do you lock yourself up in these chains?*



*No one can change your life except for you*

*Don't ever let anyone step all over you*



*Just open your heart and your mind*

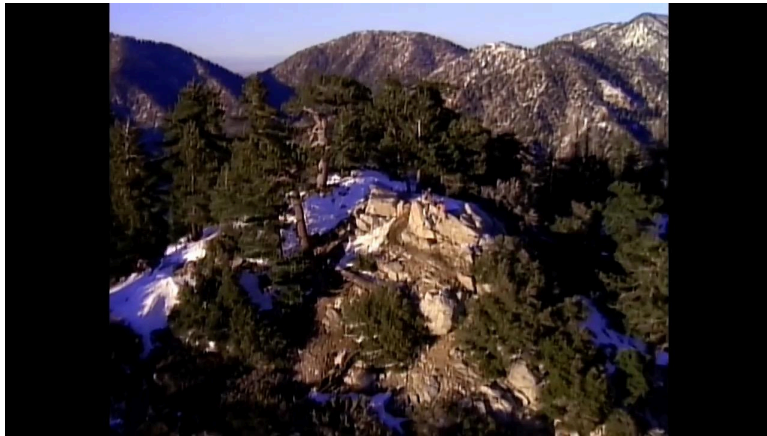
*Is it really fair to feel ...*



*... this way inside?*



*(energetic drums)*



*Oh-woah-oh!*



*(electric guitar)*



*Someday somebody's gonna make you wanna turn around and say  
goodbye!*



*Until that ...*



*... baby ...*





*... are you gonna let them hold you down and make you cry?*



*Don't you know?*



*Don't you know!?*



*Things can change*



*Things'll go your way ...*



*... if you HOOOO ...*

Kay cries from the floor beside May's orange recliner.



*... for one more day*



*Can you hold on ...*



*... for one more day?*



*Things'll go your way*



*Hold on for one more day!*

—

“I’m not going,” Ray mumbles from behind his bowl of cereal.

“Fine!” Kay throws up her hands and looks away with an intensity that shows just how not fine it is.

Ray slinks down on the couch and stares at the TV. It’s not even on.

“Uhhh! We’re going to be late!” Kay shouts. “Get in the car!” She walks into the bathroom and applies final touches to her hair and makeup.

She storms down the hall. “What did I just say!?” She opens the girl’s bedroom door, empty. She heads to the boy’s room—they better not make her late for church!

She marches back into the living room. “Where are they?”

“In the car.”

This makes Kay very angry, although it’s not clear how, exactly. She steps out the front door and slams it. Her various scents dissipate as Ray finishes his Fruity Pebbles and stares at the empty TV.

## Chapter 2

“Daddy, look, it’s a giraffe!”

“Yeah! Oh, wow—and look, I think that sign is supposed to be *Noel*. Get it? No ‘L.’”

The girl doesn’t understand what her father is talking about. Her brother is climbing over her to look out the window. “Get off!”

“Let your brother see.” Kay’s at the wheel of her station wagon. She drives slowly, focusing on the line of cars ahead, the people on the sidewalk, the lights, her family.

The boy gets a good look. It’s so big! How did they do that? The

sight of it feels unimaginable. Everything is so dazzling!

“Get a look at that home!” Ray exclaims.

“Woah!” the kids validate.

Kay rounds a corner. On the driveway they cruise by are a group of adults, hanging out on lawn chairs, around a fire bowl. A nativity scene is on the grass. They sip from steaming mugs, sweaters on, scarves and beanies. A sign next to a tank on a table reads: Free Hot Chocolate.

“Free hot chocolate! Dad!”

Kay slows.

“Can we get some!?”

“Sure”

“Come on.”

“You go out.”

“Come with me.”

“I wanna come too,” the boy chimes in.

“You can go. Your sister will take you,” Kay instructs.

“*Dad!* I want you to take us.”

“You’re a big girl.”

“Your father doesn’t want to show his face.”

“Kay—come on.”

“What? It’s *true*.”

Ray twists around and pops open the back door of their station wagon. “Get a cup for me, would ya?”

“Ok, Daddy.” The girl steps out of the car, her brother in tow.

A man with a beanie on his head reminds the girl of a peanut. He stands as she steps onto the driveway. “Are you here for some hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please—um, Merry Christmas.”

“Why, thank you! Merry Christmas to you too!” The peanut man glances back at the other adults. They all smile at the girl.

“May I please have two cups?”

“Of course! A sweet little girl like you can have all the hot chocolate she wants.” The man walks over and grabs two styrofoam cups from the table and fills them with hot chocolate. He hands them to the girl. She heads back to the car. The boy approaches. He stares patiently at the man’s knees. “Uh . . .” the man figures. “One more for you?” The boy doesn’t look up. The man fills another cup and sends the boy on his way.

When the children get back in the car, the radio is on. “Holly Jolly Christmas” plays.

The girl asks her father a question, but he can’t hear with the music. He turns it down. Kay glares at him. “What, honey?”

“Can we do that? At our house! Can we get all those decorations and give hot chocolate to everybody!?”

“Well, sure—but only if you promise to help me put all the decorations up and make all the hot chocolate.”

Sounds like a lot of work. If she wants it, they can just come back here. Easier that way. “Never mind,” she says.

The boy looks at the side of his father’s face from the crossview. Why doesn’t he want to show himself? Is there something wrong with him? He watches Ray as they sip their hot chocolate.

“Oh, come on! You should help your father if that’s what you want.”

“I just don’t want to.”

“Well, you’re helping us decorate the tree when we get home.”

“Don’t make it seem like a chore,” Ray urges.

“Fine.”

“It’s not a chore.”

“I know it’s not—”

“I’m not making it seem like a chore.”

“Oh, would you look at that home!”

“Mom! He spilled on me!”

The boy looks down. Oops. He looks up at his sister. She moves her cup forward and drops some on his lap. Kay steps on the brakes—Ray spills on his seat.

“Everybody just sit still and drink your hot chocolate!” She turns up the volume.

—

Why is it that when every choice is just as good, it seems impossible to make a decision? Ray holds a golden ornament before the Fraser fir in his living room, across from the sofa, left of the TV. He moves forward and places it wherever.

The girl lifts a macaroni Santa from the cardboard box. She turns it over and sees her own name poorly written on the back. She looks at the sloppy face. She used to be so stupid, she thinks. She pushes the decoration into the long branches at the bottom of the tree.

Kay hangs little candy canes here and there.

The boy grabs a shiny red ball. He looks closely at the scene reflected on its surface. He sees his mother warped around the globe.

Ray grabs an old one. Clear plastic, with a picture of his family inside. The kids are so small. He places it down low so that they can see it. He grabs another special memory from the box, then turns to find Kay moving the photo ornament.



She can't do that. He placed it. That's where he said it would go. So what if it looks better where she's putting it? It *does* look better there—but so what? She can't do that! He takes a deep breath. You just have to get through Christmas, he reminds himself. He hangs his ornament, a little higher now, following Kay's lead.

—

“Daddy, I have a boyfriend.”

Ray gulps as he pulls the covers up over his little girl. “Oh?” He pats her absently on the chest a couple of times.

“His name is Thomas.”

Ray nods his head. “Thomas.” He holds a manufactured posture. “That's a good name.”

“But Lacey liked him first and now she's not friends with me.”

“She's not your friend anymore? Just because of that?” Ray jumps eagerly onto the new subject.

“None of my friends are.”

Ray gazes at the ceiling of the girl's night-lighted room. He thinks hard, wanting to be a good father for his daughter. “What is it that you want?” he asks, looking back down at his girl, all tucked in and softly illuminated.

“I want Lacey to stop being mean to me.”

“Is she being mean to you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. I'm sorry.” Ray extends his arms and holds her dearly. “I'm sorry your friend is being mean to you.”

“She makes fun of me! And she calls me Bath instead of Beth because she says I stink and need to take a bath!”

Ray sits up and shows a sympathetic face, then an amused one. “That's actually pretty clever.”

“Dad!”

“She shouldn’t say that. She’s just trying to hurt your feelings. That’s what she wants. You don’t have to let it work.”

“But it does. It makes me feel bad.”

“Do you still want to be her friend?”

The girl considers the matter carefully. “Yes.”

“Then it’s simple.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is and I’ll teach you how.” He scoots forward on her bed. “It’s very simple.” He leans in closely. “If you see an opportunity.” He gives her a quick little kiss on the forehead. “Take it.”

### Chapter 3

Ray is leaving his office. He’s got his arms full of wrapped gifts, one hand carrying keys, the other his mug. He maneuvers awkwardly to set his coffee on top of his Explorer that he’s pulled up front, then unlocks the passenger door and unloads his presents. He hears the phone ringing.

He jumps back with his keys and hurriedly opens the office door, but the ringing stops as he enters. He waits for the machine. Aw, come on—who doesn’t leave a message? The ringing starts again. “Anchor Realty, this is—”

“Ray! There’s water coming out of the ceiling or it’s coming out of the floor!”

“What!?”

“The ceiling of the basement, man. The floor of the home! You got to get over here now!”

---

The girl stands backstage. She walks to the curtain, wanting to see the crowd before the lights turn off. She peeks through and scans the audience. There's her dad. He's dripping wet. Hm, must be raining outside.

Mr. DeButtón is gathering the crew together. She skips to join them. "All right, kids, this is the moment you've all been preparing for! I know you're ready. You've shown me that. You're all ready. There's only one thing, one *last* thing, I must teach you. It might seem like this is your moment, but it's not. This is everyone's moment. So go out there and make *that* moment!"

---

"There were six of them—Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys ..."

---

The play is over.

The children march back to class, where games and music have been promised. The girl, last in line, sees that Brandon and Brittney are holding hands. As the children file in, the girl notes that Lacey isn't with them. Thomas doesn't look back as he enters, but the girl does. She turns and sees only empty pavement, then a quick sight—Lacey running from the auditorium to a space between buildings.

In the classroom, the girl sees Thomas already dancing to the music, preparing games with the others. She decides to go back and check on Lacey.

As the girl rounds a corner, she hears a sobbing. Lacey lowers her hands from her face and looks up at the girl. "Am I ugly?"

"What?"

Lacey takes a deep breath. "Am I *ugly*?"

The girl sees a desperation in her eyes. "No, Lacey. You're

beautiful.”

“Why does no one like me, then!?” She throws her hands down, but brings them right back up to cover her face as she resumes her tears.

“I like you.”

Lacey’s crying comes to a quick stop. She looks at the girl. She moves her jaw like she’s trying to get something out. Her lips writhe around. She opens wide. “I just want my best friend back!” She runs forward and wraps her arms around the girl.

The girl can’t believe it! It’s a Christmas miracle! A *real* Christmas miracle!

—

Ray arrives back in his office. The way his suit has dried on him—it’s like the clothes *are* him. He presses play on his machine.

“Hi, Ray! It’s Jane. I know it’s Christmas time and you probably don’t want to be thinking about work, but I’m hoping you can help me out with something. Give me a call back when you can.”

Ray dials for Jane.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Jane. This is Ray, calling you back.”

“Hi, Ray! How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been well. How are you and Casey enjoying everything?”

“We love it here! Everything’s been perfect. Thank you *so* much for all your help. Um, you’re wondering why I called. It’s my mom. She needs to move some money around. But she’s out of state now and wants me to find something for her. I’m hoping this can be a simple thing—a quick cash deal, if that’s possible.”

“Uhhh, yeah. Of course. What is it that she—or what are *you* looking for?”

“What do you have that’s nice?”

“Well, actually, I’ve got something really nice at the moment. A seriously rare opportunity.”

“I don’t need the sales pitch. Just tell me what you’ve got.”

“It’s not a sales pitch. It’s beautiful. You might even know of it. On the corner of Cedar and Edgebrook. The towering, dark home behind tall hedges.”

“Oh, I *do* know that home! It’s gorgeous! Why’s the owner selling?”

“Just wants a fresh start.”

“What are they asking?”

“Two fifteen.”

“Ok, Ray. But I’m telling my mom they were asking two thirty. She likes a deal.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Who doesn’t like a deal?”

“I mean, really—you want to buy it?”

“It’s my mom’s money. Maybe I could talk you down, but ... Merry Christmas.”

“Hold on. Just hold on. Maybe the seller *is* asking two thirty.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny. Two fifteen and we have a deal.”

## Chapter 4

“Apple juice is fine.”

“No! It has to be milk! Santa needs milk and cookies!”

“Think about it. Santa’s visiting home after home, getting milk and cookies from every little boy and girl. Then he comes to our house and what does he find? A refreshing change of pace! He’ll be like, what? apple juice?” He does a voice. “These are two children that really put some thought into my snack.” Ray wonders if he’s overselling the concept.

The girl thinks about it, like her father instructs. She puts herself into Santa’s shoes. She guesses that it would be kind of nice to get something different. She nods her head in consent.

Ray pours from a jug into a tall glass, then places the offering with a plate of chocolate cookies onto the end table nearest their tree.

But the girl feels that this anomaly needs a supplement. She runs to her room and retrieves a sheet of paper and a pencil. She thinks hard about the right way to craft her words.

*Dear Santa,*

*Thank you very much.*

*Apple juice is new and exciting.*

*Please like it.*

*Merry Christmas.*

—

The family arises early, but not earlier than usual for Christmas morning. The kids tear through their presents, freaking out over every little thing, jumping up and down with peaks of joy they’ll never experience again.

Kay starts a pot of coffee and opens the fridge. “Ray.” She looks back at the scene around the tree. “Ray,” she calls again.

He stands and walks over. She scoots up close. “Could you go out and get some milk? For cereal and coffee?”

Ray opens the front door, gives Kay a kiss on the cheek, and leaves.

Chapter -3,652.001

“Happy New Year!” The Devil is the size of an SUV now. “Do you want to hear my New Year’s resolution?”

The TV is loud. Kay and May watch despondently.

“I said—” May’s chair disappears underneath her. She falls on her ass. The TV vanishes. “Do you want to hear my New Year’s resolution?”

“No.” May looks down.

Kay shakes her head.

“Good. Here it is. No more secrets.”

May and Kay remain unresponsive.

“Huh, I thought that was going to get more of a reaction. Ok, what if I say it like this—Kay, do you know where May is from? Do you know anything about her?”

Kay looks over.

May closes her eyes and pulls her head to the side in a slow wince. “*Shit.*”

“May ... where *are* you from?”

“Same place as you.” She turns to face Kay. “Probably.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s what he does.” May shows a defeated smile and shrugs her shoulders. “Keeps secrets between people. Stops them from getting close. And if he’s kept something from us, I’m guessing it was for a reason. What’s your address?”

“3466 Mountain Crest Drive, Port—”

“Mountain Crest!? Do you know my daughter!?” May leans forward on her hands. “Catlin! She’s in the small home at the end of the street!”

“Cat’s your daughter!” Kay scrunches up her face. “Wait, Cat’s your daughter?”

“Did you and her have a relationship? Did something happen that could have connected us together?”

“Oh! The door knocker! I have your door knocker!”

“What?”

“Cat gave me your door knocker. It’s on my door!”

“She gave it away!?” May’s expression drops. “Oh.” She rolls over and looks into the floor for a while, then glances back. She rises to her feet and stares at Kay in serious contemplation. “Come on.” She walks from the dark spot.

Kay stands and follows.

“I’m a vegetable. Back home. Every morning my daughter puts me in front of the TV and every night she takes me to bed.” May steps up close to Kay and holds both her hands. “I don’t want to be here. I hate it here.”

“What are you talking about?” The Devil calls out.

May walks Kay further from the darkness. “Arthur died—my husband. After that, my health started to decline. It got to the point where I was moved into hospice. Bret, Stacey, and Melinda decided they wanted to let me move on, but Catlin wasn’t ready. She stole me away and took me to our summer home. I can understand why my children wanted to let me pass. They all have a large inheritance coming their way. And I can also understand why Catlin gave you that door knocker. She’s trying to let go. We can help her do that.” May puts her hands on Kay’s shoulders. “And I can help you. So listen carefully. Behind my home is a shed. Approaching the home from the street, you’ll walk to the right. There’s a cabinet inside with a combination lock. The code is 4-2-7. Inside the cabinet is a shotgun. At the bottom, where the



barrel meets the stock, is a lever. Release this lever to open the chamber. Take two shells from the ammunition box and load them in, red side first, gold side facing you. When you shoot, bring the butt up here.” May brings her hand up and pats the pocket of her shoulder firmly. “There’ll be a strong recoil so make sure to hold the gun tightly.”

“May—”

“Hanging in the cabinet will be a ring of keys. The key with a blue sticker opens the back door. Now repeat it back.”

“What?”

“Repeat it all back to me.”

“Uhhh—behind your home is a shed.”

“Good.”

“In the shed is a shotgun.”

“In a *cabinet* in the shed.”

“In a cabinet in the shed.” Kay nods and straightens up. “The code is 4-2-7. There’s a lever at the bottom that opens the gun. Load two shells in. Red side first, gold side faces me.”

“Then pull the barrel back up. You’ll hear a click.” May mimes the motion and waves Kay on.

“And there are keys in the cabinet and the key with the blue sticker will open the back door.”

“And?”

“And when I fire the gun, hold it tight and bring the bottom up to my shoulder.”

May looks at Kay with a new depth of compassion, then yanks her back to the Devil. “Send her back!” May shouts. “Send her back, right now!”

“Huh, let me think about it. Ummm. No.”

“She needs to get back to her family.”

“Oh, does she?”

“They need her!”

“Correction. *Needed* her. It’s too late now. Her family doesn’t love her anymore.”

“That’s not true,” May insists.

“Let’s see . . . Ray left her. Her daughter despises her. And her son is terrified of her.”

“But they still love me!” Kay steps forward.

“Kay.”

“What?”

“Your family doesn’t love you anymore! HAHHAHAHA.”

May walks toward the Devil. “You know nothing about love.”

“I know more about love than anyone else. Why do people always get confused about that?”

“Ok, then send her back. If both her children tell her they love her, and you’re *wrong*, you’ll let her stay.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because if you send her back and she can’t get both her children to tell her they love her, then you can have *both* our souls.”

“NO, MAY!” Kay shouts.

“What an interesting proposition.”

“May, you can’t!”

May walks Kay further back. “I’m *not*. Not really. That’s what I was saying—about the shed. If I’m not here, there’ll be nothing for the Devil to take. But please, Kay—*please*—take care of me first.” May squeezes her hand. “You can do this.” She pulls her back to

the Devil.

The blue and gold lines around the dark spot freeze. “Kay, is this all right with you?” the Devil asks.

Kay finds herself nodding in the bathroom mirror. She’s staring at her reflection. Bristles run across her teeth. She lowers her toothbrush and turns around. She sees her hallway.

She walks out. Her children are watching TV on the blue striped couch. She steps before them.

“Get out of the way!”

“I can’t see!”

“Oh my God!” Kay falls to her knees and holds her children. “*Oh my God!*”

“Move!”

“Get off!”

In a feat of great strength, Kay removes both her arms from around her children. “You stay right here.” She stands. “Right here!” She looks to the door.

She picks up speed as she moves down the steps, then breaks into a full-on sprint. There’s the shed.

She puts in the code, removes the shotgun and loads it. Where are the keys? There are no keys!

She walks to the back door—she’s got two bullets. She pulls the barrel up to the lock, then drops it down. Her hand shakes as she reaches for the knob. It opens.

Cat is standing in the kitchen, eating salad from a plastic tray. “Kay?” A crouton falls from her fork.

“I’m sorry, Cat!” Kay lifts the gun up to her shoulder, aims the barrel at May’s face, and pulls the trigger.

Kay seems to wake again. She’s stepping slowly down the street.

She looks down and sees she's still holding the shotgun, dragging it along the asphalt. There's a ringing in her ears. She drops the gun and moves on.

As she bursts through the front door, she hears her children scream. They stand from the sofa.

"Tell me you love me."

"Is that blood!?"

"Just—just tell me you—"

"What happened!?"

"Listen!"

"Mommy!" The boy starts to cry.

Kay focuses on the girl. "I just need you to say that you love me."

The girl starts to tear up too.

Kay holds the girl's shoulders and gives her a little shake. "You love me—just say it!"

"I *don't* love you!" The girl stomps her foot. "You made Daddy go away!" She breaks free and runs to her room.

No, no—not now! She looks down to her boy, crying like a baby. She opts for the girl. A force pushes back on the other side of the door, but Kay powers through. When she enters, the girl is on the floor. "I'm sorry, sweetie." She reaches for her daughter, but the girl pulls back. "I'll make it up to you. How about some ice cream? Right now." Kay grabs the girl's hand. "Yeah, let's get ice cream!"

"No!" The girl tries to squirm away.

Kay pretends not to hear the objections as she declares loudly down the hall, "We can all go out for ice cream!"

She opens the front door, then takes the boy with her free hand and walks them to the station wagon. Shoot—the keys. "Get in." She

moves to the house, but her kids stay in place. “GET IN THE CAR, RIGHT NOW!” Kay points her finger and the children scramble.

The keys aren’t hanging from their proper spot by the door. “Fuck!” Kay throws up her hands. “Where did that stupid bitch put them!?”

Kay sees her coat on the dining table. She checks the pocket. Bingo! She puts the coat on and runs back outside. A police car flies by, sirens on. Kay sees Cat at the end of the street, waving toward her. She jumps behind the wheel, puts the wagon in reverse and hightails it out of the neighborhood.

“What’s happening!?” The girl looks through the sideview mirror from the passenger seat. Flashing red and blue lights.

“I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything. But right now—*right now*—I need you to focus.” Kay slows, trying to be with the moment she aims to instill. “Right now, just listen to me. You’ll understand soon enough. I promise.”

Another police car joins the chase as Kay speeds past.

“I’ve been a bad mommy. I’m ... I know.” Kay pushes her words out through quivering lips. “I know I’ve been a bad mommy.” She tries to focus on the road as her vision blurs. “I’m so sorry that I haven’t been there for you. I want you to know, no matter what—*no matter what*—I will always love you.” Kay looks over to her beautiful daughter. “Do you understand that?” She turns back to her wonderful son. “*Always!*”

Kay reaches out and holds her girl’s shoulder. She feels the back of her neck, rubs her thumb across her sweet skin. “Nothing can change that.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy! I’m sorry! I love you!” The girl hugs her mother with great momentum.

“Oh, my sweet angel! I love you so much!”

“I love you, Mommy!” she cries.

The boy sees his mother looking at him through the rearview mirror. His teeth are chattering. He pushes himself up, trying to squirm out of the situation. He looks through the back window at a group of police cars in close pursuit.

“Tell me you love me. *Please*. Mommy really needs to hear it right now.”

The boy pisses his pants.

Kay reaches around and holds his thigh. “I love you. Don’t you love me?” The wagon approaches a small bridge. Kay spins around. “TELL ME YOU LOVE ME!”

Just then a stag appears. Kay swerves. The car flies off the bridge and into the water.

—

White and gold swirl into black and blue. Kay hears a beeping, then Terri.

“San Diego! What’s he doing in *San Diego!*?”

Her world flashes and pulses. She’s in light, in darkness. It’s Marc. She hears him speaking tenderly.

“Your mommy is going to go to sleep. But this is going to be a different kind of sleep. Ok? This kind of sleep is different because ...” Marc steadies his overwhelming sadness. “This type of sleep is a type of sleep that people do forever. And ...” Marc breaks. “*Oh God!*” he whimpers. “But it’s ok.” He sniffles. “It’s ok, because she’s going to be with your sister now. Up in Heaven. And one day, *one day* you’ll all be together again. Right now you just have to tell your mommy goodnight. Ok? That’s all. You just have to say goodnight to your mommy. So go on—go on. Tell her you love her.”

Kay hears a rustling.

“Mommy—”

HAAAAAAAAAAAA! HA-HAH!

AHAHAHAHA-HAHAH-HAHAH.

HA! <sub>HAHAHA</sub> (MWHHAHAHH) AHAHAH!

HEEEE <sub>heeee hoOO</sub> HOOO. Krfluff! Cadoodle! HAHAHA!

HEHEHE! HOHOHO!