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SHORT STORIES

Master's Thesis

by

CALEB NELSON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

June 2015

Creative Writing Program

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SHORT STORIES

Master's Thesis

by

CALEB NELSON

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## ABSTRACT

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## SHORT STORIES

June 2015

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Directed by Professor Jill McDonough

Storytellers have an interdependent relationship with their narratives. If you have ever told a lie, you understand. Stories take on a life of their own, as you consider the potential ramifications of each contingent piece. Definite sets of things happen as results of specific other things. If you throw an ax at me, only a few things can immediately happen, and our relationship will be forever changed. Events evolve. When we create or discover a narrative, we live by its logic. Upon consideration, a moment compels a series of moments modulated by a voice, a single perspective, a personal narrative, which is to say a story. Stories are fabrications of reality, conveyance mechanisms of fact, fiction, and assertion. Stories are contrived, whereas narratives just exist. Narratives are there to be discovered. They are the veins of human action left by life's tendency toward disorder. Narrative is entropy through time.

Why should I fear that which cannot exist when I do?

- Epicurus

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## MEMORIES LIKE FLIES

One Sunday afternoon I whipped Fedna with a strand of grass, chasing him while he stacked rocks waist high. We laughed. I played the Egyptian to his Jew, as we saw acted out on the felt board in Bible School. We were five. My mom ran up, grabbed under my arms, and next thing we're in the kitchen, and I have a terrible new story in which I am doomed to take part. That is how I found out that I am white. Fedna is black, as black as he is a friend to me now, meaning superficially. My mom knocked a wedge between us that day that only dug deeper as we learned our stories. When I saw him a few years ago he was an aspiring record producer, addicted to heroine, and homeless. "The world is a stage," Shakespeare noted, and we play out a part established by our collective ancestors. Fedna often came to dinner when we were little because his mom locked him out of the house until 10pm. Things happen, we react, and those actions send us down a limited number of paths. We each live within the narratives we have learned and we act them out accordingly. Narratives are functions of time and entropy. They exist in the written word, but I think that we can find a definition of narrative that reaches beyond language.

James was older. He got shot in the leg in a drive-by while walking with Fedna's older brother, who'd just gotten out of juvie. Attractive narratives about gangsters circulated giving symbolic realness to a rolled up pant leg, showing off your jail time. James got a gun. He got caught. He spent two years in Walpole. Now he says he cannot get into college. I asked the admissions office at UMB, and it is true—no gun charges. We play out the narratives our parents and peers give us, and the results sometimes feel



like fate. We feed off of each other for direction and purpose. Writers interpret narratives we play out into media. We act and react often based on context, on the stories that we are told.

The truth, for example, has a narrative. Try expressing truth without syllables, words, time, movement. Even dance is narrative. I play loose with the term because it is widely defined. We often hear these words used interchangeably: fiction, narrative, and story. We use story to define narrative, narrative to define story, and both story and narrative to describe fiction. We use all three to convey truth and reality. We use fictions, stories, and narratives to unpack our memories, and to understand what happened earlier in time than the earliest oral history we've heard. We use them to unpack reality, and to identify objective things. They offer us awareness to how and why things happen. They work interdependently, with differences.

Truths exist independent of stories. Truths are simple things like time and gravity. Stories sometimes convey truth. They can make the truth palatable. They can also create enticing lies, dangerous lies. Fiction should be about what is true in a grander sense. It should attempt to approximate the infinite nature of the unknown. Salman Rushdie suggests that literary fiction, by definition, must grapple with politics and economic disparity. "It seems imperative to me that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than *what is the case*, what is truth and what is untruth" (465). The ability to think critically about things that have happened, hinges on our ability to remember and process them. Stories help us process, remember, and share events by pinpointing their emotional impact within a climax. Stories allow us to experience and think about our emotions, and their effects. This essay offers an overview

of the things I read and my thoughts as I wrote and compiled my thesis. It is an effort to reflect on the relevance of fiction, to understand how stories work, and to give definition to the concept, narrative.

Everyone involved in an incident formulates a personal narrative. We call these stories, and they are filtered through our perspectives. When we interact, there is your narrative, my narrative, and any number of other narratives, which are other ways of expressing the same event in language. Our narratives will differ based on our individual experiences, which reflect on the ongoing narrative that is our life. We use stories to codify our memories. With fiction we try to create stories that express deeper truths. We invent fictions using narrative as a tool, like a sculptor uses a block of marble. Narratives address how things happen, but answering ‘why’ requires an additional cognitive leap. ‘Why’ questions require value judgments, which arrive through the artifice of storytelling, yet stories can be perilous. Stories of war, adventure, and daring, sometimes stimulate fantasies of violent heroism.

Awareness of the unreliability of any narrator, no matter how seemingly trustworthy, exposes the inherent fictitiousness of any story. Self-aware narratives date back to the tenderest roots of the novel, at least to *Don Quixote*, which expresses the frivolity, and also the ferocity of fiction by mocking it. Saavedra’s protagonist is a crazy rich person, with a fictitious knighthood, who, seduced by knightly tales, finds himself on a journey of his own devising. From phrases like, “But the author of this history, though he has devoted research and industry to the discovery of the deeds achieved by Don Quixote in his third sally, has been unable to obtain any information respecting them, at any rate derived from authentic documents; tradition has merely preserved in the

memory” (XI), a narrator emerges continually trying to convince his readers that the thing he is writing is true. It is a story pretending to be a history, written in a fashion to highlight the fabrications of knights and kings, portraying their purportedly heroic conquests as misguided disruptions to the lives of common people. Fiction, as an art form, has certain expectations. It does not require fact, but it must spark emotion. *Don Quixote* sparks hilarity, and in doing so it demonstrates why we cannot trust any single written thing to be more than a fiction.

Fast forward through three hundred and seventy years of conquest, colonization, and migration. Think of the millions of elapsed narratives experienced and expressed by millions of displaced people in the Americas and elsewhere. Most of these are lost to history because they were never written down, or blatantly forgotten. Forgetting, sometimes, becomes an element of identity. Maxine Hong-Kingston begins her book *The Woman Warrior* (1976) with an oral history about her dad’s sister, as told by her mom. Her aunt committed suicide in China. The first lines of her book, “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said” (1), suggests how histories get lost in (in this case) misguided shame. The stories we learn from the people that raise us become the invisible bulwark from which we construct our identities. Kingston writes, “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (5). She contrasts the stories her mom told her, with stories about her family’s life in America. All of the dissociated stories in this book coalesce into a single narrative, a single series of words by which we can better understand how we construct identity. The narrative in this book is expansive. It condenses hundreds of years of stories, both memories and fictions passed down through

whatever mediums, through her mom's oral histories, with the experiences of a Chinese-American family. Through this fragmented narrative, Kingston mimics the piecemeal way that we come to understand the narratives into which we are born, and all the associated political baggage. She combines realism with fantasy into a simulation of how our brains work.

Fictions can deconstruct the idea that reality can be constructed through a narrative expressed in an individual perspective. The cognitive dissonance created by subverting realism with fantasy can make a reader aware of the uncomfortable truth that some aspects of life will remain unknowable and misunderstood, and that we experience absurdity within reality. Stories can make only vague sense of what is real. Fiction expresses those things that can never be facts by condensing an infinity of possibility into a series of moments. Truth is an expression of the infinite, the inexpressible reality that all literature attempts to grasp. Here-in lies the paralyzing idea that life itself is narrative organized by our imaginations.

Kingston categorizes *The Woman Warrior* as both a biography and a fiction. Using the word biography is an especially odd choice, as opposed to memoir. The stories of *The Woman Warrior* are learned accounts of fictional or filial women. The narrator is an introspective, Chinese-American woman. She uses stories about her ancestors to make sense of her own experiences, so we might say that *The Woman Warrior* is a biography of the Chinese-American female identity in general. Far from lambasting heroic myth, Kingston presents myths as a central aspect of ethnic identity. Many stories in her book ring true, but the truth of the stories is not as important as their emotional impact. Fiction offers an alternative to the binary true and false. The fun in fiction is that anything at all

can happen, with reason. Fiction invites us to indulge our fantasies. It is a safe-zone for nonsense, and also for social critique.

There are many facets of the Chinese-American and female experience that I can only pretend to understand. I can only imagine, and I want to imagine. I want to discover ways to reach across that cultural divide, partially because my in laws are Chinese. The Chinese-American experience is not monolithic. Delving into Chinese culture, I might read *The White Monkey*, my wife's favorite childhood story, and any number of other fictions from the ancient Chinese literary tradition. I might learn a little Cantonese. I might read *The Woman Warrior* to find purchase for the Chinese-American character I tried to create in the stories I wrote for my thesis. Still I do not feel the same guttural disgust as my wife does when I hear the phrase "Asian sex slave" in American media, even though I do not know why the Asian part important. I cannot stand in my wife's shoes when someone complements her English, or otherwise comments on her accent. Identities have real world ramifications, including my own identity. The prism of my experience will distort everything I write. I cannot ignore history. I am living out a white male narrative.

We have evolved into a classist society, and race and ethnicity are central to the way we describe each other. It is almost impossible to avoid racial thoughts when we venture outside of our own cultural bubbles. White people tend to live around white people, for example, because it is exhausting to continually have to realize one's own racial identity. I mention white people, because we rarely read things that are written by white Americans and talk about the European-American identity. Society develops around its stories, the formulated memories of its participants. Racial and ethnic tensions

grow out of stories. We cannot ignore these stories, because these stories tell us how our society came to exist in the way it does. Policies like affirmative action would not make any sense without these stories. We must understand our history, and endeavor to maintain credible historical records to affect positive changes in society. For that we need stories, but we also need fictions. We need fictions to break past the limits of our classist imaginations, to give us inklings of what could be.

Fictions reach back millennia. They are a product of oral history. Stories are long-term memory tools. Think of all the fictions that made the stars useful for navigation, the constellations, the star in the East of Osiris and Jesus (beneath Orion's Belt). When we tell fictions we engage reality, perhaps we adjust physics, perhaps we make animals talk, and this allows us to explore metaphysical realms. In fiction we can make absurd things happen. There is a thrill in imagining glorious and tragic things. Fictions give us metaphors for expressing the metaphysical concepts we use to construct our society.

Franz Kafka wrote metaphorically about his family in *The Metamorphosis*, which is my favorite depiction of the way people deal with identities they do not understand. This story works like a parable. There is no clear lesson, only a punch. The emotive moment at the end is an odd combination of relief, guilt, and sadness. In the end we realize the inevitability of Gregor's death. We dwell on it because the punch is not the realization, but the fact. He had no place in his family as a cockroach. When I read this story in high school, I felt a deep connection to Gregor, having grown up in a religious home, and having rejected my parents' faith. There is a psychological split between my consciousness and theirs. Ultimately, unfortunately, their feeling is that if I do not take on the identity that they shepherded me toward as a child, I can go to hell. When I read

Kafka's fiction, I feel connected, because there are other people that feel like cockroaches. Good fiction helps us realize that our differences are primarily superficial.

Our narratives confine us as they develop through cause and effect, and we are apparently doomed to act them out. There is an element of fate in this notion, but we can steer our narratives to some extent. I am not suggesting an idealistic American vision of meritocracy, where anyone supposedly can be exceptional, where merit is associated with capital, and where poverty is a result of poor morals. This idea has taken root in America, though it was made explicit in writing in England (by Adam Smith among others).

In a recent collection of essays, Zadie Smith grapples with the purpose and value of novels. She writes that Kafka's writings do not fulfill the basic criteria of the novel, to create a "significant sequence in narrative" (17), because he experienced an existential crisis when trying to develop a cohesive, long form, narrative. So he does something all together different. "Kafka directs your attention inwards, momentarily and with great force [...] in search of a kind of pure being that the world has no precise name for" (17). He distorts reality in order to express infinite uncertainty about what it means for something to be true. Smith suggests that novels combine our necessary lies to develop metaphorical journeys from one spot to another, which we artificially pack with significance. We "self-fictionalize" she says in order to "discover how indeed it is possible to live" (20). Smith has also written about abstract truth in fiction (specifically the novel), though she equates it with ideology. In the forward to her collection of essays, Smith wrote, "Ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith." She quotes Saul Bellow to sum up this belief: "There may be truths on the side of life." Fiction, in this case, is not meant to solve conflict but to shed light on its nature. Smith

challenges what narrative ought to be, what it ought to do, and she uses her fiction to challenge her readers' assumption about what narratives accomplish socially.

In her most recent novel, *NW*, Smith confronts the perceived ideal of individualism—noting the inter-reliance of her characters, tracking the cause and effect of the decisions they make—by forcing her readers to judge its individuals in the context of her novel's social environs. “One person's expansiveness will only result in another person's confinement” (20). The problem of the novel is essentially the problem of fiction of any length, its limited capacity to portray the true state of things. Fiction often explores what is ethical in order to discern underlying truths about society. However, Smith makes her “characters dismantle any hope of locating the ethical in the social” (21), emulating Kafka. In doing so she unearths the conceptual basis of our ethics. Her stylistic choices in *NW* articulate discord between the ideology of self-definition and our social reality. The circumstances of the characters in *NW* play a larger role in their social positions than their decisions.

*NW* compiles three different narratives, which coalesce in a fourth section. She follows three characters—Leah, Keisha, and Felix—through the various circumstances that make up the foundation of the very first chapter of the novel. Leah is a white woman; Keisha is a black woman; Felix is a black man. Race plays an important role in shaping the climax, introduced in the first section, of each of their narratives. The overall narrative provides a patchwork of experiences, which are hard to entirely connect on a first reading. Smith employs realism while keeping her readers aware of the methods and the perspectives employed at any given moment. Her fragmented chapters make readers participate in assembling her overall narrative.



She establishes the unreliability of narrative by pointing out the fallibility of memory, and also the artifice of time in constructing a narrative. The third section immediately orients readers at an abstract moment in time. It begins, “There had been an event. To speak of it required the pluperfect” (201). The event described happened six years before a proposed present moment in time, which finds Keisha in a shoe shop listening to her mother, Marcia, recount the moment when Keisha met her best friend. There are three elements at odds in this brief narrative that work to reveal the nature of storytelling: the initial pluperfect narration lasts only a sentence and a half before it is subsumed by Marcia’s account in dialogue, which is finally subsumed by a close third person internalization of the story. The story ends within Keisha’s mind, and she is unable to “contradict nor verify the account” (202). There is one glaring error in her mother’s story, the fact that Keisha’s sister, Jayden, could not have been in her mother’s arms in this story. Jayden would not have been born—a lapse in the chronology of Marcia’s narrative, exposing a fault in memory. Maybe Keisha was 5, not 4, but the details do not matter. The presence of that inconsistency makes the reader especially aware of how memory is unreliable. For the reader this story works as a reference point for how time, place, and perspective are treated in the third section. Ultimately it is an illustration of how the human brain processes and distorts stories. Narratives do not appear in our minds complete. We realize narratives with some effort, and a good amount of imagination. The narrative, however, is there, external to our own consciousness. When we hear or read a story, we experience a narrative.

Novels that address ethnicity and race take on the burden of associated stereotypes, and are expected to deconstruct them. Smith’s novel challenges this assertion

through tangential associations, “Everybody likes fried chicken. Everybody” (42). She places the responsibility of recognizing the races associated with stereotypes on her reader, and she seems to be suggesting something radical about human psychology, that stories are unnatural constructions of our thoughts. In reality, our minds pass unconsciously, associatively, between our learned definitions of the things we physically experience in a moment and brief snippets of memories. Only in retrospect, with effort, we develop these into the stories that we share with others. Thus all written narratives are retrospective fabrications, fictions. In my experience stereotypes are the traits we most readily notice about people outside of our own race, and we notice them quite often. We participate in the narrative, emphasizing certain cultural or incidental observations. We view history through an English prism. The prism is slowly shifting, as writers confront the racial biases in society. We live in a racist society, and because of this everyone has racial, if not racist thoughts. The question is how to deal with them.

Characters not specifically or implicitly defined by race are still implicitly white in English literature at the moment. Perceptions of race and culture are often enforced using realism. Realism informs our perceptions of reality by shaping our definitions of things, and yet even employing realism cannot accurately express reality. If literary fiction must seek truth, then its form must also be implicated in that pursuit. Angela Carter, a proponent of fantasy, in an essay *Notes on the Gothic Mode*, frames realism as an expression of sincerity. She writes, “Only stupid and uncreative artists protect their art with sincerity.” Fiction can only be literary if it transforms reality. She speaks of reality in the metaphysical sense. “A fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help

transform reality itself” (133). The reason that some modern critics are skeptical of realism is that its imitation of the real is inherently a counterfeit. It’s a lie. Literary fiction, they suggest, must address existential questions about existence, not merely represent what we can empirically discern.

Stories develop from metaphysical concerns. They can convey truth, or make it palatable, but more often they are lies designed for comfort and entertain. There are two essential elements in any story: character and conflict. These exist primarily in the mind of the reader. Time and place, which are strictly elements of narrative, are elements of the prose itself. Emotive elements I tried making place and time secondary in my fiction, but reading back I found several inconsistencies, and I’m sure that there are others. On my next revision I will focus on developing the physical elements of the narrative. I employ realism in the stories in this thesis, in order to emphasize the racial reality I perceive in my personal experience. I want to emphasize the tendency of white males to start racial discussions with no awareness of power dynamics.

The white male perspective dominates literature, still. I have been struggling with this reality, trying to generate a genuine voice protesting this literary convention. Without historical context, if the entire population of Earth experienced mass amnesia and all records vanished, American media would stop exclusively covering the English monarchy. The monarchy would crumble. Theories would develop surrounding shared languages, but our interests would diverge. Sociological facts without cultural or historical context have limited significance. You can say more Haitians live here, in these ten blocks, than in the rest of the city combined, but that information is useless without context. Stories are context. Stories make narratives meaningful. A story is a creative

sequence of information, a series that impels us to think about the information external to the words themselves. We create stories to identify meaning, and also to generate our identities and alliances.

We cover British politics extensively in American media, and read British literature much more frequently than translated literature in academic settings, because both our politics and our language grew out of England. We have a common narrative, and that narrative in my view is a primary reason why white people (many with English roots) dominate the resources on this continent, or at least why many white people find themselves securely within the middle class. English fiction has a deeply developed strain of realism, easy and enjoyable to read, carried on by writers like Ian McEwan. I read one of his books, *Saturday*, so I cannot comment on the scope of writing. *Saturday* struck me as brilliant and provocative until the end, when I realized that I had assumed the entire time that the protagonist and all the supporting characters were white. I still assume that they were because at the end of the book “a light boned Filipino nurse” (251) appears, and shortly afterward two West Indian men. Then there’s a black assistant, and a patient described as an “African queen” (276). These observations succeeded in jarring me, and that may be the intended effect. They also made me question the way that I employ realism, because in context these observations seem to affirm a conservative white male perspective.

Stories are absurdly powerful, especially when we believe them to be true. Stories of Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions lured the U.S. into a war we now find near impossible to escape. McEwan deals specifically with this historical narrative (and its effect on British society). It is strictly realist fiction that takes place over the course of a

day, in the tradition of Mrs. Dalloway. The clear, coherent structure sheds light on the components of narrative, suggesting empirical truth therein by exploring how humans integrate sensory perception and memory. On the way to a squash match, McEwan's protagonist, Perowne, navigates through a protest against the Iraq war, in which his daughter is marching. He "has had ambivalent or confused and shifting ideas about this coming invasion" (60), and by the end of the novel he remains ambivalent. His daughter has a sort of ideological blindness, and they argue along various well-trodden narratives about the war toward the center of the book. By the end of the novel Perowne is content in the comfort of his home and the personal fulfillment he gets from being a neurosurgeon. The story demonstrates why and how middle class white people remain ambivalent, but it works to affirm the English power structure in a way that I find somewhat disturbing.

An inconsistent narrative style is one way of dissociating fiction from reality. James Kelman's *Busted Scotch* (1997), for example, twists the traditional means and ends of storytelling with an unnerving use of time, space, voice, and dissonant conclusions force readers to contemplate the nature of narrative, and serve as a rebuttal to convention. Through its defiance of form, this book also defies the values of the individualist social mode that rose to particular prominence during the last century. Any fantastical elements in the stories in *Busted Scotch* are located in the periphery of their characters' consciousness<sup>□1</sup>. There is a definite realism in the accounts in these books, but they also attempt to uncover a deeper reality beyond the physical, or sensual. They attempt to unlock a deeper truth, by challenging their readers to consider the perspectives of their

characters. Kelman tends to maintain linear narratives that are incontrovertibly governed by the laws of physics. He has been criticized as a for doing so.

Kelman's fiction, for the most part, takes on a practical, realist tone. He works through every-day narratives to highlight underlying social conditions of the economically depressed. For him fiction is inherently political, but it also balances reality and fantasy. In an essay from his book *Some Recent Attacks* (1992) he wrote, "You cannot get true fictions and you cannot get false fictions; they just exist; stories just exist" (7). Kelman conflates stories and fiction, arguing that stories are all fictitious in a way, because they are constructions. His use of realism, however, does not differ substantially from McEwan's. It work for me because Kelman uses realism to disturb his reader, creating a sense of dissatisfaction that sends me into deep reflection on social justice.

Storytellers discover or conjure narratives, and are governed by their narratives. If you have ever been caught in a lie, you understand. Stories take on a life of their own, as we consider the potential ramifications of each contingent piece. Definite sets of things happen as results of specific other things. If you throw an ax at me, only a few things can immediately happen. When we create a story, we must live by its logic. Upon consideration a moment develops into a series modulated by a voice, a single perspective, a personal narrative, which is to say a story. I propose that narratives exist for humans to both discover and create. They are neither fictions, nor facts, but series of assertions. Narrative is a function of time, a series of compounding facts. There is a series of facts, a narrative that we can never fully discover, explaining the universe, our evolution, and existence. There are true things beyond our consciousness, which have nothing to do with our constructions of justice and morality. Humanity has developed the ability to chart

these narratives, and to invent our own. We translate narratives into language, and call them stories. This perspective on narrative partially grows from my experience gathering oral history.

Granddad told me a story: as a toddler Abbie (my aunt) ate flies from the window sills. “She’d put one in her mouth, and you’d reach in and all you’d get were some legs,” He said. This is a phrase from Granddad's memory, something he thought of in a moment with me and a digital recorder recording his audio-biography. At the time, oak leaves filtered sunlight through the bay windows in Granddad's dining room, where we sat next to a massive concrete slab bedecked with stones, which held up the roof in the center of the house he built in Syracuse, NY. My memory, when I listen to this clip, is of place. I recorded several hours of Granddad’s stories. While editing the audio I found a bunch of these incidental snippets of memory, and I wondered whether or not Granddad’s memory of Abby eating flies is a story at all, or merely a narrative portion from his memory.

Fiction can work in short form: “For sale, baby shoes, never worn.” There are three facts in those six words, and they are abstract enough to conjure a story. "For sale" establishes the image of a sign or notice, the act of offering, commerce, and a character, a seller. “Baby shoes” qualifies the commerce, and fills out our setting. It is specific, so we must be reading a notice. "Never worn" dramatically classifies the notice, and gives it significant meaning. In the final instant, on “worn,” we perceive a conflict, and a drama develops in our brains. Each of us will think of a different narrative. The further our imaginations wander, the more distinct our narratives become. Reading those six words I think of Granddad’s experience with sudden infant death, and his entire story runs through me in a flash. Words, like sparks, ignite ideas. They blaze into narratives if we

dwell on them. We judge stories based on how their words collectively affect our consciousness.

Identities are constructions based on the societies where we live, grow, and communicate. They are convenient fictions that we develop in order to explain our feelings and our world views. Granddad’s oral history touches on identity issues (class, race, religion, sex), but I want to add a dissonant perspective to his memories. I want to deconstruct white privilege. I view racial inequality as a direct result of oral history. The stories our ancestors give us influence how we act in society. They shape us, and in doing so they also influence the way we imbibe other stories. We approach every story purported to be true with a certain amount of faith in the source. Fictions on the other hand require only imagination.

This thesis represents a small portion of a larger project, which incorporates Granddad’s oral history. It is the first half of a central narrative, that weaved in-between two other independent narratives about Lynn and Alfant respectively, and a speculative fiction about immigration from Lynn’s parents’ perspective. I hope, in revision, to make each single one of these stories fly independently, like memories.

I do not think that memories appear in our brains as stories. Granddad’s assertion about Abby is not a story. It is a fact he thought of while looking at the dead flies that had collected along his windows while we were talking. It could, however, work as a part of a larger story about parenthood. A functional story needs to resonate beyond the moment it describes.

If you pin down a moment—Abbie ate a fly—the potentials multiply into a substantial array of possibilities, given time. Narrative indicates a cause and effect



relationships among beings and nature. Storytelling is as much about sequence and word choice as it is about the actual facts being conveyed. If we adjust the language in that six-word story — unused baby shoes for sale — even though we get the same information, it doesn't mean as much. We need a provocative “never worn” moment to compel us to reflect on the entire phrase. Any fact (or assertion) can germinate into a story through the application of imagination. Granddad's assertion that Abby ate flies from the windowsill could be relevant to any number of stories. It could be the premise for a tragedy, if someone put rat poison along the windows. It could also turn into a story from the perspective of a fly trying to escape the house. In any case, stories are functions of human cognition, constructions of emotion. They are narratives reduced to plots. No real thing has a plot, because plotting a narrative skews it into the perspective of a storyteller. A plot is the essence of a narrative in a storyteller's words. Story, narrative, and plot describe the construction of fictions. We develop communal understandings, memory, and even epistemological truths (like morality and justice) through our fictions.

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## ASMR

Snow flowed through the wind in the allies. Wet. Clingy. Hydrogen. Oxygen. Crystallized. Sublimating. Alfant lay in his parents's house, facing the ceiling, a streetlight in view down the sidewalk from the window obscured by the fir tree. Inside it was dim, otherwise dark, and headlights, and the rush of tires through slush, yellow snow plow lights slipping through the windows, along the walls, some blinking, some sliding like the rectangular eye of a robot scanning the atmosphere, running—periodically, in alternate directions—along the plaster walls, and the purr and hummock curled in Alfant's armpit. He drew a cool breath into his nose, arms out-stretched along his torso on a new bed. He watched the lights. The cat stood up, climbed onto Alfant's chest, and tickled his nose with its tail.

Alfant tossed the cat to the ground, his brother's cat, abandoned due to college, and now only Mom and Alfant to feed it. Dad would't. The cat landed in a pile of laundry. Alfant sat up, slid his computer out from under the bed, and searched for ASMR videos. He clicked one called Face & Scalp Massage By The Crackling Fire ASMR - Release, Breath, Rejuvenate. A woman, Lynn Wu ASMR, worked her fingers around the microphones on the sides of the camera, simulating a scalp massage.

We have these pressure points on our face and our head, Lynn said in a rhythmic whisper.

Warm light from the plasma screen radiated against Alfant's skin and glistened in his retina. If we press just properly by your eyes, it helps to make all your stress, and all the tightness of the muscles melt away, Lynn continued. To release, relax, and let go . . .

After about twenty minutes of passive absorption Alfant minimized the video and typed something into a comment. He packed a pipe and watched the remaining thirty minutes of microphones scratching and whispers. At the end, he scrolled down to his comment:

Alf Man: I can't stop watching the birthmark on your lip. Here's what I look like if I draw one on myself d^.\_^b Thanks for the tingle fest.

Lynn Wu ASMR: My birthmark so ugly though. I really hate it.

Alf Man: You shouldn't. It's beautiful. I love your videos. I watch every one you post. I watch you and my brain's like : : poof : :

Lynn Wu ASMR: Thanks. You're sweet.

He clicked into her channel, and skimmed About: Hi fellow ASMR heads, I'm just an average person with an above average dream for this planet. I dream of world wide community . . . happy . . . healthy . . . and helping one another. Enjoy these motivational, soulful, and beautifying 3D audio experiences. I made them to help you relax, and possibly sleep. I hope my little channel in this little corner of the Internet can help you in some way. Lynn Wu ~ P.O. BOX 55179 . . .

Plows still passed occasionally now, after midnight. Snow had been falling since the afternoon. Six inches in view on the gable next to Alfant's window on the second floor. He climbed off his bed, shuffled through the jumble of office supplies stuffed on a shelf by his desk. He found the folder he'd made of job postings and resumes.

That's where it was, he mumbled and tossed it toward his desk, where it fell behind his printer. He found an envelope with a stamp, and pulled a few pieces of paper from the printer tray. He sat at the desk, pushed a few knick knacks aside and sat in his over-sized deck chair.

Dear Lynn, he wrote and stopped. He crumpled up the paper and threw toward the trash can. On the next sheet he wrote:

Hi Lynn,

I'm enamored with you. I've never seen someone so beautiful in my life. The way your mouth moves, your voice, your accent entrances me. I realize that you probably hear this often, but I would really like to meet you in person, just one time. I see from your address that we live in the same city, so I'm reaching out in the hope of a date. I realize that this is weird. I've been trying to figure out how to do ask you for a month, and I can't think of any other method than directness. You never respond with much to my messages on your channel, which is understandable given the number of comments you respond to every day on your feed. Since you give out a P.O. box, I feel you might appreciate a physical note more than more digital. I was born in the 80s too, so paper just seems more legitimate to me for some reason. I realize —

I realize, I realize, I realize, he said, and crumpled up that paper as well. The third paper was the last, and he felt a certain dull finality as he wrote:

Assume I'm crazy, and you should probably stay away. But I can't control my emo — and I'm obsessed with your online persona, and I'd like to meet you in person. I'd like to take you on one date, actually, where ever you want. You pick the place. Hit

me up @AlfMan if you're interested in getting to know me, or throw out this damn paper, and forget I existed.

Only yours,

Alfant English

He looked at his chicken scratch and shook his head. Just do it, he said to himself and he folded the paper and addressed the envelope: Lynn Wu, P.O. BOX 55179 . . .

Outside the wind blew viciously between the buildings. Alfant's parents house was one of several three story mansion-style structures on the street. Alfant stood on the front porch in his slippers, peering out through the melee of snowflakes across the street toward the apartment building, and storefront beneath, and the mailbox out front, none of which he could see. The snow melted on contact with the salty road, and a few cars passed as disembodied cones of light in the blizzard.

## A DRAGON GOBBLES THE SUN

From the balcony of her parent's apartment, Lynn watched the odd light and shadow projected on the earth and the snow from a total solar eclipse. She tried to look directly at it for a moment, and a blazing circle lingered in her vision. The light made weird reflections on the snow. Most people paused on the sidewalk, staring up. Some wore special glasses, others, like Lynn, watched the effect of the light on the atmosphere, or they scuttled along disinterestedly through the chill on business. All of their long, indistinct shadows, grew and shifted together until the light was gone. Lynn lit a second cigarette, and pulled her dad's fat down coat close around her body. What little snow the wind had missed on this balcony, ten floors up, twenty floors down, had crusted in a slope along the base of the railing. She stood in front of the chair she'd brought from her apartment for her dad to sit in while he smoked.

The eclipse ended in minutes, like Lynn's cigarette. She shoved it into a beer can that had been frozen to the railing for a month.

Inside of the apartment her mom had finished praying, and was lighting incense. Mama said, 你会回家□春□?

当然, Lynn said. 我□不会□□它。

萍的□□打□□□我

□什么呢?

我不想迄今□止平, □□

你得到□么老。你什么□候安定下来?

Lynn scurried up the stairs while her mom spoke. □嘴你个老□ , she yelled back. She burst through the door of her old bedroom, and stopped abruptly. Her dad lay on his side, on the bed, breathing softly, wrapped in a wool blanket, which he grasped in his fists. She hung his coat on the garment rack in the corner, dug into the closet and untied a plastic bag. From inside she pulled a comforter, and flung it out over him, dispersing the cool gasses around the room, sending goosebumps up her own neck.

Lynn's sister peeked into the room. Is dad ok?

He's fine, Lynn said. Just tired.

They crossed the cramped hallway together. Clear plastic crates, stacked waste high, full of items from their childhood, lined the walls. Two cloths lines ran along the ceiling from the bathroom door to over the stairs. A pink bathrobe, a pair of jeans and a few shirts hung in out of the way places along the walls. They opened the door across the way, and entered the biggest room in the apartment, besides the living room. Inside fewer things were wrapped in plastic.

Sis, did you see the eclipse? It was so beautiful. I watched it through my window. Did you have glasses?

I didn't really watch it much, Lynn said. I just sat outside. She opened the top drawer of one of the two dressers and pulled out a Hello Kitty makeup bag.

Mama been praying a lot today, Sister said. Is she still praying downstairs?

Oh, Sister, Lynn said. Mama is talking about marriage again.

She's always talking about marriage.

She said I'm getting old. I hate her.



Sister lay back on the queen size bottom bunk of the bunkbed she shared with their older brother. I been thinking, she said. Do you need a roommate?

You can move in with me, Sis, if you want to.

That would be good, Sister said, because I got a job in admissions. I hardly do anything, Sis. I spent the whole last week printing things out and giving them to my boss. I watch the first season of Galaxy Quest.

You're so lazy, Sis, Lynn said. Is dad working tonight?

I don't think so. Oh my god, Sis, did you hear what happen?

What happen? Oh my god, did Dad quit again?

He got into a fight, Sis. Another cook put a rag in the 炒肉寒意

Oh, wow.

Sister spoke over Lynn. 和爸爸把他扔到□上, 破了一个洞。

He broke the wall?

He put a dirty rag in his wok, Sis. You wouldn't be angry?

I guess so, Lynn said. I feel he been getting so mad lately.

You haven't been here, Sis. It's been terrible.

Sister, let me tell you. Lynn finished dabbing concealer over a pimple near her lower lip. I'm going to get Dad a fish so he cook for me, Lynn said. Are you coming?

No, I'm going out with Bob tonight.

Oh Bob. That whore. Why do you still date him, Sis?

He's not a whore, Sister said. 'Cause I love him.

Your mom love him.

No she doesn't.

That's the point, Lynn said. I'm so mad you're leaving.

You should have called.

I came here right from work, Lynn said. Well, I'm going if you want to come.

They left the apartment together, and Sister drove Lynn to the market. How are the videos going? Sister said.

I'm actually making money from it. I bought a new microphone.

That's decent. It's still a little weird to me. I don't see how its interesting to people to watch you whisper for an hour at a time.

You have to feel it, Sis. It's the sensation.

Ok, Sister pulled up by the curb.

Bye Sis. Lynn hopped onto the sidewalk.

The store lights shone cold florescence on the ice and fish scales. She picked a tilapia, green beans and a few brussel sprouts. On the way home, she stopped at her P.O. Box, and opened a hand written letter. She read for a moment, and then tapped out a message on her phone.

Lynn: I just got a mail from someone who wants to date me.

She stood in the entryway, absorbed in information on her screen, and then she began walking absentmindedly out onto the street toward her house. Her phone buzzed.

Sister: Oh my god? Did he send you a picture?

Lynn: There's one online. Search, "Alfant Bendemann." Do you think he's an ax murderer?

Sister: Oh, he's cute, Sis. I don't know. How did he get your mailbox?

Lynn: Probably on my channel.

Sister: Your channel? Who signs their letters, Only yours?

Lynn: It's not done with love. It's done with hastiness.

At home, Dadi cooked the fish with the vegetables and white rice. After dinner, she returned to the porch with a few sheets of printer paper. She lay them over the ice encrusted seat cushion, sat, smoked another of her dad's cigarettes, and watched the moon set behind the basketball court.

## AMERICAN DREAM

Sled routes crisscrossed down the slope, cutting between bluffs crusty with hoar frost. Dusty snow rose in rivulets on the occasional breeze, reflecting evening sunbeams into their eyes. At the top of the hill Lynn took off her gloves, stuffed them under her armpit, and pressed her palms against her closed eyeballs. Alfant grasped his sled lengthwise before him with both hands and drove the back edge into a drift for leverage, and he pulled himself the last few feet up the hill.

Have you never been sledding before? Alfant asked. He swiveled toward the slope, and rested his forehead on his arms, which lay on top of each other across the front edge of the sled, sticking vertically up from the snow. He rested.

Why would you say it like that? Lynn said, still rubbing snow blindness from her eyes.

Because you keep bailing out half way down the hill.

It's too fast. I can't see. Lynn sat on her haunches and steam shot from her mouth in vicious spurts

Alfant placed the sled next to Lynn on the bulge of the hill, and sat in it. Lynn's breathing grew fluid, and they gazed toward the distant bottom of the slope. The skeletal treetops of a maple forest to the west glowed orange at the earliest stage of the sun set. A cloud had been rolling in from the east for hours. It reached the opposite horizon, but split around the sun, like the wake of a chariot. Veins of red and pink spread out along its crevices.

One more time? Alfant asked. If you don't bail out, I will buy you a steak. You like steak, right?

How about if I go down with you one more time, you get me a steak whether I bail out or not?

Several trails began along the ridge and branched in various directions across each other, down toward a golf course. One offshoot went up a small hill and over a jump that ended in a sand trap. Another ran under the trunk of a fallen tree—held up about three feet from the snow on its splintered limbs—and continued beyond another 100 yards down a slighter incline, ending in the vicinity of most of the other trails on a large packed down area where three perfectly proportioned snow men stood naked and featureless. Another path shot directly into the maple forest, which started at the bottom of the hill to the one side. Alfant scooted the sled onto a trail toward the central intersection of the paths heading toward the fairway.

Lynn sat in front of Alfant in the sled. It looks like the snow's gonna start up again, she said.

The sun infused the edges of the blanketing cloud with rays of orange and red and pink. Alfant took out his phone, and tap tap tapped the screen. It reminds me of something I memorized about how God helped David kill Goliath's brothers, Alfant said. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.

Did you really actually just recite that from memory?

I—actually no, Alfant said. I looked it up on my phone to impress you. It says something about God's wrath and being on the wrong side of the law, or whatever.

Are you religious?

No. But I did learn that verse in Sunday school.

My mom prays to Guan Yin, Lynn said. I don't believe in it. She lights candles and puts out fruits.

Fruits?

As offerings to have good luck.

Put your feet in the sled, Alfant said. She did, and he pulled her into his chest so they felt each other's heart beats through their jackets. Lynn could smell peanut butter on Alfant's breath. He pulled out the ends of the scarf she'd knit him, wrapped them around her face, and tucked them in her jacket.

Lean your head back, he said. Watch the sky. Watch the snow, relax, enjoy the ride, ok?

Lynn nodded.

Alfant lifted the heel of his boot up from the track and into the sled. It immediately began sliding, and swished partially sideways. He dragged an arm, and they straightened out. Snow assailed their faces.

Lynn, lift up your feet, Lynn, Alfant said abruptly. Bend them. Put them. Move your feet into the sled. Halfway down they were about to hit a split in the path. Snow sprayed up around Lynn's sneakers on a bump, and the sled made a quick one-thirty, and shot backward down another path. Lynn's head pressed stiffly against Alfant's chest as she pulled in her legs. Looking back, Alfant recognized the brick wall they'd climbed in over fading behind pelting snow. He couldn't see the ladder or the break in the barbwire anymore. It's snowing again, he realized. He held himself and Lynn up with a desperate

crunch. Snowflakes melted instantly on his face as he flew backward, head first, holding his back up inches from the snow, in a crunch. Exhilarated by the loss of control, Alfant grabbed Lynn tightly and hugged her so she stopped trying to roll out.

It's ok, he whispered in her ear. Let's get all the way to the bottom just once.

They hit the bottom with a bump, but the lip of the sled did not catch, and they shot into the woods. Lynn lay limp. Alfant's stomach muscles burned pleasantly as craggy branches passed above him. He felt fit and vital. The sled slowed naturally and came to a stop in the midst of a patch of raspberry brambles.

Lynn stared up through the pricklers at the static, the snow falling around the spines. A flake melted into her eye. Alfant slid his torso further down into the sled and pulled Lynn fully on top of him. He planted his boots in the snow and pulled the sled back slowly along the track.

Wait, Lynn said. What's this. She pointed out a pale yellow rectangle of paper, tattered, fluttering in the wind. She picked apart the spines and freed the paper. It had black lettering. \$551,796.19. It's a check, Lynn said. Hah, do you think this is a for real thing? She handed the paper to Alfant.

Michael Fernman, Alfant read. It's addressed to near here, Lynn. Should we find the address?

Look up the address, Lynn said. But can you slide us out first? I'm getting scratched everywhere I move. Careful.

Alfant scooped the sled back along the track, cautious about brambles catching on Lynn's face. Once they were out, and they stood up, and brushed each other off, Lynn saw another similar paper at the edge of the thorn patch. She snatched it out. A statement,

she said, From Konoko Energy to CFO Michael Fernman. Is this a pay check? Should we go find this guy, hun?

The snowflakes made Alfant's touch screen difficult to navigate, so he crouched down and bent over.

He lives on the other side of the golf course, Alfant said, like a quarter mile that way. Do we really want to trek through the snow? It's going to be dark. We could just mail it to him.

Let's bring it to him, Lynn said. She continued to study the statement. Maybe he would give us a reward. He wouldn't want his information flying through people's bushes. Do you think he would reward us, hun?

They made their way through the woods and out onto the fairway. In most places Lynn could walk on the crust of the snow, but then the crust would break, and she'd often scrape her shin when she lifted out her foot. Alfant trudged along, the icy snow breaking easily around his boots. Lynn wished she hadn't worn sneakers.

I have an old pair of ankle boots would have been perfect for this, she explained to Alfant.

A sudden flurry of snowflakes, big as doughnut holes, muffled their voices as they trudged across the tundra-like expanse, away from their car parked at the top of the hill. Even the silhouettes of the trees disappeared in the grayness behind them. When they reached another small patch of manicured forest, Alfant dropped the cord of the sled.

I'll get it on the way back, he said.



Twilight occurred to both of them at once. Several electric lamps, mounted periodically along what was apparently a walkway, lit in unison under the snow. They walked between them, up another gradual hill.

Imagine, hun, imagine 500 thousand dollars, Lynn said, what you could do with that kind of money.

I'd buy my Granddad's house, and build a huge fish farm in the field in the back.

I'd give half of it to my family first, Lynn said. And then I buy a place in Hong Kong, and then shopping time!

The shape of a mansion materialized behind the trees. A door slammed above them, and they heard a crack and wiz through the bushes. Alfant cried out, Hello? Another ca-crack. This time Alfant recognized the gunshot, and he crouched. Lynn, get down, Lynn. He said.

A figure appeared behind an azalea bush, brandished a pistol. Who's that? The guy yelled. He looked rattled and skinny, and he wore a luxurious bathrobe made from a tiger pelt. He looked like a cricket in a coat, bare legs shaking in the pits of his rubber boots that nearly reached his knees. He shot the pistol again vaguely in their direction, and the bullet flew through their patch of woods, back across the fairway, and through the jaw of an opossum burrowing out of the snow.

Run, Alfant said. Lynn, let's run.

He's not shooting at us, she said, and if we run he might. She clenched her jaw, and reached toward Alfant. Give me the check. Alfant pulled it from his pocket. She snatched it. Hey, she yelled at the man. Are you Michael Fernman?

Who says I'm Michael Fernman?

I do. I said that, Lynn yelled, waving her hand. We have something of yours.

Legally, I could shoot you right now, he said. You're on my land. You're trespassers.

What are you talking about? Lynn said, and she climbed through the snow toward the man. We found your check. He looked at her in silence. From Konoko Energy.

That's fine, he said. I canceled that one, and I'm getting a new one. Good bye. You can leave now.

Lynn stopped about ten feet from the man. You don't want this? She said. We found it over in the golf course. It has all of your information here. Someone could steal your identity. Lynn ripped the check to pieces. Your welcome for the favor, she said.

Ok. The man's eyes were glazed, and he seemed to notice them again for the first time. Go away. Leave me alone. He let off another casual shot just above Lynn's head. If you ever see me again, run.

They retreated back the way they came, stepping back in their same footprints to save effort.

Do you think he owns all of this land? Alfant said

It looks like he does. Lynn zoomed out in the map on Alfant's phone and outlined an area of land including the golf course. That's why we have to climb the wall to get in. Look, the wall goes all around here.

That's crazy this guy owns that hill, Alfant said. I thought it was a country club or something.

Was he wearing a tiger pelt? Lynn said. Do you think it's real?

I saw a reality show once about how being rich makes people crazy, Alfant said.

That was crazy.

Do we call the police?

Why? What would they do?

Take statements, Lynn said, File a report. This guy's dangerous. He should be on file somewhere.

We'd have to see that guy again, Alfant said. They reached the end of the lighted path to Michael Fernman's mansion and were confronted with near complete darkness. Alfant picked up the leash to their sled, and they pressed into the darkness. Let's just crush it and leave it here behind us, and go someplace downtown for a ridiculously expensive steak. I'm frozen to the bone.

To your rib bone, or your thigh bone, or what kind of bone?

You're stupid, Alfant said.

It's really getting dark, Lynn said.

Alfant took out his phone. Tap tap tap, and finally he tapped "Flashlight."

Everything turned to profile, black, shades of blue, and white. They avoided a sand trap.

Can we slow down? I can barely walk, Lynn said. I feel like I'm going through rigor mortis.

Sit on the sled, Alfant said and he dusted it off. Sit here.

I'm getting a cramp in my leg. Can you sit down with me for a minute?

He dropped down next to her, sending a puff of white fluff up around them. They sat close together, sideways on the sled. Alfant turned off the flashlight. The flurry was over.

That was so pointless, Alfant said, and he owns all this land.

I don't feel like eating steak hun, Lynn said. I'm tired. I'm exhausted. I feel all of the adrenaline just flowing out of me right now. I don't even think I could chew a steak right now.

They lay back together, and the sled flipped up beneath them. An opossum scuttled past, jaw hanging by a tendon, dribbling a trail of blood, which absorbed the light otherwise reflected by the flattened snowflakes everywhere. Darkness dissipated as Lynn and Alfant's eyes adjusted. clouds spread apart in drifts, mostly empty. Lynn recognized Orion's Belt.

## RABBIT ATTACK

Lynn placed the cage on the asphalt next to Alfant's mom's car. Wire frame, coated in black plastic, floor covered with newspaper, Alfant unclipped the top of the cage and held it while Lynn reached in with the harness. She clipped it around Peter's abdomen, and then his neck. Bronze fur with an alabaster strip under his neck, running down his chest, Peter hopped and sniffed a clump of grass protruding from a crack in the parking lot. Lynn grasped the leash attached by a clip to his harness.

Leaning over the top of the cage, Alfant folded the top layer of newspaper over the rabbit feces which rolled around inside until he crushed the package into a tight bunch. They left the cage next to the car, for lack of free hands to put it back. The parking lot was nearly empty, a car here and there.

Alfant dropped the ball of newspaper in a trash can next to a concession stand, which would be closed for another few weeks of off season. The fort looked squat on the hill, but formidable. Alfant had explored the maze of tunnels underneath when he was a kid. He'd ducked under a rope, into a cavern, and got lost for a time, until he figured out the pattern, and walked up and back in toward the center of the fort.

Oh, beautiful for spacious guy, Lynn sang, running her hand through Alfant's hair. Your amber waves of main. Hun, what's for spacious? Like a beautiful big face?

Like a big sky over a field full of grain.

That's so weird. Why did you think they call it for spacious, and not big?

For the syllables, I'd say.

We used to sing that song every day in school. Did you sing that song?

Sometimes, Alfant said.

Beyond a small hill to one side of the fort, a burly man swung a Rottweiler around in a circle with a rope. The dog gripped a huge knot on the end in its teeth. After a minute of spinning, the man let go, and stumbled around for bearing while the Rottweiler's ears flapped, and its legs rotated as it flew sideways into the trunk of a tree with a heavy thud.

Let's go this way, Lynn said, pointing to the path leading away from the dog

They walked casually, though Lynn sometimes jogged on a detour up into the grass, to keeping the leash loose behind Peter.

Lynn, do you ever think I have yellow fever? Sometimes I worry, when I'm out with you, that people think I have yellow fever.

Cause you date an Asian?

It's so not fair, Alfant said. I heard a radio story by this woman, Debbie Lum, about how this is a common thing, white guys with a fetish for asian women.

I know you love me cause I'm an Asian woman, Lynn said. I know you do, but that's ok, because I got yellow fever too.

You only date asian guys?

You are Asian, Lynn said, because you date me.

For some reason that bothered me, Alfant said, until I found out that her husband is white. I felt like she was judging me, but then I found that out.

On the far side of the fort, they examined a memorial to the Korean War.

My granddad, my Dad's dad, got adopted by a Korean family, Lynn said. They took him to Hong Kong, but later they got visas and left for America and left him behind.

They just packed up, but they didn't tell him he couldn't come until they left him at the airport.

What was the Chinese role in World War Two?

They fought the Japanese, Lynn said. The Japanese were evil. They rape everyone, and burn the crops. Many many people died.

I wonder how that effected the Korean War.

I don't know about the Korean war, Lynn said, except the Chinese fought with Korea.

America was very combative about Communism, Alfant said.

They turned away from the monument, and followed Peter's tugging, back toward the fort, onto the grass.

I like you with your hair down, Alfant said. Why don't you wear your hair down?

Ak, my mom say I look like an owl before execution.

Alfant laughed high in his throat, ei-ei-ei, like a bird. That makes no sense, he said.

You know how they always look disheveled?

Oh really?

Don't you think if you been starved and beaten up, Lynn said, in jail. It's a Chinese saying about how disheveled you look, if the hair's everywhere.

How do you say it in Chinese?

你看起来像在□行前猫□□

Hong ching, chow, chow. How does it go again?

No, Lynn said. That's the most racist thing I heard.

The leash ripped from Lynn's hand as Peter raced away at the rate of panic. The free leash whipped around behind him. Lynn chased after the leash, and tried to step on it a few times. The rottweiler shot into view, saliva flicking from its mouth. It leaned into the atmosphere with great might, its coat shining, muscles rippling. It was a majestic sight, and entranced Alfant for a moment, so the dog was nearly past him, when he leapt to action. He ran head long, and tackled the dog into the grass. He felt a dull snap through his shoulder, and the dog lay panting on its side.

The dog's owner, the burly man who'd been swinging the dog in circles, strengthening its jaw, raced over a knoll down below the fort.

If you've hurt him, the man said. I'm going to fucking murder you. He knelt down by the dog's head.

He was chasing my girlfriend's rabbit, Alfant said. If he's hurt, it's probably because of you throwing him at trees.

The man stood, and stepped up close to Alfant. His breath smelled like caramel, and he shoved Alfant back a step. Give me your information, he said.

Alfant punched the man's nose abruptly. On beat, the guy punched Alfant three times back. Alfant saw yellow and white, and fell. The guy spat on him, and walked to his dog, picked it up, and carried it off down the path.

They found Peter an hour later, shaking under a bush. The leaves were still young enough that they saw through to his shape behind the branches. Alfant crawled in on his belly, and pulled gently on the leash, but Peter would not come out. Alfant wiggled further under the bush, and grabbed the rabbit bodily. Peter did not resist, and Alfant rolled around on his back and elbows, out from under the bush.



He stood, holding Peter tight, so he couldn't jump, and his whole body shook.

We should probably go, Lynn said. At this point it's not even worth it to stay here anymore.

When they reached the car, their cage had been crushed by some apparent heavy kicking. Lynn sat in the front seat, holding Peter in her lap.

He need some water, Lynn said, when they were driving.

They stopped at a convenience store.

Can you get me two one dollar lottery ticket, Lynn said. My mom say this is supposed to be a lucky year for me. I feel very lucky right now.

You're like a Chinese stereotype.

Ok white man, Lynn said. Thanks for the encouragement.

Lynn watched him get out, and shivered in the brisk spring breeze blowing through the open door. Alfant slammed it thoughtlessly, and leapt to the door of the convenience store. Lynn felt a basketball of warmth rupture in her diaphragm as she watched him through the window, skirting the isle toward the back, and she breathed heavily.

Alfant got water, a yogurt with a cupped top that could function as a bowl for Peter, and a bottle of cream soda, which he put against his now swelling eye. He winced and changed tack, back to the freezer, where they had frozen meals, and vegetables. He took a bag of peas and smacked it against the floor. At the register, he held the peas to his face. They were out of one dollar tickets, so he bought twos.

\$50,000 max, Alfant said in the car, peering at the flamboyant writing. We might as well not play at all.

Shut up, Lynn said and started scratching on Peter's back. Alfant poured the granola out of the cup on the yogurt into the yogurt, and he rinsed it out with water, and he pour a fresh splash in the bottom. Peter licked it up hastily, and Alfant poured in more.

## TRYING TO GO ON A BIKE TRIP

The technician calls Alfant almost too late, and then gets agitated when Alfant questions the decision to replace the breaks entirely.

I don't have a missed call from you though, Alfant says into his phone, walking with Lynn along a cobblestone sidewalk through a heritage section of the city.

A moment earlier they stood, chins high up, admiring the baroque architecture of the apartments. Budding foliage rustled above them in a breeze that eased the heat of the sun on this unseasonably hot afternoon.

We don't spend enough time admiring the scenery, Alfant said. He looked at the clock on his phone just as it began to ring.

We brought so little for this trip, hun, Lynn said. Maybe it's better that we can't go anyway.

Sparrows still flit between branches chirping pleasantly, but less notably now. Alfant pulls Lynn's hand, picking up their pace.

Did he say it is finished, hun? Lynn says, hugging Alfant's arm, nearly running to keep up. If it's finished we maybe could make it. She lets go of Alfant, stops, and looks at her phone. She trots back to Alfant, who starts jogging along next to her when she reaches him. We have 20 minutes, hun, to make it to the train in time. We can do it. Let's go.

Alfant, breathing heavily, still talking price, holds the phone to his head with one hand. He clasps Lynn's hand with the other. She slows their pace to a determined walk as

the swanky bike repair shop that they'd been forced to use by circumstance comes in view.

It's fine, Alfant said into his phone. We're here. I'm actually about to walk in. He tapped off the phone abruptly, looking for Lynn. Lynn, could you

Lynn already unclasped the lock on the chain around Alfant's mom's bike, which they had left attached to a light pole in front of the bike repair shop several hours ago.

Go in, she said. Hurry up. Go pay. Let's go. I can't believe we're going to make it.

A whirl of cash later, Lynn leads the way, riding cautiously in the bike lane. The way is smooth, but bustling in preparation for rush hour. Alfant notices a bus bearing down, and a bus stop ahead. They'll have to speed up to not disrupt its pattern. He pulls up close to Lynn.

Can you go a little faster? There's a bus coming.

There's a bus coming? Lynn stops, and pulls to the curb.

Damn it, Alfant mutters, and he stops abruptly beside her, his back wheel skidding sideways with momentum. Why are you stopping?

We actually have 50 minutes, Lynn says. I looked at the schedule while you were getting your bike, and the train actually leaves at 4:52 not 22, so let's not rush and create another disaster for ourselves.

We didn't have to stop for the bus, though, Alfant said. It's dangerous for other people, to stop suddenly like that. We could have beat it. You just need to ride a little faster. Why are you riding so slowly for?

Aw. It's cute when you get huffy, Lynn says. It's cute.

The train is actually right through there. Alfant points toward several buildings on the right, across the sidewalk, to a slim passage between them. Let's just walk our bikes through there? Alfant sounds uncertain, but Lynn lifts her bike over the curb, and strolls toward the opening between the buildings.

The paving stones in this ally span its entire width, and link into the foundations of the surrounding buildings. Laundry lines bedecked in cloth of all colors create a festive atmosphere among the fire escapes, and none of the trash cans are overflowing. Alfant leads Lynn down the center, between rows of back exits from store fronts and apartments. Their ticking gears, and scuffling footsteps resonate between neat stone facades, which reach five stories up to a strip of sky.

I can't believe we get to go to Kayne, hun, Lynn says. I was sick to lose money on that hotel. This day has been like a bungee.

Oh god, what a terrible morning, Alfant says. Someone steals your bike. We get a ticket on the way to pick up mom's bike. I pop my tire.

Let's not talk about it, hun, Lynn says. Let's focus on how we get to go biking all weekend by the ocean, and I buy you lobster and mussels.

I don't want mussels.

I buy you whatever you want, Lynn says. I'm excited for this, hun. This is my first time to Kayne.

The air in the alley smells vaguely of soot and spoiled milk. Their words echo. The path turns often at the odd angles of haphazard architectural planning.

Do you ever imagine, Alfant says, looking up as he often does. What if a spot in the atmosphere opened, and sucked all life in a certain area out to space. What if that

became a thing that just happened, like a hurricane, the atmosphere would open occasionally and leave the landscape entirely barren of life? Do you think there's any way to plan for something like that?

I thought of that too, hun. I have that exact same thought sometimes.

They pass out of the passage, through a plaza full of vendors, between a few teenaged skateboarders practicing kick flips on the steps of the train station, which has the outward appearance of the Pantheon. The cathedral like space inside of the city's central train station has a polished black and white marble floor. In the middle, far beneath the dome, mounted in brass around the base of an old clock with a mother of pearl face, an array of giant flat screens list arrival and departure times. All of the clerks at the ticket desk beneath wear tall blue hats with mini visors.

No, I'm sorry, we don't allow bikes to Kayne.

You don't allow bikes?

Not to Kayne, the ticket clerk says. He unfolds a map, and smooths it out on the counter in front of Alfant. He traces a line on the paper. You can take your bike to Pandaemonium, here, see the little bike symbol? And to Irkalla, here, with a bike symbol there as well, but not Kayne. Kayne has no bike symbol, see. The conductor handed Alfant the map.

I can take my bike on the train, but only if I get off in Pandaemonium or Irkalla?

We only offer bike service at those stops, yes, the clerk says. Pedestrian noise beneath the cupola acoustically combines into a distant sound like sustained clapping. That's our policy.

Which one of those is closest to Kayne?

Pandaemonium is 40 miles. Irkalla's 60.

Alfant continues rehashing this restricted bike access policy with the clerk, but finally quits still not fully comprehending the logistics. He steps back from the window, where a line had formed behind him.

Thank you, he says. Thanks. I'm sorry about that. He bows slightly and waves at the clerk, who nods back helpfully, in no apparent rush to speak with the next person.

Alfant makes his way toward Lynn, who'd drifted off to the edge of the massive space with their bikes, and ponders why he'd apologized to the clerk. There has to be a reason for this, he thinks. Just because I don't see it doesn't mean there's no reason. Maybe it's a legal thing. Approaching Lynn he grows unaccountably nervous. So, we can't bring our bikes, he says.

Should we lock our bikes here, she says. We can go without them?

Can we get around without them there? The hotel you got is not close to the beach. I thought that was the whole idea, to bring our bikes so we could use that cheap hotel.

It sounds like you don't want to go now.

I'm worried if we leave the bikes here, and we don't have a really good lock for mom's, because of your bike, I'm worried about the bikes getting stolen. I feel, should we play it safer?

Fine, if you want to, Lynn says. We can't refund the hotel though. I guess we count that a loss.

On days like this I feel existence is orchestrated to punish me.

I'm your punishment then, Lynn says.

They stroll unconsciously out of the train station and into the courtyard.



## ANCESTORS

Lords and ladies are the ones that traditionally would keep histories of their families, Alfant said.

Who's lords and ladies? Is that a white people thing?

I'm curious about Chinese literature, because I think that goes back further than European literature.

Of course it does, hun. My people have been around for a very long time.

Alfant ate cereal.

What do you think a productive way to talk about race is?

I don't know, hun.

Not talk about it at all?

No. I just don't know.

It says on forms that we fill out, that we need to specify our race, so it's elemental to our consciousness. We're reminded of it all the time. By necessity too because it's an easy way to refer to somebody. Once my mom was talking to a police officer about some incident, I don't remember, and he asked about the guy's shoes. It's much harder to change your shoes than your cloths, he said. That stuck with me.

Should we go now? Let's go.

I need to get ready, babe. I'm not ready yet. Alfant lifted the cereal bowl to his lips

Aw, you're so cute eating that cereal like a little boy. Can I take a picture of you while you're drinking the milk off the bowl. Lynn's thumb assaulted the screen of her phone. Please, she said. It the cutest thing I've saw today, this morning.

What do you want it for?

You just look so beautiful. Can you drink that? Not yet, not yet. Ok, ok. Yep. Click. She took the picture. That's just the most cutest thing in the world. No, I missed it. She took another picture.

You're making me feel —

Like an object?

Yeah.

That's exactly the point.

You're trying to objectify me with your camera? Are you going to sell me to the highest bidder?

The lowest bidder, hun, Lynn said. I have to pay to make them take this picture.

I wonder how useful it is, this impulse to maintain family histories. I wonder what it does for us.

Lynn sat across from Alfant at the

What stories do you remember about your grandmother?

Not much, Lynn said. What do you mean by story?

What do you remember?

Why are you asking me these things?

Cause you said your mom wanted me to write a letter to your grandmother.

So? It won't effect what you, you're going to write basic stuff to her anyway.

Hi. My name is Alfant.

My favorite food is pizza.

And I wear underwear almost every day.

Oh, hun, My grandmother said to my cousin, in Chinese she wrote, Why must he be so tall? I'm a lot taller than her. She's my mom's height. My cousin think you're sexy too. He say, Your sexy husband.

I'm always sexy.

Ooo, you're humble too, Lynn said. Humble upbringing, hun. She giggled.

Humble roots.

Can you give me a hug? You're my favorite thing in the world.

Alfant pulled her in to his chest, curled in and then out to look at her. She looked at him too, searching his eyes, still holding her arms around his waste.

Do you think the Chinamen made everything in the world?

Chinamen?

Yeah.

Most things, Alfant said. Most of the things that you care least about. Lynn smacked him in the chest. Are you mad at me?

No, cause you know it's not true, cause you know even the stuff that's made in USA, parts of it are made in China. It's just assembled in USA. It's probably designed in USA, so they said made in USA. And now we been exporting Chinamen to America and have the Chinese people work in America so it still say USA even though it's the same people and the same price.

Really?

I think so. Maybe I'm making it up. But I won't be surprised. Same Chinamen.

Same price, but in USA so it's made in USA, and they make them buy their plane tickets.

It sounds so plausible, Alfant said. You should post it to the internet.

No, actually, to have the illegal come they have to be shipped in a boat.

## 火口

Don't tell my mom about bed bugs, hun. She won't let us in.

I can't tell your mom anything, Alfant said.

That's true, Lynn said. Sister is calling for prices. We're going 50/50.

Sounds good. Does it bother your sister that I'm always there? Should I pay half too?

You can pay half of mine, if you want.

They were breathing heavily, and talking less than usual on the way up the stairs to Lynn's parent's apartment.

How do you say it again?

我可能有一杯水.

I'm nervous, Alfant said. Do they know I'm white?

I told my mom that you are the first day I met you.

What did she say?

They buzzed the bell, and Lynn's mom hustled out into the hall and opened the secondary security door. 您好, she said. 口迎回家.

好, Mama, Lynn said. Oh, 我那么口你。你的口口看上去很美. She ran into the kitchen and hugged her dad from the back. Dadi! She said. 我很想念你. Lynn's dad held up both arms, knife in one hand.

Mama scuttled back into the joint dining room and living area, where a tv played a Chinese music channel. Chinese words appeared on the screen in front of soft featured

woman who wore a tight red shirt and a lot of makeup. Her torso swayed as she sang. The sliding door to the porch stood open, and a warm evening breeze puffed out the white silk curtains. The table was set for four.

She asked how tall you were, Lynn said as she followed her mom into the dining room.

我的朋友打□□来□你是怎么做的, Mama said.

熊黛林的□□□。我告□她, 你正在做的不□, 但你是□上了一名白人男子。她□, □是太糟糕了, 她提供了10000美□嫁□平。

那么, □什么要告□我□些? Lynn said.

我只是□你知道。

我不知道他来了, Lynn's dad said and gestured toward Alfant.

你□□叫前□。我就□更多的肉。

Mama, Alfant 有□要□你. Say it, hun — go ahead. Lynn pulled her mom by the arm toward Alfant, who still stood in the hall by the door. No Mama, 等待. Say it, Alfant. She wants to hear you say it.

Gnaw —

我 可 能 有 一 杯 水, Lynn said slowly. Say it.

Gnaw Surn Yo Di Soy.

Mama laughed. Standing against the wall near the kitchen, palming each of his shoulders, Alfant watched her scurry into the kitchen. At the small stretch of counter beside the sink, Dadi sliced beef and chicken strips thinner than cardboard. Mama filled a cup of water, and brought it to Alfant.

他是如此的可口。Mama said in Lynn's direction. 他有没有□你教他的？

Lynn pulled Alfant to the dining room table, which was covered with newspaper, and full of bowls full of different foods, a few of which Alfant recognized. A big steel pot sat bubbling, bifurcated into two sections of broth, on an electric heater.

Have you ever had hot pot, Lynn said. You cook the food as you eat it. That one is spicy broth. She pointed to the side with little flakes floating on top, And that is regular. She pointed to the other beige liquid.

I did this once, I think, Alfant said vaguely. I don't remember —

Sit down, Lynn said. I'll show you. Lynn took up a set of chopsticks, and quickly snatched an array of vegetables, and several oddly shaped bits of matter.

Alfant took a pair of the hefty wooden chopsticks, and worked them into his palm.

Use the fork, Lynn said. She picked up the plastic utensil that her mom had placed next to Alfant's bowl

I need to learn to use these though.

Another time, Lynn said. My dad hates it when you drop chopstick. You probably want to stick to those meats and the vegetables. That white stuff is tripe, and that is liver, kidney, and pigs blood. The last thing she pointed to looked like thick cubes of Indian rubber.

I see, Alfant said, and he leaned forward, stabbed one and dropped it into the broth.

You probably aren't going to like that, Lynn said. I don't.

You don't? Alfant said, face slightly limp.

Sister came down from upstairs and began an animated conversation with Lynn.

Dad joined them in the meal with the bowls of meat

Very good, huh? Dad said.

Alfant nodded with a puzzled look, still processing the accent, surprised by the English words. Good, good, he said. Thank you.

那是因□我□好了, Dadi said.

Lynn gasped hilariously. My dad was like, It's because I make it good, she said.

What's the broth made of?

I don't know, Lynn said.

It's delicious.

They all ate in silence for awhile, so the television, which had turned to new was the only sound. Lynn's dad glanced at it from time to time.

Aw, I'm worried about Allison, Lynn said suddenly to Alfant.

Who?

From the restaurant. She say she want to check herself in the hospital today.

Why?

Because she very depressed and suicidal. I was like, Uh. I'm going to text her tonight. She's not doing good. I was like, Alison you have three kids. You can't. And she's like, I know. That's why I'm checking myself in.

How old is Allison?

33.

What does she look like? Is she white?

Yeah.



Red hair?

Yeah

I know who you're talking about. She smokes?

How do you know?

I seen her smoke.

□他服□的蔬菜, Lynn's mom said.

他不喜□蔬菜, Lynn said.

他□□多吃蔬菜, 如果他想保持健康. Hey, hey, Dadi said to Alfant, and he held up a bunch of bananas in the Kitchen. 如果你不想蔬菜, 吃的香蕉.

He's like, If you don't eat vegetable, you have to eat bananas.

I like bananas too, Alfant said.

□没关系, 如果你不喜□的蔬菜。你可以吃一根香蕉□□.

He's like, It's ok if you don't eat vegetable, but you have to compensate by eating a banana. He said, It can't be just meat, and rice, and bread.

Man cannot live on bread alone, Alfant said to himself ostensibly, parochially.

Lynn engaged in conversation with her mom and sister in the kitchen. The living area had two couches and an arm chair, all covered with plastic sleeves, and Piled over with boxes, and neatly tied bags. One whole wall, the shorter wall, was devoted to a shrine to Guan Yin. A buzzer rang in the kitchen, and Dadi brought out a large fish with scales and eyes and everything.

The key to eat it, Lynn said, is to eat it with the bones sticking up. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

It's too late now.

I'm taking it off.

您需要滑出骨, Mama said.

She said the same thing I said, Lynn said. You just wasted a lot. See.

I get a lot of tiny little bones, Alfant said. Do you eat the bones too?

□他的□。我不□□他看到了□.

Immediately after the meal, Lynn's dad retreated up to his bedroom. They stayed for about an hour before Lynn said 是□候来克, and hustled Alfant out the front door.

They all said, 再□, except Alfant.

Just as Alfant and Lynn pulled out of the parking lot, a tow truck entered the complex to patrol for cars without stickers.

I'm so full from that meal, hun. My mom was like, The only thing your boyfriend might possibly be enjoying is probably the roasted pork in front of him. I was like, Probably. He's a picky boy who likes to eat different things.

I eat a lot of different things, Alfant said.

You don't eat anything unless it's freeze dried or prepared for you, Lynn said.

You're the picture of beauty.

That's such a nice complement.

What were you guys talking about? Not that it really matters, I guess.

Different stuff. My mom said one of her friends called, and asked to set me up with her son. Mama's like, Will you at least meet him anyway. She don't want to tell her no.

What's his name?

Ping.

His name's Ping?

Yes, hun, Lynn said. It's actually a very beautiful name. Just white people ruin it.

What's it mean?

It mean peaceful.

Can I tell you a terrible racist joke?

Why don't you keep that to yourself, Lynn said. Ok?

But I don't want to keep it to —

Is it the one about how Chinese get names?

I haven't heard that one.

Oh it's terrible, Lynn said. Allison told me this one.

Actually, I was thinking, Alfant said. It's not a joke but I remember, Tikki Tikki Tembo No Sa Tembo Chari Bari Ruchi-pip Peri Pembo. I used to love saying that when I was little. So much fun!

Tikki Tikki Tembo? Lynn said and snorted. What's that?

It's a kids book about two brothers. The first had a long name that was hard to say, and the second brother's name was so short that it meant nothing. One day the first brother fell in a well and almost died because the second brother lost his breath running

for help, and couldn't say the first brother's name. Ever after Chinese named their children with very short names.

I never heard of this book before, Lynn said. It sounds very racist.

I don't think it's racist at all, Alfant said. Actually I hadn't thought about it at all. I just remember it being a good story about brothers.

Well it's definitely not true, Lynn said. Was it written by a white man?

I don't know, Alfant said. I thought it was a Chinese book. The drawings look Chinese.

It's probably written by a white man.

How do Chinese name themselves?

It's what happen when white people write a book that speculate about Chinese culture.

What?

They don't learn anything, Lynn said. It's like if I say to my mom that English name babies based on the weather when they're born. She'd believe me.

Whether when what?

Because your people always talk about the weather, Lynn said. Get it?

That's not true, Alfant said. How did you get your name?

My grandmother named me, Lynn said. Lin means forest.

Spelled L - I - N?

In Chinese, Lynn said. But in America it's spelled L - Y - N - N.

Why do you do that?

Because you white people like that, Lynn said. Don't you? The Americanized thing?

I want a Chinese name, Alfant said. What can my name be?

Your name can be Fan, Lynn said. It mean annoying.

## IN SHOWER IN LOVE

In the supermarket Alfant picked up a medium size watermelon.

You like watermelon? he asked Lynn. I really want a watermelon.

Lynn picked out a slice of wild salmon from the fish counter.

On the walk back to her apartment, Lynn carried a few light bags. Alfant walked behind with the watermelon hanging from his right hand like a wrecking ball. He swung to the rhythm of his walking, and hit Lynn's butt twice. The first time both of her feet elevated from the sidewalk for a moment.

Stop

He hit her one time, accidentally higher than before, and this one propelled her straight forward so she almost tripped on the curb.

Stop trying my patience, hun. It's abusive.

You think I'm abusive? Alfant said, smiling. Look at the sky, babe, will you look at the sky?

I just want to get home right now, hun.

In kitchen, immediately, Alfant cooked the salmon for 12 minutes, and made imperfect rice.

Lynn made the rice again, fluffy, steaming, and the smell relaxed her eyelids. I love you, hun. I'm not even mad at you that the salmon is cold now. I'm so happy about this rice. Mmmmm. Oh but the salmon is good though. It's still juicy. Hun, am I very Chinese?

Well I guess because we're eating with chopsticks, and you have chinky eyes, and the room is very smelly like fish. I would say we're like that Siamese Cats in Aristocats, the movie, playing piano with chop sticks. Shanghai, Hong Kong, egg, foo, young. That used to be my favorite movie, and Mulan.

Chinky eyes? Lynn drew together her eyebrows. I don't like that you say chinky.

But they are, Alfant said, like a chink.

Do you think I'm like Mulan? Lynn said. You know they have a Japanese flag on their medical tent.

On the medical tent?

On the flag, someone at Disney put a Japanese flag, not Chinese.

That's too bad, Alfant said. I loved that movie. I probably watched that 20 times as a child.

Can we watch it, hun? Do you want to watch it? I used to watch it all the time when I was little too. Oh, let's watch it, hun.

I want to too. I think it would be racist for me to ask you. But since you ask, I think it's ok. Are you serious?

Let's rent it online, hun.

They reveled in nostalgia, through Mushu's attempts to be a dragon, until image of the doll leant against the sword. Then they began talking. Alfant place their empty bowls on the floor.

Could I tell you something personal, that you need to know, since we live together now?

You can always tell me things.

This thing is different, Alfant said. I should have told you awhile ago. I think you won't want to date me.

What is it, hun?

I can't have children. Why can't you have children? They might be schizophrenic.

Are you schizophrenic, hun?

A little, Alfant said. Sometimes I have symptoms, but they're not too bad, and I'm on meds.

My brother's best friend went psychitzophrenic in college, Lynn said. My mom didn't let them be friends anymore.

After the movie was finished. Alfant sat across from her on scooping out watermelon chunks vigorously with his spoon, feet up on the bed, trying to be normal, but sweating profusely from the hands, and his twisting stomach made it hard for him to swallow. Lynn turned forty degrees and pressed her feet against his feet on the bed.

Sole to sole, she said.

Ooo, it feels like I'm standing up. That feels really powerful, babe, like we should sleep like this if we're ever in an apocalyptic situation. I would feel you wake up this way. It's like we're a team. Do you want to finish your half of watermelon?

No, Lynn said. I'm full, and I think I'm going to take a shower, hun. I feel sweaty and dirty right now.

I'll put it in the fridge.

Alfant wrapped the watermelon in cellophane while Lynn got naked in the room. She walked into the kitchen with one arm across her breasts.

We're the only ones here.



Oh, that's true. Lynn dropped her arm. Do you want to shower with me, she said.

Of course. Alfant followed her, taking off all of his clothes in three motions. In the shower they washed each other thoroughly.

You're you're so beautiful, hun, like a greek statue.

Like the statue of David?

And your humble too, Lynn said. I like that you're humble.

Sometimes I think I'm a reincarnation of King David. Do you think I'm like king David, baby? Do you think I could conquer giants, and ethnically cleanse a small portion of the middle east? Sometimes

You sound like an anti-semite, hun.

Maybe so. I know the holocaust happened. I know Jews get it rough. I feel dirty just saying Jew. Why does it feel dirty to say races. We see differences in our features for example other I just don't think anyone should be

Ok, white man.

And that's the thing, most of them are white too. Didn't Abraham live in Egypt? Abraham was probably black, or at least brown. Black or brown, they mean the same thing. The Bible's all about identity, I think. Israel, the whole Israel only lasted from the reign of David through Solomon. I wonder if calling him wise was a subtle joke among his scribes, because they really play it up. Cutting a baby in half, You call someone a philistine, and it's ok to kill them now? And there's slavery in there, and all kinds of immoral stuff. God's immoral in there. He's a jerk. He lets an angel torment Job to prove a point. The Bible is not moral.

I don't know what you're talking about right now, Lynn said. You sound like a crazy person.

Alfant watched Lynn talk until she turned away from him. She stood still, and he moved out of the stream of water so that she could feel it on her back.

I'm very mad at you, hun.

What?

I'm very mad at you but you won't understand.

Understand what?

Why didn't you bail out on the sledding?

What are you talking about?

When we went sledding a few months ago, why didn't you bail out? When we spun around, and went into the woods. You could have hit your head. You could have died, hun. What would I do if you died?

Call 911, I assume. Then you'd be sad for awhile. After about a year you'd start dating again. But I wouldn't have hit my head. The trail was too well worn to ended abruptly at a stump.

You don't know that.

I guess you're right. It could have been a death trap. I wan't thinking that way.

It make me so mad that you would think like that, and force me to go along.

Think about what that would have do to me, hun. I would be devastated if you do that to me. I would die of grief. People do that, bun bun. People die of grief. They stop eating. They do drugs. Suicide by cop. Maybe I would have rob a bank and be shot.

Alfant saw an older her, and melted like an ice cube. He thought of living with her forever. And this made his eyes water profusely. He faced the shower, continuing to say nothing for five minutes after Lynn got out. Lynn duck faced the mirror several times while Alfant dried himself and skulked out of the room to drop down sideways, somewhat rigidly on their thick queen size mattress on the floor. He sank into the memory foam. After about thirty minutes, Lynn climbed over him.

Hun, I'll wait for you on the bridge. If I die before you, I'll wait for you on the bridge.

What?

To the after life. I'll wait for you there for as long as it take, and then we reincarnate together. They lay looking at the ceiling. Alfant rolled sideways and enveloped her body in his limbs. Would you wait for me? I mean, I don't care. I still wait for you either way.

I would, Alfant said. Hypothetically. What if I turn into a monkey or rhinoceros though?

We'll be rhinoceros together.

What if you're not? What if you're a beautiful queen bee, and I stuck in my rino body?

Hun, I rather speculate, Lynn said. I don't believe these things either. I only mean the sentiment.

I'd be your drone, Alfant. I share you with everyone, if I must, and still love you only.

## MISTOOK

At dusk Alfant pulled up at the bus stop, and Lynn hopped in the front seat.

We have a Cantonese patient, of course I have her, Lynn said. We actually do not have a Cantonese translator, so the translator need to come from elsewhere. It's actually a lot better, so I feel like I'm worth living.

More valuable, Alfant said. Are we going to the restaurant or are you done for the day?

To the restaurant, Lynn said. Oh, could you pick me up at ten?

We'll see, Alfant said. I'll ask my mom to use the car again later. I can foresee that being a problem though, because I think she has to —

Ek, Lynn intoned. I'm tired. I —

How do I indicate that I'm going to that long right, and not this tight right, Alfant said, because I don't want to get hit by this guy right here. Lynn, can you hand me. Actually, I'm going to pull in there for a minute. I got you a thing for your birthday that maybe you can use tonight.

Alfant turned into a convenience store parking lot, and pulled up behind a row of decorative trees, across from a dumpster and a rectangle of windows, illuminated, with a clerk inside, wearing a yellow polo and black visor. Alfant twisted around, reached into the back seat and pulled out a tiny gift bag full of colorful tissue paper. Lynn peered inside, rustling the paper.

Is it another cigar? she said. I'm still furious by that. I can't believe you do that to me this morning.

It wasn't as funny as I thought, Alfant said. You said you like cigars.

I said I prefer cigars to cigarettes, smell wise. I would prefer if my dad smoke a cigar. I don't want a cigar.

A man in a hockey jersey knocked on their window with an industrial flashlight. He peered in at Lynn and beckoned in command. Another man stood by Alfant's window, arms bedecked in intricate tattoos, sleeves of the thermal he wore under a Metallica t-shirt rolled up. He held a brass badge to the window. His other hand rested suggestively on the gun in a holster on his waste. The other fellow spoke into a radio, voice muffled by the window and the ac running at full blast. He said something like, We got one.

Step out of the car, the man with the tattoos said to Alfant through the window. The other man knocked on the window again with his flashlight. Lynn shook visibly, and dropped the present.

I think they are police, she said. Why would there be police?

I swear I used a turn signal, Alfant said. He rolled down the window. What can I

—

Step out of the car, sir.

Why out? Alfant reached for the glove box. Don't you want my license and registration?

The police officer grabbed Alfant by the back of the collar through the window. Get out of the car, he said.

The other officer opened the door casually. You too miss, he said waving his hand expansively like a doorman. This way miss. He shepherded Lynn across the parking lot, out of easy earshot. He indicated for her to sit on the curb in front of the store.

I am on my way to work, Lynn said. I don't want to get gum or nothing on my ass and ruin my garment.

Do you have ID?

Why do you need my ID?

Mam, if you do not have ID we can take you to the station and find your birth certificate.

I almost want you to make that mistake, Lynn said. But it's in my purse, in the car.

Get this young lady's ID from the car, the officer yelled across the lot to his partner, who had Alfant spread out, both hands pressed against the hood of his car. Alfant noticed a sale on milk in the window of the convenience store, happy cows in a green pasture.

Where is it? The partner called back. He held Alfant's ID and the car registration in one hand.

It's in her wallet, Alfant said. I'll get it.

Don't move.

The officer across the way talked with Lynn, who was quite animated, for a moment.

It's in her purse in the passenger seat, the officer yelled.

She's going to have to get it then, said his partner, who began examining the registration to Alfant's mom's car.

I can get it, Alfant said over his shoulder. She's my girlfriend.

You stay, the officer said.

Lynn stalked to the car, pulled out her purse, rummaged, found the ID, walked mechanically around to the officer next to Alfant.

Come back here young woman, the other officer wearing the jersey called from across the parking lot. You stand here by me. Lynn crossed back to the convenience store, and she stepped up on the curb so she was almost eye level with the officer. He stood in a gutter beside her, examining her ID.

Lynn folded her arms. A pidgin flapped up in front of a jet stream in the sky above the gas sign. She gazed.

Mam, are you in any danger from this man?

The officer with Alfant clicked his teeth. You may turn around, sir, he said. Alfant pushed himself up viciously, turned and rested his backside against the car. What are you doing here? The officer said.

I was giving my girlfriend a present. What do you mean what am I doing? I stopped to find it.

I mean, what are you doing here? The officer examined Alfant's ID. What are you doing in this neighborhood?

I live here, Alfant said. Around here, I live nearby.

Nearby — the officer said and he looked at the registration again. This is your mom's car?

That's what I said.

What is her name, your girlfriend?

Lynn.

Last name?

Wong.

The officer left Alfant to confer with his partner in the center of the parking lot. They exchanged IDs, nodded and shrugged respectively. The officer in the Jersey took Lynn lightly by the elbow, and the two officers walked to Alfant with her between them.

Thank you for your time, one officer said.

We can go? Lynn moved to get in the car.

You can go, the other officer said. Stay safe sir, mam.

The officers leapt into a maroon car. The one wearing a jersey drove, speeding around a bend, to disappear for a minute and pull up again next to the convenience store dumpster. Alfant could just see their headlights, which went out that second.

They drove out of the parking lot, across traffic. The chaos continued, opportunities for collision repeated every block. They stopped at the intersection of fast food, liquor, checks cashed, and the Church of Abraham, printed on aluminum. A light held them there in dark silence. A reflection of Alfant's headlights flared on passing cars.

Do I look like a prostitute? Lynn said.

Not really, Alfant said. Your collar's little low though.

Look hun. Lynn pushed her chest toward Alfant, pulling her collar as open as she could without taring fabric. Look, you can almost see my cleavage, hun. She looked down at her breasts. I must really look like a slut, right? Oh my god! I can't believe those



cop did that, hun. I'm so mad right now. I almost feel surreal. You know what that cop say? He say, Your mother should teach you better. What if my mom is dead, hun? I don't want to work, hun. I just want to sleep.

Alfant clicked on the radio. A lady said, through the airwaves, I wear purple in this court room today because it is my son's favorite color. I miss my baby boy oh so much, but I know that I am going to see him again, and that gives me hope. I forgive the people that had a hand in my son's murder —

Can you not play that, hun. It give me a headache.

## ALMOST REPUBLICAN

Being a social worker is going to make me Republican, Lynn said. I swear.

Why's that? Alfant said.

Oh, there were two people, Lynn said, at the hospital. A man came in today, neatly dress, and he was very polite, and he said he want to go into a treatment, because he has lung inflammation.

What's lung inflation?

It's from heroin.

So? Alfant sat at his desk filling out an application to the aquarium.

A few hours later a woman yelled at me because I couldn't get her an apartment. She said I'm prejudice, and this is the United States, and we should be able to get her housing. She said she have leg weakness, and that she live on the street and all that. I said I could probably find her a shelter. I just put a woman with no legs in a shelter. She was in a wheelchair, hun, and that was the only place I could find, but I didn't tell her that

Damn, Alfant said. That's hard.

But this woman went to my supervisor. She's like, you're intern doesn't know what she's doing. She's not even looking if I can get an apartment. My supervisor's like, I'm going to tell you the same thing Lynn said. We can place you on the shelter. She said you're throwing me back on the street. I'm sick of these hood rats. These ghetto people acting entitled without working. I wish they'd all die, disappear.

You don't like poor people?

It's not poor people, hun. It's these hood rats, these ghetto people, these pieces of dirt that ruin the system for everyone.

Do you not like black people?

What? Lynn turned fully toward Alfant, eyes wide. She shrieked, What does that have to do with anything? I hate that you said that. I just get off a double shift. I'm exhausted. And you say this thing?

I'm sorry, Alfant said. I'm just saying, isn't dirt slang for black people in Cantonese?

That has nothing to do with this. You got to be kidding me. That man was black too, and I said he was very nice. He said he's out in the cold. I'm like, I'll see what I can do. We have two weeks to find him a place. Why are you so fixated on race? I'm sick of you always bringing up race like a relevant thing.

Ghetto people is just kind of racist to me.

That was such a stupid question. I'm so mad at you. What do you think I mean by hood rat? It mean they're everywhere, like rats, and you can't get rid of them.

You want to get rid of poor people? Is that your solution? Extermination? Novel.

It's like I'm telling you this story and you ask what color shirt he was wearing.

Lynn spun sideways and made a duck face in the mirror, examining her new blue blouse, which had just arrived that morning in the mail. You're focused on what doesn't matter. You're like my old boyfriend who I was telling about this guy who was a counselor who raped a bunch of kids, and he asked what position they were in. I told my sister, and then I told him I just can't do this any more. I'm exhausted, hun. I don't want to have this conversation anymore.

## TWO RINGS

In the afternoon, the day after his 28th birthday, Alfant held the last of his savings in two small boxes, one white faux leather, the other black velvet. The larger, the pho-leather box, snapped apart from a brass hinge, revealing a rigid platform covered in white velvet. The other opened like a trap, inside lined in white satin. Exposed to the skylight, mounted in slits in their respective boxes, two rings evoked velocity. Oxymoronic pins of light moving in his eyes, Alfant examined each ring in turn, jowl loose: three strands of gold, white gold, gold gold, red gold, weaved loosely out in the shape of a wave on one side with diamond chips melted in; in between two loops of white gold, the other ring featured three certified diamonds. At this specific place in time and space — his childhood bedroom, in his parents house, in an imposing country, in an American continent, in a far corner of the milky way — Alfant considered a practice relatively ubiquitous but new to humanity.

On the floor below, in the kitchen, Alfant's Mom made Lynn tea.

We had a lot of asians, Lynn said.

What would be the racial mix of a good American high school? Mom asked, wiping down a corner of the counter a few feet away from Lynn.

What do you mean by good?

If you're talking about a rich town, like Lexington?

I think even asian would be, Lynn considered. Fifteen percent?

That seems like a lot.

Oh no tea, thank you, Lynn said. I'm very much more of a coffee person.

Oh I'll make coffee, Alfant's Mom said. I

Well, Lynn said. My friend went to Wellington Academy and there were like six asians.

Well, there's another stereotype, Mom said. That asians are smarter.

That's true, Lynn said. It makes my parents disappointed at us. I think my mom had a vision that we all go to ivy league schools. In high school I got a D- in a test, and my friends were all like, What's your grade? I said I basically failed. They said, So you got an A-, that's an asian fail. They didn't believe me until I showed for real my grade.

There's a stereotype right there, Mom said laughing.

At the center of her universe, from electric movements through her synapses, arose a further recollection from high school drama, A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Lynn wondered why these Asian conversations followed her into her every interaction with white people. She had reached the stage of talking about family, Lynn realized. As she turned and parted the curtain in front of the stairs, she said some things about Alfant, and Alfant heard.

Socked feet mounted the stairs. Alfant snapped the ring boxes shut and shoved them under his bedsheets, rethought, pulled them out again with one hand, and threw them hastily into the trash bucket, followed by several teeshirts from the floor. The door opened, and Alfant stood. He banged his head as he stood on the slanted attic roof. He sunk back on the bed, and Lynn's head popped into view through the hole in floor. She wore a simple and close fitting black dress with sleeves, and the silver necklace

Would you brag to people if I'm one of those smart asian girls, that went to Harvard? I study like

I'd be like, I got a catch, Alfant said. But no. Instead, you speak Cantonese.

What? But Asian girls that gone to Harvard speak Cantonese too.

Come on, Alfant said. It's a dead language.

Tell that to the population of Hong Kong bitch. You know Cantonese is a main language in Hong Kong, right?

I know that. But the Chinese, I met a Chinese person who was really negative on like

Was he from China? Lynn said.

Yeah.

He's not as good as Hong Kong people. My mom doesn't consider herself Chinese. She's like, I'm from Hong Kong. I'm like, Mom you were born in China. She's like, It doesn't matter. Hong Kong people don't like Chinese people at all

And visa versa?

They're probably like, why do you think you're better than us? Hong Kong go to China with no ID, but if you go from China to Hong Kong, you have to go through all this shit. If you visit from China to Hong Kong, you get a three day pass. If you go from Hong Kong to China there's no questions asked.

Lynn kissed Alfant's bald spot, and sat next to him on the bed. Alfant pulled a pack of cards from the night stand, pushed all of his blankets to one side, and dealt out four hands.

Big 2?

Lynn each took a pile, and Alfant followed.

Ok, I hate to brag but, Lynn said sorting her cards. So our professor's like, what's 8 times 15 class and I said, 120. So my classmate's like, How did you get that so fast? I'm like, It's 8 times 15, it's not. I said in my head, It's not 8 times 1.78. It's 8 times 15. It's easy. But she's like, You did that in you're head? I'm like, I'm so mean. I'm sorry.

You're such a valley girl, Alfant said and he dropped two cards on the center of his bed.

I'm not a valley girl. Lynn leaned back on the pile of blankets and pillows, Ok. What? She said, still scanning her cards.

Pair of threes.

You couldn't pass me a worse hand than this. Lynn did a deep laugh, from her chest. This is terrible. I open it. I'm like what the hell is this. Well, I'll see what I can do, cause sometimes it's just, skill is all I need. No luck.

While she talked Alfant stood, crouching, and walked around to crouch further into the laundry basket, and dug to find the pho-leather box. Success. He slid it in his pocket, and sat back as Lynn dropped a pair of sevens.

Pass.

See, that's what what I'm talking about.

What?

That's it. It ends here.

Pass, Alfant said. Pass. You have got to be kidding me.

Oh my god, Lynn said. Is this happening? Do you know how bad my cards were?

Pass.

Dust particles moved with the sweeps of their hands and the cards flicking through the sun rays from the skylight focused on their pile of cards in the center of the bed.

This should have been recorded, Lynn said. If you see what's in my hand. Did you put down a pair of fives? Why did you put a pair of fives down? Go. Because. Alfant lay down a pair of Jacks. Oh my god are you still gonna win?

Smack, a pair of queens.

Pass, Alfant said.

Lynn, lay down her last five cards, a full house.

That's a lucky hand.

Did you see how bad my cards were? I had no ones, no twos.

Alfant lifted himself slightly up from the bed, straining his wrist to reach into his pocket. I got something for you, he said and he held out the pho-leather ring box.

Lynn screeched briefly, and her hands shook as she took the box. It opened weakly, and she took out the ring. Oh my god, it's beautiful beautiful, hun. I don't know what to say.

It's not an engagement ring or anything, Alfant said.

I know that, Lynn said, and put the ring on the bed hastily. She crossed her arms and itched both of her elbows at once for twenty seconds or so. I think there's yeast coming out my elbows, hun. I read, they said gluten free do that sometimes.

Why don't you guys come down and join us here, Mom said, her head peeping up from the stairs. Remember our policy.



We're on our way. Lynn hopped up from the bed, and followed Mom down the stairs. Alfant pulled his computer from under the bed. Online, he reserved a table at 224 Boston Street, and wrote in a box labeled Special Requests and Services: No specific requests, but I'm going to propose to my girlfriend tonight, just so you know.

He put on a collared shirt, and padded down the stairs. In the front hallway he asked Lynn out to dinner, while holding her hand.

I don't feel like it, hun. It's too wet to go out. Let's go next week?

We could, Alfant said. I just really want to get out of this house. Can we at least take a walk, and if we decide to go we can go. I made a reservation. I can cancel it, but let's go out for a little bit. It stopped raining.

Why did you say it's not an engagement ring? Lynn asked.

Because it's not, Alfant said. I saw it and wanted to get it for you, because you were at my mind at the time, in the mall.

When were you at the mall? Lynn said. Y

They borrowed Mom's car for transportation, and Alfant took Lynn to the bike path, where they walked.

You're not going to smoke? Lynn said.

Because you don't like me to smoke, he said. They walked in silence for awhile.

Are you listening to me? Lynn said. Screw you, you don't listen to me.

What did you say?

A car was following me, hun, on your street. I told your mother. And they were asking me to get in with them.

How many were there?

Four, and they asked me where I live. They followed me down the street, hun. But a line of cars came behind them, and made them move.

Did they come back around and follow you?

No. I ran, hun. I ran into your back yard, and came in through the back. Your mom said it was god's plan to have the traffic there, hun, so that he could move on.

What a smart plan.

That's what I'm saying, Lynn said. I called my mom and she say, Was that god's plan too to have him do that in the first place?

They reached a pavilion, and watched the sunset. Lynn pulled her sweater tight around her shoulders. Alfant shoved his hands in his pockets, and felt the velvet box.

But what was I gonna say, Lynn said. I was very scared, but you know what, I'm so glad god have planned the traffic behind them so they honk and they have to get out of the way. I know this is just god's test to test my bravery, so I thank him, but I wish he choose something else because that's very scary. But I'm very thankful.

I'm glad the traffic was there, Alfant said. That's lucky.

That's his plan, Lynn's voice was rich with a smile.

It's true. The whole universe is orchestrated in our favor, because we follow God. Of course, if something were to happen, if someone were to die, for example

Or kidnapped, Lynn said. Did you take me here to kidnap me?

Of course, Alfant said. I actually think it's time for the reservation.

In the restaurant, Alfant scarfed down all of the gratis bread and ordered a bottle of Pinot Grigio. Lynn ate fried chicken on a bed of mashed potatoes. Alfant had salmon

with the most delectable gravy his taste buds had ever experienced. Alfant drank most of the wine, and when it was gone, he stood.

What do we get for desert, hun?

On one knee, Alfant said something. Lynn's arms shook. Eyes wide, face tight, she said, Are you serious?

I'm serious.

She kissed him on the lips. The manager of the restaurant stood behind their booth. He raised his eyebrows and nodded. Alfant nodded back. He began clapping and several tables followed. Alfant stood, and waved. I shouldn't have put in the comments about proposing. I'm sorry. I should have just asked for a booth.

It's ok, bun bun, Lynn said. She tried on the ring. Can I keep it even if I say no?

Of course, if you want.

I'm kidding, hun. Oh my god, hun. I'm calling my mom. She snapped out her phone, and the desert came. Mama, (translate the following into Chinese) I just got engaged. Can you believe it? To Alfant. The ring's beautiful. Ok. I'll come tonight. Ok. I'll show you tonight then (end Chinese). Ok love you mama, bye bye. Hun, we have to go to my parent's after this. My mom wants to see you.

They ate desert in great haste. Alfant paid. Lynn got the tip. All the older people waved and said congratulations as they left. When they were outside, Lynn grabbed Alfant's hand

I don't like that, hun, she said. I don't like how they clap for us. The air smelled of moss. Leaf buds poked from sticks above their heads. I don't even know what a marriage

is, hun. Why is it something we need, even? I mean I understand there's tax benefits, so maybe it's smart to do it. Why can't we just love —

All I know is that I costs 50 bucks, Alfant said. I looked it up. I just want the documents, so my parents can stop caring if we sleep in the same bed together.

They held each others hips and walked in a carelessly awkward way down the sidewalk, nearly tripping like drunks to a certain shared rhythm.

## GRANDDAD'S HOUSE

It wasn't really a spring thing, but he bought cider wine anyway with the map. The bottle was sea-glass green, and the label, in blood red lettering, said Barry's Orchard Spirits, and 11% alcohol by volume in a circle around an apple shape. Glint. The door closed behind Alfant, though he didn't hear it, being himself inebriated by the smell of wet earth. He sneezed in the mid-afternoon sunshine.

Behind him, behind a big plate glass window, Lynn spoke with a gas station attendant. She grinned. Thank you. Mmmm. I see. Thank you so much, and so on. She inclined her body slightly toward him, nodded, smiled, and twiddled her fingers. She held her hip tightly, grasping the hem of the thin purple hoodie she wore, the grasp the only sign of The attendant talked for moments, gesturing at times. She bought the map he showed her.

I already have a map, Alfant said when Lynn reached the parking lot. The problem is he is sending you around on the highway. I just need to look at the map.

He just wouldn't stop talking. Lynn wore a thin purple hoodie, over her let-out hair. She trotted out to Alfant, and her hoodie billowed, unzipped, about her.

Alfant pulled into the intersection, which had been empty through the whole period of time that they spent inside of the store. Two cars slowed at the red light. Alfant pulled behind them.

Can we lay on the grass for a little bit? Lynn said, gazing out at the passing cows in the pastures by the road.

Yeah, and we'll drink hard cider too.

But it's illegal to drink in the public.

No, this is private land, Alfant said. It's not public.

Your mom's public, Lynn said.

They listened to a few Winnie the Poo stories on tape.

I can't believe there's a tape player in here, Lynn said.

They drove by the across stadium in the reservation, and the store where everyone goes to buy tax free cigarettes, through several thousands of acres of corn fields and well over one hundred trailer homes, before they climbed the hill. Dug out drifts of dirt and shale ran along the road, directing the run off into the swamp on the reservation, which was flooding now in the spring.

Here we are. Alfant tuned onto a dirt roadway. This is really messy, Alfant said.

All the weeds?

They drove a quarter mile along a field hedged from view by a line of trees. Dry thorn branches scratched along the paint on the car. The smell of wet mud flowed through the breeze

Are we here?

Yep, Alfant said as he put the car in park. He opened the door, and peed into an unkempt bush.

Do you have the keys to go in? Lynn said watching him, standing on the stoop holding her arms close, the breeze was cool in the shadows, and wet. Lynn pulled

It's unlocked.

Hun, why is it unlocked? What if people just come in? Lynn opened the door, and stepped around the kitchen counter into the dining room. Alfant followed her in. Hun, what if people just come in, Lynn said again.

It's better if they just come in then.

Oo, it's beautiful, Lynn cooed. Is there a place for me to lie down? Lynn walked around the massive stone fireplace, which served as a boundary between the kitchen and the living room and opened on both sides. She looked out through the plate glass windows, which spread floor to ceiling. What if people just come in, hun?

It would be better if they just come in the door than if they break a window or something, you know.

Your granddad wasn't worry someone would steal something from here?

There's not that much to steal. It's a lot of old stuff. All the stuff that's worth anything is gone.

I could lie down here, Lynn said, indicating a couch, the only piece of furniture in the room, which echoed their voices.

That's exactly what it's for.

They napped off for an hour, and when they got up, Alfant made lunch on the porch, just sandwiches. They sat by the picnic table in plastic chairs, which Alfant had draped with blankets for comfort. He struggled with the bottle of hard apple cider.

I need to, Alfant said. It's not one of those twist off ones.

Yes it is.

Did you just twist it off?

No

No, it's not one of those twist off.

How did you open it?

With my lighter, Alfant said and he handed Lynn the bottle with the popped off lid sitting precariously on top. You gonna ask me why I have a lighter?

No, Lynn said. She chuckled. Oh fuck I dropped that. I dropped the lid, hun.

We'll pick it up later.

I'm not going to pick it up. Lynn handed Alfant the bottle.

They drank for a time in silence, looking down into the valley. A gang of turkeys gobbled across the lawn below. The cool wind rustled in the sumacs, but the sun rays were warm on the porch as they lounged there.

It's too sweet for me, Alfant said, handing Lynn the half empty bottle. You can finish it. Do you want a tour of the house.

Alfant took Lynn through the big central room, with windows so large it felt like the outside, past the kitchen, and into Granddad's bedroom, where they poked through the stuff that wasn't in boxes. Then they poked around the basement. A few of the doors had mold climbing up from the bottom, and there was mildew on all the walls and the ceiling.

I said to my mom if I own a home I'll live with her, but I'm going to trap her in the basement, and like feed her through a little hole, and she get to see me once a year.

Well we can make this a very nice basement to trap your mom in. We'll make her an apartment. We'll take out the stairs, of course, so she can't come up and bother us. But what if we need something cleaned?

Oh, that's true. She can come up and clean for us.



Back up in the dining room, Lynn held the bottle aloft in salute.

Hun, let's do this, she said.

You want to do it?

Alright, Alfant said. Let's walk the property. Do you want to get a jacket?

I have one in the car, hun.

You want to get it, or you want to use one of these jackets? Alfant took one of Granddad's jackets from a bunch hanging by the door.

No, I don't want to wear these. Lynn pulled back dramatically. Ok, I'll wear those, she said. I'll wear this one.

Why not this one, Alfant held out the jacket he'd picked.

No I like this one. Lynn was already putting it on, worn out blue with a white interior. Ooo, it's a membership jacket, Lynn said.

What's a membership jacket?

It's an eighties thing. I don't think it's in anymore, but, Lynn said. Let's go.

It's not cool.

Let's go. Let's do this hun.

Alright.

The door slammed shut behind them, and they trapped down the lawn to the pines, and the woods below them.

We're going to have to eat just bean sandwiches for this, Lynn said.

Seriously we should stop going out for dinner.

We haven't go out for dinner for a long time. We been ordering pizza. That's a luxury thing.

That is a luxury thing, Alfant said. We'll have to cut that out too.

I hope I will become a therapist and make 100 an hour. She reached her lips, smelling of apples and berries and alcohol, up to kiss Alfant. They kiss, and Lynn wraps one of her arms around his, and chugs on the bottle

That's way more than we need. This is actually pretty cheap property, like 200 thousand dollars is not that expensive. It's just the fact that it's in the middle of nothing.

Imagine if it was in the city, hun, on the hill, right next to the state house. Tie your shoe lace. Hun, tie your shoe lace.

Alfant knelt in the leaves a few feet past the pines, under the sugar maples.

Oh can I have a sowing room?

Yeah. That room on the corner will be your sowing room.

No, that's the yoga room. Everything need its own room.

Did I show the corner room?

Actually the sowing room will be inside my closet, because once I'm done sowing I put it up on the rack. Is that very smart?

The closet is big too.

Aw, I'm excited about this.

The property line is down, just about here, about thirty feet down that way.

Do we have have to buy the house? If we don't buy the property would it be cheaper?

Well the property comes with the land. Maybe we could sell the field to the farmer next door, and it would be little cheaper. Not much

Could we sell the woods?

You don't want the woods? Look at this, this beautiful space to walk along.

So this would be all our place then? We could do whatever we want on it?

Yeah. It goes down to, see the rocks down there.

I feel like we need this much land. Can we sell some of this land if possible, if anyone want it? That's an issue right?

We could look into it, but maybe.

Let's do this, hun.

You want to do it?

Yeah, let's do this.

I kind of like the property though. It's nice.

Ooo, it's mushy here.

And the other thing is I don't know who would buy it.

They turned slightly along the path, which ran along, close to the edge of the property, and up toward the

You're a cutey, Lynn said. Let me call my mom. I want to tell her we're going to do this. I think she'll be excited because I told her we were coming here. I'll tell my mom and see what she says. Lynn hit her call log and call. Ok, keep walking. Mama, (Chinese) We're going to buy the house (end Chinese) Mama. (Chinese) I need to go now, Alfant keeps talking. I'll call again

We're coming back up to the road now, Alfant said. This is a stream right here.

Well, hun, not including me being a therapist, at the restaurant, even with me being in school, I'm making 1200 a month, even with school and internship.

I think that we can buy it together, Alfant said. I don't think we'll have a problem with it, except I need to get a job

I'm just saying, I'm making 125 per shift, and I'm not going to work at the restaurant forever, but I'm just saying. I'm saying, hun. Jackie, who works full time said she make 4500 a month, hun. But I'm just saying. I'm not going to be a waitress for the rest of my life. Oh my god, if I become a therapist, I'll still waitress here and there.

Oh, this is the stream. This is the stream I was talking about, and the other thing is there's a pond up there, and in the winter it'll freeze over so in the winter we can

We can ice skate in it, Lynn said raising her voice in excitement.

Yep, we can skate.

I farted again.

Cause it freezes right through to the bottom so

Hello, you're not listening. I farted again.

Watch out for this. Alfant held apart a few pricker stalks for Lynn to walk through.

Of, I think I'm getting buzzed, hun. I'm really feeling dizzy.

They passed the barn, crossed the road, and cut through the underbrush to the field, which was full of dried corn husks.

The farmer next door is farming this, Alfant said. He only pays 300 a year, but we get a tax break so it's worth it overall.

They climbed the hill. The wind set Lynn's hair out in streams.

I'm sold, hun. Let's do this, ok?

You like it?

If we're divorced can we still live in the same house together, but you can't go on my side? Lynn said.

Yeah, we'll do that.

Ok, but we can have sex sometime, right?

Alfant stopped and gazed at the cloudless sky, soaking in the radiant waves of light from the sun.

Hello, Lynn said. Do you hear what I was saying?

Of course, Alfant said and kissed her. Look at that view. They stood on the highest hump, above the house, which was obscured by a patch of woods that began several hundred yards away.

## STALE BREAD BASKET

Oh but I ate so much today, Lynn said. I think I ate 1000 pounds. Two million calories. Is this better, hun? This is still a little chubby. She turned one side toward the mirror and sighed. I just ate a lot today. Could you take a look at me? Is it a little better?

Lynn stood in the hall, next to the mini fridge, in front of the body length mirror on the door going into the bathroom.

I don't care, Alfant said. I don't give a shit.

Yes you do. You care enough to say something.

No, he said. You took off your coat. He stood at the buero next to a 56 inch plasma screen television holding a note from the concierge. You took off your shirt. He lifted his other arm part way, feigning to point at the cardigan on the otherwise tidy bed.

And I extended myself, because it's more like, ahhhh.

Sure.

Hands on her hips toward Alfant, Lynn turned on her feet, facing him. Her bun, which she'd wrapped high up toward the top of her scalp, tossed forward as her chin went down and she looked up, searching for Alfant's eyes. Alfant was reading: Congratulations on your special day.

Cause babe, the size of your belly was wider than your shoulders.

That's not true.

It was just really surprising, babe. I'm sorry. Do you want a glass of champaign?

Your strand of hair is wider than you, Lynn said. That's how skinny you are. Ok? Take that. Anorexic. Now I'm just being mean. I'm sorry, hun. You know what? I'm not sorry. That really hurt my feelings.

Babe, there's no reason for that to hurt your feelings, Alfant said. That's ridiculous.

You're ridiculous.

I can say whatever I want —

That's not true —

and there are no repercussions.

No, Lynn said. You love me. You're supposed to say everything I want to hear.

I love you, Alfant said. I tell you you're beautiful every day, especially today.

No. You call me a fat lard.

They drink champagne, and decide to order some bread sticks, which cost \$30.

When they came with butter, they were toasted to mask their staleness. Alfant regretted not taking any of the food Mama and Mom had boxed at the restaurant.

Lynn lay on the bed, and kicked the flower print

Let me see if the men responded to me.

Who did you write to?

None of your business. Men who won't say that to me. She type, type, typed, and scrolled through a message board. This is how affairs start. I don't get no attention from my husband.

We're already talking about affairs?

I thought you said you wanted to get married so we could live at your parents house. You don't care about me. I can have affairs if I want to.

Stop it, Alfant murmured as he crawled across the bed toward her, and peeked at her laptop.

I'm kidding, she said. I'm having an online site of all my cloths and people are telling me to post more pictures. She read some things. Ooo, I got two notification. Do you want to buy my stuff? Oh, you're kidding me. No. I'm not selling for that. She typed something quickly, and closed the laptop. Oh, you're kidding. I got my bag for 120. I'm selling it for 45. This woman offered me 20. I'm not even responding.

Just tell her, You've gotta be kidding me.

No. I don't want to say that.

It's better than not responding.

Than not responding? Go away. This site is so crazy. I will be obsessed with this. Go away Tooth Pick. Go away. Alfant pulled her from behind into a suffocating embrace. Go away concentration camp survivor. Go away.

Why are you saying this?

Because you're being mean to me. Go away.

I'm not selling mine for 20. No way. Come on. Let me see what other prices are. Oh hell no. Hun, other girls are selling theirs for 70. I'm not selling mine for 20.

Why are you selling for so little then?

Cause I never used here before. Ok, some girls sell it for fifty. Ok, fine, you know, but nobody's selling for 20. You're kidding lady, no.



They spoke until well after sunset, and they bathed together. Afterward, in bed, he said, Do you want to change position?

No, I want to stay like this cause if I go to change position, by belly will sink, and I don't want you to see that.

It's not your choice then, Alfant said. Hop on top.

Ok, fine, Lynn said, and she enveloped herself in a comforter with red, yellow and blue pinwheel print. I'll do it like this way though. She lowered herself onto Alfant. You can't see it.

Like a Muslim woman? Or Jewish? There's some sort of religious thing where you have to have sex through a sheet. Maybe that's Catholic. Did you ever hear of that?

No. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself, kneeling, sitting, and grinding down on his pelvis. I have no self-esteem. That's why I do this, she said amid heavy breathing.

Babe, Alfant said, sliding his hand under the blanket, gripping her belly, stimulating her clitoris with his thumb. This is a ridiculous thing to be bothered about.

No, she said. My OCD is not telling me I'm fat. My OCD is telling me many different things now.

What's it's telling you now, Alfant said.

I'm going back on Prozac.

Don't do that, Alfant said. Why would you do that?

Hun you know being fat is my worst nightmare, Lynn said. Why would you say that to me?

I was just joking with you, babe.

No you wasn't, Lynn said. I hate my life.

I love your life.

I want a divorce.

It's no big deal.

You're no big deal, Lynn said. .

You're my chubby Lubby.

No, Lynn said. Shut up. I want to marry someone who won't say those things to me.

I'm just joking with you, babe.

You don't appreciate me.

Lynn rolled over and pulled the blankets up over her head.

Why did you post it? Alfant said. I was just saying it

I got a friend request, Lynn said. Ok, I'm sleeping in the livingroom. Alfant just said, I just noticed this, you look like you gained weight. I hate him.

I did not say that.

You said, Wow you're getting chubby. That's even worse than that. This is a lighter version. Did you not say, Wow, you're getting chubby?

Yeah, generally that, that's what I said.

You don't think that's worse than this?

That's more appropriate.

You think that's more appropriate than this lighter version?

Lynn, why are you posting about it?

Cause I'm so upset at you, she said. Fine, no one will ever know how sad I am. Go  
away.

You're like a winey teenager.

You know that really bothers me

Could you read it again?

I just deleted it.

Oh. Good.

## IN LAWS

Alfant watched a documentary on his laptop, hopped up, grabbed a book that was lying on its side on his top shelf. He flipped through the, the exceedingly fat book stuffed with papers and writing.

He sat at the bottom of the bed

I was crazy babe, Alfant said. This is, he caught his breath chuckling, like the Bible from when I was young. Look at what I wrote. I found this note in my Bible.

Lynn took the page of college rule notebook, and murmured as she read: generally causing disputes . . . is forgiveness too hard . . . I need to have a firm faith. I need to strengthen my walk with Chr. Oh my god. Show this to your parents. Tell them it's how you still feel.

All this paper in here I should just take out. He continued flipping through the Bible, absently reading at times. He chuckled.

If I sell everything I posted, I wrote this

Babe, I wrote this in high school.

That's not that long ago.

No. I was seventeen. I said, I cannot wait to meet my wife. Keep her safe for me.

Let her know that I love her no matter what.

Is that a letter to God?

It says, Dear God, I am enormously confused. I love you. Help me never to turn away from that love. Isn't that weird? There's another one. Lord keep my wife safe, and turn my eyes and heart—

But who is your wife?

I don't know. You're my wife, apparently. I was praying about you.

Like your future wife? Oh that's so cute.

So I'm watching this movie about North Korean propaganda, and I saw this quote of Kim Jung Ill's and that's basically a metaphor Jesus used in the Bible, so I want to just write them down next to each other to inspire me. He says, "In art, the seed is the ideological life essence of the main subject and the soil in which the elements of the image can strike root." The seed is only as good as the soil, Alfant said. He put on a pair of sound canceling headphones, and watched the movie, imbibing information, contributing nothing to the moment. Feeling fine. Joyous.

Lynn lay on her belly, feet kicking the pillows, scrolling through the facets of online society.

I think they shouldn't have stars on movies, Alfant said, like ratings and stuff like that. Write a sentence, 144 characters about what the thing is. Forget the stars. The stars don't mean anything. Democracy doesn't work very well, babe. Not that there's another better system out there, but democracy is pretty shitty. We can do better. It keeps movies like this, with really important information—

This girl's crazy.

Alfant pulled he headphones out of the jack. What did you say? He said. Music burst from the speakers on his laptop.

Oh that's Chinese, Lynn said. A woman with a hand organ sang in operatic tones.

Chinese? Alfant said. Why do they have Chinese music in a movie about Korea?

Hun, can you use your headphones, Lynn said in a brassy voice. You're giving me a headache like you are.

Alfant clicked off the music abruptly. There was this girl at the library, he said. I don't know who she is, but I heard her voice on the other side of the computers, and she's always arguing these ridiculous things, like she was talking about how she's so annoyed with people who call each other babe. It was just so ridiculous. I felt bad at first, because she said it's objectifying. Then she started going off on this feminist tangent and I thought, Hang on. Women and men use it. I understand it being disgusting in terms of sexualizing children, which is one of the things that she brought up.

But that's a different story, Lynn said.

Or you're imagining having babies with the person.

How is it offensive if you're imagining having babies with other people?

That's the thing. It doesn't make sense that it's offensive. I was like, You're talking in a big circle.

I guess unless you don't know them well, Lynn said. Babe is a stupid thing to say to someone if you're not in love.

I guess so, Alfant said and he began scrolling through articles on his laptop.

The passage you found from when you were 17 said To My Wife? Lynn said. You meant to your future wife in the future? What were you asking God to do? To protect her? You're so silly. From what? From all the evil spirits? Why didn't you tell God to protect her from OCD?

I should have.

You know the irony is it won't have made a difference.

Do you want it? It's addressed to you.

There's things I rather not know.

How do you say no thank you in Cantonese?

We don't say it. We have something similar. It's sassy though, this one,

□□你，没有感激之情。It's not funny in English, but it's a very sassy term. I say it to my mom all the time.

What's it mean?

Thanks with no gratitude. See, it's not funny, but it can be sassy though.

I want something that I can say to your mom that's nice when she's trying to give me sweets, or whatever.

Say 我不希望它。I don't want it. I think you just saying it will be funny.

(我不希望它。

Gnam Ew, Alfant said. Gnam Ew. Say it again?

You could say, 我□。I'm full. She'll understand that.

Gna Bow. Gna Bow.

They watched a video online.

Just to be cute, say, 我。Lynn shut off the video. 我喜□做的不是。Say it. 我,

Gna

我喜□做的不是。

mmm jung yee

我不喜□它。

Gna mmm jung yee.

If you say, 我喜□它, it means I like it.

Gna jung yee, Alfant said. Gna mmm jung yee.

Lynn gasped and hopped off the bed. Oh my god, hun, there's a cockroach. Can you kill it?

Where?

There's a cockroach right there. Lynn pointed to a little brown bug scampering under the desk.

Hold up let me -- Lynn said. She smacked the ground with a notebook full of copies of Alfant's resume.

Alfant? Alfant's mom knocked on their door. Alfant hopped up from the desk chair, pulled out the fan, and closed the window. His pipe fell to the ground.

Not yet, Martha. Don't come in. We're trying to kill something here.

Ok, Alfant's Martha said through the door. Tell Alfant when he has three minutes, I'd like him to help carry this dresser in for you. The sound of her slippers receded.

Ok. It's dead, Lynn said.

There's no way you killed that thing, Alfant said.

It's right there. I'll clean it.

Oh shit, Lynn said.

Can you read this? Alfant handed Lynn a book with pictures of American presidents on the cover.



It's the history of America, Lynn said. Oh my god. I need a tissue to pick up the cockroach I just killed.

Our exchange student left it here.

Oh yeah, Lynn said. We need to get tips for the delivery guy. I don't understand why though. Should we start tipping the mailman too? I don't get why — ahhh. It didn't die. It start running. Ahhh! Help.

Alfant took a swift step sideways and crushed it. There, he said. It's dead.

So what bin should I use for my underwear? Lynn said. Cause I feel that's going to be very important.

You can take whatever drawers you want, Alfant said. You tell me.

Where are all these stuff from?

It's all your cloths, some of your cloths from the apartment.

You can take my cloths out of that drawer.

No, Lynn said. I'll put it in the second one.

Alfant focused on his computer screen. Welcome back mortal Nation, his computer said. Thanks for taking some of your rapidly dwindling time on earth to be with me.

You don't care about me, Lynn said. Only I care about myself.

Why do you think that? Alfant said. Oh, what do you think of the top of the dresser

Lynn stood up on her tiptoes, squeezing the removable glass surface of the ornate oak dresser. You put our photos here? Lynn said. But I can't reach them here, but that's ok. They're really for you.

It's the end of an era babe.

The start of an era living at your parents's. She folded and put away cloths for about five minutes in silence. My girl at the hospital, she said during her worst drug time she spent 5,000 in two weeks. What is molly hun?

It's ecstasy.

Do drugs cost five grand for two weeks?

I'm sure you could do that, Alfant said. For sure.

It's so sad, Lynn said. You know people who lost everything? She really has lost everything, her daughters, her marriage. Lost her home. Lost her legs. Wha -- it makes me sad.

Do you still want to do social work?

I guess I have to, Lynn said. I spend 60,000 already. So, ok, where do you want me to put your cloths hun?

I don't know, Alfant said. I haven't looked into anything yet.

Can you get off your computer and help me? Don't give me an attitude.

Fine, Alfant said, and he stood.

Whoah, Lynn cooed, you're really chubby. She pinched his side. How does that feel?

Doesn't bother me, Alfant said, cause I'm not self-conscious about that. You want to play some Big 2?

No, Lynn said. Hun, look at this. We can't do anything until all of this is done. I need to make a bin for just for my restaurant stuff.

Alfant clicked on music from his computer, filling the atmosphere with trip hop.  
We've gotta find a way to make it easy for us to function, but also —

How about this bag? Lynn said. Because I don't have much restaurant stuff.

I kind of want to get it as much paired down as possible. He sat in a desk chair  
and lit his pipe again.

You have to hurry up, she said. We still have this mound of stuff to do.

Babe, this isn't going to take long.

Yes it is, Lynn said. This is very sexy music hun.

You're very sexy music, Alfant said. Let's play just on game of Big 2. Inhaling,  
placing his pipe on the desk, pushing aside a pile of blankets, holding his breath, he dealt  
a pack of cards into four piles on the bottom of the bed. Strands of smoke percolated from  
his mouth. He let go, and his breath was smoke. Do I look very sexy when I do this hun?

No, Lynn said. You look very stupid.

I am a fire master, Alfant said.

Lynn climbed onto their bed. She across from him, where he sat at the end of the  
bed in his desk chair. Ok, whoever loses don't have to clean all this.

Whoever loses doesn't?

That's the point, Lynn said. Because the winner's so happy they can clean  
whatever they want. She sorted her cards. Do you have a three? No?

Oh, you bitch. Lynn had put down a full house. Pass. Babe, what do you think of  
cunt?

I call my mom cunt, but she don't know what it is.

I think cunt's a better thing to call someone than bitch. Bitch is like possessive, and degrading. Cunt is like cock or dick, right? If you call a guy a dick it's half an insult, because guys are supposed to be dicks. I mean not a guy necessarily, but you call people dicks when they over exercise power. Cunt should have the same casual status.

Why'd you call me bitch then?

Cause you're my bitch. I own you.

I own you, Lynn said.

Fuck, Alfant said. Pass. Are you kidding me right now. Pass.

You're my bitch. Lynn dropped her final card.

Fuck you cunt, Alfant said. You know what that means?

I finish the pile, so I don't have to

You spoil me, Alfant said. You're so sweet to me.

Can you help me?

One minute.

Ew. Lynn faced away from him, and she sniffed the air.

What?

You just tooted.

No.

Yes you did.

No.

I don't know who it can be then, who would do such disgraceful stuff. You tooted all the way, and you're ruining the atmosphere in which I have to work in. Ok, stop smoking or go into the other room.

I can't smoke in the other room.

That's the point. Ak, your shirt. I'm going to throw this shirt out. It's got two holes in it.

Let me see? Alfant shook out his pipe into the rug, and stood. We'll use it for a rag.

I thought we have a lot of stuff for rags, Lynn said. Didn't my mom give us like —

We're running out, Alfant said, believe it or not. Just because we're using it and tossing it out. I'm going to make a bag of rags for Granddad's house.

I love you hun, Lynn said. She opened her arms abruptly to Alfant and hugged him.

Alfant dug through a pile of laundry. Where should we put my pants, he said.

Hun, those jeans are disgusting, Lynn said. No one wears anything like that anymore.

What do you mean?

This is the most disgusting pair of jeans.

You mean they're out of date?

They look like they're from the 80s. They look like something like New Kids on the Block wore.

They do actually don't they.

Can we get rid of them please?

No, that's ok.

What are you going to do with them? Go to your first job interview.

Flick, Alfant hit Lynn's couch.

Ow. What you hit me for? Lynn said and hugged him again. You have to clean. You can be a winner. She sank to the ground and hugged his leg. You're my teddy bear. She kissed his knee. I love you hun. I adore you. You're my most favorite. Meanwhile Alfant took her hand and pulled her up to stand before him. I like it when you tell me to rise so I don't have to stay kneeling. Oh you made my face turn red, hun. You saw that? Now I wish to get some money. How come you won't pay me money?

I don't know, Alfant said. It's sexist.

What does that mean?

It's objectifying. We should be financially independent.

Talk about yourself. I am independent.

Alfant pinched her belly. But I'm stronger than you.

I'm the one making the money, Lynn said. I'm also better at math.

That's so racist, Alfant said.

So what? It's true. I also love rice and eat with chopstick. Is that racist?

You also need to learn to use the plural.

It's about context, hun. You don't need a plural. It's superfluous. I went to high school too. I got my evaluation today, she said. Something bother me. I don't get these people. So, I been having my internship since September. I need her recommendation. I had a family meeting today, no tomorrow that I —

You want one of these? Alfant pointed the opening of a chip bag toward her.

You should start going to you therapist again. I'm just saying.

Why?

It's just healthy. Why not? You have insurance?

Don't you want to talk about how crazy I'm getting. I'm just saying.

How was your evaluation?

It was actually pretty good, because last year my supervisor make it sound like I'm retarded. I'm nervous about this year, but it went pretty well. She gave me a lot of average, and, well it's one to five, right. I got a lot of fours, and some fives. It's not supposed to be all fives of course. My supervisor last year was all one and two. She hated me.

Why did she hate you so much?

Because I suck, Lynn said. But it's much better this year. I was trying to avoid the evaluation and Lesley call me into her office and was like, We need to talk about this. Ak, I'm getting stressed. Lesley keeps saying, like, when you get a job in the future. I don't think I'm ready for an actual social work job, but she keep talking about it.

You gotta start thinking about it.

And when she's on the phone with other agencies, she say, I have an intern here graduating in May. Will you let me know if you're then. That makes me sick in the stomach for some reason.

Why?

I don't know. I feel when I get there they'll call Lesley and be like, You sent us this girl?

No Alfant said. Lynn, you're going to be a great social worker.

No I won't. I don't want to do anything. She laughed, and whined a little. I just want to waitress, and sell stuff online, and I'll build your house with you.

Alfant chuckled, and breathed. You don't want to do social work anymore?

It's too hard. It's difficult. I'm too stupid for it. It's too much work.

After having paid 60,000 dollars for the education?

Yeah. I rather work as a waitress, Lynn said. If I work full time at the restaurant

Alfant finished smoking, closed the window, and sprayed air freshener around the room.

No, it's not — No, that make me nauseous too. Now I'm gonna be very nauseous because there's too many things going on at once. Oh my god. There's too much smell going on.

Alfant laughed.

This doesn't make you sick at all? It must be a white people thing.

Alfant laughed hysterically. That's new.

It's awful this smell, Lynn said.

Oooh it is pretty terrible this smell.

I rather smell your fart at this point. At least it's natural. Because that bring out the smell of weed, and the weed bring out the smell of that spray. Because they're very different it brings out each other.

It's the contrast.

Yeah, and it isn't good. It's this chemical smell. I need to find a new husband. I don't know where though. I'll go online. I'm gonna find a gay guy and marry him. We'll be in a loveless relationship, but we shop together, and he doesn't smoke weed, and we sell things online at the same time.



There was this girl at the library. I don't know who she is, but I heard her voice on the other side of the computers, and she's always arguing these ridiculous things, like she was talking about how she's so annoyed with people who call each other babe. It was just so ridiculous. I felt bad at first, because she said it's objectifying. Then she started going off on this feminist tangent and I thought, Hang on. Women and men use it. I understand it being disgusting in terms of sexualizing children, which is one of the things that she brought up.

But that's a different story, Lynn said.

Or you're imagining having babies with the person.

How is it offensive if you're imagining having babies with other people?

That's the thing. It doesn't make sense that it's offensive. I was like, You're talking in a big circle.

Unless you don't know them well, Lynn said. Babe is a pretty stupid thing to say.

They had organized about half of their belongings in the room by midnight, and the other half remained strewn about in piles or boxes. They gave up, and sunk into bed.

You smell so nice, hun, I love your natural smell, Lynn said.

I smell like detergent? Alfant said.

That's not a natural smell.

What do I smell like?

Like a wet potato.

Is it like a fresh wet potato or an old one?

A fresh one, after the rain.

I don't know what that smells like.

I don't know either. It's a natural smell. Did you put on deodorant?

No.

That's what I like, when you haven't shower in a few days, and put on deodorant a few days ago. The smell just intertwine, and it just smell so nice. They should make a perfume out of it, and I'll wear it, Lynn said. Alfant laughed. To be honest, I'm not sure if a lot of people will appreciate that smell, but I know I will.

Isn't that a sign of a good perfume, that it mixes with your scent, and makes it smell better on a molecular level?

Oh, that's true, so maybe it won't be good on me. I'm going to have to keep your sent somehow so when someday you leave me I have your scent with me, and I'll let my new boyfriend smell it too. I be like, This is my love. Can you sniff this for me, and then maybe I never see them again after that, but they need to smell it. It's smelling really nice.

Mmm. Alfant gazed into his laptop screen, interpreting the pixels and the sound.

You smell nice, and you have a nice butt. What more could I ask for? Lynn pulled a strand of hair out, over her forehead, and into her view. She split it. I know earlier I talked about divorce, but you know things change up by the minute with me. I'm looking for divorce one second. The next second I want to buy you a ticket to take you to Hong Kong.

## PICC LINE

Once upon a time when Indigenous Australians worked for English land owners, they would leave the fields at random for weeks on end without asking permission. Early travel writers interpreted the phenomenon as a coming of age ritual. Like a certain carpenter, these young people were believed to have been led by a spirit into the wilderness, where they starved and saw satan, or whatever.

Alfant surfed the Internet in the hospital on a warm evening in August, “The Walkabout is perhaps one of the most important institutions in vogue among the aboriginals [ . . . ] To the settlers it is considered in the light of an excuse for a holiday or for shirking the work upon which the blacks would otherwise be employed,” reading an excerpt from an 1897 manuscript by the well known protector of aborigines Walter Roth, who was so dedicated to the scientific documentation of native behavior that he asked an Aboriginal couple to pose in a sex position for a picture.

On the first page in the next link, Alfant could read a study touching on the misconceptions of travel writers on native spirituality, for 183 dollars. But he already knew all he needed to know from the synopsis: in fact young aborigines left the fields to visit family suffering sickness or death. Walkabouts were invented in English. He might find an opportunity to repeat this vague fact in some associative way, and thus be considered wise or otherwise crucial. He read for the sake of argument alone.

Have you found a movie? Lynn asked from the bed, in her hospital gown.

I’m reading about Walkabout.

Is it a white people movie?

I remembered it being a good movie, Alfant said. Why is it they always advertise shitty old movies on these streaming sites?

There are good movies they advertise, Lynn said. Oh, there's a movie you have to see. It's by Wai-Keung Lau, the guy that did the original of The Departed. But it's not that one, It's called, "Chungking Express." Can we watch that? It's a Hong Kong movie though. You have to read subtitles, and you miss some of the jokes, but I'll explain to you the jokes.

They watched the movie through, with the lights out. The blood pressure monitor beeped for the nurse a few times, when Lynn laughed the hardest. On the fifth visit, the nurse unplugged the machine, and said she'd be back to check on them later. The movie ended.

I sent my sister a text that said you stupid bitch. Listen. Lynn hit play on the audio file attached to the text on her phone. You stupid bitch, the phone said, in a recording distorted by its loudness.

How vigorous, Alfant said. I like it.

She opened it on the train, hun. She opened it and it played, and everyone on the train heard it.

Did anyone pay attention?

She said a few people looked, and she heard a few chuckles.

How do you get urinary tract infections? Alfant said abruptly, back to browsing the Internet on his computer.

They just happen, hun. It's not something you can control.

They can't just happen, Alfant said. Something has to make them happen.

So went their conversation, to depths untoward. They spoke in brief series usually initiated by Lynn. Alfant became engrossed in further research.

I am a resident physician here. A doctor addressed them from the foot of the bed. Alfant looked up casually, masking his surprise at the voice that seemingly materialized from nothing. The doctor explained again that they would have to stay in the hospital over the weekend. He explained the simple procedure they would perform on Monday, putting in a picc line. Are there any questions that I can answer for you at this time?

I don't mean to be a dick, Alfant said, speaking at the end of an out breath, feeling the need to breath in. Instead he engaged his larynx in a rapid series of expression that made him perspire. But is it possible that she just didn't drink enough water? I read, well it was online but still, how kidney infections happen by not drinking enough. I don't mean to blame you Lynn, understand. I just worry. I don't want to be telling you this later as a fact, and not have a doctor's word to back me up. Several beads of sweat reached his chin. He was conscious of the cool a/c drawing together the hot fibers of the skin under his thinning hair.

Oh, because I don't like to drink water? Lynn said. She laughed.

The doctor furrowed his brow briefly, looked at Lynn, and back at Alfant. Not in this case. Sometimes it happens

Alfant stared into the doctor's wood putty eyes and lost track of his thinking. His mind turned with the knowledge of aughting to know something new and expecting to be outed. The doctor continued talking, and Alfant nodded.

After the doctor left, they sat for a time on their respective computers. Alfant began reflecting on the length of a day. Lynn interrupted him.

Did you know that throwing acid in people's faces is like a common thing, she said. She looked at Alfant, finger on her laptop's track pad. Like 200 people got acid thrown in their faces this year.

What? Where?

Pakistan. I tell you a quick story because I'm reading this, ok, so this factory owner tried to have sex with a girl and she wouldn't have it with him. So the factory owner had his son throw acid on her face while she was sleeping. So she ran away from the factory and told her father, and the father called him, and he's like, It's ok. My son will still take her in marriage. Can you believe that? He'd take her . . . But the father took them to court and the factory owner got 3 years in jail. The son got 17 years. But the dad spend all of his money on lawyer fees. That's the sad thing. Awe. Can you believe this, hun?

Sure. Sounds feasible.

I never hate someone that much, hun. To throw acid on them. Well, they'd have to kill my parents or something. If someone killed my parents, I guess I would consider it. Lynn started doing leg exercises on the bed. Sometimes when I'm in here, she said. I think about dying, and what you would do if I leave, and it makes me tear up a little bit.

In what way?

In the way I wish you could die with me. Is that morbid to say when I'm dying?

You're not dying. don't say that. Sh.

You, sh.

Are you trying to seduce me right now with your bare thigh exposed?

Hun, what does hither mean?

It's like here.

Oh like come hither? Come hi-th-her, She enunciated. That is such a weird word, hun. Why do they say it?

It's an old English thing.

Would you say to a dog hither! to get him to come over, so just hither?

I think you would have to say the whole thing come hither to do it correctly. To do it right, I mean.

But it would be funny if people started saying it now.

You'd sound like such a douche, Alfant said. Why'd you ask about hither?

I don't know. It just came up into my head and I wanted to know what it means

Alfant got lost again in the information vortex, and the evening turned to night.

Could you play Dirt Off Your Shoulder for me, just quietly? Lynn said.

Sure, but why?

Because I like to picture us dancing while I fall asleep.

## SCRATCH TICKET

This is bad, but I passed through the living room and I heard something, Lynn said. I think your mom's trying to buy a house. And then your dad, he does this thing, Let's look at the factors. One. Lynn let off a gasp of laughter.

It might be Dad's buying a place for his business, Alfant said. Because this is illegal, for him to have it in this house, even though he's had it all my life. Lynn gasped again, hilariously, smiling face-wide. Do you want to hear this story?

Yeah, Lynn said, and giggled in her throat.

You know the Jamaican restaurant down the street? The guys that were doing the Jamaican restaurant were doing it out of their house, across the street at first, years and years ago. So mom calls the cops on them.

Why?

I don't know, Alfant said. My mom irrationally calls the cops on people sometimes. She's like, It's dirty. And it's true, you shouldn't be serving food out of your kitchen.

How is it dirty to serve food out of your own kitchen?

To sell food, Alfant said. It doesn't follow health code, which is whatever.

That's true. There's no inspector.

So Mom calls, and they get shut down and fined. Within a week we hear from the city about our zoning violation. Mom thinks they called to retaliate.

How would they know?



They might have guessed, or maybe when the city came for the restaurant, they saw Dad's trucks and took a twofer. But my mom thinks they called without any other evidence other than she's annoyed. Back then our driveway, parking area, whatever, went down to the sidewalk, with a pretty ratty fence. It didn't look great. We tore out the fence and the bottom part of the parking area, and made it a garden, and the city gave us a continuance as long as we only have two cars in the front, because it wasn't zoned to have a parking lot in front.

While Alfant talked, Lynn took a lottery ticket from their bedside table, and began scratching.

You don't park two cars there.

That's what's in writing, Alfant said. But it's true. On any day we could get a citation if they see more than two cars there.

I think I won forty bucks, Lynn said.

Huh, Alfant held the ticket close to his face. I think you're right.

She finished scratching off the ticket. I won forty bucks. Lynn hopped off the bed with gusto. Yep, I won forty. Let me call my mom. This is something I need to tell her. I never won anything from playing these. My mom told me too, she said, Tiger's very lucky this year, so she's like, You need to buy it whenever you can. So I'll buy them every day to see if I win the jackpot.

Alfant laughed. Tiger's very lucky this year?

Yeah, Lynn said. You know what, I don't care if they judge me. I need to tell them. Lynn hopped off the bed, swung open the door and rushed out of the room. Alfant caught her hand.

Lynn, Lynn, Lynn, he said. Don't tell them.

But they won't show it even if they judge me, she said. With me they be like, That's so nice Lynn. Alfant's eyes looked wide and Lynn sensed fright. Ok, I'm going to tell my mom. Lynn pulled a phone from her purse, and dialed.

They'll still have it in the back of their head though.

So? Lynn said. I don't care. The phone rang. You think I care? Mama (Translate to Chinese) I won on a lottery ticket, 40 dollars. I couldn't believe it. I'm so lucky. Of my whole life? (end translation). My mom's like keep buying because you're very lucky this year, she said, in every way, in career, marriage, dating. If you're married you'll be lucky. If you're single you'll find someone. In every way possible. This is going to be your best year. I was like, Of my life? She said, Well not your life, but you know (Translate to Chinese) Thanks so much. Ok, we'll go to the casino. I love you (End Chinese) Mama, bye bye, I love you. She's like I told you you're lucky this year. She want to go to the casino with me now.

You opened up a can of worms now, Alfant said. Do you believe in luck?

I believe in bad luck, Lynn said with a laugh of three beats. I've never been lucky in my life. Like, shit always happen to me.

The slings and arrows of outrageous, Alfant emphasized Outrageous with sailing sing-song delivery, Fortune.

The attic floor was made of plywood, covered with a large piece of off-blue carpet salvaged from a nearby dumpster owned by a contracting firm. The carpet only covered the side of the room that the stairs came up toward. The other side didn't have lights, so the boxes cast long shadows, when the light was on, toward the curtain-less

window. When the lights were on, the far side of the room was bathed in darkness. When the electric lights went out, light from the skylight and the windows on either end diffused the shadows. The peaked ceiling, ten feet up down the center, dropped sharply on either side. The stairs came up exactly in the center of the the attic, and Alfant's bed was pushed against the roof beams, making the most of the already excessively large space. The truth is, Alfant liked to sleep in corners.

I won forty buck in scratch ticket, Lynn said. I want to be sure. I don't want to be stupid. Did I win, because this one definitely didn't win, the bottom one. I won right?

She handed Alfant the ticket, and he examined it with a solemn expression, chin slightly protruding, eyes gazing down pointedly. All ten scratch spots showed a gold bar with \$40 printed underneath. It certainly seems so, he said.

You judgmental people, Lynn said. Judgmental. Oh, you know who would appreciate this? Karen, cause Karen's not judgmental like some people.

Me judgmental? Who's Karen?

Can you not look at my screen while I'm using it, Lynn said. It's annoying, hun.

Why don't you want me to look at your phone?

Cause I'm doing something, and your head is in the way, Lynn said. Did your mom make dinner? Lynn hopped off the bed. Sorry. I'm just a fat person. Well, I am bringing all of the dishes out while I'm at it. She collected a pile of plates and cups from various surfaces around the room, descended the stairs to the kitchen, got a plate of chicken and rice, and returned. The bed squeaked when she sat on it, and she pulled her legs in under her butt.

Oh wow, Alfant said. You're a beauty queen, like a queen over everyone, especially the marching nations.

Marching nations? Lynn said. Alfant poked her a few times in the ribs. Stop that! I'm going to poke this in your eye. She held up her fork. Stop it, hun, I'm eating. Can I relax?

That smells spicy.

It is spicy. Lynn pulled out her phone again. Oh my god, Karen said I won 400, because it's forty each.

What? No.

Karen's the expert. Lynn flicked through her phone for several moments. But that makes sense. Look at this, Karen's like, Ok girl, that's 400 right there. Oh my god. Lynn tapped the call button. Mama, (In Chinese) The ticket I won actually 400 dollars, can you believe it? I called my friend, and she's like, Ok girl, that's 400 right there. We don't need to go to the casino (end Chinese).

Alfant picked at his cuticles while Lynn talked to mother at length. Description of Alfant's room.

My mom's like, We need to go to the casino.

Why?

She's like, If we go to the casino I'll give you money to gamble on behalf of me.

I don't think that's a good idea babe.

No it's not, Lynn said. She's crazy. Lynn finished her plate of food and placed it on Alfant's night stand. She lay the width of the bed on her belly, legs bent and swinging in the air. I don't even know how to gamble.

Should we, Alfant said. Do you want to go get it?

Tomorrow, not now, Lynn said. If it's 40 K I'm gonna have a heart attack, 40 K hun.

What do you mean if it's 40 K. It's not 40 K.

I know, if it is.

If it was?

Ok, I know it's not 40 K. I just said if it is.

The present tense implies that it might be. Alfant examined Lynn's face for response. Like you're not sure, maybe it is.

Oh, yep, sorry, Lynn said. Not only are you being negative, you're pointing out my lack of comprehend English.

Yeah, even though you grew up here, Alfant said, laughing in his breath, and he leaned back from Lynn as though anticipating a hit, oooooooooOOO. He made the sound of the start of a siren.

Mom's head poked up through the hole in the floor, Why don't you come down and join us to eat?

We'll be down, Alfant said.

I just want to remind you about our policy about guests in the room.

We'll be down in a minute, Mom, Alfant said.

I'm not hungry, Lynn said. Can I stay here?

Alfant disappeared from the room for about half an hour. In the meantime, Lynn entertained herself with her phone. When he returned, Alfant sat on the edge of the bed looking somewhat dejected.

Lynn, sometimes I feel like you're so beautiful I wonder why you even talked to me.

I love you, Lynn said as she scanned through comments on a video that played at low volume on her phone.

You say that now, but then one day when I'm old and grey and decrepit you won't say it anymore.

When you're old and, Lynn said. No I'd love you even more. We get to have old people sex, and I'll break your bones.

I want to check this. Alfant picked the lottery ticket from the bed stand. That's the thing, did you win 40 or 400? I think it's 400, because it's 40 for each symbol.

Because it's for that symbol, and this one has all gold bars. I find out tomorrow, I guess. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if I didn't win anything?

How would it, Alfant said. It says win on it, you know. How could it not?

And in this drawer I keep all of these guys, the lady in the video playing on Lynn's phone said. I keep all of my single eyeshadows here, which the majority of them are Color Club eyeshadows

How does it make you feel to watch these things?

I don't know it's intriguing.

What's intriguing about it?

It's like, oh my god, how do someone get so much of that? Why? Are you judging me?

No, Alfant said.

It never ends, Lynn said.

My Urban Decay Electric palette, my Gorgeous Cosmetics palette, my Wet n Wild Fergie Shimmer palette, Vegas Lights palette from Makeup Geek.

Makeup Geek?

It's a brand.

It seems ironic, cause you'd think geeks don't wear makeup.

They huddled together for a time, over Lynn's phone, entranced by all the things people amass.

## INCENSE OR SPICE

I told your dad I won the thing, Lynn said.

Was he judgmental?

Dad worked on a Bible study at the table. Do you see me as judgmental, Alfant?

He said.

This is one of the most judgmental house holds, Alfant said. I

It was a spontaneous move, Lynn said as she brushed by him. It wasn't my ticket to success. I usually don't do it, you know, but I was like, you know what Alfant, get the cheap one. Awh I'm so happy.

I'm going to start investing in the lottery. 400 dollar return on two dollars, Alfant said. That's crazy. Come on now.

I was very intrigued by your concern, Alfant, Alfant's dad said, focusing his full attention on Alfant in the kitchen. So I'm curious to mine it out, because I agree that I'm against the lottery, but why am I against it

Speaking of which, can we pick up the money tonight? Lynn asked. Where's Martha?

Well Martha, I told Martha and she was excited for you and she said, Tell Lynn not to spend it all in one place. That's her advice. But I think that you're right that she's going to want to see the ticket, so I think you're right to wait, but she is going to arrive at any moment.

I took a picture of it on my phone too. It's probably a once in a lifetime



She probably, Alfant's dad interrupted. She probably wants to see the real thing.

Well me and Alfant couldn't figure how much I won. I mean could you initially? Unless you really look at it. I knew I won something, but I didn't know it was each of them accumulated.

Well, Alfant's dad said. You have to read the thing, for sure.

Well they said each, so I guess that makes sense.

I think it's amazing that you got ten of them, Alfant's dad said. They spend a lot of money to make that kind of thing enticing. When I was young, kind of your guys age. He chuckled. I don't know how many times I fantasied about what I would do if I won millions of dollars in the lottery, so I think that's a very common imagination, probably a youthful imagination. The problem is, some people stay youths too long, and I think the people that are looking for their salvation in the lottery.

Are not going to find it, Lynn said emphatically. Well, we

Are a sad bunch, Alfant's dad interrupted again. And that's why I detest it.

We have people at the hospital that spent their SSI checks on lottery tickets. They're like, well I have no money, and I didn't want to bring up you just got your check, but as you talk to them more they're like, I bought \$60 worth of scratch tickets. Oh, so that's where your money went.

It's stimulating, Alfant's dad said. Even twenty bucks, you spend two dollars and get twenty dollars, I bet it's the same feeling.

The front door slams, and mom climbs the stairs, hands full of groceries. There are more in the car, and Alfant goes to get them.

Martha, look, Lynn ran up to Alfant's mom as she put down the groceries.

Four hundred, oh I love it, Alfant's mom said. That's fabulous. I've never seen a real winner, look at that.

I went to the convenience store down the street to try to get the four hundred.

Down here? Mom said. I wouldn't get the money around here at all.

That's what Alfant told me, but the guy was like, Come back later, I don't have four hundred.

Don't go to those, Mom said. You want to go somewhere outside of the neighborhood.

Lynn went up the stairs to the attic. I'll keep the curtain open, she said. Is that ok? She was gone.

Hi Alfant, how was your day? Mom said.

Good. Alfant finished pouring a glass full of chocolate milk.

So I love Lynn's winning, Mom said.

Yep, Alfant said, and he scooted up the stairs.

Lynn lay on the bed, watching him come up the stairs. Oh no a rapist! It's a white man come to rape me and take my fruits!

Alfant gets into bed, under the covers and spoons Lynn

This is what we should tell men. Don't rape her, just hug her, lay next to her and give her a hug, and then maybe she'll turn her head, and you can kiss her

I can kiss her? Lynn kissed Alfant

Only once, but if you keep lying there, then maybe she'll rape you

What men are we going to tell this to?

All the men. Tell them if they're gentler they can still get what they want

Lynn rolls on top of Alfant and is smiling into his face, pinning his arms by his sides with her legs

I stay up to wait for you and waste my time

I want you to waste all of your time on me!

On you? Stop grabbing my pants. You tore a string.

I'll tear your string.

Oh yeah, remember when I said I was going to release the hem on those pants I gave you, and you said I'll release your hem? I told my sister and she said that's stupid.

Can you not go out of the room for fifteen minutes?

You want to do your habit don't you.

Well, I don't have to, but its funner if I do.

Oh hun, you know at my work I see these people who's lives are ruined, ruined by drugs. I mean they're never getting it back. And it's not even the drugs sometimes, it's the things they cut it with. It could be rat poison, or asbestos.

Asbestos? Alfant looked indignant. Not with weed. You can't cut weed.

That Afghan Ice stuff, that incense you call it, you only did that once, right? You know that has a direct correlation—because they've done studies—to schizophrenia.

That's weed made in a lab, hun. It's not good for you, hun.

I'm only smoking real weed.

How can you know that?

Because I ground the nuggets.

Do what you want, hun, but there's a lot of things we don't know about that drug, and I only ever see messed up people who smoke it. I know you're depressed, and I know you're not feeling good, but I think you need to find something better, hun.

You think I'm a messed up person?

You're pretty messed up, hun.

Regular people smoke it, just nobody knows.

You can smoke, hun, just use the fan. Lynn, gazed into her computer screen, flicking through online information about social security. You know, because of your thing, you could get public housing, a very nice place for like 600.

I don't have 600, Alfant said. I need to at least get a job.

Why don't you look into a restaurant, Lynn said. It doesn't have to be a dream job.

I know it doesn't have to be a dream, Alfant said. I just want something that can further my career.

Well you can never buy Granddad's house without a job.

Why do I have to own it? Alfant said. I just want to use it. I blame Locke for our English mentality about property. He made it sound reasonable for a person to own things.

## PICTURESQUE

Lynn sat still on the bed, in the room, now dark. Shadows and lights slid across the wall and ceiling from the cars that were outside. Sirens. Sirens. The red-lights. The blue-lights. Somebody might have been shot. Or a fire. This house is on a main cut through that anyone who drives in the city goes down multiple times in a month, if not every week day. What are you doing? Are you ok? What's wrong?

Stretching, Lynn said. I don't feel like things will ever be the same again.

What do you mean? Alfant said. Nothing is ever the same.

No, hun, Lynn said. Are you not attracted to Asians?

I'm turning on the light. Can I turn on the light? Alfant said. The bulb eliminated everything in the opposite direction, blanch against Lynn's skin and the Pineapple Delight paint on the wall. He sat in the chair with a big box.

What's this?

Are those the shirts? I got you shirts, hun. I forgot to tell you. They're here. Let's see what they look like. Give the package to me. I'll open it. But I'm going to need a knife. Can you get me a knife, hun?

You look very Chinaman right now, Alfant said. He smiled. Lynn looked surprised for a moment, then smiled back. She took the knife.

What do you mean I look very Chinaman? I am a Chinaman.

You just look like a Chinese computer logo.

I'm cheap then.

It's a complement, Alfant said. You have an Apple face. You quality equipment.

It's a complement.

Aahhaa—Apple pie.

Apple sauce, Alfant said. Saucy sauce.

But apple sauce have no structure. At least a pie a circle, like my face, Lynn said.

Apple sauce have no shape.

Apple sauce generally takes on a bowl shape. Alfant stood at the base of the bed, turning the fan in the window so it blew outward again. Are you still taking Prozac? he asked.

Why? Do you think I should be taking Prozac, Lynn said. I'm fat. That's the only reason why I take it. It makes me not hungry.

I don't think you should take it, then. I like you better when you're horny.

Can you get me a few paper?

I thought you did it already earlier.

It take two people to flush the line, hun, Lynn said. I can go get your mom —

Alfant washed his hands, put on some gloves, opened the syringe and forcefully screwed it into Lynn's catheter line.

How much longer? Alfant asked as he cleaned the medical remnants from the bed and put them in the hazardous waste disposal barrel the hospital had provided, which he had stationed at the base of the bed. It was a red plastic cylinder, maybe 3 gallons.

Ten days, Lynn said. They said two weeks, but maybe shorter. The nurse comes tomorrow, and she'll tell me more certain, but 10 days at the longest, hun. I can't take much more. Lynn, sitting on the bed grabbed one of her legs, and stretched it up again,

over her head. Oh hun, there was this woman at the hospital, and she has a picc line too, and she's shooting heroine into it, so the doctor tells her this is not healthy and could kill her so he will have to take out her picc line if she continues. The next day she admitted that she did it again.

She immediately hid it again? Alfant said. What's again?

She admitted that she did it. They are going to probably take out her picc line tomorrow.

You mean she lied? Why would they know if she lied? Did they drug test her?

No, hun. She say she did heroine the next day. I am so mad at her, hun. She has a heart infection, which is worse than the kidneys, and if she goes off antibiotics she will die in a few weeks. The doctor say she will die, but if they leave in the picc line she will kill herself with the heroine. If she kill herself, the doctor is responsible then.

Alfant blew a series of smoke rings into the fan, which whurred soothingly. He looked up at her intently when she stopped speaking, and she watched his face as well, head propped on a pillow. You're beautiful, you know that? He said. Wow, you're so picturesque.

What's picturesque?

It's a American word, Alfant said. It's like a picture for water that has E S Q printed on the side, and it's called a picture-esq. Lynn lay back on Alfant's shoulder. He took out her hairband. I'm stupid, he said.

You're not stupid, Lynn said. You're beautiful.

Can you tell me what picturesque means, Alfant said. What you think it means?

I don't know.

Tell me a guess.

I'm like a picture, cause I have a round face.

Picturesque is something that looks like you want to take a picture of it.

So it must be something nice looking, Lynn said. Oh, wow.

Sometimes I can't tell if your joking or your serious.

I don't know what picturesque mean. You tell me to make up some definition, and

I did. I am a picture. I'm round and stumpy. I'm made in China, like many pictures.

But you're not round, except your face, and you're not made in China.

Oh, that's true, I wasn't made in China.

Can you claim China if you weren't made in China?

I'm going to get dual citizenship.

Can you do that with China?

I think I have to pay a lot of money.

Is that how it works? like, you grease the right pockets?

Palms. I guess so. I have to ask my mom. Do you think my family is sketchy, hun?

No, Alfant said. When did your parents become citizens?

My mom's a citizen. My dad's not a citizen. My dad has his green card. He can be, but he doesn't want to take the test, cause it doesn't matter. He's been here for long. He has a green card, so he's like I don't really care. My dad came, 'cause his aunt married an American, and she filled out the paperwork to make him come here.

Do you think he's really a Chinese spy?

No.



White light streaks slid across the wall and ceiling from the cars that were outside. Sirens. Sirens. The red-lights. The blue-lights. Somebody might have been shot. Or a fire. Maybe a sick person died. A kid had leukemia. The house was on a main cut through street for people in the south part of the city, and Lynn and Alfant lived in a large room that takes up the front right sixth of the second floor. Their room had the thermostat.

Is that at all a possibility?

No not at all. My dad came to America when he was 28, like our age, hun.

Maybe we should move to China, Alfant said. Do you ever want to go back, and to live in China?

It's not go back for me. I'm not from there. But, it's just a lot of people that look like me, so it feel like home.

Like Irish people do? Alfant said, Like I'm a small part Irish. Irish people always hold tight to their identity, so I'm just wondering like—

But I, no, I, no, I do too. I won't call it my home, though, 'cause I married you.

That's realistic. I'm just saying Irish people, they call Ireland home even if they've never been there, some people that grew up in the United States say they're Irish.

I guess I accidentally call it that too, sometime, Lynn said. Remember?

That's what I'm saying. I don't think there's anything wrong with it, I'm just saying that's sometimes what people do. For some people it's helpful, but, what's wrong? Are you crying? Alfant wiped a sheet of wetness from her cheek. Tears beaded on her chin. Baby? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said. What did I say?

It's who you are, Lynn said. She wept.

Alfant held her tight. You're ok, he said. Lynn didn't say anything for a while.  
She sat, legs crossed while he hugged her from behind.

Let's lie down, she said. Turn off the light. Can we sleep naked?"

I'm just not tired.

Can you spoon me for awhile? Lynn asked.

Alfant lay down and pulled her to him. I'll spoon you, He said.

Can you at least take off your pants? Lynn sat, legs crossed while he lay hugging her from behind. I'll lie down, she said. Turn off the light.

Alfant woke up at midnight and rolled back over to Lynn.

Can you make me some food? He said.

You make it yourself, She said.

Alfant slipped out of the door, tripping over several items, including a glass of water. The lights were out throughout the house, except for a string of white christmas lights that ran along the ceiling in the hall year-round. Granddad's room was dark, but a shadow moved within. A lumpy silhouette rose in front of the window. Moonlight from above the alley outside seeped through the sheer white curtains, which hung still like dry nets.

Sole to sole, she said, and they put their feet together. Alfant pressed his feet in against hers

I would sleep with you like this every night if I could. I just don't think there's a bed long enough.

Babe, could you come here? Could you remove all of these obstacles? Could you come here? No, not your feet, you come here.

## YIN

The boxes sat on the dresser still in piles. The ones on the right were canned salmon, veggies, and heart of palm. Lynn ate these foods, often with rice, which she ordered for delivery online. Tip two dollars max. Alfant always suggested she do five, because it's their income. Alfant is a fool with money.

Lynn preferred to eat in private, which was why she kept this food in her room with Alfant. Light finger-like shadows projected from the bald branches of the pine through the window, and wavered across the piles of clothing strewn about the room, overflowing on both desk chairs, making the room feel cramped and cozy. Late summer sunbeams glinted from the polished metal on the case of a sewing machine that used to be Grammy's, which Granddad might give to Lynn but her Mom in-law is intent on defending the sanctity of the estate until Granddad's passing and though Lynn could care less at this point, it seems to her like a good way for her to fit herself into their grieving process. The rumor that she liked to sew started when she loosed the hem on Alfant's pants a few months ago. It was another of Alfant's leaps in logic. Last week he said she should kiss Granddad on the head when she passed him, like his sister did when she was around. He would appreciate the affection, Alfant said at the time. There are other ways to show him affection, Lynn said. She hardly knew Granddad.

Lynn laid out her iatric materials on three overlapping sheets of pristine printer paper on their bed. She laid out cotton swabs, alcohol wipes, the antibiotic itself, a few fat syringes. She took off the sweat band that has been covering up the open wound

facilitating a rubber tube to reach into the large vein running under her armpit and into her heart. A spot of blood swirled in a puddle around the hole underneath its clear covering. She drew in the stand. It had wheels. She rolled in the stand and hung the antibiotics on there with the tubes. She screwed the limp end in the catheter running that a heavy duty seal (which she'd started to pick away a few days ago) that wrapped around her arm, made of clear plastic. The flow for the antibiotic opened. Lynn leaned her face out toward the small mirror above her dresser, across the room, and examined her goose. In the mirror she also saw Alfant smoking by the window, and watching her.

I love your silly goose face you make, He said. Do you want me to get your makeup?

Make up, Lynn repeated, emphasizing the downward cadence of these English words. Do you like if I make you up, hun?

Alfant, who cradled his pipe on the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, broke out into a sustained coughing fit, and he lay back onto the bunch of blankets piled in the middle of their bed. You can make me up one day, he said. Not at the moment.

I'm just, it would feel nice, I think, Lynn said. You might like it. She gazed at the top of his head, which peeking up from the blankets like some sort of cute varmint. His sharp nose poked up further above his black mop of hair. Her blood had made its way up into the tube, and the level of the blood was rising steadily. It already filled four feet of the tube. Alfant, something bad's happening.

Is that blood? Alfant crawled toward Lynn, toward the other side of the bed.

It's blood, hun, I need my phone, hun, I'm calling the nurse.

The next few minutes were consumed with a ten minute phone call. Lynn spoke with a receptionist, an insurance agent, and finally a nurse. My blood is rising into the antibiotic bag, she says. She says says many things several times. I walked home from playing volleyball an hour or so ago, she said. Alfant walks around the room, moving the antibiotic stand to a more convenient place, rearranging the syringes, replacing two pieces of paper wet from the alcohol wipes, et cetera. I changed the tube several minutes ago, Lynn said. The same thing just happened. The blood's almost up to the bag again. The used tube coiled on the ground, a six foot long soft rubber cylinder, a quarter inch in diameter, full of blackening blood, leaked from both ends into the carpet.

What is it? Alfant said when Lynn hung up the phone.

He said to just let it go down on its own, Lynn said. You're supposed to wait an hour at least after physical activity, he said. All of the blood had drained back into her arm from the tube, and the antibiotics were half through. Hun, let's get ice cream when this is done?

How much longer till it's done?

Another five minutes, or so.

That sounds fine, Alfant said. While you finish up I'm going to pay Granddad for the house this month. Can I borrow a hundred? Do you have cash on you?

I'll write him a check, Lynn said. Give here. Alfant handed her her checkbook. She wrote it. She tore it out. She placed it between his fingers. He left.

She got off the bed, crossed the room, and examined the darkness around her eyes up close in the mirror. Small crows feet. The freckles Alfant said he likes. The mirror next to her was huge, and she turned swiftly into it to examine her affect. She could see

her whole body. Alfant put this up for her when they moved into his parents house for the short term, shortly after they got married. Now, since they are buying Granddad's house, it looks like they will be living with Alfant's parents for the foreseeable future.

Having tried on a series of summer dresses, carefully drawing the tubes to the catheter through the fabric along her skin. She chose to wear the light blue floral print. Silk. The erotic feeling of the fabric put her in the mood for makeup. Eye lines, flesh tones to cover up several pimples.

I must be close to my period, Lynn said. She leaned in toward the smaller mirror above their dresser, visible between those boxes of food on one side and on the other side boxes—

Hun, I need to send these packages, hun, Lynn said. I need to return this clothing. Can you blow out the window? She turned around. It smelled like smoke, but Alfant was gone. He left a few moments ago to see Granddad, she remembered. His pipe on this window smoked in the fan. The antibiotics finished draining into Lynn's body, and she unscrewed herself, flushed the line, cleaned the sundry medical implements covering the bed.

## YANG

The carpet sank beneath his feet like peat moss. It filled the between of his toes. Alfant stood among bags of used cotton and latex, cups with various quantities of liquid on wooden or plastic platforms all about: teas, coffee, juices, water, water, and more water. Oxygen tanks stacked, plastic seals intact, under a pine table that his brother built as a gift, six six-inch planks deep, sanded smooth. A shallow drawer pulled part way out contained many scraps of medical profession: loose pills, tape, bandages, aloe, two thermometers, diapers, lotions, lemon-petroleum swabs to keep Granddad's lips wet. He called these swabs lollipops. Alfant shoved Lynn's check under Granddad's wallet on the dresser.

The throaty smell of feces and sweat in stagnant air, he stepped further into the room. There lay about bloody gauze, dressings for sores, ointments. Splatters and moans were muffled in the bathroom. Don't stand. Don't stand. Words lost in the sounds of a faucet. You want to wipe yourself, or should I?

Alfant sat next to the window in an armchair with little flower designs fading in the upholstery on the left armrest. No.noh.o . . . go-ah-hay. The August evening heat radiated through the glass. Flakes of skin, of cotton, of carpet dust floated through the light. The sink ceased hissing, and a wee tone sang through the stillness. *There interposed a fly.* Alfant recalled the poem. It spiraling along the window — *With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz - Between the light.* Wap, wap. Wap, wap.

Alfant lifted the curtain, and watched it buzzing in circles along the window, juicy, bloated with eggs. He imagined them hatching from the dampness of Granddad's mouth, as he lay in bed gaping, half conscious, throat broken, maggots like rice crawling into his belly. Nutriants. A nurse said starvation becomes blissful toward the end. The other choice was a feeding tube. Sometimes when Alfant checked Granddad's breathing, hand to mouth, he considered the mechanics of suffocation.

Lynn looked into the room. Hun, She said, Let's get some ice cream. Alfant stood, and opened the window half up. The fly flew back into the room, through the bedroom door, over Lynn as she slipped into her shoes.

The doorknob to the bathroom jiggled for an excruciatingly long time, it seemed to Alfant. The door opened. Mom held Granddad at the waist with one arm. She grabbed the sink with the other quickly, harshly, so as not to fall, bent on her haunches, holding him up with her lap. Granddad's legs spread out like a wishbone. Alfant grabbed the door and stood on Granddad's toes to give him the leverage to stand up, but he, Granddad, could not stand, and he continued to slide slowly through Mom's arms.



## SILVER WAVE

The Eskimo rode a silver wave on the marquee over the ice cream stand. Frozen Dairy. In a line of maybe 8 people, Alfant rubbed a certain knot in Lynn's left shoulder, which had been bothering her. Lynn adjusted the band around her arm, itching the base of her picc line.

Why we stop having sex? Lynn whispered up toward Alfant's neck.

I thought you couldn't have sex with a picc line in.

It gross you out, Lynn said. I know. But we can still have sex if you want to.

Sh.

A few yards away, one of the children swinging around on the concrete posts barring cars from getting in too close to the shack fell into his mothers legs. He rolled around them and into a run. Then he collided with Lynn's legs beyond, rolled around them, and ran further. A little girl wearing a fairy costume with wings chased him less delicately and fell on the concrete, and cried. Her mother picked her up by the arm, brushed her off, and pulled her forward. You're ok, the mother said. They were the next in line. An employee took their order. Lynn had her smartphone up, flicking through social media.

This breaks my heart, Lynn dropped her tone a light step on each each word.

What happened?

My barista, I call him my barista but he made my coffee every morning for a year until he moved to New York. He moved to New York, but yeah. He died. The coffee

shop posted on Facebook, R.I.P. Phil. You were our best barista. It's true. He was the best barista.

That's sad, Alfant said.

And he was only 35, or something. He was in his mid thirties.

Now you're investigating it?

I told my sister too. I said, remember that barista? He died. She said, oh wow, and she's investigating too now.

You nose, Alfant said. That's the problem with Facebook. They don't tell you how it happened. You have to decipher people's comments.

I just want to know how people die. Does that make me nose?

The salmon pink colors of evening faded into the horizon. Traffic was piled up on the two lane route, and grumbling behind them. A light breeze, smelling vaguely of burnt gasoline and french fries, kept off the majority of sweat. The whine of the tree frogs, in spite of the city. The rush of the traffic. Many voices. Mira los aviones, Said the man behind them to three boys dressed in little league baseball uniforms. Están escribiendo algo en la puesta del sol.

I asked the nurse for lube when she was here.

What did she say?

Oh, I asked. She shrugged and say, 'why not.' She said she bring it tomorrow.

She thinks it's for your arm? Alfant said.

Lynn stepped up to the ice cream stand. I don't know what she thinks, She said.

They stood at the counter now. Can I get a brownie Sunday, a Chocolate? Lynn looked at

Alfant's eyes. Maple Walnut milkshake, and a small soft serve twist in a cup to go. Lynn turned toward Alfant partly. That's for Granddad, She said.

Good thinking.

The clouds were orange, pink, red, and purple, looking like origami made of felt. Some of the dandelions growing out of the concrete at the corners of the building still had seeds on them.

Lynn faced Alfant, and held his hands. How many times a week did you have sex with your last girlfriends? She said.

I don't know, Alfant said. Three or four times.

But we don't do it that much.

Only for a few weeks, Alfant said and stepped a half foot backward. Only for the last few weeks. We did a lot before, though.

I never asked you, Lynn said. Can I ask you this? How many girls have you slept with?

Eleven.

Oh. Lynn said. Ok. She stared up. Three planes mingled in skywriting, CONGRA-T-S T-OMM-Y A-ND MATT. The words materialized across the sun, which blazed like glass in the blower's furnace, all the colors of refracted heat manipulated the way they perceived the clouds. Lynn let her breath out slowly. I've had five, just so you know.

Ok, Alfant said. I didn't ask for that information.

How many were Asian? Lynn said.

None. Two were Black though, well one was half Black, half Indian, Native American Indian. Mostly Whites.

I don't want to know anymore. Don't tell me anything else. You just keep talking and talking and telling me more things I don't care about.

You asked me about races.

They took their ice cream into the car. Alfant packed his pipe. He smoked, and he drove into traffic. Lynn rolled down her window. The people in the cars around them glared only forward, listening to the news on their radios. One car, a black BMW, played Bach loudly with its windows closed. The occupants were obscured by tint on the windows. Alfant drove with his knees, and relit his pipe, occasionally, on an inhale.

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