TRIPTYCH 1

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ABSTRACT

The goal of these three stories is to bear witness to American Christian life in the 21st century, to give weight and texture to the virtues and contradictions of what Cornel West called "the most absurd and alluring mode of being in the world." Borrowing from the traditions of psychological realism, Christian existentialism, and American minimalism, these stories attempt to craft credible accounts of Christian belief and doubt. The stories follow a woman estranged from her family who begins caring for her ailing pastor; a young couple as they try to get back to the basics of their faith; and an older man who travels to Mexico in search of catharsis. Organized as a triptych, each story attempts to depict the tension embodied by the prayer, ”Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

DEDICATION

For Hannah, who teaches me everything I need to know.

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CRAFT ESSAY:

(Un)Reasonable Belief: Perspective, Character, and Reader Expectation

This thesis began with a simple question, "How do Christians live in the twenty-first century?" This question has two parts: 1.) What does a Christian life look like? and 2.) How is Christian belief sustained (or not)? In his introduction to *Keeping Faith,* Cornel West asks a more pointed question: how, in light of the tragedies of the 20th century, can one still have hope, still believe in "the love ethic of Christianity—the most absurd and alluring mode of being in the world" (West xi). My stories attempt to bear witness to that mode of being, responsibly representing what makes it both alluring and absurd.

Because of these questions, the craft elements I became most interested in were perspective and character, as well as how perspective shapes reader expectation of character and conflict. Alice Laplante's definition of perspective from *The Making of a Story*—"the *intelligence* that is telling the story" (her emphasis)—influenced my thesis most, as this definition recognizes the epistemological dimension of the narrator (Laplante 261). "Intelligence" here is not a cultural metric of intellect (education, IQ, or other credentials), but the being through whose *knowledge* the reader is able to access the story. As an author develops their narrator, they must consider the narrator's epistemology, asking themselves questions about what the narrator knows, how they know what they know, and how they find themselves doing the telling (regardless of whether this last piece of information is revealed). While the narrator is not always a character in the story, the

narrator's epistemology determines *how* characters are presented *by* the story. Here, I found Douglas Glover's understandings of the exigencies of story helpful in articulating this relationship between perspective and character. First, he defines form in story as the apparatus by which reader expectation is satisfied (24). This allows for experimentation and self-discovery, as there is no set form, there is simply the possibility of many forms, each determined by the various expectations created when a reader is presented with a "conflict between two poles (A vs. B)" (in which A and B are two states of being, and the juxtaposition between them is the conflict, and the space between them is the story) (24). This space (the story) has exigencies (expectations) which "force depth and change on a character," driving the content of the story (25). Therefore, if my goal was to write stories dealing with faith and doubt, or, the tensions between what a character knows, doesn't know, and doesn't know if they know, the different intelligences telling my stories would need to believably reveal or conceal the character's self-knowledge. Of course, these concerns aren't limited only to authors who write characters dealing with crises of faith. Here's Glover on character: "Character is perversion; what a character wants is often..an object that bears some metonymic or synecdochic or associative relationship to what he really desires" (29). Still, it logically follows for me that this "perversion" would be of particular interest to anyone writing stories concerned with responsibly bearing witness to Christian faith, or any organized belief system that attempts to assess why we are here and what there is to do about it, as this "perversion" betrays an uncertainty. My stories lean into that uncertainty, as without it, they wouldn't be functioning stories. There is no place for faith or doubt, and therefore story, if there exists certainty.

In my extensive reading for my thesis, I found many compelling examples of harmony between perspective and character that revealed how both can shape reader expectation. Of all the writer's I read, I probably owe Jamie Quatro the most, both in terms of theme and content. A story of note, from *I Want to Show You More,* is "Sinkhole," in which a a star high school athlete with obsessive-compulsive disorder, Benjy, goes on a church retreat. From the first person, he describes his compulsion: sometimes, at random, what feels like a sinkhole will open up in his chest, and he must lie down and wave his hand over the space above his chest to close it. Otherwise, he'll die. A love interest is introduced, Wren, who, after battling a rare uterine cancer as a child, wears a compression stocking and walks with a limp. The reader discovers through Benjy's admission that "I'm so love with her that I've decided to ask her to do a faith healing on me" (Quatro 142). While this sets up the expectation that the story will end with the faith healing, the underlying conflict that moves the story from Point A (Benjy with the sinkhole) to Point B (Benjy receiving the faith healing) is a confusion over who Benjy thinks God is. This conflict is revealed in the simple moments in which Benjy describes how he tries to deal with his compulsion. While watching a youth leader pantomime the person of God (in this instance dressed as a cowboy, shooting a cap gun into the audience saying, "You get a cavity!"), Benjy explains that when he starts to feel the sinkhole open up, "I repeat the line my therapist gave me: I am my own Great Physician" (136). He explains later that his therapist told him the worst thing he can do is fight the sinkhole or pray for God to take it away. The therapist pushes Benjy to identify the underlying fear of the sinkhole:

> "'Easy,' I tell him. 'The sinkhole will squeeze my heart to death.'
>
> He says that's my surface fear.

'Okay,' I say. 'Then my deeper fear is dying period'" (140).

Here, the reader is shown the complex web of Benjy's own doubt in God's ability to stop the sinkhole, the therapist's encouragement to leave God out of the equation, as well as Benjy's fear of death, coloring his pursuit of a faith healing as having little to do with a faith in God, and more to do with a faith in Wren. The closest the reader gets to Benjy expressing this absence of faith is when the youth leader dresses up as an old man, and presents a God who is detached and uncaring (153). "That's him," Benjy says to Wren. "The real God" (153).

But what makes Quatro's use of first person successful in communicating this conflict and character? The simple answer is distance. While limited only to one character's point-of-view, Benjy's narration is particularly successful because of the distanced stance he takes towards his own experience. In the sections sighted above, he reads as almost alienated from himself, as if he were watching himself move through the world from the position of a third party. At one point he even imitates the perspective of the church culture he lives in, naming himself in the third person as he describes their expectations of his athletic talent: "I'm supposed to get so amazing that people will say, We have never seen this before in a human being…We knew it, we've always known it: Benjamin Mills has given us a glimpse of the limitless perfections of God himself" (137). Here, through Quatro's use of third person within first person, she establishes the distance Benjy feels towards his life in his specific church and how his faith in God is a performance, just like his running. And his movement towards Wren, towards healing his sinkhole, is an attempt to end the performance and find something true for himself outside the Church.

Another exquisite use of first person (that I also am deeply indebted to) is found in Denis Johnson's posthumous collection, *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden.* "The Starlight on Idaho" is a story constructed entirely by letters written by Mark Cassandra as he dries out at the Starlight Addiction Recovery Center on Idaho Avenue in Ukiah, California. Mark writes old friends, his sponsor, his new doctor, the Pope, and the Devil all in an attempt to make sense of his tumultuous life up to that point. Unlike Quatro's dissociative narrator, the frame and premise of the story allows for the reader to get about as close to Mark's inner thoughts as possible. As the addressees of the letters change, the distance dilates somewhat, but, overall, Mark presents himself with little to no attempt at objectivity (or distance) as he moves through the NA program. Everything line is a subjective analysis of his life, even from the outset. When he begins by reaching out to Jennifer Johnston, a grade-school sweetheart, he says, "I would count there to be about fifteen or sixteen hooks in my belly with lines heading off into the hands of people I haven't seen since a long time back, and [my memory of you] is one of them" (Johnson 43). When speaking with the Pope, he explains why he got high: "I liked to laugh at nothing and get my feet crossed and go down on my ass. Then it was torture, but it was a button I could push to destroy the world" (50). His take on the recovery facility? "It's a salvage yard for the people who totaled their souls" (51). And his first words to his sister: "Here I am—yep—again—same old story" (52).

As he processes his misdeeds, his writing becomes more erratic, frantic. In a letter to his brother that he never sends, he writes, "I have to burn this page and write a letter to God while it's on fire. Question is, God, where are you?" (57). When he begins to lose his sanity during an allergic reaction to Antabuse, he admits to the "dr in charge of antabuse complaints" that he hates

everyone in his group therapy (66). When the Antabuse wears off, he writes to Satan: "The Antabuse was your last thing. Well it didn't work…you got no strings. Not one of these strings from my heart-hooks lead off into your evil hands" (71). He signs off this letter as "Mark Cassandra, a more or less Christian" (71).

The story is a conversion story. In his final letter to his brother, who he feels insecure reaching out to because of their disparate lives, he says as much when describing his most recent arrest, imprisonment, and his withdrawal:

> God is squeezing…every last fiber of my soul in the almighty grip of the truth. And the truth is that everything I've done…is shit turned to dust and dust blown away. God, I said, fuck it, I'm not even gonna pray. Squeeze my guts till you get tired, that's all I want now, because at least it's real, it's true, it's got something to do with you. So then I think I died…And nothing to show for thirty-sex years on this earth. Except that God is closer to me than my next breath…
>
> Your Brother in Christ,
>
> Cass (77-78)

Whereas Quatro employed first person to show a young man distanced from his own experience and faith, Johnson uses first person to craft a credible account of conversion by setting up reader expectation through the granular description of the narrator's desire for redemption. Throughout, the reader feels as if they are sitting on the pastor's side of the confessional booth.

Though both these stories were hugely influential to my use of first person in my stories "Mysterium Tremendum" (where I attempted to imitate the dissociated first-person narrator from Quatro's "Sinkhole") and "Hotel California" (where I implemented the same frame and similarly

confessional first-person narrator of Johnson's "The Starlight on Idaho"), my central story, "Still Life," told in the third person, was influenced heavily by Tobias Wolff's "Hunters in the Snow" and Eudora Welty's "No Place for You, My Love." From *Garden of the North American Martyrs*, the story follows Tub, Kenny, and Frank on a hunting trip outside Spokane. Told in third person, the perspective begins limited to Tub for the first half, then becomes objective, following Tub and Frank as they take Kenny to the hospital, and finishes in its last paragraph as omniscient. Tub is named first, and the story begins with him on the side of the road waiting to be picked up by Kenny and Frank. When the car containing Kenny and Frank meets Tub, the drivers are faceless and nameless as they tease him, jerking the car forward a few feet every time Tub reaches for the door. Kenny and Frank remain unnamed until Tub gets in the car and names them through dialogue, establishing the perspective as limited to what Tub sees when Tub sees it. The only physical sensations mentioned by the story are those of Tub ("the edge of the crust bruised his shins"), and the movements of Kenny and Frank are often described in relationship to Tub: "A moment came when he realized he hadn't seen them in a long time. The breeze was moving from him to them; when it stilled he could sometimes hear Kenny laughing but that was all" (10). This establishes Tub as outside the world of Kenny and Frank, and coupled with the escalating mocking of Tub by Kenny, the reader expects a confrontation of some kind, particularly between Kenny and Tub. After their altercation which leaves Kenny shot, the perspective switches to that of observation of Frank and Tub as they attempt to take Kenny to the hospital. As Kenny lies in back of the truck in the cold, the reader watches Frank and Tub indulge themselves in coffee at a bar, as well as the hand-drying machine and pancakes of a diner, as they divulge secrets to each other (Frank is having an affair; Tub's excuse for his weight problem—his "glands"—is a lie).

Whatever sympathy for Tub established by the close first person narration is gone, replaced with frustration and disbelief at the two's carelessness. The move of the perspective at the very end, to omniscience, is established by the final, ominous lines: "'I'm going to the hospital,' Kenny said. But he was wrong. They had taken a different turn a long way back" (24). Reader expectation is both established by the perspective and the factor which determines the shifts in perspective. Once the reader is sympathetic for Tub, their sympathy must be complicated, but once the sympathy is complicated, the reader expects there to be some sort of answer, result—a God-like voice to say not what the story means, but where it is headed. This story could not have been told in first-person, and it expertly moves between the three modes of third person as its primary method for manipulating and answering reader expectation.

The closest I got to myth in my reading was Eudora Welty's "No Place for You, My Love," from her collection *The Bride of the Innisfallen.* The most striking juxtaposition in the story happens with the first words: "They were strangers to each other, both fairly well strangers to the place…" (Welty 421). Though this line establishes the omniscient third-person perspective that is maintained throughout the story, it seems at first in immediate contradiction to the title, "No Place for You, My Love," which could read as dialogue said by a character, or narration addressing an intended audience. This off-kilter beginning keeps the reader poised for unexpected shifts, allowing for the sometimes violent head-hopping between the two unnamed protagonists, a man and a woman each traveling alone through New Orleans.. The story jumps from the man disliking the woman's hat, to the woman's belief that his attention is recognition that she is in love, to his assumption that she was living in a cultivated hopelessness, and these shifts happen across only about fifteen sentences. The unnamed protagonists take a drive through

New Orleans and the surrounding bayou, and both find themselves at various points just about to tell the other something important about themselves, but can't. They metaphorically dance around topics, around how they feel about the things going on around them as they actually dance in a bar. She muses on what someone said of her: "I wonder what he called me,' she whispered in his ear. / 'Who?' / 'The one who apologized to you,'" but he doesn't answer (432). The narrator butts in, saying, "If they had ever been going to overstep themselves, it would be now…" (432). Welty indulges this interjection of the narrator quite a few times, almost crafting an "I" out of the narrator, but pulls back just enough to allow the reader not to expect the narrator to be named, or be an entity. A far cry from the cold third-person of Wolff, but used expertly to create a near-myth—in which the tension between the sexes is meted out in near-archetypes—from a simple story about two travelers moving through the Bayou. When they arrive back at her hotel, the moment for a kiss passes, and they shake hands. "Had she waked in time from her deep sleep, she would have told him her story," the narrator says, and their trip becomes something for them that both know they will never tell anyone for fear of it becoming more meaningful (435). "A thing is incredible, if ever, only after it is told—returned to the world it came out of," the narrator offers, again, also attaining subjectivity. While my center story, "Still Life," favors the cold-tone of Wolff's third person narrator, the basic relationship of missed opportunity for connection between an unnamed man and an unnamed woman was inspired by Welty, as it poises the reader for sometimes violent shifts from one character's head to another.

There are many other stories that influenced this thesis that would have been worth investigating, but these four stood out as some of the most influential (or, maybe, the most stolen from). Each taught me different elements of story-craft, but particularly helped me in my

creation of narrators that could responsibly reveal the contemporary Christian life and the nature of belief, doubt, and certainty by recognizing how perspective develops character and manipulates reader expectation.

# EPIGRAPH

Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag…

World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

- Edna St. Vincent Millay

Mysterium Tremendum

I was always early, I remember that. The sanctuary smelled like Lysol and mold. As I found my pew, the choir filled into the stands, the organist into his big box, and the choirmaster to center stage.

I liked to sit in the fifth pew from the back, on the right, in the inside aisle seat. I've been told that on the Sundays I'm not there—when I'm sick, or we're on vacation—this seat remains empty. "Everyone knows," the choir director told me once, "that that's Miriam's seat." I felt selfish about this. I didn't want to put anyone out. But I was also rather proud. Regardless, I shouldn't have been so protective of it. I shouldn't have felt the need to "beat traffic." But I was, and I did.

The choir hushed. The organist set the key. The room settled with them. Then they sang.

I opened the pamphlet and found the title of the song. "My Times Are in Thy Hand," it read. Someone must be sick.

As the choir practiced, the sanctuary brightened. Behind me, the modest stain glass of a lamb, a cross, and a crown glowed and caught the choir in the kaleidoscope.

The large, wooden door to the sanctuary opened and closed during the choir's second run-through. I didn't need to look. I remained fixed on the choir, on the swooping of the choirmaster's sleeves when she arrived beside me and whispered, "Good morning!"

"Good morning," I whispered back, turning. "Peace be with you."

She smiled. She held a stack of papers. Her dress was tight, floral, carnations and chrysanthemums the size of watermelons. She was middle-aged like me. A mom and a wife, like me. Still dyed her hair a roasted walnut, like I once did. “How are you? Rob, the kids?”

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Well.”

“Will you be at the meeting after?”

“Yes,” I said. “I may have to leave a little early.”

“Oh. That’s fine. One of the ladies can take your notes for you.” She looked at the choir now. “Aren’t they wonderful?”

“Excellent,” I agreed. “Is someone…is anyone sick?”

“Someone’s sick?” She looked alarmed. She crouched down next to me. “Miriam, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I said. We both looked back at each other, trying to assess what the other knew. I said, “It’s just, the song—”

“Hmm.” She pursed her lips. “I’ll ask Pastor De Vries.”

“No, you don’t need to.”

“Whoever it is—maybe the Women’s Ministry—” but cut herself off to think.

I reassured myself that if someone was sick, Beth would know. The choir were still singing. We both watched.

A shadow appeared in the wing on stage left, on the stairwell that leads to the pastor’s office. It was just a pair of legs, paused halfway down the staircase. The choir reached a crescendo, and the choirmaster pumped them higher and higher, cutting them off when the room could no longer stand it. The choirmaster clapped, chuckled, said a word of encouragement, then

began pointing at a young man in the bass section. The young man opened his mouth in a tall oval, let out something low. The shadow, standing still this whole time, suddenly turned and walked back up the stairs. Beth was already at the stage. She walked past them all and into the wing after the shadow.

The choir left through the opposite wing shortly after, when people began showing up. Mostly families. The Christian college, up a mountain overlooking the church, provides us with many college students. Graduates and faculty from that school make up most of the congregation now, me and my husband included. My former classmates were coming in, children in tow, and scattering through the pews. The organist plucked away at something more cheerful. Someone opened the doors, and with everyone came suburban Spring—Bradford pear, asphalt, gasoline.

We were almost full when I turned my phone off. The blonde heads of Beth's husband and their three children were lined up together in the second row, but she was not with them.

The worship leader, a young man wearing leather bracelets and a graphic t-shirt emblazoned with a silver cross, strummed a guitar. The assistant pastor approached the pulpit and welcomed us. "It is good to be together," he said, with a thin wire of grief, and began praying. Most everyone's heads were bowed, but I was still looking for Beth.

There was movement in the wing. Two pairs of legs this time—Beth's toned calves alongside the same boxy khakis from before. "You do more than we could ask or imagine," the assistant pastor said, as Beth's calves trembled and the khakis braced against her weight. The drummer used two mallets to softly play a cymbal. Beth grasped the railing and slid down the wall until she was seated on the stairs. Her silhouette heaved, but I couldn't hear anything over the swelling of the music.

—

"I can't believe it."

"Me neither."

"Does anyone know how bad it is?

"I looked it up during service. Prostate cancer has a very high survival rate."

"Really? But he's so young. Did it say anything about age?"

"I think we should begin," I said. We were sitting around the large, circular table in the youth director's office. Beth's decision. Beth thought a circular table best for making decisions that every woman in the church had to live with. That day, we were supposed to continue our planning of Woman's Ministry annual retreat. Beth is the director. I was the secretary.

"Without Beth?" one of the women asked.

"I don't know when she will be back," I said. Everyone saw her follow Pastor De Vries back into his office after the service, after he explained the situation.

"She must be devastated."

"Crushed."

"Her and Derek have worked on so much together…remember the couples workshop?"

I tried again. "I think we should—"

"Should we pray?" another women asked. We reached out and took each other's hands, and she began, "Lord Jesus, we praise you for your goodness, and we beseech you—" but she stopped when the door opened. Beth took a step in, closed the door quietly. She turned, her eyes swollen and pink.

“Oh honey,” someone said, which made Beth crack. They all rushed to her and after the initial condolences, they all ended up on the floor. Beth told us the biopsy wasn’t good, that it was aggressive, that surgery may not be enough.

“They’re worried about nodal involvement,” she said.

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked. She broke into another sob which echoed through the group. The hands that lay on her rubbed her more vigorously.

I wrote in my notebook:

Meal sign-ups

Rides for the kids

Weekly prayer meeting

———

At home, Robert was gone. Stephen was in his basement room. Alice sat at the kitchen island, looking at her phone.

“Where’s your dad?” I asked.

She didn’t answer. “Alice, where’s your dad?”

“He didn’t say,” she said. “What’s for lunch?”

I didn’t answer. I walked downstairs. The basement air smelled like stale french fries. I knocked on Stephen’s door. He was playing something, what sounded like a video game where you’re a guy with a gun. “Stephen, I’m coming in.” No answer. I opened the door. On the TV, the game. On his computer, the live stream of both the game and the webcam watching him play. I saw my legs in the top right hand corner, just above his head.

“Stephen?”

“Yeah?” He slouched in his chair, almost horizontal with the ground.

“Do you know where your dad is?”

“No,” he says.

Once back upstairs, I called Robert. No answer.

I opened the freezer, pulled a store-bought frozen lasagna out and put it in the oven. I checked the crisper and pulled out celery and carrot, found an onion on the kitchen island, and began a bolognese for the De Vries.

When the oven dinged, I texted Alice and Stephen. In the old breakfast nook, I sat down in front of the family computer. My computer, really. Spreadsheets and emails. I typed out, “Let’s stay positive,” then deleted it. I decided to sign off each note to the deacons and elders, the small groups and the prayer teams, “In Christ, Miriam,” followed by part of Isaiah 41: “Do not fear, for I am with you.”

The bolognese bubbled away.

Robert came home after I’d gone to bed. I only knew because I woke suddenly, and he was there beside me, gently breathing. I touched his back, which made him roll over. In the morning, Robert was gone and I still couldn’t remember what woke me up.

Getting the meals planned didn’t take long. Almost everyone wanted to help. The rides were more tricky, and fell mostly to me, which was fine. Our kids went to the same school, though they did live across town. The first few days, I made Alice and Stephen come with me. I liked to be early, for the De Vries convenience. We would arrive before dawn, Stephen usually asleep and Alice on her phone. I made them both sit in the back so the De Vries children could hop in the middle seats.

The children were adopted from Ghana about two years after Mrs. De Vries found out she couldn't have any of her own. They were both elementary aged back then, and already had names—Chidi and Bisa. Alice and Bisa played volleyball together until the seventh grade, when Alice quit. Chidi, a few years younger than Stephen, always looked up to him. Stephen used to let him play games on the Xbox, until I found them both staring, eyes glued to the TV, as a digital woman in nothing but a thong gave their character a lap dance.

After a few dead silent drives to school, Stephen and Alice asked if they could be picked on my way back from getting the De Vries.

"My kids aren't like you guys," I told Chidi and Bisa on the first day Stephen and Alice stayed home. "No matter what I do, they just sleep, sleep, sleep!"

Bisa humored me with a closed mouth laugh. Chidi looked out the window.

———

Beth and I spoke on the phone a lot in the beginning. "I spend most days in bed," Beth told me on the phone later that week. "Just sick over it."

"The Lord has him. The Lord loves him more than we do," I told her.

"What will we do without him?" she always asked.

———

When I brought Chidi and Bisa home from school in the afternoons, Mrs. De Vries sometimes came out to the car to thank me. She wore cardigans and shawls, regardless of the weather.

"This means so much to us," she said. "Really."

"How are you?" I asked.

“I take it a day at a time,” she said. “Thank God it’s tax season.” She’s a CPA. “If I didn’t have this much work, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.”

On the drives home, I listened to the Christian station, watched the budding branches rock in the wind, and tried to cry.

———

I started fasting. I didn’t overcomplicate it. I found an old textbook from school that showed the Orthodox liturgical calendar. The textbook made sure to explain that the goal of fasting is to put to death the desires of the flesh, not to curry favor. But on Wednesdays and Saturdays, I drank tea with lemon, and I journaled prayers for the De Vries whenever I felt hungry. As long as I didn’t tell anyone, as long as I didn’t let anyone know, it wouldn’t be idolatrous.

———

The house felt bigger for some reason. It had to be, with how much we all missed each other. I bought more frozen lasagna. When Bisa had volleyball games, I left two twenties for the kids to order pizza. When Chidi had an orthodontist appointment, I let Alice go study at a friend’s house and told Stephen I’d pay him back for the Uber ride.

Lent came. I couldn’t keep the fast. Late one night I broke down and ate leftover lasagna straight from the tin. It was cold, and rubbery. As I ate, I heard the garage door open, and I was barely able to get the tray back into the fridge before Robert walked in.

“Hey,” I said, which startled him.

“What are you doing up?” he asked.

I asked about the campaign. “We’re looking good,” Robert said. “He meets with black community leaders tomorrow. I was promoted actually.” He set down his bag and jacket on the kitchen island. His tie was loose, and the top button unbuttoned.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, if he takes South Carolina, then we’ve really got a shot.”

“So what does that mean?”

He sighed. “I’ll be gone more,” he said. “Florida, Nevada, probably Colorado.”

“Oh,” I said. Very faintly, we could both hear the gunshots from Stephen’s speakers.

———

The week before Easter Sunday, the tests from surgery came back. They found the nodal involvement, he explained in an email to church staff. This meant they had two options. Chemo, amongst other things, or hormonal treatment. I drove the kids to school the following morning.

“Chidi?” I asked Bisa when she climbed in alone.

“Staying home,” she said. She began crying. I reached back towards her, took her knee in my palm, and squeezed.

———

Pastor De Vries started chemo. He knew what hormones meant and didn’t want that. A deacon told me that one doctor, a believer, told Derek he would live, that something else would certainly kill him decades from then, but the doctor warned against it. The deacon explained: “The doctor looked him in the eyes, said point blank, ‘You will grow breasts. You’ll never look at your wife the same way. You’ll have no passion for ministry.’ Derek said, ‘To hell with that.’”

He continued to preach every Sunday, beginning a study of the Psalms. For those several Sundays after his surgery, he preached sitting down. When he recovered, he stood. Then, after he started chemo, he preached sitting down again.

Often, he shouted the verses.

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the almighty!

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have broken rejoice!

The preaching changed how we participated. People stood up, raised their hands, remaining that way for the whole service. Beth and some of the other women from the planning committee laid down on the steps of the stage below the altar. The sermons became unwieldy, with long pauses where Pastor De Vries assessed where to go next, but no one left. I found myself turning my palms upward in my lap, saying, "Yes, Lord," to myself over and over.

On Easter Sunday, we prayed over the family for who knows how long. A huddled mass below the stage, rippling on the surface as we took turns with the mic.

———

Bisa had a volleyball tournament two states over in Tennessee. Robert was in Florida. Alice and Stephen promised they could handle things at home by themselves. I bought more lasagna, left more money for pizza.

The De Vries couldn't take Bisa because they had been offered a position in a clinical trial at the Mayo Clinic.

"What about Alice and Stephen?" Mrs. De Vries asked.

"Robert is home this weekend," I lied. She didn't need the added strain.

Bisa and I listened to a podcast about history as we drove. The Spanish-American War. Bisa wanted to become an anthropologist, she said, and get a full ride somewhere on a volleyball scholarship. Based on her performance at the tournament, or at least the response of the coach and teammates, it seemed to me that she would do all those things and more.

While she spent time celebrating with her teammates in the restaurant downstairs, I watched a movie in the room. Some Lifetime original about a woman with breast cancer. Nothing about her grief seemed believable. She continued to run charity 5k's, even as her hair fell out. That was actually the whole conceit, that she worked at a breast cancer non-profit, yet got breast cancer. One of the final scenes, before her surgery, she sat up in her hospital bed with dignity, praying over her children. She glowed, very unlike Derek. Derek's already boxy pants had only become more hollow. Did they consult anyone about this before they made it? Wouldn't someone, at some point, have mentioned something? Don't they know that most people live utterly paralyzed, and that not even the threat of death is enough to jolt them awake?

Robert called as the doctor in the movie announced that the most recent scans had come back clear. The family jumped for joy, praising God, as Robert told me they won Florida. He said it best for him to just continue on to Nevada, since he'd packed so thoroughly. "Be Thou My Vision" rolled with the credits.

———

I helped Bisa carry her bags to the door. It was late, and she had been asleep.

Her mother couldn't look her in the eye. Apparently, Derek wasn't able to join the trial.

"There was a mix up with the paperwork," she said. "One of his tests…the number was too high…too much liability for them."

I brought everything inside, then we sat at her kitchen table. The mugs of tea in front of us went cold. “How’s he taking it?” I asked.

“I dropped him off at the church earlier.” She wiped at her cheeks with the neckline of her shirt. “He said he’d call when he’s ready to come home.” She checked her watch.

We said goodbye after more silence. I began to go home, but as I drove, I thought of him alone at the church. I thought of his office, which I’d never seen, but I imagined him amongst his books with a humble lamp. Beth knew what it looked like in there.

All the church’s lights were off except for his office. The big, wooden doors to the sanctuary were unlocked.

The room was quiet. Hushed. Moonlight streamed in from the thin windows to the right. As my eyes adjusted, I traced my hands along the pews. The light in the stairwell was on.

When I came to my pew, I stopped, then sat down. I think that was the defining moment of this whole thing. Why did I go, really? What did I expect?

I decided to leave, but his shadow appeared in the stairwell. The lock to his office turned. I couldn’t move, for fear of him seeing me, the middle-aged chauffeur of his children. When he came to the bottom of the stairs, he turned off the light and, like me, felt around for something familiar to guide him.

I lay down in the pew, hoping to hide, but knocked a hymnal onto the ground.

“Who’s there?” the pastor said, timidly. This was the first time I heard him sound afraid.

A light appeared from his direction. I slowly sat up, caught in it.

He said my name as a question. He turned the flash off, and put his phone back in his pocket.

"Yes," I said.

"Aren't you…aren't you supposed to be with Bisa?"

"She's home," I said. "We just got back."

"Oh ok. Great," he said. "Well, I'm, I'm…leaving." He gestured to the doors behind me.

"Right, me too," I said.

He held his keys in his hands, which were slightly outstretched, like he was receiving a benediction. "You know, I've been meaning to tell you," he said. "You've been so great to us. I'm sorry I haven't said anything sooner."

I nodded.

I don't know how to tell this part of the story. Nothing happened. No matter what anyone says, even Beth, who did find us the next morning. All I know is that at some point, as we discussed his thanks, his family, he sat down next to me. He said things like, "You think…well I don't know what I thought. I guess I thought the years of service would save me." He felt stupid. "Everyone dies," he said. "But how many of us really believe it?"

He wondered about the congregation he'd led for so long. How many people go to his church, any church, telling themselves they're preparing for death, but the prayers and the small groups and the charity drives aren't even indulgences for the next life, but efforts to prevent the next life from ever happening?

He started rambling. "Hell isn't anywhere. Hell is everywhere, because death is everywhere. It's this moment, right now, these moments where death becomes as real as it can be for the living."

At some point we were holding hands. Through tears, he spoke of vampires. “That’s what we want! That’s what we all want! We’d rather live forever, passionless and eating the living to survive than to die! Do you know what I did? Do you know who I called?”

I shake my head.

“My old doctor. The one I went to originally, who said I should take the hormones while I had the chance. A Buddhist in South Carolina. I asked him if I could go back. As he explained it was too late, I hung up.”

He had been so proud of his decision to take the riskier treatment. I realized I was proud of him, too. He placed his head in my lap.

“But then there are people like you,” he said.

I looked down at him. “What do you mean?”

“Quiet, long-suffering. Never asking for anything in return. You will outlive us all,” he said. “Or be taken from us to teach us something.”

I tried to resist it, but I let the wave of acknowledgement wash over me. “But my family…I’m not…” but I stopped, because I didn’t really believe it. My family what?

“No, your family…that’s not your fault.” A pool of his tears formed on my thigh, bleeding through my jeans. “You can’t be held accountable for them.”

We sat in silence like this, him gently whimpering. I look at his pale face, his more pronounced cheekbones. I traced his cheek with my hand and he shuddered, then I brought my hand up to his scalp, felt the texture of the wig. It was real human hair, his wife had told me. Cost a fortune.

He started sputtering again through intermittent fits of anger and weeping. He'd turned in his office to apologetics—Plantiga and Van Til. His original comforts from seminary, when a pall of doubt hung over him. I stroked that man's hair that wasn't his, and prayed:

Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on us, two sinners.

———

The email was to the point. From one of the elders, the oldest actually. Ben Worsham, a retired religion and philosophy professor who once taught me Intro to Old Testament:

Dear Miriam,

The council of elders has been made aware of a situation involving you and Pastor De Vries. As part of our investigation, we need to meet with you to hear your side of things. How's Thursday, around 4 PM?

In Christ,

Ben

Thursday at four worked. I wore a tasteful dress, which had no effect. They wanted to know why I did it. They wanted to know how, after so many years of service, after the charity and the generosity, I had tried to come between him and his family.

"Was it consensual?" one of the elders asked, thinking himself progressive.

I tried to explain nothing happened. That he was upset, and I was too. That we comforted each other.

"Was there penetration?" Ben asked, blankly.

When I left, I saw the De Vries' car in the lot. I jumped behind a concrete pylon, checked to make sure they were already inside. When I saw no movement, I ran as fast as I could to my car.

———

The second email was also to the point.

Miriam,

Our session has concluded that, while no sexual activity occurred between you and Pastor De Vries, that you both should step away from your duties for a time.

More to follow.

-Ben

Nothing addressed to me, specifically, did follow. An announcement came promptly in the church bulletin. Pastor De Vries would be taking a break in pursuit of his health. Another clinical trial had come up, it said. I never heard from Beth, or Mrs. De Vries, but I knew my duties had been given to someone else.

I refused to stop going to church at first. I decided that place was still mine, that I still belonged. And what's a church without sinners? But I stopped after two weeks, as I couldn't sit in that pew anymore. I never stopped praying for him. I kept the fast, and I waited for word.

All the meals I had planned for the De Vries I fed to my children. I tried to learn about Alice's boyfriend. I asked Stephen which game he was playing. Once, he asked me to join him while he played online. He shouted at his camera the whole time, telling people who I was. And I ran wild in the virtual world, getting shot more than shooting.

Robert won Nevada, then asked for a divorce. I told him yes, as long as I could keep the house. The kids weren't too shook up. Stephen said most of his friends' parents are divorced. Alice said she was expecting it.

I remained on the church email list. After about two months later, I received an email saying Pastor De Vries would be returning to the pulpit the following Sunday.

When I arrived a few minutes late, I found my seat was taken by a cute young couple from the college. The kind that rubbed each other's back during the sermon. I walked down the center aisle, and sat in the first row on the left.

We sang, we clapped, we prayed. The choir did a rendition of "Mourning Into Dancing" that almost blew the roof off.

Pastor De Vries took the pulpit. He saw me. We made eye contact. And he smiled under his wig.

"Church, I have some good news." The trial had worked. His last scan had been completely clear.

The place rumbled like a football stadium. As everyone shouted for joy, I knew what had done it.

He began reading from Ephesians.

He spoke of benevolent, beautiful Jesus, naked and destroyed on the cross. He mentioned the pain. An article he read once detailed the horrors of crucifixion, showed a cross-section of the human hand and wrist, its bone and sinew and nerve like a bundle of wires and insulation. Iron straight through would register very high on any pain scale, the author explained. Under my

jacket, folded in my lap, I pushed my pointer finger into the center of my hand, pressed its nail until I felt a tear. After the right, I did the left.

He prayed over the communion. I turned and looked out over the congregation, all their bent heads. Whatever anger I had was gone, replaced with something that I might call love.

I stood and walked over to the iron table. Pastor De Vries stopped praying when I started pushing the cups and carafe of grape juice to the edge, placing the wafer tins on the floor. When there was enough room, I lay down. With deep breathes, I relaxed into the cold slab.

It seemed the congregation thought Derek was simply gathering his thoughts, like he used to, because they didn't move for a long while. He looked down at me, watched me the whole time. Congregants began to sense something had changed. They opened their eyes. Some stood to get a better look, but aside from whispers, no one really said anything, until Old Ben.

He started shouting, "Whore! Whore! Whore!" That's when I closed my eyes. The murmuring grew louder. Teenagers laughed. I heard the facsimile click of a phone taking a picture, the same from Alice's room.

"Miriam...what are you doing?" Derek asked.

I opened my eyes to look at him. He reached out, but brought his hand back before he could touch me. I turned and saw the congregation. They were teeming now. Some were leaving, gathering their kids and heading for the door. Others just watched in bewilderment. Some, I thought, were smiling.

Ben was being held back by two ushers. Beth appeared behind them, just as furious.

All of them, I decided in that moment to forgive.

I turned back to Derek. "It's ok," I said. "It's over now."

He looked out at the congregation too. He asked someone to call an ambulance. Ben and Beth were both yelling, both being restrained or reasoned with, both telling me what it was I was doing and what it meant. I closed my eyes again, prayed my fasting prayers, and waited to be taken home.

# Still Life

She didn't know why she said this—maybe it was something about her mood that morning, hopeful because of the sunny weather and everyone coming over, or maybe it being their third anniversary—but she turned to her husband in the produce section and said, "I think we ought to talk more about our faith."

He was counting the number of lemons in a bag he was holding. He paused and looked at her, his brow curled. "Sure," he said. He frowned. "But what do you mean?"

"I mean whenever," she said, "Could be later tonight, if you'd like."

"Yeah. Ok." He placed the lemons in the basket. "I'm getting everything going at 6?" He gestured towards her with the lemon bag. "We need to make sure we use these this time, even if it's just in tea or something." He opened his phone, where the list was. "They mold so fast."

"I could make that pie," she said. "The one from last Thanksgiving."

"But that would use all of them, huh?" He'd moved on to the bell peppers. He weighed a red and a green one in his hands. She was just behind him. A baby cooed nearby. He interrogated the peppers with his eyes and fingers, then turned back towards her. "I really need them. That's why I got them."

"Ok, that's fine," she said.

"Should we get two bags?"

"No it was only because you mentioned—"

“Because they’re expensive.” He was still holding the two peppers, still questioning them with squeezes.

“We don’t need two,” she assured him. She found the source of the cooing. A little boy waddling in a blue onesie, holding a baby carrot in his small fist.

“What about the thing? The cake?”

“No, it’s fine.” She noticed a bag of baby carrots with a hole in the corner.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” She went bag in hand, tapped someone stocking leeks on the shoulder, and showed him the hole.

“Ok,” he said, still weighing the peppers against each other. She walked back over to him, but then turned, looking for the child. She planted her feet and swung gently back and forth, slow enough to still read the prices of the cherries. She wanted to be nonchalant about this. When she thought the child was gone, she began thinking of other pies. Cherry, maybe. Then, the little boy appeared from behind a rack of oranges, like he knew she might possess the possibility of pie. He took two steps towards her, smiling, and as she raised her hand to wave, he fell backwards onto his diapered bottom. He wailed, and she lunged toward him, some animal part of herself wanting to take him up in her arms and make him hers. But a woman with a magnificent mane of red curls distilled from behind the oranges and swept him up instead, the folds of her linen shirt falling around him, embracing him in a cocoon of affection. They glided in a cloud of giggles toward the bulk grains, where another red-head, this one about twelve, stood next to an overflowing cart, holding a phone in landscape and furiously pressing the screen.

She turned back to her husband to see what the decision was. A small pinch squeezed at her belly button, then passed. After a long moment, and a sigh, he pulled a bag from the dispenser and slid the green pepper into it.

———

At home, they unloaded the groceries in silence, sidestepping one another, their hands reaching out to land on a shoulder, or an elbow. The hands said, “I’m here with the pinto beans,” “I’m there with the chicken thighs.” It was like they were dancing to music only they knew.

Later, when they were making love, she said, “I think we should stick to the church’s schedule. We’re in Deuteronomy now.”

His face was pressed into her pillow. “What,” he asked, but he was muffled, so she said, “Huh,” and he stopped and resurfaced, his face hovering over hers.

“Are you low?” he asked, meaning her fertility.

“That’s what my little thing said,” she said, meaning her fertility monitor.

“So I can..?”

She nodded.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She paused for too long. “Yeah, I’m…everything feels fine,” she said. She’s not being entirely honest. Every time he thrusts, there is a small, almost imperceptible stabbing sensation in her stomach.

They waited for the uncertainty to pass. Then they smeared against each other, choosing not to worry.

He dropped a roughly chopped jalapeño into the pot, and as it cooked, he started speaking to it: “I didn’t touch myself, but I still looked. Scrolled through her pictures she posts in her bathroom. Watched a video where she writhes on a bed. Is that wrong?”

He leaned back from the stove. She still sat on the couch, reading. She was far enough away; the kitchen sounds loud enough. The only people who heard were himself and God.

After a few minutes he took the dutch oven off the burner. He always used the dutch oven. He liked its weight. It made him feel certain. He poured fish sauce into the wilted vegetables, and a cloud lifted up and around him, fogging his glasses.

“What are you making?” she asked. “Smells good.”

“Marinade,” he explained. “For the chicken.” He turned to the cutting board, chopped something else, which he then dumped into the cauldron. As it all congealed, bubbled, he surprised himself again: “I dream about them, too. But I stop whatever we’re doing and wake myself up. I promise.”

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The pain began in her lower right abdomen. At first like a pinch, then like something oozing.

“I think I’m getting my period,” she said to him, reassuring herself.

“Oh, I’m sorry, babe,” he said. He was in the kitchen, in the apron she bought him last Christmas, a chambray thing with many pockets. They currently housed the meat thermometer, his phone, and a fork, whose tines stared up at him—specifically, his right eyeball.

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked as he turned on the sink faucet.

She put her book down and stood, which sent a shooting pain from the base of her heal to her throat.

“No,” she said.

“Hmm?” he asked, turning from the sink with a pot full of water and potatoes. He placed it on the burner, poured salt into it. Her pain radiated inward with an impossible density.

“You don’t need to do anything for me,” she said. She walked to the bathroom. Each step became less and less painful, which she took as a good sign.

On the toilet, she took her phone and searched, “pain lower right abdomen female.” She scrolled past appendicitis. There were a bunch of strange infections that sounded wrong. Another cause was severe indigestion, which sounded most right. She strained, trying to pass it, which caused her right side to light up with a cold, deep pull. It wasn’t just in her side anymore, but her stomach and what felt like her lung. She decided to breath. She pretended the air coming through her nose was traveling the perimeter of her skull, then down her back and resting in her stomach until she blew it out. As her diaphragm expanded, there was the same pulling. Her mouth filled with saliva, which she spit in between her legs. It was clear and bubbled. She was shaking.

She thought to try straining again but couldn’t bring herself to. She pulled up her pants and had to steady herself against the sink. Through the door, she heard a burner click and light. A blender whirred intermittently. She flipped the switch for the fan. The overlapping white noise developed into throbbing textures, like two turn signals blinking in and out of time.

She looked up at the mirror. “Something’s wrong,” she said, wobbled for a moment, and fell back into the closed door.

The door hadn't been locked. When the EMT's arrived, he said, "She said she was having her period."

In the emergency room, he looked at her. She was pale, paler than her normal off-white olive. He reached out and took her hand in his. His hand looked cotton-candy pink under the halogen.

A doctor walked over, pulled up a swivel chair, and took off her shoes. He punched her heel with his open palm. She whimpered. "That hurt?" he asked, then walked away after she nodded.

She lay in a gurney up against the wall. He sat in a chair beside her, which he had to get up from every time another gurney came down the hallway.

"Appendicitis," the doctor said when he returned a few minutes later. He nodded after saying this. "More than likely. Dr. Ben, by the way." Dr. Ben reached out his hand.

He took Dr. Ben's hand. "What does that mean?"

"Surgery, non-invasive," Dr. Ben said, then stuck a finger in his ear and carved away at the inside. "You'll go home today." He wiped off his finger on his scrubs. "We'll check you for other things, just to be sure. Any chance you're pregnant?"

"I don't think so," she said.

"We haven't been trying," he said.

"Don't worry. We do these all the time," Dr. Ben said to the hallway he was walking towards. He rounded the corner.

Just then someone screamed outside the double doors to the ER. Then they were inside, pushed slowly by a nurse, who was chewing gum. The nurse blew a bubble and pushed the

gurney toward them, but diverted at the last second, taking the screaming, writhing mess of blankets and torn clothes through a bay of automatic doors. “You’re ok, you’re ok, you’re ok,” the nurse said.

He looked out over the ER. He watched the nurses and doctors crowded around all the computers. Each time he made eye contact with one, they would immediately sit up, collect some papers, or wiggle their mouse. Some even stood in response to his eye contact, paced around to another doctor or nurse, every few moments looking over their shoulder to see if he, or anyone, was still looking. When he turned back to her, her eyes were closed, her mouth a small little o, breathing.

“Why do they have so many computers?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

“Babe?”

Still she didn’t answer. He got annoyed and fidgeted with the zipper of his jacket. He didn’t like it when she didn’t answer him.

Her phone started buzzing—her mother. He reached across the gurney and clicked the side buttons until the call went away.

“Babe?” she asked.

“What?” he said.

“I don’t think it’s appendicitis.”

Dr. Ben appeared from entrance to the hallway he had disappeared into. He looked at them both, then looked away, flipping open a folder in his hands that appeared empty. Another doctor peeked around the corner that Dr. Ben stood in front of, and just as she was about to turn

back down the hallway, Dr. Ben saw her, threw his arms out, took her by the elbow, and made his way down the hallway with her. After a moment, the other doctor reappeared, looking around the ER again, until her eyes rested on them. She walked towards them with her lips curved down in a tasteful frown. “Hi, guys,” she said to them. “I’m Dr. Jen.”

“Where’s Dr. Ben?”

“He’s with another patient.”

He could see Dr. Ben’s elbow peeking out of the hallway.

“Ma’am?” Dr. Jen asked. “Did you know you were pregnant?”

She looked up at Dr. Jen.

“Oh dear,” Dr. Jen said. “Well, you wer—are. I’m sorry. This must be very hard to hear,” Dr. Jen said.

“Is she going to be ok?” he asked.

“The fetus?”

“No, my wife.”

“I was about to say. We can’t tell the sex yet,” Dr. Jen said, then pouted. “I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you this.”

Dr. Jen explained it would be a quick procedure. “Same method as appendicitis, actually, but instead of the appendix, obviously, it's the fallopian tube.”

“But you’re removing the baby, though, right?” his wife asked.

“Yes, the removal of the fetus occurs with the removal of the tube.” Dr Jen held up her hands and made a crooked hook with a pointer finger. She pointed at her knuckle. She imitated a

small explosion. The fingers on the other hand danced, and rained down from her other finger like a decaying firework.

"That's what happened," Dr. Jen explained.

"So it's not alive?" he asked.

"The baby?"

He nodded.

Dr. Jen held out her hands and said, "A question for the ethicists."

They sat in silence. "It won't survive?" he asked.

"No," Dr. Jen said, pouting again. "It won't."

A small team of nurses appeared and began unbuckling and clipping and otherwise assembling the gurney for transportation. His wife winced at him. He and Dr. Jen stood against the wall and watched, both holding their chairs in their hands. Suddenly, he felt her hand on his.

"I'm so sorry for your…well, your loss," she said, and squeezed. She turned, put her chair between two gurneys, and made her way to the hallway she had come from.

———

She came to in a beige room, cold and sitting in a vinyl chair. She could hear beeping and the gentle rolling of wheelchairs in the hallway. She tried swallowing, which caused something to roll back and into her throat, so she gagged. Coughing, she pulled up the sleeve of her gown and spit up into it. A little blood, but mostly spit.

There was nothing in the room except a swivel chair, a sink, and two cabinets under and above the sink. She sat there, wiggled her toes. The room seemed dark, darker than it was, like

she was in a cave. She tried to speak, but the thing slapped the back of her throat again. She gagged, but had nothing to spit up.

She could barely move. She leaned forward and felt a pull at the inside of her elbow. An IV bag hung above her. She tried to stand, but could only move to the edge of the seat. She placed her forehead in her palms and waited. She tried again after a while. As she got up, leaning into the IV stand, a nurse opened the door, looking at a chart, saying, "Good afternoon, missus—what are you doing?" The nurse took her at the shoulder and back and gently pushed her into the chair. She couldn't resist.

"Where were you going?"

"Trying to find someone," she managed to croak.

"Your husband?" the nurse asked.

"Anyone," she said.

As the nurse explained a few medications, her husband came through the door. Before he could say anything, the nurse asked, "Have you pulled your car around?"

"No," he said. "They didn't tell—"

"You need to go pull your car around," the nurse said, waving an arm around, explaining where he could go, what entrance to avoid, and when to call his wife. His eyes were pink.

"Ok, I'll be back," he said to her. The nurse nodded.

"Ok," she said. His backpack hung on his shoulder with computer charger wires sticking out of the water bottle holder. He held her clothes in his hands. With everything hanging off him, his shirt rose up in the back, and his pants were sagging. She didn't like to see him like this—disheveled. "They'll take me down after I change." She held out her hands for her clothes. She

didn't want to say anything else. She didn't want to talk about this. In fact, she wanted something to happen. As the nurse wheeled her around the hospital, she imagined him pulling out of the parking garage and getting T-boned by a semi. Then she imagined them both in the car, merging onto the highway, a big truck sideswiping and smearing their little Toyota against the concrete pylons. She imagined other scenarios—brain hemorrhages, mass shootings. Anything, as long as he wouldn't ask her, "How are you feeling?"

The nurse brought her down to a waiting area, and lined her up with the other chairs. She could see outside. The sun was low, piercing, shining straight at her through the automatic doors. It reflected off the linoleum too, casting warped blobs of light onto the ceiling. She waited and watched as the sun moved imperceptibly towards the top of the parking garage across the street. She tried looking at the sun, directly at it, in defiance of it, but her eyelids kept closing. She sat in the pink-orange haze of her closed eyes and let the sun warm her, but then her eyelids began to grey. A large bank of clouds approached from stage left, obscuring the sun. The rain started shortly after.

She waited and watched the rain. She didn't want her husband to die; she just didn't want to have to explain. She didn't want to tell him what it all was. To be full, then to be not. And she knew something was wrong. Not that day, but weeks ago. She remembered sitting at her desk, scheduling an appointment in her boss's calendar, and felt an overwhelming sense of certainty. She felt it so strongly that she stood up, went to the break room, and made herself a tea. She sipped from the styrofoam cup, filled by a *thereness*, a *now* that she couldn't quite articulate. But when she got home, got out of her car, and shut the door, a group of small black birds thundered out from their neighbor's tree. The mass floated above their houses, a teeming, black cloud,

before scattering across the street, over the funeral home and the abandoned dry cleaners. As they disappeared into the horizon, they looked like locusts. That's when she knew.

Her husband called, and she waved at the nurse, who pretended not to see. When it seemed that they were not going to stop filing charts, she tried to stand again.

"Don't do that!" the nurse yelled, again taking her shoulder, but this time pushing her into the chair with force. "I was coming," the nurse said. "I was on my way."

At the car, the rain had let up, and it more or less waved around with the wind. The nurse helped her into the car and slammed the door on the loose seat belt. The car door bounced on the hinge as the nurse pushed the wheelchair back to the waiting room. She fumbled with the belt and leaned out to the car door. She felt something stretch too far inside her as she grabbed the handle of the door and pulled. When she buckled in and turned to her husband, he was vibrating with rage.

"I'm sorry that took so long. You will not fucking believe this. Fuck. FUCK. I'm so mad, I'm so fucking…" he trailed off, gripped the steering wheel, breathing. "Cunts. They're cunts. I'm sorry, I know they're just high school fucking interns or something but they're fucking cunts. They told me…they said, 'You can't get parking validated if you leave—' and I said no one told me that I had to move my fucking car if *you* left the E.R., I was told to go to the fucking O.R. where *you* were having emergency fucking surgery and these dumb fucking little cunts were just so pleased to explain the…rules…just the stupidest fucking thing—"

"Babe."

"And if I hadn't forced them to validate, it would have cost us $45. Can you fucking believe that shit? She started explaining that they charge that much because of people like me,

like I was putting others out. This isn't the fucking movies, I didn't come here to…you know its not like I plan—"

"Babe."

"And that's the other thing I mean what the fuck? I mean what the ever loving fuck? These stupid private school cunts trying to pad their resumes speaking down to people twice their age about parking etiquette—"

"Please, babe."

He stopped and turned to her.

"Home," she said. "I'm sorry." She coughed into her hand. More mucus and blood. He leaned forward, then rummaged through the glove compartment. As he rummaged, a car behind them laid on their horn. He found a small packet of tissues in the glove, handed them to her, and punched the roof of the car before turning the engine over.

They moved through downtown towards the interstate, slowly, because of the rain, the last dull grayness of the day slowly waning. She fell asleep before they got to the ramp.

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The gales raged all night. He woke up first, a little after two. Her face was pressed between his shoulder blades. He stretched, unintentionally pinching her nose. She started, then rolled over. The fan blew over his back and his skin tingled where her face had just been. He reached over his shoulder, and found the damp spot. He tasted his fingers. Salt.

Her back to him, she inhaled sharply, then shuddered in her exhale, letting out a whimper. He reached over to her, wanted to ask her if she was crying, but he fell back to asleep. He found himself in bed with a woman he used to work with. She wore one of his old shirts, the same one

his wife was wearing to bed. Candles flickered all around the room as the woman straddled him. A peel of thunder rang out, and he saw flashes of lighting out the room's window.

The same peel of thunder entered his wife's dream as her mother, screaming. Her mother shouted in the thunder's language, "DO NOT TOUCH THE FIRE!" She was standing frozen in front of the fireplace of her childhood home. Her hand glided towards the grate. Her skin sizzled, black smoke billowing from her hand, and the searing pain woke her. Her face was in her pillow, her mouth open, biting it. She lifted her head, trying to rest her face somewhere there wasn't drool. She pulled one leg out from under the covers, rolled over to face her husband, and fell back to sleep.

At some point, he pushed the woman off of him and explained to her he can't do this to his wife. She asked him if that really was as fair as he seemed to think. He picked up his pants. "Of course," he said.

"What a pity," she said, "that she doesn't want you to experience beautiful things."

"That's not true, and I—" but he was cut off by a sudden paralysis, every ligament almost frozen. He turned to her as fast as he could, and she was holding a candle in her hands, muttering something in a language he didn't understand. His face went slack. He tried to move his legs, his arms, anything to get out of there. Her voice became myriad, warping and distorting. His was able to reach a hand forward, barely above his waist, and he slurred through his palsied lips, "God, help me," before waking up so violently he almost fell out of bed. He checked his phone. It was almost four.

He sat on the side of the bed and asked to the floor between his feet, *Was that a demon?*

Then, he searched this question: How do you stop dreams?

She rolled onto her back and her arm twisted such that her palm faced upward above the duvet. He saw this, and moved towards her, taking her hand in his as he slid under the covers. Her hand sweat in his, but he couldn't let it go.

He fell back to sleep, and she woke to find her hand clenched in his. She began to pull away, but something stopped her. She opened her eyes, and his nose was almost touching hers. The house was getting pounded with rain, sheets raking against the shingles. She thought of the roof, of its longevity, as she pondered her husband's vulnerable pout, his flattened blonde hair. One day, they will have a fifteen-thousand-dollar problem, but for now, they're safe. About a year ago, the inspector said the roof had ten years left. In ten years, they'd almost be forty. Forty! She replaced her sweaty hand with the drier one. She held his fingers together like a bundle of sticks and traced his stubby, bitten nails until she also slipped back under.

Neither woke for the rest of the night, and eventually their hands dislocated, but with each night-sound, each slap of branch against the outside of the home, they moved closer, until they were two curled balls mirroring across some arbitrary line.

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When she woke up, she was on his side of the bed. She rolled over, in great pain, to find her side empty. She walked through the small two bedroom house and found him at the kitchen table with a Bible and laptop open. He was drinking coffee in his underwear. She refilled the kettle, then sat down next to him.

"I thought we'd stay in this morning," he said.

"Yeah," she said.

When the water began spilling out of the top of the spout, she went and made some tea. He had set her medications out on the island in a row. She took them, then returned to the table with a mug and, without saying anything, reached for the Bible and began reading from Deuteronomy. After reading chapter six, she asked if he'd like to read chapter seven. He responded by taking the Bible in his hands, beginning, "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering," hardly taking a breath until he finished.

When he was done, she thought to say, "The Word of the Lord," but he read the first discussion question from the devotional. "Who are the nations that God will clear out for Israel?"

"There are 7, those ones from the first verses." She found the list in the chapter, and read them.

He scrolled down the document. "I don't see any answers, but I think that's right."

He read the second question: "What are God's reasons for giving this land to Israel?"

"He chose them. They've been faithful?" She leaned back in her chair, took a sip of tea, which was now cold.

"Yeah, they are following his commandments," he agreed.

The third question was about metaphors for Christ, his coming salvation.

"That's strange to me," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Christ wouldn't do this."

"That's what I thought too," she said. "He came to bring all tribes together."

"Exactly," he said. "To me, this is the old God, the one before Christ. This is the one Christ stopped."

She agreed. “But I guess we could think of those foreign tribes as our sins? And Christ took care of our sins?”

He mulled this over for a minute. “But what about the sins of those people? The ones that are cleared out for Israel? Wouldn’t that mean that they’re abandoned, before they’ve even been given a chance?”

“That’s a good point,” she said. She looked at his stomach, which rippled over his waistband. He smelled like he looked. She couldn’t help it. “Hey,” she said, taking his hand. She squeezed until he looked at her. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he said.

They continued to hold hands as he read the fourth and final question.

“What obstacles are in your life that you don’t believe God is big enough to move?”

A mockingbird trilled out what sounded like a car alarm, then a ringtone, then something more avian, a caw, caw, caw. “I’m not sure, actually,” he said, his hand cradled in hers.

“Me neither,” she said. They both sat connected in the silence and the slanted morning light, listening to the mockingbird and thinking about the question and all their possible answers.

## Hotel California

Dear Beth,

It's been a long time, hasn't it? I'm sure you still don't want to hear from me. I remember what you said, and what you asked, and I know that by writing you I'm breaking my promise. But the kids mentioned they'd spoken with you, that you asked how I was doing, so I thought I'd tell you myself. I believe you should hear the whole thing from me. Both the miracle, and what I think led to it. It's crazy, Beth. How many people, right? It makes sense, in a way. If you look at the Bible, God often used most the weakest people. Given our marriage, and everything I did since, I think I fit the bill.

I know what this sounds like coming from me. I remember that first morning I stopped going to church with you, and those things I said have bubbled up in me over the years and corroded my heart. I should never have mocked you, or brought up all that about your family. Was that the beginning of the end? It's only just occurring to me. But even with all that, I hope you can believe me when I say that now, after this, I believe it more than I ever did, even when I was considering the seminary. I look back at that man, at who I thought I was, and I see through him just as I see through the atheist he became. Both performances of virtue, both in love with his own voice. You should ask the kids if they see anything different in me. Ask them if I'm sincere. Or don't—I don't know know. Maybe that's all a bit too soon. We sit together most days, and I think we're breaking through whatever old awkwardness used to be. I told them about

choosing doubting Thomas as my patron; they told me about their frustrations at work, their fears for their own children, other things we lost to time. They've even met Father Javi, and know all about the monastery up on Sierra de San Lorenzo.

And I should explain that too, before I get too ahead of myself—I'm not coming back. I'm staying here, in Mexico, to honor the vision given to me and to begin my mission. I think they're disappointed, but what are you to do when you've been called to something higher?

I guess I should begin with William, his wedding. He told me he invited you. I understand why you wouldn't want to come. He understands too, you know. A third marriage, a destination wedding at that, and her being so young. All a bit scandalous, I agree, even given my history, but you should have seen her on the day, Beth. I remember how you used to cry at weddings. I'm telling you, whatever hardness in you would have melted.

Ashley and I arrived together. We hired a car, this little late aughts Peugeot, and headed for the spot, a mango orchard in the coastal town of Todos Santos. The driver kept asking questions, you know, "Business or pleasure?" then "Who wedding?"

"Can passengers drink here?" Ash asked. The driver glanced between Ashley and the road, then said, "Beer? Oh, sí. Is beer." He pointed towards the mountains, and laughed, also bringing his thumb to his mouth and tipping his hand back. Ashley looked at me. I shrugged. The way Ashley asked the question and the way the driver answered it made me feel so old.

"So, you friend," the driver asked, "he old friend?" I didn't want to answer. I felt bad, but what was I supposed to do? Just speak in careful English about things no one wanted to explain, that the driver was just being polite about anyway? He didn't want to know about William or his bride to be. I know he didn't want to know that she was Mexican like him, aware of what she

could get with her beauty, that she was pregnant and spoke English with a ruddy lisp. I pretended he was asking Ashley, and Ashley pretended he was asking me. The silence lasted until we reached the farm—over an hour. The whole ride, the end of a cloud bank moved with us, always out of reach, even as we passed through downtown Todos Santos and its collage of Spanglish signs: “Tacos Y pizza” and “Cold Brew + café de olla.”

The mango trees weren’t fruiting, which I didn’t realize would disappoint me until I saw them there, bare and brown. I asked the guy if we could go any faster, seeing as he’d slowed to a crawl on the unpaved road, which was lined with palm trees and circumscribed the orchard. The driver ignored *me* now.

As we bumped along the dirt path, corridors between the trees formed and scattered. I don’t know if I thought about anything. Ash was zonked, dead to the world. There were these dogs sleeping in the orchard who started following us up the road—terrier and retriever mutts with dreadlocks in their fur. Ash woke up when one of them barked. The car felt nervous—a mix of excitement and competition, heightened by this place, where it’s hard not to have expectations. Then, a large, sprawling one story building appeared through the palm leaves.

William greeted us, in a party shirt with pineapples on it un-bottoned to his belly-button. The only difference between him back then and now was gravity. I thought the same thing when I saw Ash, balding and holding a bottle of duty free gin back in Houston. We all hugged our old man hugs. He introduced this short Mexican woman. “Get settled,” he told us. She walked us through the campus wordlessly, pointing to different buildings, then tapping one of us on the shoulder to explain, “That’s where you’re staying.”

As we walked, there were these stone tablets, bordered with a mosaic of shells and sea glass, with different quotes, all attributed to Kirk.

“What we can easily see is only a small percentage of what is possible,” one read.

“Imagination is having the vision to see what is possible, to picture that which is essential, but invisible to the eye,” another read.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. We hadn’t seen anyone—the girl’s family, friends, William’s guests, etc, but she just kept clopping in her flip flops down the winding dirt paths from each one bedroom adobo to the next. It was so strange, to see someone like her, like the driver. You don’t even realize that these people are real until you’re with them. Like they didn’t exist until you showed up.

We changed, showered, and then walked back to the main house. That’s when the people just started showing up. Bridesmaids, in-law’s, others from the town, all chattering in Spanish. Ash and I tried our best to introduce ourselves, be polite. No one else from back home had come. We both, and William too, stood at least a foot over everyone. We also had at least fifty pounds on everyone.

Then this gangly white man appeared from the orchard, muttering in Spanish to the groundskeeper. Everything was really bustling at this point in the main house when he came in. People cheered. After a few beers, he was revealed to be the owner, and the author of the tablets. At one point, I overheard him saying to Ash, “Listen, I know what you’re thinking. But all these things—aliens, angels, gods—they’re us, evolved, from the future, man.” He mentioned Zoroastrianism, but it was hard to follow.

Anyway, we gave Maria, Bill's bride-to-be, our best when the people parted ways and allowed for it. "We're so happy you're here," she said, these tiny white flowers around her head, their stems tied in a chain. "Bill won't tell you this, but he would be beside himself if you hadn't come."

We went into town after, to the Hotel California, for dinner. Can you believe that? It's real. No relation to the song, though. We asked. We ate, three old white men with three generations of this country, at a long table in the back. That's when I first saw her.

She was one of the waitresses. A gorgeous young woman who looked like possibility incarnate. She didn't take any of our orders, only brought the food. I tried speaking to her, introducing myself when she came past. She giggled, and I was convinced that if we had the chance, things would be grand.

As you know, Samantha left me a few years back. It's not like it had been some big loss. When she left, all I felt was relief. You were right—I never loved her. She did such a good job of being quiet at the right times, but also loud too. Always caught up in her own little world, scheming schemes that no one knew. When she gave you attention, you felt invincible. But when we finally tried it, the veneer wore off quick. She was just Samantha, just normal, not so much in love with herself as completely unaware and uninterested in anything else.

After her, I couldn't hack the new world, even people our age. The one's capable of compromise had gotten married and stayed married. I went on a few dates, but bring up one wrong thing, and it's a lecture now. Everyone so ready to show how they've evolved. Remember back in school, those chapel talks, the one's on race? It's like that, only even less interested in moving forward. What would they rather? I pretend not to be who I am, to not have enough

respect for them to say, “I’m uncomfortable. I don’t agree.”? I never stormed out on them. I stayed, talked. But it’s every last word now. Everything embattled, qualified to all hell with our perfectly tailored histories, our individual records of the truth. Given infinite time, we’ll all come out on the bottom. Like I said, gravity.

But I’d been reading about all this, how America is so individualist, obsessed with time, and I watched how this woman moved. A generosity, a grace in her step. Little English, little corruption, I thought. Someone you could really talk to.

We moved to the bar. Maria’s brothers wanted to show us the town’s only club. The woman cleared our bottles and before I could say anything, the bartender asked if we wanted anything. We didn’t, and we went to the club, a one room bar with the walls painted black and a disco ball and Britney Spears blaring from the speakers.

The next day, there were no plans. Bill had things to organize, things to pick out with Maria. Ash and I decided we should go eat, see the town in the daylight. The sun, the sun, THE SUN, Beth! I can’t put it into words. Like whatever we’d known before of sunlight was false.

Nothing much happened that day. We found a man frying fish for tacos on the street. An art gallery full of linoleum block prints. I bought one, actually. These four women, eating pie, having tea. So much drama between them. I decided they must be talking about their husbands, their disappointing children, that they were the only people who they could be entirely honest with, and I wished I could be one of them.

Do you remember how angry you used to get about my tone? And do you remember how I used to say I couldn’t hear it? After I bought the print, Ash joked. “Where are you even going to put something like that?” he asked. “I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll figure it out.” He laughed, like it

was just the funniest thing. “Look at you, getting into the Mexico spirit.” Still ironic, he was. Remember how he used to needle us, find the weak spots and push? I realized he had to know what he was saying, had to know how it would feel, and I thought of how you must have known as well, when I said those things I used to say. I’m sorry, Beth. Truly.

Kirk came with us, told us stories at every corner. He showed us this craft brewery, begun by some Australians from Brisbane. We sat with beers, IPA and that, eating ceviche, and he began another one of his sermons. He asked us about the best sex we’d ever had, whether we felt some communion with divine woman, or man. Then he just started talking about Mexico.

“Listen, it’s a different kind of freedom down here,” he told us. He leaned in, like he was about to mention the devil. “I was skunk drunk, I mean really gone.” His eyes flitted up to the television, then back to us. “Pulled over, cops all serious, but then…500 pesos. And that’s it. Boom. I’m back on the road home.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his front pocket. His shirt had pineapples on it, like Bill’s the day before. “I’m never going back,” he said.

The Hotel was on the walk back. The same bartender was at the helm. I described the woman, reminded him who I was. Here’s the strange thing. He said, “No one like that works here.” I kept describing her, offering every detail I knew—turquoise belt buckle; loose, pink shirt—and I even moved like her, which made Kirk laugh.

“Don’t know who you’re talking about,” he said. He nodded to a young man, bussing tables behind us. “He worked yesterday. He would have taken care of you.”

Kirk wanted to know everything. Neither he or Ash remembered her from the day before.

“Could it have been one of the cousins?” Kirk asked. It’s true, Maria had many cousins coming and going from the farm. I felt crazy walking back, holding my tube of old women

eating pie. With every step back towards the farm, she felt more and more like a fragment from a dream than any solid memory.

When we got back, we found beers in the main house. Maria's brothers were playing 1v. 1 soccer on the tennis court. We drank, and watched the younger men sweat in the low light. The girls, the cousins, the aunts and uncles came out. One of them had a guitar. Like a movie, honestly, Beth, but they really live it. The sun in the day, the stars and moon at night. Drunk and watery eyed, everyone listening to the trilling singers. Maria and Bill sat on a lounge chair, Maria's kid waddling up and down its length. Bill took his little head in hand at one point, stroking his dark hair. People started dancing. Maria asked me. "Bill was right! You're not as intimidating as you look," she said to me. I know it's been a while, but my features haven't softened. Still that sharp brow, the dimpled chin. When the song finished, and we bowed and thanked each other, I stayed on the makeshift dance floor and swayed with my Corona.

The next day was the bachelor party. There's not much to fill you in on. We started early, and the brothers took us around to place we never would have found on our own. Kirk, again, tagged along, wanting to discuss being and the ten dimensions.

We drank, and we caroused, and we played games, mostly drinking games. The brothers asked Bill about erectile dysfunction, which destroyed them every time, just falling over themselves. "Viagra," one of the few English terms they knew. They said Bill like "peel." It was hard not to love them. By the evening, we had revisited many of the old places. We picked up a few friends of the brothers along the way. Again, I got names, but who can remember?

We ended up at the Hotel, again. And we asked, again, if the servers had heard the song. "The Eagles!" I shouted. The bartender watched me, I remember that, because when I took the

hand of a different young girl, and whispered to her about the other, he was between us before I could finish my question.

The brothers announced that we should “go beach.” Kirk was on a roll, too. “The want us to think that we’ve cracked it, that we’ve understood. But even those official reports, the ones that contradict the previously dominant narrative, those are just another smokescreen,” he was saying. “There’s something else, something deeper and beyond even the most valiant journalism.” He pulled out a baggie with four or five little pink pills. “Do you want one?”

I took one in my hand and decided that for someone my age, with the heart stuff, that half should be enough for me. I bit it, spat out the rest. The only light was the last remnants of sun and the moon, that dull gray-pink, as we made our way out into the sand.

Kirk walked over to everyone else. Bill and Ash took one, as did the brothers. The friends, at this point three or four of them, crowded around but Kirk had already put it all away. One of them was playing a song from their phone, some dance number and bass went shuggah, shuggah, boom, boom. As they collapsed up the sand, the sea overtook the phone. Bill walked over, handed me the tequila that I didn’t remember us buying.

We must have spent hours there, each having our own little experience. I sat down next to Bill and asked him about Maria. “You really love her, don’t you?” I asked. He told me a story. “She saved me,” he said. Apparently, they met at the restaurant we all used to go to on Sundays back in school, the Mexican place, la alt-something-or-other. With the rolled “n.” His office was around there. He’d sworn off women, dating, everything. “Kids from two marriages, that’s what I had to live for,” he said. He ate lunch there most days, and she often came in after the rush, took up a booth in the back, and studied. She was in the nursing program at the university downtown,

not related to the owners, who were Guatemalan, but knew them. They let her work while she waited for her kid to get out of pre-school. “At first I ignored her, but then…I don’t know, I decided to talk to her. I knew how it would look, but there was something about her, a seriousness, an intensity. And we’d made eye contact a few times. I even prayed about! ‘Lord, close this door if it be not your will.’ I told myself if she has no interest, then ok. That’s it. No more. But when I walked over to her, she handed me a piece of paper with her number on it and days, times she wasn’t in class or working. And that was that,” he said. He started crying. “She gave me permission to believe in love again.”

I looked out at the sea, at it teeming under the moon. I didn’t realize Bill had gotten up until I turned and saw them all down the way, carousing and singing and stumbling in the sand. When I looked back at the sea, I thought I should go into it and lose myself in its indifferent blackness. You know how I used to get. These moods. The beginning of a prayer formed on my lips, I could feel it, something beyond language I couldn’t quite get my hands around. I’m ashamed to admit, but after so many decades of talking about it

I’m starting a new sentence. I realize that I didn’t have the courage to speak plainly. After years of talking to you about suicide, of how the thought pierced my brain over and over like bolts of lightning, I decided that, after the wedding, after I wished Bill and the girl well, I would do it. I’d get in a cab, tell them I’m going to the airport, then wait somewhere until night and make my way back to that exact spot. I’d pray my wordless prayer, then I’d swim until I couldn’t anymore. I said, “Soon,” out loud. To the ocean, to whatever I saw in its vastness, but it was God who heard me.

I stumbled down the beach and caught up with everyone. Bill had stopped on a small dune, and now he looked out at the water. I saw him thirty years ago, standing on that calanque in Cassis. Remember when he and I studied abroad in Marseilles, you in Paris? Remember camping on those things, the spray of the Mediterranean in the morning? Your lost ring, the one your mother gave you, that we somehow found outside of the bakery?

He saw me looking at him, and smiled, then turned back to the ocean and shouted, "Maria!" We all laughed.

He always surprised me with his ability to just take one thought in after the other, to just be well with himself. Maybe I'm not making sense. Maybe I'm speaking about things most people don't understand. Ha ha. Who am I kidding?

One of the brothers suggested to Bill that we go back into town. We could see it now, a faint glitter up the hill from the shore. He said the hotel was closed, but that there were stores still open that sold beer and liquor.

We walked through the empty streets, down the middle of the road. Kirk was singing a song I didn't know, quite well I should say, and the chorus crashed against the mud walls of the buildings and echoed down the street. The sign for the Hotel appeared a few blocks away, when we topped a hill. It was still lit, the twinkle lights still blinking.

"Are you sure it's closed?" I asked. Bill translated, and the brothers shook their heads, explained in Spanish.

"We should check," I said, and began walking down towards it. There was confusion, but I was confident, so everyone followed.

As we approached the Hotel, the brothers pointed out a convenience store, glowing blue from the halogen. But I stayed the course, walking up to the double doors, which were locked. I cupped my hands, looked in through the tinted glass. The same bartender from before was wiping down the counter. I knocked on the door. He didn't stop. I knocked harder and he flinched, so I banged again, and again, and again. He walked up to the door, smiled, then punched the door with a his fist wrapped in the rag. "Jesus Christ," Bill said. The bartender began shouting a mix of "Away," and "Out," with strings of Spanish, muffled through the door. The brothers and their friends started chattering to each other. We all backed away.

The bartender unlocked the door. "Away! Away!" Bill intervened, explained, but the bartender pointed at me, speaking to Bill, "Take your friend away."

"What'd you do?" Kirk asked me as we walked to the convenience store. I told him, nothing.

The brothers picked through the coolers and we each had beers in our hands as we walked back past the hotel towards the farm. I stopped as they walked on, and I looked down the alley to my left, dark and brooding. A door opened from the hotel, and light spilled out form it. I thought it was the bartender, and as he propped the door open with something, I hid behind the wall of the adjacent building. I heard him walk out and I looked back down from my hiding spot. But there she stood, dropping a full trash can into the dumpster.

People with self awareness just end up doing all the terrible things people with no self awareness do, only they have justifications. That's the only excuse I have for this next part, that self-awareness or not, I'm as weak as anyone else. But that doesn't make it right, and I know that, and the Lord and I have been speaking on it regularly.

I took her by the elbow. She jerked away. I didn't want to squeeze, didn't want to pull her, but I did, hard. She yelled. We struggled. I told her to stop moving, to just stop. Guests of the hotel opened up their windows, peered out, shouted down at us to be quiet, to take it somewhere else.

I asked her why she told them to lie. The most embarrassing part, now: I was hurt. I told her I thought I could love her. She tried to hit me but I caught the wrist. I told her that when I saw her, I thought that life could be good again. That the bad wasn't going to happen to me anymore. That I wouldn't be so unnoticed. "You noticed me, didn't you?" I said.

She cried and leaned her weight into me, lowering herself to the ground. I cupped her elbow in my hand like I would a hurt bird.

"I saw you and you saw me. Isn't that all there is?" I asked.

This whole time, she kept saying things in Spanish. Sounded like "no may yay-vas." Also, "Mister, please."

I told her I wasn't going to hurt her, over and over again. I know I should have let her go. It's so clear now, what was happening, what I was doing. But I couldn't. She spoke very soft now. She must have been praying.

That's when I heard the voice above me:

"What are you doing, child?"

She was just floating there, above us. Mother Mary up by the windows of the alley, more beautiful than anything you'd find in the Vatican, her hands and face shining like the most perfect diamond, robes gleaming like the most perfect pearl. And behind her, I saw the city, brilliant too, and a feeling came over me. I don't know how to describe it. It was more like

understanding. She smiled at me and I was not aware of anything but Her. The feeling told me that I had a place in one of those brilliant buildings, some small square of heavenly space where I would live free from this horrifying yearning—what drove me to my first ideas of God, then from those ideas of God, then from you and the kids—for all eternity.

I've been told what happened next, but, for me, it was just a sudden, totalizing blackness, then a slow turning over into consciousness. I'd been gone a week, Bill told me. The bartender, the one who told me to leave, came out while I was entranced, picked up a piece of bent rebar and buried it in my right temple. A little bit further up, or deeper in, they tell me, and I wouldn't be here.

They stuck me in one of those contraptions that holds my neck and head in place with screws, but again, the Jase and Jess probably told you. I'm expected to make partial recovery. Physical therapy should get me set up with a cane. The only real problem are these seizures, which unfortunately might be for good. The anti-convulsants help, but some days I see double and feel like I'm wearing earrings made of barbells. Father Javi says the monastery I'm going to boasts of many healings. He's confident the Lord will show up for me there.

I know how I got here. Allow me this potentially crass thought: I wanted to find that proverbial glen, secluded with a young woman bathing, her skin like chicory root and her face peering back at me behind a veil of water, warped and inviting. Ash always seemed the hedonist, but the truth is, when we landed, walked out of baggage claim to that open air bar beside the hotel shuttles, I was overcome with that feeling that everything there was something I could take a bite out of. I think that's how I've always been, and will be my chief struggle in my new life.

I've re-read this many times. At the beginning, I said I hoped you believe me. I don't hope that, really. I hope you forgive me. Will you, Beth? I don't need to know. I don't deserve to know. Tell God your answer. He's already comforted me on this end, and maybe, through some other way, he'll let me know if you do.

We leave so much undone. Remember Jason's friend, the boy who he roomed with one summer during college, how he got in that accident with the skateboard going down some hill? Even a young man like that probably had regrets, moral debts, who knows. But that's grace. He believed, Jason told me. Covered to the last, even as the truck overtook him.

I'm rambling now. The truth is, I miss you. I'm not saying anything with that—please give Dan my best. I hope his firm is doing well, even with all this market volatility. He was always smart, from what I remember, and with you always so steady, I'm sure you're both doing just fine.

But all I'm saying, even now, whenever I make a decision I wonder what you'll think of it. Again, I don't deserve to know.

Nothing I ever planned panned out. Even this, the monastery and the whole bit, who knows? I know it won't be exactly what I'm expecting. But I think this is the first time I've ever gone forward and been alright with not knowing what's going to happen.

I've included the address of the monastery, in case you'd like to write. Visitors are allowed on Thursdays. You can call, but it likely won't reach me.

Yours always,

Richard

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# VITA

Calvin Cummings is a poet and short story writer from Oak Ridge, TN. A graduate of Covenant College, he returned to academia after five years of selling beer. He is married to an elementary school teacher named Hannah, and their first child is due in August. He is currently waiting to hear back from M.F.A. programs.