How To Build a Home for the End of the World

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2020

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 6 February 2020

How to Build a Home for the End of the World

by Keely Shinners

For Dan, Kathy,
Neelufar, and Kay

HOW TO BUILD A HOME FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

A Case Study of Post Apocalyptic Times

by
DR. MARIA CAMPHOR

Presented to the
Collective Grants Commission
with many thanks to the
International Program for the Advancement and Longevity of the Universal Body

Los Angeles, California

The first question that comes up is naturally how much of a job it is to build a house by yourself. Well, it's a big job. On the other hand, there is nothing too complicated or difficult about it… If you can just do three steps measure, cut, and nail and almost anyone can, then you can build most of the house yourself.

Hubbard Cobb, *Your Dream Home: How To Build It for Less Than $3500*

Part I

Measure

Fox Lake, Illinois

Donny Sorensen studied the puddle that contained the last traces of Fox Lake's water supply. It was a small, tepid thing: still, unresponsive, swirled with pollutant. And yet, for him, it was the end of the world. Of course, since the rains stopped years ago, he had heard those words many times over. Politicians had talked about it, promising and failing to fix things. Priests had talked about it, signaling that Judgement Day was nigh, and Donny had prayed every day for absolution. Newscasters never failed to mention it, and Donny had been somewhat relieved when their airwaves went dead. Neighbors said the words to his face as they bungee-chorded their lives to station wagons and took off towards the coasts. But the words had never seemed real. The lake was there. The lake was always there. The lake had been there since the day he was born. Convinced that when the rains came, and he was convinced that they would come, the lake would experience a tourist boom the likes of which hadn't been seen for a hundred years. Donny, like his father, and his father before him, was a carpenter, and had busied himself fixing up the old houses in preparation for the migration. Now, the lake was gone. He did not know how he was going to break it to his family. He did not know what he ought to do about the renovations. All he knew was that he would kill the bastards who stole his water from him.

Donny pulled the crutch of a joint out of his pocket, flicked his lighter, and took a long pull. Donny hawked from the back of his throat and spat, and the spit smacked into the puddle. Donny watched and waited for the little yellow bubbles to dissolve, but they did not. He did not like this strange, new world.

Donny shoved the crutch in the pocket of his favorite, faded blue jeans, took one last look at the cloudless sky, and set off running across the sinkhole that the lake had left behind. Past the upturned motorboats and their bleached bellies. Past the docks and their naked legs. Away from the lake cottages and their boarded-up windows. Away from the marinas and hotels, which had once led journalists and travel agents to dub Donny's hometown 'the Workingman's Riviera,' but which had long since been abandoned, even well before the so-called End of the World.

He breathed harder than he had to, trying to drown out their voices. The way they groveled. But he could not keep the sound of the lake at bay. The lake moaning at him: *I freeze. I melt. I wash over. I dry up. I drown.* Fear took over him, and he ran faster. Running home.

Once Fox Lake had all but been abandoned, Donny could have chosen to live in any house he liked. He could have refurbished the old country club, for instance, or a Chicago executive's fishing-weekend manor. But he preferred the two-bedroom bungalow in which his mother, whom they all called Gram, raised him and his six older brothers by herself. (Donny never met his father; he never came back from the war.) He had been born in the kitchen on the linoleum floor. He had carried his high school sweetheart and eighteen-year-old wife, Cora, over its threshold. It was the only home that he and his two daughters, Mary-Beth and Maddie-Lynn, knew.

On the outside, it was the only house left on their block: new panel siding, new asphalt shingles, a fresh coat of yellow paint. Donny climbed up the porch steps and stared through the bay window, catching his breath. On the inside, it looked just about the same as always. The same wood panelling and floral lampshades were there. The same taxidermied bass and buck's heads were there. Cora was there, doing her step aerobics in front of the small box TV. Cora's clean, white sneakers bounced off the shag carpeting, and her bright, peroxided ponytail bounced with her. The TV screen was a black bulb, there being no electricity to power it. Instead, Cora watched her reflection, and followed only the steps she had memorized. Maddie-Lynn was there, brushing the hair of her Barbie doll, even though, at the age of ten, she was perhaps too old to be playing with Barbies. Gram was there, wrapped in her pink fluffy bathrobe. She sipped on a glass of gin and sucked on an unlit cigarette while Mary-Beth, Donny's eldest, lay at her feet, painting her toenails.

Donny stormed through the front door, temples pounding. Mary-Beth jumped, knocking the bottle of varnish over, staining the carpet red. He beelined for the mantlepiece, where his shotguns were kept, and grabbed them both. Cora tried to grab him by his beltloop, but he shrugged her off. He kicked the front door so hard the hinges busted and tunneled back outside. He spun around, wondering in which direction he should chase them, but had no idea where to

go. “Shit!” he spat. “Fuckin a!” He kicked up a chunk of cold, dry ground and fired four shots into the distance. “You fucking bastards!” he screamed, drooling out the corners of his mouth.

“Donny,” Cora cooed from the front porch. She was used to his outbursts and knew that during them he had to approached cautiously, like stepping around landmine.

Donny let the shotguns fall out of his hands and looked back at his daughters. Little Maddie-Lynn cowered behind her mother’s leg. Mary-Beth stood chilled in the doorway, tugging nervously on her long, blonde braid.

“I was here first!” he said, banging his fist against his chest. “They had no right to take it away from me!” He fell to his knees and began to cry.

Donny was a man who often cried—at birthday cards, at sad commercials—but Mary-Beth had never seen him crumple like this. Her rough, beer-chugging, motorcycle-riding father, a man who could lift a sunken roof by himself in a day, resorting to a tantrum. She was embarrassed and afraid. She glanced at her mother, searching for an expression she might copy, a strength that might protect her. But Cora just looked on, blushing, like something she had hidden had been found.

“Take what?” Cora asked.

“The water!” Donny cried. “All of it. It’s gone.”

“It’s not gone,” said Cora. She knelt down beside him and wrapped her arms around his back. She was a full foot shorter than her husband and half the weight, but holding him, she seemed bigger, older, more in control. “We have enough to last until spring, when the rains come.”

“It was taken,” Donny said. He slammed his fist on the frostbitten ground. “Stolen!”

Gram shuffled out the house in bare feet. She gripped the banister with knobby, veinous hands. Her unlit cigarette dangled from a gap in her missing teeth. She said, “If it was stolen, then go get it.”

“Go back inside, Gram,” said Donny, laying his forehead in his hands.

Gram peeled a piece of paper out of her pocket. Her hands shook as she unfolded it and held it up. “Go get it back.”

Mary-Beth took the flyer from her grandmother and read it.

What if the End of the World was not a dystopian anxiety but a utopian opportunity?

What if the End of the World was not a threat to the survival of humanity, but our last chance to save it?

What if the End of the World was not the outcome of oppression, but the catalyst for liberation?

What if, instead of narratives of destruction, we adopted strategies for creation, collaboration, and change?

What if, out of the ashes of the End of the World, the people rose up to build a new one, free imperialism, capitalism, consumerism, and exploitation?

What if, at the End of the World, all borders were open, all housing was public housing, and most importantly, everyone had equal access to water?

What if the End of the World wasn't the End at all, but a New Beginning?

Join us, THE COLLECTIVE, an international community based on the principles of common treasury and selfless service, communalism and cooperation, equality and solidarity.

Together, we can seize the means of survival and usher in a New Beginning.

To prove our loyalty to the people, we're giving out free gallons in of water all day, everyday.

More justice. More peace.

Mary-Beth read the page over again. Half the words were illegible to her. At seventeen, Mary-Beth had little more than a fifth grader's education, and the books leftover at the library offered

little more than soppy romance plots and now-useless gardening advice. All she could gather was that there was a woman with a sloppy dress in Chicago—there was a picture of her stamped on the bottom of the page—and that there was water there.

Donny snatched the flyer and brought it up close to his face. “What the hell is this?”

“Safekeeping,” said Gram. She brought her fingers to her lips and exhaled, the cold her cloud of smoke. “I knew this wouldn’t last forever.”

“You mean to say you knew these commie sons of bitches were coming for our lake?”

“It was never ours,” Gram prodded Donny’s potbelly with her cane. Even though he was responsible for taking care of Gram, Donny was still her baby, and she held back no opportunity to belittle him or boss him around. “And it is never coming back.”

“If they did take the water,” said Cora, “we can go and ask for it back.”

“No!” Donny shouted. He grabbed Mary-Beth and squeezed her close. He lifted her as easily as he had as a child in their sack-of-potatoes game, only now Mary-Beth feared he wouldn’t let her go. The sweat on his thick, grey beard grazed against her face. His breath was hot. She tried to wriggle away from him but he would not budge. “Nobody’s going anywhere,” he growled. “God had me born in this house, and I’ll take care of this house until Kingdom Come.”

“So, that’s it? You want us to die?” Cora grabbed Maddie-Lynn’s wrist and shook it. “Do you want these girls to die here? Is that what you want?” Maddie-Lynn was really crying now, gasping like a fish with a hook through its lip. Donny and Cora did not fight often, but when they did, it was always the same: Cora thought the Sorensens should leave Fox Lake; Donny would not stand for it. Mary-Beth got the feeling that this time their argument would reach a conclusion. She couldn’t decide which made her feel more helpless: if Donny won, or Cora. Either way, she and her sister were hostages between them.

Donny’s grip on her tightened as the voices around him became louder. Cora’s anger, Gram’s judgment, Maddie-Lynn’s tears. His house lamented, *Finish me*, and it broke his heart. Mary-Beth screamed, “Stop!” and he panicked, throwing her down, knocking her straight into her grandmother. As strong as Gram was for eighty-nine, she buckled like a doll. Legs cracking as they broke. Skull bouncing off the weather-whitened floorboards. Maddie-Lynn screamed.

Cora shouted, “Look what you’ve done now!” Donny pointed his fat, calloused finger at Mary-Beth and spat, “It was that one that did it!"

Mary-Beth scrambled to her feet, horrified. Gram’s eyes were wide open, her jaw agape with pain, but she didn’t make a sound. The bunny slippers twisted at demented angles. Cora, mechanically, ran inside and dialed 911 on the telephone, then slammed the receiver against the wall when she realized her mistake. Maddie-Lynn was curled up in a little ball on the stoop, and Donny was clawing the folds of his mother’s robe, weeping, trying to get her to stand.

Mary-Beth could not bear to look at them. She turned to face the barren cul de sac and spotted a bicycle left to rust in a driveway. Before she knew it the handlebars were in her hands, and she was kicking violently at the pedals, not caring where she was going, just going, and trying to get all those terrible sounds out of her mind.

She rode past the gas stations and the high school she never got to go to. Past the sports bars and closed-on-Sunday diners. Past the parking lots with their many cars for sale. Past the vacant harbor motels, the unstocked supermarket, the cinema which advertised the same four movies year after year. To her, Fox Lake had always felt empty—a ghost version of the tourist town it had once been—but only now did the emptiness make her feel alone. She had hardly had friends growing up. Not because she was shy, but because she felt different from other kids her age. She never liked boat races or diving competitions or tug of war or capture the flag. She would much rather beat laundry with Cora, or set rollers in Gram’s hair, or help Donny skin a deer. She liked to be of help. If she could not do that, what use was she?

Cold throbbed against her face as she pedaled across Nippersink Bridge. She looked out at the forsaken lake. She felt not unlike the waves of sand the wind kicked up, or the fractured bits of plastic that tumbled around shore. She felt flimsy. She felt placeless. She was terrified of what she would might to face back home. Her father angry at her. Her mother angry at her father. Her grandmother, hurt, and it was all her fault. Then she heard the far-off, lonely drone of the train.

Fox Lake was the last stop on the Milwaukee District North Line from Chicago. Before the End of the World, the railway had been automated, and although the workday commuters disappeared with the industries that necessitated them, the train continued to travel mindlessly up

and down the line. Mary-Beth had often heard its siren in the middle of the night, and wondered what world lay in the city on the other side. Without a plan in mind, Mary-Beth followed the siren into town.

The train's big aluminum compartments came steaming into the depot. A bell chimed, and the doors halved open. Mary-Beth peered inside. The cars had been graffitied—*Take the land back, Down with pigs, The revolution will not be televised,* more words Mary-Beth was too naive to fully grasp—but the film of dust that covered the windows and chairs signaled that no one had been on the train in months. Mary-Beth's heart pounded. She knew she shouldn't be standing there. She knew that beyond the confines of her life there would be nothing but death and trouble. She knew she should turn around and go home. A bell chimed, and a ghostly voice announced over loudspeaker, "Caution, the doors are about to close." Mary-Beth stepped off the platform and pushed her bicycle up the ramp. The known world slid shut behind her.

Mary-Beth chose the nearest seat and wiped the window down with the sleeve of her denim jacket. She could see Fox Lake's main street, its one, flat road and squat brick buildings. The train lurched forward, and then her small town receded.

Mary-Beth could not rip her eyes away from the window. Everything she saw fascinated her. Old sports bars and their faded neon signs, bearing names like Stormy Monday and Blueberry Hill, Pug Mahone's and Mickey Finn's. Riverbridges and the empty beds beneath. Dilapidated warehouses and looted grocery stores. Even the main streets, which looked about as ordinary as her own, thrilled Mary-Beth, for they inhabited an altogether different heritage. She wondered why she had never dared to flee before. Had she really been happy, reading the same juvenile paperbacks over and over again, wiping down her parents' wedding china, fetching Donny warm cans of beer? How many nights had she lay sleepless in the bedroom she shared with her sister and grandmother, awoken by Gram's oxygen machine or Maddie-Lynn's sleep-mumbling? Nights without anything to yearn for, dreamless and blank. Mary-Beth listened to the announcement of approaching stations—Lake Forest, Deerfield, Northbrook—and tried to imagine the green creeks and rolling pastures that must have earned them their misleading names.

At a station called Forest Glen, Mary-Beth spotted a man waiting on the platform. Frightened, she sunk to the floor and tucked her knees into her chest. She held her breath and tried to stay very still, hoping that the man would not come on the train, and if he did, that he hadn't seen her. The train moved on. Mary-Beth listened for the man's footsteps but heard nothing. She peeked out and caught a glimpse of him through the narrow window between compartments. His beard was long and his hair was falling out in odd places. His face had not been washed in weeks, but his leather jacket looked brand new. He scoped the compartment to ensure he was alone, then took something shiny and silver out of his pocket. Mary-Beth jumped, accidentally kicking over her bicycle. It made a cheap, hollow sound as it crashed into armrests and then onto the floor. Mary-Beth crawled as fast as she could to the bathroom and locked the door. Sweat pooled on her forehead. Her heart beat in her armpits. She could feel the train jerking to a stop, and she cowered between the toilet and the wall. Sure that the man would find her and hurt her, Mary-Beth was so full of fear she could not move. A fist banged against the bathroom door. She cursed herself. She told herself she deserved to die for thinking she would ever make it far from home. The door swung open. The smell of sweat and leather. Mary-Beth closed her eyes and swung her arm in the direction of the man's face as hard as she could. He doubled back, cupping his hand over his nose. His eyes jolted innocently from Mary-Beth's to his bloody hand.

"What do you want from me?" said Mary-Beth, trying to keep the shake out of her voice.

The man shook his head and said something in a language Mary-Beth didn't understand, then turned and walked away. Mary-Beth took a few wobbly steps out of the bathroom and watched the man force the sliding doors open, disappearing outside. Mary-Beth felt briefly proud of herself for scaring him off, before the problem of the standstill train sunk in.

Perhaps the man had not been trying to hurt her after all. Perhaps he needed her help. He looked so startled when she hit him. It must be awful, she thought, to find oneself all alone at the End of the World. He must have been far away from home too, she reasoned, or else English was becoming yet another antiquity. Mary-Beth admonished herself for her bad manners. Her parents didn't raise her that way. And if she was going to survive in this precarious new world, being paranoid of other people wouldn't do her any good.

Though her heart still raged in her chest, Mary-Beth walked outside and around to the front of the train. The man was there, running his ungloved hand along the metal track. He looked up at Mary-Beth and said, “Cold.”

“It is cold,” said Mary-Beth. She put her hands on her face. It was still red and sweaty.

The man grumbled. He plucked a few sprigs of wild rye from the embankment, then took a matchbox out of his pocket and lit the bouquet. Mary-Beth hovered back, imagining he might throw the fire at her, if not find a way to burn the whole train down, but the man simply tossed it on the tracks. “Cold,” he said again, pointing at the fire. Then, she understood. Donny would sometimes douse the driveway in gasoline and set it alight after a big blizzard, trying to curtail the ice. She guessed this was the same; the switches got jammed if the tracks were frozen. Mary-Beth gathered handfuls of dried grass and helped feed the fire. The man smiled at her and did the same, careful to stomp out any flying sparks. Once they had gotten a few yards on fire, the train’s wheels started turning again. Mary-Beth and the man ran back towards the railcars. The man jumped, edging his way through the narrow opening, then held the doors open for Mary-Beth to tumble in. The train sped forward. Mary-Beth and her unforeseen compatriot collapsed beside each other, laughing softly. They lay like that for a while, watching the blank, white sky spin outside the window.

The man reached down and took out, again, that shiny, silver thing. It was a plastic wrapper, which he tore open, revealing a row of cookies, gold and pristine as coins. He took one and broke it in half, stuffing one in his mouth and offering the other to Mary-Beth. She nibbled at the edge, and the crumbs dissolved on her tongue. It had been so long since she had eaten sweets, the sugar made her lightheaded. She put the rest of the cookie in her pocket, deciding to savor her treasure until she needed it most. She listened to the man chew, a calm and spongey sound, and made a mental note about risk.

Chicago, Illinois

Mary-Beth followed the man through the deserted marble station, but by the time she reached the street outside, he had disappeared. There seemed to be no one on the sidewalk, and the few cars

on the road sped past as if in flight. Mary-Beth craned up at the towers, once strongholds of powerful officemen, and heard music, saw bright clothes on washing lines. Since she didn't know where to go, Mary-Beth took off in no direction particular. Because the city was so quiet, even the faintest sounds rattled her. Pennies shaking in a dixie cup. A motorcycle engine several blocks away. Train screeching over an elevated iron rail. There was a man playing the trombone alone in an alleyway. Underneath his winter coat, which was zipped wide open, his shirt read, I want to be like Gandhi, or John Lennon, or Martin Luther King Jr., but I also want to live. Mary-Beth grinned at him. He raised his eyebrows and nailed a high note. A block down, two old folks guarded the front door of a 7/11. They sat in beach chairs and cradled rifles in their laps. Inside the store, there were several flower beds, from which small orange trees emerged, bathed in strips of fluorescent light. Mary-Beth grinned at the guards, but they only squinted and scrunched their noses at her. Another block passed, and Mary-Beth came up against what used to be a long, wide river. Peering over the railing, she saw only dregs of greenish sludge, and one ashy, shirtless man, singing gibberish to a bonfire. This Chicago was but a shell of what it used to be, but to Mary-Beth it was carnivalesque, bewitched with possibility. She pedaled on, nerves giving way to a gullible infatuation.

Mary-Beth saw a group of people gathered in a donut shop, drinking out of mugs and smoking cigarettes. She was thirsty, and decided to stop and ask if they had any water, or if anyone knew where she might find the woman with the sloppy dress. As she approached the glass revolving door, a fight broke out between two men. The one grabbed the other by the shirt collar and yanked their noses close, while the other smacked him across the ear. Mary-Beth searched the faces of the crowd, gauging what she ought to do, but nobody seemed to pay the tussle any mind. They just went on talking, twirling their wrists, tugging at their smokes, nodding at each other. One of the boys tumbled to the floor. Blood poured out of his nose. Mary-Beth ran inside before she could think twice, offering the boy her hand, smiling. The boy simply curled his lip at her, as if offended. The boy who punched him helped him rise, patted him on the back, then flicked his flattened palm at Mary-Beth, shooing her away. "Go on, white girl," he said.

Mary-Beth backed out of the donut shop, feeling foolish and inadequate. A knot tugged in her chest. Strange. She had only felt the knot when she got caught doing something wrong. She hadn't done anything wrong. Had she? She was only trying to help. Then again, this was not her territory. She was a foreigner here and should expect to be treated like one. No matter what, it was childish to get defensive. It was also the End of the World. Things worked differently in this wild country than they did in her lonely little house in the boondocks. Mary-Beth pedaled faster. She resented having been so sheltered. She resented all the things she did not know. It would take so long for her to get used to things out here, but she was determined to try.

Mary-Beth spotted a clearing in the skyscrapers and moved towards it. There was a park, or rather, a long, flat stretch of dirt with concrete pathways scribbled arbitrarily across it. Meet us at the park, the flyer had said. Mary-Beth had understood that much. She followed the path towards the faint sound of many voices. Round a few bends, and Mary-Beth found herself at the butt end of a single-file line, snaking back and forth across the dirt and ending at a fountain. Mary-Beth squinted to see it better. The woman in the sloppy dress, water pouring out from under her feet. Mary-Beth's mouth dried. She was so thirsty. Everyone waiting in line had large buckets and jugs to fill. Mary-Beth wondered if she might just sneak a sip of water and be on her way, but moving forward awarded her only nasty glares from the people around her. She kept to her spot in the line, running her tongue along the inside of her dry cheeks, wondering how long she could wait.

A man with a shiny, bald head stood in front of her. He was tall, so tall Mary-Beth wondered if he had once been a basketball player. His long fingers graced the shoulders of two little girls, possibly his daughters. They had matching beads in their hair, and were pretending to serve each other tea in small, Tinkerbell-printed cups. "Excuse me," said Mary-Beth, tapping the man on the back. "How long does this usually take?"

"Depends how much they're rationing. Could be hours," answered the man. He turned towards her. He had a cool, lean face and wore a diamond earring. "Sometimes days."

Days. Mary-Beth hadn't realized how good her family had had it. Sure, the hours wheelbarrowing water from the lake to the house were back-breaking, but at least they had more than they needed. At least they didn't have to beg for it from someone else. Mary-Beth bit her

nail, thinking about how difficult life was going to get for them now that the lake was gone. Donny would have to relent eventually. There wasn't another option. Mary-Beth considered getting one of these buckets herself, carrying it all the way home, and presenting it as a kind of peace offering. She shook her head. It would be shameful to go back.

Mary-Beth scanned the crowd of faces. There were couples standing with their arms around each other. A group of teenage boys huddled together, playing cards. There was a woman in a rose-colored headscarf, singing loudly, somberly, to herself, and no one told her to stop. A skinny girl, around Mary-Beth's age, struggled to lift the container she had just filled into a shopping cart. No one seemed to care, so absorbed they were in their own weights to bear. Mary-Beth watched the girl try to lift the container again, her face scrunched up under the hood of her black sweater. Mary-Beth took a step forward, then doubled back. She didn't want to embarrass herself again. She looked away, noticing a group of young people standing just outside the line. They wore identical puffy jackets and bright buttons. They paced up and down the line, asking questions, writing notes on clipboards.

"Who are they?" Mary-Beth asked, pointing.

"Activists," said the man.

"From the Collective you mean?"

The man nodded.

"So, they're the ones giving out free water."

"It's the people's water. It belongs to all of us," said the man. "But yeah, I guess they're organizing things."

Mary-Beth examined the activist closest. She recognized a bit of herself in her. She, too, had thin, blonde hair and a freckly, babyish face. But the activist had something Mary-Beth did not have. Some confidence. An air of entitlement that allowed her to smile brazenly in the face of a woman who had broken down crying, jot something on her clipboard, and walk away. Mary-Beth was envious. She wished she had that kind of bravado. She wished she wasn't so brittle, so eager to please.

Sirens ruptured in the air. Even though there were no such thing as police, people panicked instinctively, shoulders tensing, kneeling down, taking hands out of pockets. The girls

each clutched a clump of fabric from their father's track pants. A pickup truck cut through the crowd. They were blasting music, not sirens, the start of a song by Public Enemy. *Armageddon, it been in effect, go get a late pass. Step.* Sensing no danger, shoulders relaxed and foreheads smoothed. The crowd shuffled forward, and Mary-Beth shuffled with them. *This time around, the revolution will not be televised. Step.* Two boys hopped out of the truck and started towards the girl with the shopping cart. She pulled the hoodie away from her face, her hair spiraling away from her scalp, her mouth swelling into a radiant, gap-toothed smile. *Consider yourselves… warned!* The boys each kissed her on the cheek. Mary-Beth felt weirdly jealous. Who were these people? How did they know each other? How come they talked, moved, and touched so gracefully, as if those things were easy? Together, they lifted the girl's containers and loaded them in the back of their truck. The girl gave the boys instructions, pointing south, left, then right. Mary-Beth wondered where they were going. Mary-Beth tucked her hands under her armpits, offended. She wanted to go there too. The boys refilled the cart with empty containers, kissed the girl one last time, and drove away, leaving an enormous quiet in their wake. Mary-Beth watched, astonished, as the girl slid right back under the fountain, eyes fixed forward, ignoring the whispered cusses and dirty looks it warranted.

Before Mary-Beth could think twice, she had abandoned her place in line. She marched, fuming, towards the fountain and, forgoing all her manners, gripped the girl's thin, threadbare wrist. "You can't do that," she said.

The girl beat her off. "Excuse me?" she said.

Mary-Beth stepped back. The girl was beautiful—her skin glossy, face smooth and lean, with high cheekbones, a dark mole edging her two-toned lip—and her beauty intimidated Mary-Beth. She took a deep breath and said, "There are people who have been waiting here all day."

The girl looked Mary-Beth up and down, making Mary-Beth feel self-conscious about her blonde braids, the daisies embroidered on her jeans, her tattered high-tops. The girl seemed unimpressed. "Who are you to tell me what it is to wait?"

"I saw you earlier," said Mary-Beth, shivering. "You have more than your fair share. There are families here."

“And my family?” asked the girl. She clicked her tongue against her teeth. “Who will wait for them? Not you.”

Mary-Beth’s whole body shook. Inside, too. Her heart not just pounding but dislodging, ricocheting against her ribcage. Her voice came out stuttered. “Th-that’s—that’s not how it works.”

“Listen,” said the girl. Water spilt over the lip of her container as she slammed it on the ground. “You know nothing about who I am. What I’ve been through. What I’m here for. How much I’ve lost and how much I stand to lose. I have work to do, and I don’t appreciate your holier-than-thou attitude.” She shoved another empty container under the tap and turned her eyes from Mary-Beth. “I’m sick of white girls always asking me to take two steps back. Why can’t y’all just get out of my way. Or, God forbid, help a girl out. For once in your stupid little lives.”

Mary-Beth buried her hands in her pockets. She tried to relax, to turn and walk away, but her body was shaking so badly she could not move. The girl was right. Who was she to get involved in other people’s business? She was a stupid, naive little girl. She should go back to her stupid, naive little town and never bother anyone who mattered in the world ever again. But her body would not budge. Mary-Beth looked up at the woman in the sloppy dress, begging for some sort of validation. The woman stared stonefully back at her, her eyes blank, her lips cold. The cup she pinched between her fingers was empty. An invitation, not an offering. Mary-Beth had the weirdest feeling that the woman was waiting for someone to take her in their arms. Mary-Beth thought about water. Water waiting. Water reaching.

“Let me help you, then,” she heard herself say.

The girl’s lips tightened. She studied Mary-Beth’s face.

“I *want* to help you,” said Mary-Beth. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “All right,” she breathed. “Help me carry these.” The muscles in Mary-Beth’s back stiffened as she lifted the heavy container. “Load up and follow me.”

The water containers beat against each other, making a sound like blood pumping through an artificial organ. Water sloshed out of them and dripped out of the shopping cart, which the girl had attached to Mary-Beth’s bicycle. The load was heavy. Mary-Beth’s thighs ached as she tried

to keep up with the girl pedaling down a wide expanse of empty highway. To their left was desert. Sand drifted from the dunes where Lake Michigan used to be and flew against Mary-Beth's face. She rubbed her eyes and sneezed.

"Bless you," said the girl. She turned and offered Mary-Beth a smile. Mary-Beth blushed. "I'm Aida, by the way," she said. "Aida Parker."

"I'm Mary-Beth." She sounded breathless.

"So," Aida slowed down so that Mary-Beth could catch up with her. "You're like two people at the same time?" Mary-Beth looked down at her hands, thinking Aida was making a joke she didn't get. Aida went on, "I mean, don't you think it's weird that you have two names? Mary and Beth?"

Mary-Beth shrugged. "I like both." She looked out across the desert. "What happened to your lake?" she asked.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

Mary-Beth shook her head.

Aida sighed. "Let me guess. You're from some tiny town out in the burbs, same town your daddy's from, and his daddy, and his daddy. You've been getting by fine because Jesus told your granny to keep a stockpile of canned peaches and potatoes in her cellar for the End of Days. But there's no arguing with water. When the water runs out, mommy and daddy pack up the old station wagon and hightail it to the city. You come to take our houses, our food, our water. Your mamas start trying to boss us around. Your daddies get paranoid and shoot our boys dead in the night." Aida was quiet, for a moment. Then, she said, "You can't fool me. I've seen it too many times."

Mary-Beth's face went clammy. How did Aida know all that stuff? Right down to the station wagon. She felt lost, awkward, and frumpy, like a tourist. "We didn't run out of water," she said defensively. "Somebody stole it."

Aida looked offended. "Why? It's not like you own it."

"You said it yourself," said Mary-Beth. "Our family has been there for generations."

"Then you're generations of settlers." Aida pedaled faster, leaving Mary-Beth to stare at her blank, black hood. "You're not ready to talk to me about what's stolen and what's earned."

Trying to maintain a sliver of dignity, Mary-Beth added, “And my family isn’t going anywhere. I ran away.” After being on the fence all day, saying the words for certain, out loud, felt good. “And I’m never going back.”

That seemed to strike a chord with Aida. She pulled the brakes on her bike. Mary-Beth stopped next to her and rubbed the muscles in her legs.

“How does it feel?” Aida asked.

“A bit scary. A bit exciting,” said Mary Beth.

“Aren’t you afraid that you’ve hurt them too much?”

Mary-Beth imagined her mother, wide-eyed in bed, jumping at any semblance of a sound that might mean Mary-Beth had made it back home. She imagined Donny, grumbling obscenities, scratching unconsciously, pacing up and down the halls. She imagined Gram, groping for her in the bedroom they shared, wrinkled hands coming up empty. She had done the unspeakable, abandoning them when they needed her most. She felt very, very sorry. But in lieu of all that, she said, “No, I’m not afraid.”

Aida took Mary-Beth’s hand and squeezed it. Her hands were soft and slender. Mary-Beth’s were red and cracked from the cold. “You’re brave,” Aida whispered. Mary-Beth squeezed Aida back. She didn’t want to let go. “Let’s go,” Aida said, sliding her hand away. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.” She rode on, and Mary-Beth followed. They took an exit, and the desert highways disappeared, towered by old, gothic university buildings.

“Where are we going?” Mary-Beth asked.

“Deliveries,” Aida said. Mary-Beth gave her a quizzical look. “You think people in this city are really gonna haul ass to the northside, stand for hours in the freezing cold for a few drops of water? Water that was rightfully theirs in the first place? No, thanks. So, we’re bringing the water to them.”

“What do you mean, it was taken?”

“If you ask me, this End of the World people kept babbling about, it was a blessing in disguise. No more cops. No more landlords. No more mayors. No more bosses. I mean, at last, we could *breathe*.” Aida had a way of riding with no handlebars and punctuating the air with her hands. It was dizzying, and mesmerizing, to watch. “Sure, we didn’t have water in the taps, but

with the lake right there, we could take care of ourselves. Then these self-aggrandizing, savior-complex, wannabe-revolutionary fools come in and decide they're in charge. Of course, people eat up their pseudo-socialist bullshit and allow them to mismanage the city all to hell. Where's our water now? They have us lining up for scraps they swiped from God knows where and expect us to be thankful." Mary-Beth wondered if that's where the water from their lake went, but decided not to mention it. She didn't want to interrupt. "Not me. I'm praying for the day people wake up and send those bastards packing."

Mary-Beth tried to wrap her head around all the big words Aida had said. "So, you're saying you don't trust them?"

Aida laughed, and in her laugh there was something lonely and troubled. "Word of advice. Don't trust anyone who claims to have power over you."

Mary-Beth nodded. She was reminded, briefly, of her father. Donny's big arms wrapped around her, refusing to let her go. She wasn't sure if that's what power was, but she was angry with him for always dragging her, and everyone else for that matter, into his anguish.

Aida stopped on the corner of 59th and Michigan in front of a bright red, brick-faced, multi-storey house. It was one of the only houses on an avenue swept by vacant lots, and the only one whose windows were not boarded up, or whose roof was not caved in. "Welcome to Washington Park," Aida announced, unlatching the lock on a squat, wrought iron gate. "Bet you wish you had stayed in— Where did you say you were from again?"

"Fox Lake." Mary-Beth thought the opposite. The big red house was beautiful, solemn and ornate, like a castle. She sat on the cracked cement steps and admired it while Aida banged on the front door.

"Rags!" Aida called. She tapped her foot, waiting. "Bet you've got big, beautiful lakeside mansions out there in Fox Lake."

"There are some," Mary-Beth admitted. "But we don't live there. Our house is half the size of this one."

Aida shook her head. "I'll never understand white people. Why cage yourself up in the past when you have the whole world available to you?"

Mary-Beth mulled over that word. Cage. “My dad is a carpenter who remodels houses nobody lives in.”

Aida snorted. Mary-Beth, in spite of herself, laughed with her, and the laugh seemed to create something solid between them. “That’s ironic,” Aida said.

“What’s ironic?”

“The past he thinks he’s lost hasn’t ended yet.” Mary-Beth didn’t know what that meant, and she must have showed it, because Aida went on. “I mean, the past doesn’t de-escalate like we tend to believe it does. We live with its injuries.” As if what Aida said was at all clarifying, Mary-Beth nodded her head. Sensing her bluff, Aida leaned over the porch’s iron railing and smiled, saying. “The world’s a joke, and the End of the World is the biggest joke there is. Look around you. Water or no water, the world’s *been* ending.” She sucked her teeth. “It might do you good to think about your hand in all that.”

“No,” Mary-Beth said. “I mean, what’s ironic? What does ironic mean?”

Aida just shook her head and laughed. Mary-Beth brought her knees up to her chin. She wanted desperately to fit in with Aida, to speak the language she spoke, but the cues were indecipherable, the rules eluded her. She felt marooned, and yet, or perhaps because of it, she wanted Aida to like her. She would follow Aida to the ends of the earth if it would earn her her approval.

“Rags!” Aida banged on the door again. “It’s Aida, baby!”

Mary-Beth heard the sound of many locks unlatching. A tall, lazy-eyed girl, not that much older than Aida and Mary-Beth, appeared in the doorway. She wore a loose plaid bathrobe and had cigarettes tucked behind her ears. “Aida, come in,” she said. “It’s freezing.” Mary-Beth stood and wiped her hands on her jeans, smiling awkwardly. “Who’s this?” asked Rags.

“My new assistant,” said Aida, raising her eyebrows. She snapped her fingers, motioned to one of the containers, and followed Rags inside.

Mary-Beth grunted as she lifted the heavy bucket up the stairs, down the corridor, and into a large, high-ceilinged room. She slumped the container down and looked around. Tapestries lined the lengths of each wall. In one, embroidered people danced. There was a ferris wheel, threaded smoke from a grill, fish in the river. Signs in the shop windows advertised hog liver and

corn meal for 10 cents. In another, people trying to kill each other, and people dying, and people walking on unaware. Two blue swallows carried a banner in their mouths that read, *Please, let us have peace.*

"Do you like them?" asked Rags, exhaling on her face. The smoke smelled good, somehow clean, like how clothes fresh from the dryer used to smell.

Mary-Beth nodded. "How long does it take you to make them?"

Rags leant against her cane and pointed to the tapestry behind Mary-Beth. "This one," she said, "Took me almost two years. But that's because it brought up a lot of trauma for me. I had to take long breaks."

Mary-Beth nodded, but then felt guilty. Mary-Beth had known people who had moved away, or disappeared, but no one who had died.

"This one, though." Rags pointed to the brightly colored one. "I finished in a month. Because it gave me hope." She paused and smiled at Mary-Beth. "If I had known how much free time I'd end up with, I'd've prayed sooner for the End of the World."

"What happens to them now?" asked Mary-Beth.

"Don't know," said Rags, "But I can't stop making them."

"Documentation is important," Aida said, resting her chin on Rags's shoulder. "People need to know their history."

"It's not like anybody's out here burning books yet, Aida," Rags said.

"Let the books burn. Half of them are written under bullshit pretenses." She twirled the loose threads of one tapestry around her long, thin finger. "They don't live in the world. This lives in the world."

Rags rested her palm on Aida's cheek. "That's very kind of you," she said. She bumped the water container with the foot of her cane. "And very kind of you to bring that for me."

"It's not so bad now that I have help." Aida winked. Mary-Beth blushed. She wasn't sure if the wink was meant to congratulate or ridicule her.

"Will I be seeing you tonight?" Rags asked Mary-Beth. "There's a party for Aida's nanna. 100 years old. Can you believe it?"

Mary-Beth held her breath. The idea of going to a party with Aida, at her house, with her family and friends, seemed cause for both excitement and panic. If she went, it would mean, once and for all, that she was not returning home, that her old life was now behind her. On the other, it might earn her Aida's trust, which would, she was sure, give her permission to start her life anew. Mary-Beth smiled sheepishly at Aida and said, "Sure, why not?" Aida narrowed her eyes, flirtatious or skeptical, she could not tell.

After wishing Rags a loud and prolonged goodbye, they continued along the delivery route Aida had memorized. All the roads between 51st and 63rd had the same names as those in the Loop. South Michigan. South Wabash. South State Street. As if the whole of Washington Park were a mirror for the North Side. Aida took Mary-Beth to many houses between them, each populated by curators of their own eclectic worlds. An old drunk who shrunk beside his huge vats of dandelion wine. A young woman who claimed to be possessed by the ghost of Lorraine Hansberry, reciting lines from *A Raisin in the Sun.* Someone who had collected the April page from every calendar since 1976. Mary-Beth was startled by the sound of growling dogs when they rang one house's doorbell, but it turned out to be only a recording, warding strangers astray. Aida remembered all their names, checked up on their relatives, agitations, and ailments. She loved them, and, judging by the two-cheek kisses, the long embraces, the ceremonial offer of a cup of coffee or glass of wine, they loved her too. Mary-Beth hung back and watched these interactions out of the corner of her eye. As she broke her back carrying the heavy containers up to bathtubs, down to cellars, round to backyard wells, Mary-Beth wondered how Aida could have possibly managed it all by herself. Even if folks were kind and grateful, it was hard to imagine Aida's commitment to care being fairly reciprocated. Mary-Beth wondered what Aida did to take care of herself, or if she managed to take care of herself at all. Desperately, though she didn't know how, or why, Mary-Beth wanted to be the one to take care of her.

Gradually, the sun waned. The night, magnetic, clung to their bodies, growing colder. Although the shopping cart was much lighter now, Mary-Beth was exhausted. Her arms shook, and her legs ached. She struggled to keep her neck straight, or navigate her bicycle in a straight line. They had one more water cooler to deliver, but Mary-Beth could hardly take it anymore. Under the faded, flickering light of the only streetlamp on the block, Mary-Beth's legs gave out.

She let her bike fall, collapsing right there on the asphalt. Aida began to ride circles around her, taunting. “What’s the hold up, white girl?” Mary-Beth groaned loudly. Aida knelt down close to her face. She felt Aida’s hot breath in her ear. “Remember that you volunteered for this experience,” she said. “You agreed to get in over your head.” And so, Mary-Beth rose, determined to fulfill her promise. She pedaled along after Aida, slowly but surely, until they pulled up to a narrow, two-story brownstone. The windows glowed, warm and feathery. Silhouettes appeared and retreated from behind a set of lace curtains. Voices rambled into one another. Mary-Beth assumed it was Aida’s house, the way her shoulders dropped as she slid between tight-packed cars in the driveway.

Inside, pots were boiling on all four burners. Four women attended to them, laugh-yelling and wiping beads of sweat away from their hairlines, stirring fiercely with wooden spoons. A stack of mink, down, and leather coats spilled from the closet in the corridor. Aida and Mary-Beth side-stepped the pile, and their shoulders touched. Mary-Beth giggled and then pursed her lips, worried that she had made a mistake. Aida turned and smiled.

The hallway opened up onto a sunroom. A dining table built for twelve was seating twenty, at least. Men sat around a game of Scrabble, and children ran around them, playing salon, pinning clothespins in their hair. One of the children tried to steal frosting from the carrot cake at the center of the table—*Happy Birthday, Gigi*, it read, in pink—but a French manicured hand swiped her hand away. The child ran off, and the manicured woman scooped a nailful of frosting for herself. She winked at Mary-Beth before returning to her conversation. “Who gets to be proprietor of the future?” she asked.

“Who deserves the future’s inheritance?” another responded. It was Rags. She had changed out of her bathrobe and into an emerald, high-collared gown. Aida pulled up another chair to speak with them. They exchanged double-kisses on the cheek.

Mary-Beth stood behind, too shy, or too embarrassed, to introduce herself. She searched around the crowded room. Mary-Beth saw herself in a mirror hanging crookedly off a strip of faded wallpaper and jumped. She was ashamed at the sight of herself. Her denim outfit seemed out-of-place, bumpkin, and bland compared to everyone else’s bright-colored clothes and shining ornaments. But the pink t-shirt she wore underneath made her look childish and only served to

amplify the red tinge to her freckled face. She quickly undid her braids and shook out her long, thin, blonde hair, hoping it would make her look older, more at ease. Below the mirror, an old man sat at the keyboard of a player piano, playing Bessie Smith. *It's a long old road,* he sang softly, *but I'm gonna find the end.*

Aida grabbed Mary-Beth's wrist and lead her into yet another room, a big living room compacted by the density of furniture in it. Mary-Beth figured there must have been at least twelve different sofas, in different iterations of floral trim. They were arranged like booths in a restaurant, and Aida crawled around them effortlessly, smiling her generous gap-toothed grin.

Someone tugged at Mary-Beth's jeans. "Come sit with us, dear." A group of three women —they looked like sisters, each in cat-eye-framed glasses—scooched over to make room for Mary-Beth.

"That's okay," said Mary-Beth. She tried to perch on the arm of the sofa, but the women were insistent. They pulled on her arm and plopped her down between them.

"That's better," they said. Mary-Beth was suctioned between their arms, which were fat but dainty, like soft-boiled eggs. They were busy mending what looked like one extra-long pair of stockings. They introduced themselves as Nella, Octavia, and Kay.

"How do you know our Aida?" asked Kay.

"We're her mothers," said Nella.

"I'm, uhm," Mary-Beth licked her chapped lips, "her assistant."

The women hooted with laughter. "That's our Aida." They beamed.

"What do you mean? Does she have a lot of—" Mary-Beth swallowed. "Assistants?"

"She's just very persuasive," said Octavia.

Kay said, "Do you remember when she convinced Ms. Goldie to buy her a pony for her birthday and she did? And then when we said the house had no space for a pony Leonard built a stable out back all by himself."

"How about when she convinced the school to let her and Rags play Romeo and Juliet?" Octavia said. "And even went so far as to change the ending so that neither of them died?"

"My favorite is when she raised all that money for Gigi's operation," Nella said. She turned to Mary-Beth and explained. "Aida's grandmother had damaged her heart and needed a

big surgery, but we couldn't afford health insurance at the time. Those were sad times, all of us preparing to say goodbye. Then one day Aida shows up with a five-gallon jar full of cash. I couldn't believe it."

Across the room, Aida was whispering in an old woman's ear. Mary-Beth guessed it must be Gigi. She was seated at the center of the party, rocking back and forth in her rocking chair. She was ferociously thin. Wisps of her grey hair jutted out from all angles. And yet, she did not look frail. She was graceful, controlled. Her face was wrinkleless, as if she had commanded the skin not to sag. She chuckled and gripped Aida's wrist. Aida adjusted the silk of her robe, grateful, it seemed, for all the women this woman was before now. She was presented with the birthday cake, upon which one hundred candles blazed. A chorus of "Happy Birthday" erupted through the house. Many eyes closed on the final, lingering notes. Many children vied for the pleasure of blowing out as many candles as they could. Gigi looked on with a logic of her own.

Two boys—Mary-Beth recognized them from earlier, they were the ones in the pickup truck—arrived late. Each held a bottle of Dom Pérignon."Look what the cat dragged in!" they shouted, and everyone cheered. Aida took a bottle and, in one elegant flick of her wrist, the cork flew into the air, bounced off the ceiling and between the sofas. People clapped for the stream of sour foam poured onto the carpet. "Speech!" someone demanded, and the crowd repeated it, "Speech! Speech!" until Aida relented, and the room settled quiet.

Aida cleared her throat. "The world Gigi was born into one hundred years ago looked very much like the End of the World, but Gigi always found a way to make do. Gigi grew up in what was once a rich man's parkside mansion, a building which, after the white folks fled, was ravaged, gutted, and divided into tenements. Gigi lived in a one-room kitchenette with her mother, a rag seller and a washerwoman, and twelve other children, some of them sisters, some cousins, some neighbors, some of them kids my great grandma took in off the street. But that never stopped Gigi from living like the queen she knew she was born to be. As a child, Gigi mastered the art of stealing butter from the university dining hall, books from the students, silk ribbons out of the white woman's laundry basket—"

"I never did steal," Gigi interjected. "I took back what was stolen from me."

Aida smiled, rubbed her thin shoulder, and went on, “Chicago at the time looked very much like our so-called End of the World. Nobody cared if you were poor, dirty, or starving. Indeed, the city thrived on it, and did everything in its power to keep you poor, dirty, and starving. But, that never stopped Gigi from imagining, from demanding, a better life for herself, and all those stolen-back textbooks added up eventually to earning Gigi a teacher’s certificate. By day, as some of you may recall, she was the one of the greatest fifth grade teachers the Chicago Public Schools system has ever had, and a union leader to boot. By night, as others may recall, Gigi was the finest blues singer this side of Roosevelt.” The crowd laughed and snapped. Mary-Beth found herself, enchanted, clapping with them. “And in a world that was hell-bent on snuffing out any sign of a woman’s agency, or God forbid, desire, Gigi chose to love whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted, with all her heart. She certainly risked a lot, burnt many a bridge along the way, and, rumor has it, cost the White Sox the World Series in 1959. But her many rapturous love affairs came with moments of happiness and freedom, as well as my three beautiful mothers.” Aida blew a kiss each for Nella, Octavia, and Kay. Mary-Beth looked down at her high tops, overwhelmed. “Listen, don’t get me wrong, I’m not interested in anyone’s redemption. I’m not interested in a bootstraps narrative, and I’m not interested in making light of a hellish situation. All I know is what Gigi taught me. That crisis is ever-unraveling, and therefore, healing is an ongoing enterprise. In other words, she proved to me that it is possible to survive the End of the World, and in spite of it all, find time for joy.” Aida raised the champagne bottle. “For beauty.” She kissed Gigi’s forehead. “And for love.” She raised the bottle to her lips and chugged. The crowd whooped. Aida sighed and wiped her mouth. Mary-Beth thought she saw a single, sorrowful tear creep down Aida’s cheek, but then an older man took Aida in his arms, and she was laughing again.

The bottles made the rounds. Gigi drank. Rags drank. The pickup truck boys drank. The Bessie Smith lover drank. Even children, aided by their mothers, sipped at the bottle joyfully. Nella drank, Octavia drank, Kay drank, and then it was Mary-Beth’s turn. She tried to pass the bottle along, but the mothers insisted. Her hand shook as she gripped the bottleneck. She tried to sip confidently, but only succeeded in coughing up and dribbling wine all over her face.

“First time?” Kay asked, trying to be nice, though she wasn’t far off. Mary-Beth had once tried the flat spittle swirling at the bottom of Gram’s glass of gin, hated it, and sworn off the stuff forever. She was shocked by the wine’s bitter, astringent taste. She tried to smile it off, but the head rush that followed made her dizzy. The room full of laughing, smiling faces suddenly took on a different tone. Where was she? Who were these people? Why was she pretending to be like them? Why was she pretending like she belonged in this world that she knew nothing about, a part of a family whose language she could not speak? She scanned the crowd of faces, which throughout the evening had felt so familiar to her, so much like half-memories of her own, and saw only strangers. The way faces in dreams could, at any moment, lose their substance completely. She began, again, to shake.

Mary-Beth hurtled herself through the party, down the corridor, and out the door. She wanted to be home. She cursed this place which, without motive, had swallowed her whole, alienated her from her own life, her lineage, her responsibility. She wanted to be wrapped in Cora’s arms, smell her expired perfume and her bleached hair. She wanted to play with Maddie-Lynn’s toes, as she had when the girl was just a baby. She wanted to kneel next to Gram in the bed they shared and have the woman pray away her sins. She wanted Donny to spin her round, faster and faster, and then toss her into a pile of dead leaves, where all of her troubles would rot away. How could she have gotten so sidetracked, so lost, so out of control?

Mary-Beth grabbed the handlebars of her bicycle and tried to remember the route home. She hoped her body, sore as it was, would take her there. She hoped that there was a train waiting for her already at Union Station, and if there wasn’t, that God would give her the strength to cycle home by highway. But just as he hopped on the seat, she saw Aida running out the front door. Mary-Beth tried to make an excuse for herself, but Aida just walked right past her, her hand on her stomach. She ran to the vacant lot across the street, doubled over, and threw up.

Mary-Beth could have disappeared then. She could have pretended not to see anything. Or, better yet, she could avoid seeing Aida again entirely. But something irrevocable had occurred in her body that day, something she could not name, but which made it impossible for her to sit idly by while Aida suffered. Mary-Beth ran after her. She placed her hand, gently, on Aida’s back and rubbed soft circles there. She tried not to mind the acrid smell of froth. Aida

choked and spat until there was nothing left in her. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and the snot from her nose. Gallantly, she burped. And, much to Mary-Beth's surprise, she smiled.

"Are you okay?" asked Mary-Beth.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Aida's voice was rough from vomiting. She spat again. "Well, not fine. I'm sick, and I've been sick for a long time. Something gastrointestinal. I get ulcers. I can't digest most things. Including—actually, especially—alcohol." She laughed at herself.

"Then why did you — "

"I don't like to deny myself things."

"Does it hurt?"

"All the time."

"Then how do you —"

Aida shrugged. "You just get on."

Mary-Beth couldn't think of what to say. She felt terrible. Not guilty or sad or sorry, but really so terrible she wondered if she, too, might get sick. Mary-Beth was filled with despair. How could it be that Mary-Beth was brought to despair for a girl she had just met? She didn't know what words she could say—to Aida, to herself— to make the despair go away, but she did swallow the lump in her throat and stammer, "Should I— How can I help?"

"Weren't you just leaving?" asked Aida, eyeing the spinning front wheel of the bicycle she had flung in the middle of the street.

Mary-Beth caught her breath and clenched her fist. To make herself seem strong, she repeated Aida's words. "I volunteered for this experience. I'm prepared to get in over my head."

Aida smiled, took Mary-Beth's hand, and led her back into the house. By then, the party was so engrossed in their belly-belching and chitter-chattering to notice Aida cut through them and led Mary-Beth up the staircase. The steps were narrow and slippery, and Mary-Beth tripped several times climbing up. Aida and Mary-Beth laughed harder each time she fell.

Upstairs was a floor of many rooms, each of them full of clothes, blankets, pillows, and rugs. Mary-Beth wondered how many people lived here, and fantasized about how nice it would be to wake up beside them in the morning. All that noise. They walked through a bathroom. It was crowded with washcloths, toothbrushes, and hair-styling devices the likes of which Mary-

Beth had never seen. And, to her confusion and amazement, the bathtub was full of sand. But before Mary-Beth could ask her about it, Aida pulled them into a closet-sized bedroom and shut the door behind them. It was dark there, and warm. Mary-Beth stood there, dumb and flushing with desire and fear. Aida struck a match and lit a few candles. Her room seemed altogether ordinary. A mattress tangled in white sheets. A few carpet stains. Socks strewn here and there. But the walls were covered floor to ceiling with drawings, of what Mary-Beth could not quite make out.

"They're maps," Aida said, bringing the candlelight closer to the wall. Mary-Beth squinted. She recognized one that illustrated the route they had traveled, with names and small notes coloring each block (Estellina—nothing too heavy; Mr. & Mrs. Sampson—make sure cats are fed). Another listed historical events and where in the city they took place (November 1870—Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable became the first non-indigenous trader in Chicago; July 1919—white people torch over 1,000 black homes). A map labelled "Chicago image as derived from verbal interviews" made a fluid, bulbous mess of the city's grid system, with roads to nowhere, with entire neighborhoods forgotten. Others offered more utopia visions, replacing banks, strip malls, and parking lots with community centers, food gardens, mental health and healthcare facilities. "I started them when I was little," said Aida, setting the candle down and falling back onto her bed. She pointed at one she kept close to her pillow. "Octavia saved this from when I was five or six. I declare myself Windy City Crown Princess and rename all the buildings in the city after me. I guess it's one of my ways of reclaiming the city."

Mary-Beth ran her finger along the blocks, admiring their detail and feeling grateful that Aida had welcomed her into her more private world. Or any world, for that matter.

"Are you going to help me or not?" asked Aida, poking Mary-Beth's thigh with her toe. Mary-Beth sat tentatively at the edge of the bed, glancing away when Aida pulled off her hoodie. "Nothing to be afraid of. It's just a body. I know you have one too." Mary-Beth looked back at her. Aida had stripped down to a pink sports bra and jeans. She was thin, thinner than Mary-Beth, but whereas Mary-Beth hid her birdseed body under layers of ill-fitted clothes, Aida was confident, brazen even, about the body she had. "So," Aida drew a semi-circle across her belly, from one bony hip to the other. "This is where the large intestine is. Basically, if you massage it

like this," she made a kneading motion with her thumb, "it helps the digestion along. But it's hard to relax if I'm doing it myself."

Mary-Beth felt butterflies in her stomach, and became all too aware of her clammy hands. But she sensed no impatience in Aida's voice, only the invitation to a casual intimacy. Mary-Beth slid off her denim jacket and crawled next to Aida in bed. Holding her breath, she lay her hand on Aida's stomach, taking delight and comfort at its softness, and rubbed along the imaginary line of Aida's insides. "You can go harder than that, Mary-Beth," Aida sighed. Hearing Aida say her name made Mary-Beth blush. She mimicked the kneading motion with the heel of her palm. Aida closed her eyes and breathed softly, as if giving way to sleep. Mary-Beth could feel her own breath adhering to the rhythm of Aida's, becoming shallower, loosening. She thought, how nice it was, just nice, to lay there with her and to make her feel, who knows, more at peace.

"Aida," whispered Mary-Beth. "Can I ask you something?"

"Mhmm," she breathed.

"You don't seem too worried about the world ending. Running out of water and all. I mean, everybody else is worried." Mary-Beth bit her lip and admitted, "I'm worried."

"Well, first of all, I'm not surprised," Aida said. "Think about it. We had abused water, taken water for granted. We built walls, dams, and levees, culverts and canals; we told water where to go. We stole water, we polluted water; we turned water into chemicals and poured chemicals into water. We spilled blood and oil and refuse and history in water and pretended to forget about it," Mary-Beth let go of Aida's stomach and perched on her elbows, soaking up every word. Aida spoke wildly, again, with her hands. "We made water the site of our battlefields. We disrespected anything that had to do with water. Mothers, namely, and all people who had come from water. Especially, people who were lost to it. When water was scarce, we hoarded it from each other. When water was plenty, we gambled it away. When water was angry, when it poured and flooded and stormed, we let each other drown in it. There was no use arguing with water. Water had a right to leave."

"So what happens to us, then?" asked Mary-Beth.

"If you were paying attention *earlier,*" said Aida, sitting up. "you'd remember that dystopia is nothing new. History is dystopian. People—at least, *my* people—have *been* surviving.

It's only the end of the world for those who think the world is entitled to them, that they have some kind of authority, or that they're somehow immune."

Mary-Beth fell silent and picked at a thread on Aida's bedsheets. Perhaps that's why Donny freaked out that morning, because he thought he was immune. Mary-Beth wondered how she might communicate to him the contrary, then let the thought pass. She was here with Aida now. She and Aida were friends. And if she and Aida could take care of each other, there would be no need to go back.

"Can I ask you something else?" Mary-Beth asked. "It might sound a little weird."

"Shoot."

"Your Mom, Octavia, she said you and Rags put on Romeo and Juliet. Were you Romeo or Juliet?"

Aida smiled. "We switched off." She clasped her hands under her chin and fluttered her eyes theatrically. "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite." She nudged Mary-Beth on the shoulder. "Now you say, 'Oh, blessed, blessed night! I am afraid all this is but a dream.'"

"Blessed, blessed night. I am afraid this is all a dream," Mary-Beth repeated, looking down into her lap.

"Hey," Aida said, tilting her chin up. "Stop making yourself so small."

Mary-Beth didn't know why, but she felt suddenly naked, exposed, like a disguise had been ripped off her face. She scrambled to change the subject. "One last question. Why is there sand in the bathtub?"

Aida raised her eyebrows. "You don't do that in Fox Lake?" she teased. She took Mary-Beth's hand and lead her into the bathroom, bringing one of the candles with her. She opened the medicine cabinet and clinked her fingernail across rows and rows of small, blue vials. "This is an old trick. As old as time. I mean, when in history could you jump into a hot shower at any time of day?" Aida chose three vials labeled, on a handwritten tag, patchouli, sandalwood, and rose. "But that doesn't mean my ancestors walked around smelling like shit. I, for one, come from sensible people." Aida unbuttoned her jeans. Without questioning, Mary-Beth did the same. Bare-legged, they perched on the lip of the bath. The porcelain felt good against the back of Mary-Beth's

thighs. Aida took a handful of sand and added a few drops of essential oils. The smell hit Mary-Beth like a great relief. Aida touched Mary-Beth's legs, urging them into the tub. Mary-Beth rested her back against the tiles and plunged her feet into the sand. Aida, sitting beside her, their legs entangled, began to massage the mixture into Mary-Beth's calves.

"The sand exfoliates the skin, and the oils leave you smelling clean," Aida said. Their bodies were so close together, Mary-Beth did not know where it was polite to look. Aida's hands, wrapping around Mary-Beth in skilled, careful loops. Aida's toes, long like fingers, pinching and releasing petals of sand. The bubbles in her heavy hair. The fuzz between her thick, dark brows. Her large, dark eyes. Aida was so beautiful; Mary-Beth did not want to fragment her. She looked away, and found, again, her image in a mirror. Even in the warm glow of the candlelight, her exposed legs looked cold, white, almost fishy. Mary-Beth felt the strange desire to take the soapdish from the sink and hurl it at the glass, to smash it to pieces, so that she could be with Aida, alone.

Aida patted Mary-Beth on the shins. "Your turn," she said, grinning.

Mary-Beth cupped the sand in her hands and let the drops dip out of the dial. She crouched beneath Aida and repeated her movements. Stubbles on Aida's legs puckered underneath her touch. Mary-Beth felt the knots there and tried to unravel them. Sand slipped between Mary-Beth's fingers with each push and pull, until her hands were empty. She looked up at Aida, who mouthed, simply, "More." And Mary-Beth obliged, was only too happy to oblige. She reached higher and higher up Aida's legs, determined to please. Small, delightful sounds burst from the narrow space between them, and Aida whispered, "More." Mary-Beth rubbed sand between Aida's toes, stretching the full fat of her fingers between them. "More." Aida rolled up her sleeves and Mary-Beth massaged her arms. Taut at first, the muscles relaxed under her grip. She rubbed Aida's hands, her shoulders. She slipped her hands across Aida's belly, rubbing her ribcage, her back, her hips. Each touch lead to a new softening. Mary-Beth wanted desperately to give this to her—a soft body, a calm body, the body she deserved.

Aida leaned forward and took Mary-Beth's hands. Mary-Beth fell into the dizzying proximity of their faces. Aida whispered, softly, so close the words registered in vibrations between Mary-Beth's teeth. "That's enough." And, "Thank you."

They kissed. Aida's mouth tasted bitter with vomit and wine. Their bodies swelled, beholding one another. Tongues orbited. Hair worked its way into clenched fists. There was fear there, and surprise, for Mary-Beth had never before kissed anyone, nor could remember ever feeling the desire to. But above all that, there was the logic of it all. Mary-Beth felt she was exactly where she was meant to be, that the universe had conspired to throw her off course and land her in her rightful place, in this bathtub full of sand, drenched in the smell and heat of the smartest and most beautiful person she had ever met. Mary-Beth thought about what Aida said, about being in over your head, and she felt she understood. Like the first time she dove head-first into freshwater, a deep feeling rose to meet her, enveloped her. She was not afraid of drowning. This was safe. This was right.

Their kisses softened to a lull, a wrinkle, and then, just a breath. Mary-Beth rested her head in Aida's lap. Aida whispered, "You've put me in a difficult situation, Mary-Beth." She ran her fingernails through Mary-Beth's thin, blonde hair. "I seem to like you. Against my better judgment." She bent down and whispered in her ear. "So, either I can kick you out right now, and you go back to where you're supposed to be, and I forget we never met. Or, I can let myself like you."

Mary-Beth looked up into Aida's face. Her eyes were strangely somber, mournful. Mary-Beth wiped a tear on Aida's cheek with her thumb, trying to tell her that there was nothing she had to give up, nothing she had to lose. "Please like me," Mary-Beth whispered.

Aida pursed her lips. She helped Mary-Beth stand, brushed the sand off her legs, and lead her back into the bedroom. They tumbled into bed, kissing again. Aida wrapped her legs around Mary-Beth and unpeeled from her sports bra. Aida tugged at the hem of Mary-Beth's pink t-shirt, undressing her. Embarrassed, Mary-Beth tried to pull the sheets up over the crotch of her faded, butterfly-printed underwear. Aida smiled, ripped them off, and tossed them into a pile of her own dirty clothes. Aida began to suck on Mary-Beth's small, freckled breast, coloring her nipples red. Mary-Beth craned her neck to kiss Aida's neck and ear. She ached. She wanted, needed, to be inside of Aida. But not like that. She would be perfectly happy to make herself small, curl up into a ball, and settle down in the hammock of Aida's ribs.

Aida reached down and pressed on the bud of skin at the center of Mary-Beth's body. Mary-Beth trembled, thrilled to relinquish a place she had kept private to another person's hands. Aida rubbed her, gently at first, and then harder, faster, digging deep inside, revealing caverns of feeling Mary-Beth didn't know she had. All the while, Aida whispered in Mary-Beth's ear. "Imagine, if you can, the logistics of water," she said. "You have to be adaptable, ready to perform any number of tasks at a moment's notice. Rush. Spill. Swell. Wave. Pump. Drip. Rain down. Bubble up. But then, there are things water is not allowed to do. Like rest. Like desire. Like disappear and never return. Water is not allowed to stop being water. It can be ice or vapor, momentarily, but after that it has to start being water again." Mary-Beth clutched Aida's shoulders, begging her to come closer, and then, overwhelmed, pushed her away again. Aida kept rubbing, and whispering. "People expect water to be limitless, the way time is limitless. Which is why water has to set boundaries. This is why water hides: sometimes underground, or in oceanic salt. Water's favorite place to hide - the best way for water to live out its fantasies - is in a body. Water loves to coat eyelids, to fill mouths, to pool between thighs. Water possesses us, then makes us thirst."

Something in Mary-Beth burst. Broken and buried under pressure, strange sounds escaped her mouth, and water pooled between her thighs. When she came to, she was breathless and apologizing. She thought she had pissed all over Aida's hands. But Aida knew better. She licked her fingers clean and rolled Mary-Beth's body on top of her own.

"Feel me," Aida said, coaxing Mary-Beth's hand between her legs. Unsure what to do, unsure of the difference between erotic and disrespectful, Mary-Beth lightly traced the folds of Aida's skin. Her sex was wet. It puckered and pulsed, as if a living, breathing thing. Mary-Beth worried that if she scratched or slipped or pushed too hard she would disturb, or worse, destroy, the beautiful thing. But Aida, impatient, tilted her wrist and thrust Mary-Beth inside. Mary-Beth closed her eyes and pretended that she was untangling lake weeds from a fishing hook. Her fingers pressed against the spongey bit that lined the underside of Aida's belly. Aida moaned, and Mary-Beth thought herself a part of something miraculous. She began to kiss Aida all over, and with her kisses, she did her best to convey her gratitude, to bestow thanks. Her goosebump neck. Her collarbone and the hot marrow beneath. Her nipple, taut as a bead. Her sweat-dewed navel.

Sweet curls of her pubic hair. The hood of her sex, at which Mary-Beth lapped with a delicate tongue. Aida's thighs loosened and her nails sunk into Mary-Beth's hair, pulling her closer. The veil of flesh is a curious boundary; it was difficult to distinguish their liquids, their smells. It was difficult to tell whether the tremors that shook them both came from Aida or Mary-Beth or somewhere in between. They moaned together. Aida's limbs tightened and grew heavy around Mary-Beth's face. Mary-Beth thought, if she ever took her lips from between Aida's thighs, the rest of her life, she would feel cold. She pulled her mouth away for a moment, scrambling for words to make sense of things. She wanted to say *I love you.* Or, at least, *Show me how to love you,* but Aida was too close to the breaking point. She pulled Mary-Beth's face back in. "Hush," she breathed, whistling through her gap tooth, "Shh," until they arrived at a silence that snapped.

It was a long time before Mary-Beth surfaced. She wiggled her fingers and toes, coming back to her body again. Aida was breathing softly, tracing the part in Mary-Beth's hair. Mary-Beth kissed all the way up her midline and looked into her face. Aida was staring up at the ceiling, her eyes very far away. Mary-Beth kissed her forehead, and Aida smiled, closing her eyes. Mary-Beth lay her head on Aida's chest, rising and falling with its tide. She said nothing, but in her mind's eye, a new horizon was appearing before her, rushing open. It was decided. She had fallen in love with Aida. And this love, she was sure, would carry her away from her past, into a new road, a new country, with Aida by her side. Mary-Beth closed her eyes and cradled her lover. She vowed, silently, to learn whatever it took to make her happy, to make her feel safe. She would adjust for Aida. Labor for Aida. Surrender herself. Whatever it took, so long as Aida loved her as much as she, perhaps naively, loved her now. Whatever it took, she would make it last.

Mary-Beth awoke to the sound of sharp, gasping breaths. Aida was crying. Mary-Beth sat up and rubbed the salt from her eyes. The room was now very dark and cold. Mary-Beth fumbled with the matches and lit the caked remains of their candles. Aida was rocking back and forth, her hands wrapped around her belly, weeping. "I can't go through with it," she was saying. "I can't leave them. What if something happens? What will they do without me?"

“Slow down,” Mary-Beth said. “What’s wrong?” She looked into Aida’s face, which grief had twisted into a face she did not recognize. Not when Aida had vomited, not when they were naked, not even when they made love, had she appeared so vulnerable. “Come on, Aida,” Mary-Beth groaned, and touched her shoulders. “It’s okay.”

“How would you know?” Aida said, her voice full of hurt and contempt. Mary-Beth pulled away and brought her knees up to her chin, as children do when they are ridiculed or reprimanded. She, too, felt like she might weep. “I shouldn’t have let you get into my head,” Aida went on. “This was our last night all together, and I ruined it.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Mary-Beth whispered. “I don’t want to go back. I want to stay. Here. With you.”

Aida wiped her eyes and looked at Mary-Beth as if she had suggested they move to the desert, or set sail across the ocean together. She rubbed her temples and shook her head. She sifted through a pile of clothes and pulled out a wrinkled, faded piece of paper. She unfolded it and handed it to Mary-Beth without looking at her. It was a letter, watermarked with the same logo as the letter Gram had kept. Mary-Beth squinted in the dim light and read it carefully:

Dear Comrade,

You have been personally selected to participate in IPALU: the International Program for the Advancement and Longevity of the Universal Body. We are looking for compassionate individuals like yourself who align with the Collective’s mission: to make a new society fit for living things together with all peoples of the earth.

Unfortunately, many may never get the call saying that a suitable donor organ — and a second chance at life — has been found. Our research shows that thousands of preventable deaths occur each year due to lack of donor organs.

Our program matches our patients with individuals who display extraordinary reparative potential and dedication to the amelioration and endurance of the Collective. This means that

your donation won't just save one or two lives, but hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives, over generations to come.

Contributions like yours give us hope that The End of the World might be extended decades, or even avoided altogether. Choosing to become a living donor is a generous and worthwhile decision that could save our global community.

Mary-Beth wanted to tear the letter in half, crumple it up and hurl it out the window. Why did all these people have to speak with big words she did not know? "What does it mean?" she asked, gravely.

"One of the activists gave me this letter at the water collection point. At first, I was pissed Why would they recruit me, out of all people, for this weird program? I thought they were trying to separate me from my family, my responsibilities. But the more I thought about the more I started to wonder. What if *I* got the donation? What if someone donated their organs to *me*? Then, for once, I could have a normal body. A body that isn't in so much fucking pain all the time. Imagine that. I don't trust the Collective, as you know, but if they can help me get better—" Aida wrapped her arms around her belly. "There's just so much more I could do."

"If they can help you get better, that's great." Mary-Beth rubbed Aida's knee. She tried to smile. "Then there's nothing to cry about."

"They only problem is they can't do the operation here," Aida said, hanging her head low, "I have to go to California."

Mary-Beth was silent for a while. An icy feeling took her over.

"I have a friend who's going to Los Angeles to join some water justice organization. He's agreed to let me go out west with him." She wiped the tears from her face. "We leave tomorrow."

"California?" Mary-Beth said, shivering. "You can't go to California."

"I have to," Aida said. "If I want to live."

"What are you going to tell them? Your mothers? And Gigi?"

Aida let the tears drip into her lap. "I don't know," she whispered. "But I need to get better. For them."

Mary-Beth dug her wrists into her eyes, trying not to cry. “What if you never come back?” Her voice broke, and she could not control her tears anymore. The structure, which for so long had kept her in check, was now fracturing. In its place was terror, and loneliness, and resentment. Things she had bottled up, kept hidden as best she could, surged forth, grabbed a hold of her, broke her down. She wept, and the only words she managed to muster were, pathetically, “What about me?”

“You?” Aida raised her eyebrows. She laughed, and this laugh seemed to want to thwart Mary-Beth’s affection, mock her fidelity. “I’m not going to stay for you.”

“Stay with me,” Mary-Beth clutched Aida’s arm, her bone-thin arm. “Please.”

Aida ripped away. “Get out,” she said. She rose and threw open the door. “You’re freaking me out.”

“There’s got to be a doctor here who can do the operation. Why do you have to go all the way to Los Angeles?” Mary-Beth felt about as pitiful as she looked, naked and trembling, begging on her knees before a stranger she had vowed to love. She grasped at the promises she had made to herself the night before, trying to make sense of things. To risk. To sacrifice. “Take mine!” she said, clutching her abdomen. “Take mine instead. They can do that, right? Cut me open. I want you to have it. I want you to live.”

“You want me to approve a death sentence? Bullshit!” Aida shouted. A layer of glass had shattered between them. It was cutting them both. “No, you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to absolve yourself by saving me.”

“Please,” Mary-Beth said. She felt betrayed. How could it be that the moment she found a new home, she was abruptly cast out, lost and orphaned again? All she wanted was to give. That’s what she told herself. And she was prepared to give whatever she had if it meant keeping Aida close. If all she had to give was a body, then so be it. Even if it cost her her life. And then the words spilled, uncontrollably, out of her mouth, “I love you.”

Aida dug her nails into her hairline. “Who even are you?” She paced back and forth, mumbling words Mary-Beth could not hear, sighing out many things unspoken. Then, she put her hands on her hips and looked Mary-Beth straight in the eyes. “What is love like for you? Huh? Tell me. I would really like to know.”

Mary-Beth could not look at Aida anymore. She shook her head, weeping hard, whispering only, “Please.”

Wax, at last, engulfed the candleflame, and whatever was left of their light went out. Aida slumped back in bed, cocooned herself in her bedsheets, turned away from Mary-Beth, and made no sound. Mary-Beth felt through the dark for familiar things: her jeans, her t-shirt, her jacket. In an act of spite, she stuffed the good-for-nothing letter in her pocket. She would decide later how best to destroy it. Tying the shoelaces of her hightops together and slinging them over her shoulder, she slammed Aida’s bedroom door and moved as fast as she could through the unlit, unforgiving house. In the hallway, she tripped over several sleeping bodies, and they grumbled at her. She nearly fell down the stairs, causing a ruckus that woke the sleepers on the sofas. “Is everything all right dear?” said a woman’s voice, but before she could think to reply she was out the door.

She ran into the middle of the street, where all was silent. Cold pinched at her face and throat. The sky was black and the stars were so abundant, so beautiful, Mary-Beth wanted to scream at them, tell them to stop, that she did not deserve them that way. Broken, spent, and as far as she was concerned, with no where else to go, Mary-Beth got back on her bicycle and pedaled—legs still terribly sore—down the street, readying herself to make the slow, sorry, shameful meander back home.

Fox Lake, Illinois

When Mary-Beth arrived home—thinned-out, exhausted, and reeking of sweat—her mother was seated quietly at the kitchen table, running a fine-toothed comb through one of Gram’s old mink coats. The heel of her black pump tapped manically against the linoleum floor. Her hair was curled around tomato soup cans. When she turned to face Mary-Beth, she did not look relieved, or angry, or even a little worried. She simply said, “You look awful,” then went back to her combing.

Mary-Beth was stunned. The whole journey home, she had practiced an array of apologies. She had prepared to be reprimanded, to be shouted at, even to be slapped across the

face. She had not prepared for Cora to act like nothing had happened, or worse, to act like she didn't care. She moved closer to her mother and saw the black circles under her eyes, smelled her stuffy, black velvet dress.

"Go get changed. You can't show up to church dressed like that," Cora said.

"Church?" Mary-Beth said. They hadn't gone to church in years. And in its disuse, like most things in town, Our Lady of the Lakes had become dusty, gutted, ransacked by time. Donny had taken steps to fix it up, though these projects usually frustrated him. What did it matter if there were no preacher for the new pulpit, no congregation for freshly-varnished pews? Mary-Beth couldn't think of why Cora might want to go there now. But she was desperate to be forgiven, to put her transgression behind her, to put Aida behind her (although she could not stop thinking about her smell, her touch, her voice), and, she had to admit, looking down at her torn sneakers and dirty clothes, she looked like shit.

"Go on," Cora said. "I laid out something nice for you."

Mary-Beth climbed the carpeted stairs slowly, taking inventory of all the little domestic objects she had never cared to notice before, objects which seemed otherworldly to her now. Photograph of Donny and his brothers, all of them in long hair and ill-fitting clothes, younger versions of men Mary-Beth could scarcely remember. Photograph of Gram at Mary-Beth's age, doe-eyed and poised, not yet worn down by widowhood and seven hungry mouths to feed. Photograph of herself as a child, and Maddie-Lynn a toddler, laying in green grass. Photograph of her parents at the prom where Donny proposed. She in pink, he in a pale blue suit and ruffles. Mary-Beth wondered if it was love that kept them together all this time, and if so, why they had succeeded, and she failed.

In the bedroom she shared with Maddie-Lynn and Gram, the curtains were drawn. A scented candle was lit next to the bed where Gram was sleeping. The flower-stamped bedspread was drawn up over her face. All Mary-Beth could see was white hair in foam rollers peeking out the top, and half-painted red toenails at the bottom.

Mary-Beth took off her clothes, tucking the letter she had stolen from Aida in the hem of her underwear without really knowing why. A black dress with a white lace collar lay draped over a rocking chair in the corner. Mary-Beth didn't understand why her mother insisted on

being so formal. Putting it on, she felt ridiculous. Not just because the dress was musty and old, too tight around the ankles and too short at the bottom. But because it was a child's dress, and Mary-Beth believed that she had seen too much, felt too much, to be considered a child anymore. Why had Cora chosen this? By infantilizing her, were they trying to trap her here? Or were they themselves trapped here, and had neglected to notice time passing, Mary-Beth's body filling up and out? Aida saw her for who she was. A person capable of revision. A body capable of opening.

Mary-Beth's heart sank. If Aida saw her for who she was, why didn't she want her? Why wouldn't she want her help?

Maddie-Lynn joined her in the room, wearing a matching dress, white stockings, and shiny, black maryjanes. Mary-Beth tried to smile. Her sister scowled, then crawled into bed and started undoing Gram's hair. It wasn't until then that Mary-Beth noticed something wrong: Eva's oxygen machine tossed into the corner like a dead animal. And then, Gram's body, stiff as stone beneath the sheets.

Mary-Beth moved closer without feeling her feet touch the ground. She reached for the hem of the bedspread. She had to look death in the face to know that it was real. Beneath the sheet, Gram's face was warped—her eyes droopy, her cheeks sunk in, her jaw ajar. Mary-Beth hurried to cover the face back up, but the image of it lodged, making it difficult to see anything else. "What happened?" was all she could think to say.

"What do you mean what happened? You hit her and she fell."

Mary-Beth thought back to Donny knocking her into Gram on the porch. She knew Gram was hurt, not that she could die from it, not that she was dead. "I didn't hit her," she tried to defend herself. "Dad pushed me."

"Then why did you run away?" Maddie-Lynn said vindictively.

Mary-Beth stepped back. She had come home seeking refuge after heartbreak, affirmation of her right to belong, her right to be loved. But the way her mother had looked at her, blank, and the way her sister was looking at her now, full of spite, told her that home—the one solid in her life—no longer existed, and if it did, she was no longer a part of it. Unable to move, she watched Maddie-Lynn finish taking the rollers out of Gram's hair. Lovingly, her little

sister tucked a towel under Gram's chin, encouraging her mouth closed, and applied a jagged layer of Gram's favorite pink lipstick. Then, Mary-Beth set off running, looking for her dad.

She found Donny in the garage, running a sheet of plywood through his push-pedal skilsaw. "Good, you're here," was all he said. He lifted up his white tank top to wipe the sweat off his forehead, then handed her two long, rectangular pieces. "Put some wood glue on the edges, wouldya?"

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" Mary-Beth said.

"Well, somebody's gotta make the coffin." Donny's tone was cool, casual, almost cheerful.

Mary-Beth stared at him for a moment, baffled. "I mean, what happened to Gram?"

Donny took the boards back and began to apply the glue himself. It came spitting out in beads which he smoothed into one thin, filmy line. This movement was so careful and ordinary that Mary-Beth found it disturbing. She wanted to take the bottle from his hands and throw it far away, but he was still her father and he still frightened her, so she waited for him to speak.

"Do you know your Gram was the one who taught me how to swim?" he said, smiling.

Mary-Beth did not know what to say. She shook her head.

"She didn't have to do that, you know. She was a busy woman. Worked three jobs to keep us all afloat. Lunchlady at the Catholic School during the schoolyear, farmhand in the summer. At night she waited tables at the Mineola Hotel. Some days she didn't get home till four o'clock in the morning, and she had to be up again at the crack of dawn. That was the kind of woman she was. A woman who does whatever it takes."

Donny placed the smaller rectangles on the base of the coffin and wiped his hands on his black trousers. "She could have let my brothers get around to it. Maybe she knew they weren't the kindest to me. Nothing too mean, just boy stuff. Tying me up and whipping me with willow reeds, that kind of thing. Holding my head underwater until my face turned blue. I was the baby after all."

Donny grabbed a hammer and a few finishing nails out of a jelly jar. He went to work on securing the joints together, pinching the nails he wasn't using between his teeth. "One day I

wake up and she's in the kitchen, frying bacon in her swim cap and one-piece. You have to understand, Mary-Beth, this was a big deal for me. I only ever saw your Gram in her church getup or a uniform."

He shook the edges of the boards a bit to make sure the base was steady. "And then she was with me in the water, saying 'Let the water hold you, Donny.' I didn't want to let go. I'm not proud of it, but I was scared. Kids get scared, I guess. 'Water is like God,' she said, 'You don't need to hold onto Him to let Him hold you.'"

Donny took a screwdriver and drilled hinges onto the side of the coffin, then attached the lid with more screws. "And then I let go, and I was floating. I remember looking up at the sky and thinking, this place, this place is a holy place."

The lid of the coffin slammed closed, producing a cloud of sawdust. Mary-Beth coughed. Donny wiped his nose. He said, "I had big dreams, you know. Making it in the city. Or taking off on the road and seeing where the wind blew me. Going out into the big country. But there, in the water, wouldya believe it, I heard an angel speak to me. Not my mother, I know my mother's voice. This was a voice from heaven. Or, more like a voice from the water, and she said, *Born into a righteous house, the builder labors elsewhere in vain.* Do you know what that means? It means I'm in the right place. The best place. The place I'm meant to be." Then he put his hand rather patronizingly on her shoulder and said, "I want you to know that, Mary-Beth. You're in good hands here."

Mary-Beth did not like what this story was supposed to do to her. Inspire pity. Restore her faith in him. Wash his hands of any culpability in Gram's death. Make her feel guilty for running away, and more than that, make her feel guilty for imagining a life outside the one he had planned for her. Moreover, he was admitting to her that he had no idea a place like Washington Park even existed, and did not care to know.

She wanted him to look her in the eyes and apologize. For Gram. But also for bigger things. Deeper things. Things she hadn't been old enough to see until now. Like how he cunningly avoided apologies. Like how he always pretended to be innocent. Like how he could be tyrannical one moment, then immeasurably tender the next, which made it impossible for anyone to keep a grudge against him, or hold him accountable for his anger.

Love—her love for Aida, even if it was not requited—had seemed to shift something in her. She did not belong to Donny anymore. Therefore, she was able to see him not as her father but as a man. For the first time in her life, she was able to judge him, and this judgment created a great cavity between them.

In that moment, she decided. She would follow Aida to LA. Her heart began to beat fast as plans unfolded in her mind. She would pack her bags, steal the station wagon, leave in the middle of the night. She wouldn't let herself feel bad about her family. Cora and Maddie-Lynn seemed to have done fine without her anyway. And Donny was a man who slipped so easily into denial; he would probably forget about her. She would drive to LA and find Aida and prove to her that she was serious, that she was willing to risk it all, that she was willing to do whatever it took to help Aida get better. How could Aida argue with that? How could she want someone else's body, rather than accept help from the body that wanted for her, the body that loved her? Once she saw Mary-Beth there in the hospital, she would come around.

The way Mary-Beth saw it, she had two options. Either she could die here, in this house, in the same bed Gram died in, having seen nothing, done nothing, helped no one. Or, she could die responsible for helping a beautiful person lead a beautiful and important life.

Mary-Beth smiled. Aida—wherever she was, that was where Mary-Beth was meant to be.

Donny, of course, only saw her smile, and it placated him. He tucked a strand of Mary-Beth's hair behind her ear. He said, "I gotta get the chapel ready. You'll keep your mother company, won't ya?" He swiped at the sawdust that had stuck to Mary-Beth's dress, threw some tools in the back of his pickup truck, and took off, saluting her as he pulled out of the driveway.

Mary-Beth felt giddy with excitement. There was, in the back of her mind, a long list of unresolved problems. How to get out the house unnoticed. How to navigate unknown roads. Where to get fuel. Where to get food. Where to get water. How to stay alive, should the journey be dangerous or unforgiving. But for Mary-Beth, being still very young and swept up in the romance of it all, those problems were secondary to the overwhelming sense of purpose the trip inspired. She had made it to Chicago and back on a bicycle relatively unscathed. How hard could the rest of the country be?

She practically skipped out of the garage, feeling like a child who has made up a new game. Maddie-Lynn was sitting outside on the stoop, wrapping her Barbie doll in a piece of black fabric. She glared at Mary-Beth as she walked past, but Mary-Beth didn't pay her any mind. She ran up the stairs and closed the door to their room. With only a corpse as her witness, she had time to pack her few belongings into one of Gram's old canvas suitcases. A pink velour zip-up, t-shirts, jeans, a handful of socks and underwear. She creeped into the bathroom for a toothbrush, a block of salt they used as deodorant, a box of Tampax. She wished she had some essential oils, so that she could wash herself the way Aida taught her, but all her family had were a dozen half-used bottles of crusty 2-in-1 shampoo. She chuckled softly, and a bit condescendingly, for being the bearer of a secret her parents did not know.

Next were the practicalities: atlas, flashlight, cans of soup. She figured she could snoop around for those while Cora and Donny were distracted with funeral preparations, or else while they were sleeping. For now, she hid the suitcase back in its place in the closet. Then, and she wasn't entirely sure why, she knelt beside the bed, took her grandmother's cold, wrinkled hand, and slipped Gram's wedding ring off her finger. She examined it in the dim light of the scented candle. It was tiny, too small to even fit on Mary-Beth's pinky. The diamond inside was also tiny, probably not very expensive, and clouded with age. Later, Mary-Beth would tell herself that she took the ring in case she got into trouble and needed to bribe her way out. Or, that it served as a memento of her grandmother, and therefore, her home, her past, her legacy. But really, Mary-Beth took the ring because it represented, for her, a strength which she lacked, and which she would need a great deal of if she was going to get by. Carefully, she tucked the ring, along with the IPALU letter, in the inside pocket of her denim jacket, kissed Gram on the forehead, and left the room.

At the other end of the hallway, Mary-Beth saw the door to her parents' room cracked open. She peeked inside and saw her mother, cans still rolled in her hair, sitting on the floor by the edge of the bed. She was pulling small pieces of paper out of a shoebox, sighing, and putting them back in. Mary-Beth knocked gently. Cora did not look up, but something told Mary-Beth that her mother needed her. Mary-Beth tiptoed inside and sat down beside her. In the box were piles of newspaper clippings, each of them, it seemed, from the travel section of the *Chicago*

Tribune. She skimmed the column in Cora's hand. It was an article about the best routes to drive to see the autumn leaves in Michigan.

This time, when Cora sighed, she said, "Do you know how many times I snuck into this house when I was your age?" She pointed out the window. "Your father would meet me over there, at the end of the street, in the middle of the night. He would carry me through the house and up the stairs so that if anyone woke up they would only hear one pair of footsteps." She shook her head. "We thought we were so clever. Now that I'm a mother myself I imagine that Gram knew exactly what was going on. Mothers know everything." Cora wrapped her arms around Mary-Beth and pulled her close. "But your father was the sweetest to her out of all his brothers, the most obedient. She probably figured it wouldn't hurt if she let him get away with something, for once. You're the same," she said, stroking Mary-Beth's hair. "So good. That's why I wasn't worried about you. I knew you'd come back."

Mary-Beth clung to her mother. It felt good to be forgiven. Though Mary-Beth didn't know what her mother was forgiving her for. Running away, she supposed. But she suspected that Cora had intuited her new plans, too. Her mother clung to her, too. Mary-Beth wondered what that meant. If Cora were begging her to stay, or letting her go.

"Also," Cora said, "I don't blame you." She shook the articles around in their box. "There's a big world out there. A home is supposed to be a place you can return to. Not a cage."

Mary-Beth looked into the box. All the faded pictures of beaches, markets, and mai tais. She wondered how many years Cora had kept it. How many years she had fantasized, even strategized, an escape similar to the one Mary-Beth was planning now. How many times she made the decision to stay. "Do you feel like it's a cage?" Mary-Beth asked.

Cora sighed and thought for a moment. She ran her palm across the carpet, lovingly, despite its worn and matted patches, as if it were a pet, or a beloved piece of clothing. "When I was your age, this house was the only place I ever wanted to be. And I got what I wanted. As I got older, I wanted different things, but it became harder to get them. I don't resent anyone for that. It just is what it is."

Mary-Beth found it difficult to imagine her mother feeling the same way about Donny as she felt about Aida. "You must have really loved Dad then, huh?"

Cora smiled, and her smile contained many fond memories Mary-Beth would never be privy to, but which were, nevertheless, embedded in the making of her. “Yes, very much,” Cora said. “I still do. Even though the love looks very different.”

“What is love like for you?” Mary-Beth asked. Perhaps her mother’s answer would illuminate something she had missed about love, and when she and Aida were reunited, she would be able to respond to the question with conviction.

Cora put the lid back on the box, slid it under the bed, and said, “Love is letting yourself go.”

Mary-Beth wanted to know more. What did letting yourself go mean? Forgoing your needs for someone else’s? If so, then she was surely on the right track. Or did it mean leaving a part of yourself behind? Or letting go into something, like letting yourself fall? She wanted to ask her mother more questions, but Cora stood, tired of talking, and began to unroll the cans. She shook her head, and her blonde hair fell out in big, buoyant waves. As she slipped on her black pumps and a pair of gold clip-on earrings, she became Mary-Beth’s mother again, a solid and secretive woman, no longer a confidante. With Gram’s mink draped over her forearm, Mary-Beth thought she looked regal, and indulged in picturing her in the lobby of a hotel somewhere tremendously far away from Fox Lake.

Gram’s body had already begun to smell by the time Cora and Mary-Beth got to dressing her. Mary-Beth noted that it was different from a dead animal smell. Less like must, or still water. More rancid, astringent, like rotting fruit. She held her breath as Cora bunched up the comforter and sheets. Gram was still in her fuzzy pink bathrobe. Stains the color of feces pooled across her torso and hips. Cora stripped her down to her underwear. As Mary-Beth helped guide Gram’s arms through the sleeves of a heavy lace dress, she noticed that Gram’s skin had begun to curdle in places.

Although it disturbed her, Mary-Beth refused to look away. She took this moment as an opportunity to prepare herself for what would happen to her body after the surgery that replaced Aida’s insides with her own. If she was going to go through with it, she could not afford to be afraid of death, its foul odors and strange fluids. She only wished that Aida would not have to see

her like this. That she would remember her as young, supple, full of life, and that she would carry that life with her all her days.

Mary-Beth held up Gram's torso as Cora slid on the mink coat. Then came a long string of cultured pink pearls, which Cora tied in a knot like the flapper girls in the old silent movies Gram liked. Mary-Beth tried to fit on her Sunday shoes, but Gram's feet had bloated too much. She wished there were time, at least, to finish painting her toes, but Donny was already in the doorway, ready to carry her down.

As a final touch, Cora wiped the edges of Gram's mouth, smoothing out the shaky line of lipstick Maddie-Lynn had left behind. Then, Donny curled his arms under his mother's body and gathered her to his chest.

Mary-Beth wondered what he must have thought, holding the person who had brought him into the world and knowing he had taken her out of it. Did he feel any remorse? Perhaps he had told himself that she was old and dying anyway. Perhaps he congratulated himself for giving her a quick death, for saving her from some chronic, miserable disease. And Cora? Didn't she blame him? Wasn't she angry? She tried to search her mother's face, but Cora had busied removing the top sheet from the bed and inspecting the damage done to the mattress beneath.

Mary-Beth did not want to feel bad for her father. She wanted, rebelliously or perhaps a bit vengefully, for him to be left alone with the consequences of what he had done, not to lean on the crutch of other people's pity. Punishing him made it easier for her to disappear. And yet, as she looked into his face, so twisted with sorrow, she could not help it. Donny began to cry, and she cried too. For Gram, whom she had loved. And for her father, whom she would always love, no matter what he did, no matter how much distance there would be put between them.

Donny, perhaps too fragile to make the final journey downstairs, sat down in the rocking chair with his mother in his arms. Cora and Mary-Beth sat on the edge of her deathbed and watched them sway back and forth. Tears dripped from Donny's beard as he sang softly:

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want, he makes me down to lie.
In pastures green, He leadeth me, the quiet waters by.

It took all four of them to lift Gram up to the bed of Donny's pickup truck. Mary-Beth and Maddie-Lynn crawled in the back with her and rested their feet up against the edges of the coffin. Donny put on his white shirt and suit jacket. Cora fixed her hair and blushed her cheeks in the side view mirror. Who they were trying to impress, Mary-Beth did not know. Perhaps it was out of respect for Gram, who always dressed up for church, or simply out of habit. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Maddie-Lynn seething at her stocking-less legs and high tops. Mary-Beth didn't care about looking fancy, and she didn't think Gram would have cared much either. Besides, she liked to be able to feel her bare legs, still soft from the sand and smelling, just faintly, of Aida's oils.

As they drove through town, Mary-Beth couldn't help but feel somewhat nostalgic. The same abandoned movie theaters, sports bars, pancakes restaurants and car dealerships which had, only days before, inspired such a panic in her, now appeared quaint and endearing. She wished she and Aida could have met in a different time, so that she could show her this place. They would eat soft-serve ice cream and make fun of the locals in their 4x4s and camouflage pants. Could Aida eat ice cream? They could wade out in the shallow parts of the lake and swim in the sandbar. Could Aida swim?

Mary-Beth realized that she didn't know much about Aida at all. She knew about her hometown and its context, her family and its history. She knew her opinions on big issues—power, collectivity, solidarity, crises of the past coming to bear on the present. She knew about things people who had known her for years probably did not know—her cartography, for instance. Or the noises she made when caressed in the dark. She knew about her commitment, compassion, bravery, smarts. But she did not know the little things. Basic things. When was her birthday? How old was she? Did she have a middle name? What music did she listen to? What did she do before The End and all its complications? Did she like to cook with her mothers? Hang out with her friends in the park? Or did she prefer to be alone, in her room, drawing? Had she had other lovers before Mary-Beth? Girls, or boys, or both? What were they like? Was Mary-Beth at all special compared to them?

She had been so swept up in Aida's world, and it had ended so abruptly, that she had forgotten to ask these questions. These unknowns made her feel silly, and a bit stranded. But they

did not take away from the love she had for Aida, nor did they deter her from what she was prepared to do. She only hoped that there would be time before the surgery to get to know each other a bit better. They would be in California, after all. Tons of the romance books she had read had taken place there. Maybe they could go for a long walk on the beach. Mary-Beth had never seen an ocean before.

This train of thought was interrupted by Maddie-Lynn saying, "Why are you smiling?"

Mary-Beth hadn't realized. She pursed her lips and looked down at her shoes.

"Aren't you at all upset?" Maddie-Lynn said.

"Of course I am. I loved Gram."

"Well then you better start acting like it." Maddie-Lynn crossed her arms and pouted.

Mary-Beth fought the urge to bicker with her sister. It was their last day together, after all. "I'm sorry," she said, and extended her hand out over the coffin. Maddie-Lynn took it and squeezed tightly, but did not look at her.

They pulled up to Our Lady of the Lakes and began the monolithic task of carrying Gram's casket up the stairs. They managed, after a great deal of cursing and grunting, to get her into the lobby. From there, Donny was able to stuff some old choir dresses under the box and drag her down the aisle, while Cora, Mary-Beth, and Maddie-Lynn took their seats in the front row.

Donny had worked hard to make the church look decent. The pews smelled of varnish. The stained glass windows cleaned. The rotted rafters replaced with reclaimed wood, forming a web of mismatched colors and grains. Jesus himself had gotten a facelift—his crucifix polished, his body bleached, drops of blood on his forehead and ankles gleaming with fresh red paint. But his efforts had done little to make the place seem any less depressing. There was still the fact of the moth-bitten hassocks, the yellow, molding bibles, and the one lone family left standing in Fox Lake, here to honor their fallen matriarch in front of an audience of no one. Skilled craftsman as he was, there was little he could do to resurrect all that.

Donny, in traditional Catholic pomp, pointed Gram's feet to the East, lit candles around the coffin, and recited what he could remember from the Office of the Dead. When it came time

to pay respects, he opened the lid of the coffin. Gram had been jostled in the car ride, so he worked quickly to straighten out her legs, her pearls.

Cora stepped forward first. She said nothing, just sat staring down at Gram for a long time. Mary-Beth wondered about all they had shared as mothers—how they gossiped, conspired, and lamented with one another behind closed doors—as well as the things, as her mother-in-law, Gram had withheld, or told her not to do. Cora took a small, white box out of her handbag. It was Gram's pack of cigarettes. For years, she had not been allowed to smoke, but she carried the pack around anyway. Sometimes, when she was stressed or angry, Gram would put a cigarette between her lips and let it dangle, unlit, for a while, out of habit or longing. Cora tucked the box in the folds of her coat, kissed Gram's forehead, and sat back down.

Maddie-Lynn was next. She didn't say anything either, just sniffled and rubbed at her nose until it was red. As she stood there, Mary-Beth noticed that the dress her sister wore didn't fit either. The sleeves rode up her forearms; the bodice squished her chest. Maddie-Lynn was growing up, too. Mary-Beth mourned all the things she wouldn't be there to help her sister with —shaving her armpits with a dry blade, making a tampon out of whatever paper you could find —things that were difficult for girls at the End of the World.

When it came time for Mary-Beth to pay her respects, she felt no need to mourn. She simply bent down and whispered, "Don't worry, Gram. We'll meet again real soon."

As she turned around, however, Donny was shaking his head at her, seemingly wounded by her dry eyes, the curt farewell. As if to admonish her, but not to argue, he stepped forward, gripped the edges of the coffin, and launched into another monologue:

"Well, Ma, look at us. We made it this far. There were lots of times I thought we wouldn't make it, but like you always said, God will provide. You know what this box is made out of?" He slapped the sides of the coffin. The sound cast echoes across the high ceiling and rattled Mary-Beth to her bones. "One-hundred percent oak. Do you know I thought Dad would come back as an oak. Reincarnation isn't Christian, I know. And he was a good, God-fearing man. Or so you said it. Still I saw those big oak arms and thought of his big arms. Or at least they seemed big in pictures." Donny peeled off his sport coat and let it fall to the ground. He said, "Lord knows I didn't get these guns from you." He rolled up his sleeves, flexed his arms, kissed his biceps.

“Look at your baby boy, Ma. Your big, strong, baby boy.” His voice was cracking. Mary-Beth looked down at her shoes. She could not watch him weep again, or else she too would weep again. “You were strong too, Ma. You used to be so strong.”

Mary-Beth heard Cora whisper, under her breath, “He’s leaving me.”

“That’s the opposite of what he’s doing,” Mary-Beth whispered back. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“No, I mean I don’t recognize him anymore.”

Mary-Beth looked up at her father again. Donny was pulling on Gram’s limp arms, rubbing her hands all over his face. “What happened to you?” he cried. “What happened to us?” He began to kiss her hands, finger by finger. Then his face changed. “Shit,” he said. He released his grip and dropped down on his hands and knees. He began to crawl around on the ground, padding the church’s carpet. “Shit shit shit shit.”

“Donny,” said Cora, in a voice meant both to soothe and admonish him.

“The ring,” he said. “My Ma’s wedding ring is gone.” Donny shimmied on his belly down the length of the church’s aisle, peering under the pews. He pulled Bibles out of their shelves and shook them. Pages fell out in chunks from their cracked spines. He threw the empty books over his shoulder, which Cora hurried to pick up and lay neatly into piles. She tried to tell him that it didn’t matter, that the ring was probably lost long ago, that Gram didn’t need it anymore, but he would not listen to her.

Mary-Beth sat motionless. She was about to pipe up and explain what she had done, just to calm her father’s nerves and to give her mother less to manage, but the words would not come out. Perhaps she was embarrassed. Perhaps, in her heart, she wanted to punish him. Her face heated, a lump gathered in the back of her throat, and all she could think about was how close she wanted to be to Aida, and how far away from everything else.

Donny became more frantic. He began to knock over things: the baptismal font, the tabernacle—which crushed the communion crackers, broke a bottle of sweet wine across the altar steps—the images of St. Francis, Joseph, and Mary. Cora, unable to keep him tethered to reality, sat back down beside Mary-Beth and watched him. With her hand cupped over her mouth, her breath trailing steady in and out, she looked the way someone who believes in acts of

God might watch a storm blow in: bewildered, but not in any way afraid. Mary-Beth could not help but admire her conviction. Not only for surviving her marriage, or any marriage for that matter, but for surviving her marriage at the End of the World. Mary-Beth did not know what would happen to Cora while she was gone, but she had faith that her mother would be okay.

Donny searched for the ring for a long time, pacing back and forth, talking to himself, looking and looking again at the places he had already looked. His wife and daughters sat silently, waiting, as they had learned to wait, for him to calm down. But instead of calming down, he picked Gram's body up out of her coffin and lay her on the ground. He ran his fingers along the crannies in the bed of the box. Then, he started fumbling through the folds of her coat and dress. He cried, "I'm sorry," and the cries echoed. The sound of Gram's bones breaking as he tossed her limbs around echoed too. When he took her into his arms to rock her, her spine rattled, her head bent back, and nothing could be seen but the whites of her eyes.

Cora closed her eyes. She squeezed them tight, as if she could wring the image out before it got stuck in her memory. Quietly, she rose. Mary-Beth and Maddie-Lynn followed without having to be told. Cora held out her hands, and her daughters each took one. Then, together, without seeming to inspire any reaction at all from Donny, they left Our Lady of the Lakes. Cora handed the car keys to Mary-Beth and slipped into the passenger seat, cradling Maddie-Lynn in her lap even though she was too big to be cradled. They drove in silence, composed of heaviness as women are, staring ahead at the grey road, the scattered, shuttered houses, and the blank sky. They did not need to speak about death. Death was banal. Death was bearable. Death was all around them. The problem was that something about living had become unbearable, something which could not be spoken, but Mary-Beth could feel it, the change occurring.

So, it did not come as a great shock that, when they arrived home, Cora took a suitcase out from under her bed and, carefully, almost ceremoniously, removed every article of clothing from her dresser, folded it neatly, and piled it inside. All of it: the chlorine-bleached swimsuits, the staticky fleece pajama pants, the wool socks and sports bras. All of it except a rose-colored negligée, a Valentine's Day gift from Donny a few years back, which still had its tag on, and the gift receipt stapled to the tag. It seemed natural, too, that she would kick off her black pumps and replace them with a pair of flip flops which slapped proudly against her heel as she walked about

the room, collecting towels and toiletries, photographs and pillowcases, into garbage bags. And it was not at all surprising, at least to Mary-Beth, that she pulled out the shoebox with the articles inside and said, "Where should we go, do you think? Tampa? Jacksonville? I've always wanted to live by the ocean. How about Fort Lauderdale?"

Maddie-Lynn, however, did not seem to register what was going on. "What are you doing, Mama?" she asked.

"I'm choosing something different," said Cora. She closed her eyes and fished inside the box, then pulled out a clipping randomly. "'A Cocoa Beach day is doable on any budget.' Now, doesn't that sound nice?" She licked the article and stuck it to Maddie-Lynn's forehead.

Mary-Beth laughed, half out of awe, half out of dread. For her mother, she was elated. Free from this hollow and angry place, she could become a woman of sun and blue water, no longer a caregiver, but the woman she wanted to be. Cocoa Beach, however, was on the opposite side of the country from where Mary-Beth needed to be. How would she sneak out now? If she couldn't sneak out, how could she begin to explain all that had happened to her, all she was now prepared to do?

But all Maddie-Lynn heard was the laughter, and she thought Mary-Beth was making fun of her. Maddie-Lynn scowled and swiped the clipping away. She eyed the heap of Donny's clothes—his bandanas, cut-off shorts, and calk-stained jeans—which had been left in a heap on the stripped-down mattress. She gathered a handful of them in her arms and stumbled after her mother across the hall.

Their bedroom still stank of Gram, now even more so that the candle had burnt out, the bunched-up sheets left to ferment in the corner. Cora pulled the curtains down and opened the window. In came the ever-bright light, illuminating the stuff of the world which was now about to be packed into boxes: Gram's costume jewelry and religious tchotchkes, Maddie-Lynn's toys, Mary-Beth's library books. Maddie-Lynn tried to hand the pile of her father's clothes to Cora. "What about Dad?" she said. "Don't forget Dad's stuff."

Cora tried to make her voice sound calm. "Your father needs to stay here," she cooed.

"He's holding the fort down?" asked Maddie-Lynn.

Cora looked sadly at her daughter. It was the explanation Donny gave to his children when they wanted to know why couldn't they follow their friends' families to New York or San Fransisco, why couldn't they go somewhere where they could go to school, why they had to stay in Fox Lake while the rest of the town had been evacuated. *We're holding the fort down,* he would say, as if there were a battle to be won. Against whom? At whose expense? Cora sighed. "Yes, he's holding the fort down." Then, "Now, do you want to pack for yourself, or should I?"

Maddie-Lynn dropped the bundle in her hands. She searched Mary-Beth's face the same way Mary-Beth sometimes searched her mother's face: for instruction, an answer, a sign. Mary-Beth had nothing to offer. How could she prepare her for the road ahead when all was so unknown? What use were words of comfort her when their world was bottoming out from under them? How could she begin to apologize for the fact that she would not be there to help them build a new one?

Maddie-Lynn had no other choice but to surrender. She met her mother in the closet. Cora gathered the essentials—sundress, tennis shoes, clean socks, underwear—while Maddie-Lynn added the strangest combination of objects to her little duffel bag—a piggy bank, a pair of ice skates, a half-eaten candy necklace. Mary-Beth hoped to God they wouldn't pull out the canvas suitcase with all her things packed already and demand an explanation. She did not have an explanation. Her plan sounded so foolish in words. *I'm going to drive cross-country for several days by myself so that I can donate my large intestine to a girl I met yesterday. But you have to understand, I love her. You have to understand, I need this. You have to understand, I have so much to give.* There were no words to convince them. Even Mary-Beth felt less convinced. For a moment, she wondered if she should go with them to Florida instead. It would be smarter, easier, safer, to sit on the beach with her mother and sister and care for them until they all grew old. But Mary-Beth had not made the safe choice when she agreed to get in over her head, and she would feel like a fraud if she gave that up now. And Aida—who was so lovely, so good, so devastatingly beautiful—Aida was sick. It was possible that Aida could be dying. If Mary-Beth chose to do nothing about it, she would never forgive herself.

"What are you standing there for?" Maddie-Lynn called. "Come pack!"

Mary-Beth did not say anything. She did move.

Maddie-Lynn eyed Cora desperately. “Is Mary-Beth holding the fort down too?”

Mary-Beth sat at the edge of the bed and buried her face in her hands. She thought about the endless years of gratitude she owed her mother. How could she look into her eyes and say, I don’t need you, there’s someone else who needs me? Where were the words for, you taught me how to love, but I’ve chosen to love someone else? She wanted to say, you are the best of all possible mothers. She wanted to whisper, forgive me.

Instead, she heard Cora say, in a calm and tranquil voice, “She’s chosen somewhere else already.” Then she felt her mother’s hand on her shoulder. She looked up. Cora wasn’t upset, wasn’t even crying. She winked at Mary-Beth and said, “Mothers know.”

Donny did not get home until after dark. He locked the door behind, lit some candles, cracked open a can of beer. But it wasn’t until he slumped onto the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table that he noticed the house was quiet. Dead quiet. *How can they be sleeping at a time like this,* was Donny’s first thought. Then he took a closer look around the room. The TV was there, the furniture was in its usual place, the buck’s head still stared out its sad, black eyes, but certain things were missing: some cushions, a lamp, some pictures. He walked into the kitchen, threw open the cupboards and drawers. Everything had gone except one plate, one coffee mug, one fork, knife, and spoon, a few cans of baked beans and beer. *We’ve been robbed,* was his next thought, and he grew angry, and worried. He ran upstairs and into the girls’ room. His daughters’ things had all gone missing, but Gram’s things, her bathrobes and dresses and Catholic icons, were all there. *So they’ve run away then,* he thought. *They’re overcome by grief and ran away. We have to find them before it gets too late.* He rushed to wake up his wife, but Cora was not there. There was nothing there but Donny’s clothes in a pile on the bed. And on top of the pile, a small box. Donny picked it up. It was a present, wrapped in newspaper and tied with twine. *To D. Love C*, it said. Donny tore it open. It was a copy of Hubbard H. Cobb’s *Your Dream Home: How To Build it for Less than $3500*. The same copy Cora bought him when they first moved in together, after they were married, into his mother’s home, this home. On the flyleaf, she had written, all those years ago, *So we can plan for… someday*. Those words, and the weight of the

dream they once carried, served to break him in half. And then Donny did not think anything. He only felt terribly, utterly alone.

Donny's fears were confirmed when he saw that the station wagon wasn't in the driveway. His pickup truck, at least, was there, and its keys left sitting in the driver's seat. He pulled up the garage door and found all his tools and treasures—things he owned and, therefore, things he could count on—still there. He began, mechanically, to pick up things that consoled him—hammer, saw, studs, nails, a few stacks of two-by-fours, his shotgun—and tossed them into the back of the truck. He set up a ladder and climbed up into beams that supported the roof of the garage. There, among the cobwebs, he kept a rusty, tin lunchbox, and inside it, his most prized possessions.

The moon was a slice of itself, and in its meager light, Donny sorted through tops and marbles and baseball cards from his childhood, his brother's harmonica, his mother's rosary, his father's dog tag, and found what he was looking for. A pink, lacy, fuzzy thing: the garter Cora had under her gown at the prom where he proposed, right there on the basketball court while the DJ played "Every Breath You Take." He held it close to his mouth and inhaled deeply, searching for Cora's smell underneath the smell of metal and dust. And there it was: smell of sock sweat and cheap perfume. Donny was sure he could hear her voice as well, singing along in a creaky falsetto to Sting's words. *Every move you make, every vow you break, every smile you fake, every claim you stake.* Cora was, still, the best thing that had ever happened to him. *Why,* Donny thought. *Why, why, why. Why would she want to leave me?*

He wanted to rip the garter into pieces. He wanted to smash things. He wanted to bust in the windows of the house, stab the cushions of the couches with a butcher knife. He wanted to throw his pile of clothes out the window and set them all on fire. But he did not. Instead, he shoved the garter in his pocket, got into his truck, and drove, not entirely sure where he was headed, until he arrived back at the front gates of Our Lady of the Lakes.

As he approached the old, unfinished building, he heard that old nursery rhyme in his head. *Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and…* There were the steps on which dried rice fell over him and his new wife. There was the classroom and the desk at which he sat from the ages of six to twelve. There was the cafeteria where Gram worked as a lunch lady to

afford his tuition. There was the baptismal font where Donny was born into the world. There was the altar where Donny took his first Eucharist, promising himself to the world of angels forever. And the aisle down which he and his brothers had carried an empty pine box coffin meant to contain the memory of his father, the fallen solider, accompanied by an electric organ rendition of "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." There was the image of Lord he had prayed to every Sunday of his entire life in Fox Lake, Illinois. There was his pious mother lying on the floor. Why couldn't he find that goddamn wedding ring?

Donny shut himself up in the confessional booth. He knelt down into the dark. He touched his fingers to his brow, sticky with sweat, "In the name of the Father." His chest, thick as bricks, "the Son." His collarbone, "and the Holy Spirit." He took a lighter from his pocket and filled the booth with its timid, orange glow. He clutched the pink, fuzzy garter and held it to his lips.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been… a while. Since my last confession. It took me a while to perk up the energy to build the damn cabinet. Anyway. How you doin? I have to say, Lord, my faith has been tested. But I have believed in you with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength. You could say a lot of things about me, but you cannot say that I am not a faithful man." The metal flint of the lighter started to burn, but Donny's calloused fingers did not feel it. "Lord, I try with all my might to provide for my family. I am a good father. I am a good husband. I am a good worker. But my family thinks I'm a douchebag. They love me, but I can tell, they think I'm a douche."

Donny heard voices gathering around him. "Am I losing it? I was sane until the world started screwing with me. Taking things from me. First my profession. Then my home. The water. My mother. My wife…" Donny heard the voices becoming louder and more aggravated. "I have to confess, Lord, sometimes I wonder if I could just… Drift. Off into the void. Just to see if I could do it. Sometimes I think I could do it on my own. But I know you've got the master plan for me, Lord. I am a good father. I am a good husband. That's what I was put on this earth to do. And to make things. I just need to know what to make. I need your guidance, Lord. Forgive me. Tell me how to be a good husband. Tell me how to make good things."

Donny noticed that a blister had developed on his thumb. He killed the lighter and let the dark and the voices embrace him. He offered his palms.

"Show me what to do with these hands."

The voices went silent. Chills stuttered across the nape of Donny's neck. He felt something brush against his shoulder. A web of hair brushed against his shoulder. He could feel someone's hot breath in his ear. A whisper. An angel's voice.

"Greater love has no one than this, that you lay down your body for your life."

Donny was not entirely sure what that meant. But lay your body down sounded a lot like an invitation to the gates. Donny was scared, and he did not like the burnt alloy taste of the barrel in his mouth. But he also felt so spent, so without, that he chose to trust in what the angel said, and figured the Lord could explain the rest on the other side.

Mary-Beth flung open the confessional door and found him this way: about to put a bullet in his mouth. So she kicked it away with all her strength. So a shot rang out. If there were anyone nearby, they might have mistaken the sound for the clap of thunder. They might have dropped to their knees, stuck out their tongues, and thanked their lucky stars for the promise of rain at last. But there was no one nearby, and there was no rain, just a father and his daughter gripping each other in the dark, trying to align the rhythm of their breathing, just to prove, again and again, that the other was, indeed, alive.

After a long time, Mary-Beth unfolded the IPALU letter and slipped it into Donny's hands. He flicked the lighter again and tried to read. The words *donor, collective, Los Angeles,* and *life* appeared before him, but he was too tired to make out the rest, and too tired to ask.

"I'm leaving too," said Mary-Beth. "I have my bags and the keys to the car. I could be gone right now."

Donny's mouth was numb in all the places that the barrel had touched. He said nothing.

"Or," she said, voice shaking, "you could drive with me. It's your choice. I leave with you, or I leave without you."

Donny licked his lips. "I will promise you this," he said. "I will never try to leave you again. Just please do one thing for me."

“What is it?”

Donny swallowed. “Please help me bury your grandmother.”

Part II

Cut

Fox Lake, Illinois

Mary-Beth studied the puddle that contained the last traces of Fox Lake's water supply. To her it looked more like an oil spill than water, with Donny's yellow gob of spit still floating around in it. Still, it made her mouth water. Perhaps out of habit. Perhaps out of longing. Or perhaps the mouth was mourning the body of water which had left them with nothing but a sinkhole, desolate as the moon.

Dawn rose. Donny spat on his hands, lifted his pickaxe, and began to break apart the cold, hard clay. Mary-Beth stood aside, her father's extra large sport coat draped over her shoulders, and watched as Donny dug, shoveling up great clouds of dust. She looked back and forth between her father, the puddle, the truck that would take them to California, and her grandmother's corpse which—because the coffin was too heavy for Donny and Mary-Beth to carry by themselves—was rolled up in layers of quilts. Only her white curls and swollen, half-painted toes could be seen. This was all that was left of their little lives, she thought, feeling a peculiar mix of fear and relief.

When the grave was long and deep, Donny threw Gram's body over his shoulder. He lay her body down, kissed her one last time on the top of her head, then announced, in a shrugging voice, "Well, ashes to ashes, I guess." When he climbed out, his dress shirt was wet with sweat, his pants and work boots stained the same lunar color as the sinkhole. He donned the coat, then took a harmonica out of its pocket and played the first few long, sad, solemn notes of Amazing Grace, pausing at *that saved a wretch like me,* to weep.

Mary-Beth rubbed circles on his back, wondering how different things would be if she had two bodies to bury instead of one. Then she wondered if her father would be around to bury her, too, if he would play Amazing Grace and weep over her. She hoped so. The wind picked up. Chills ran up her dress and across her bare legs. Dust fell like snow on Gram's quilts.

Donny, after a while, caught his breath. Mary-Beth tossed down a bouquet she had made out of dried thistle and goosefeathers and, when her father wasn't looking, the wedding ring. Then earth: each sprinkled a handful at first, before Donny shoveled heaps of it into the grave, adding heavy stones and bramble to keep the dry earth from blowing away. When they were

finished, the land looked about as flat and white as it had when they began. Donny took the big, freshly-painted crucifix from Our Lady of the Lakes and stuck it in the ground to commemorate her. He wiped his forehead with a red bandana and asked, for the dozenth time, "We got everything?"

They had some clothes, a few gallons of diesel fuel, candles, matches, Donny's one remaining shotgun (bad luck to take the one he had kissed), some canned vegetables and beans, a road atlas published in 1994, a mohair blanket, a box of Mary-Beth's homemade tampons, one bottle of Jim Beam, one 30-rack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, The Holy Bible, and *Your Dream Home: How To Build it for Less than $3500.* It wasn't much, but they figured it was enough to last them the five days it would take to drive to Los Angeles. If in fact it did still take five days to get to Los Angeles. For all they knew, the route ahead could be crawling with obstacles or, who knows, blasted to smithereens.

"Everything," Mary-Beth replied.

They each took a turn in the cab to change out of their funeral garb. Donny put on a flannel and carpenter's jeans, Mary-Beth her denim jacket and a Rolling Stones t-shirt of her dad's, big enough for her to wear as a dress. By the time Donny started the engine, the wind had grown stronger, pushing walls of rubble across the crater. They knocked Gram's cross slightly askew.

"Here we go!" Donny howled, affixing his rosary on the rearview mirror. "Road trip! Road trip!" Donny banged his fists on the steering wheel. "The Mother Road! The road of flight!"

"Do you have to shout?" Mary-Beth said, pinching the bridge of her nose. She had a headache. She realized that she hadn't slept since she spent the night—half the night, at least—at Aida's house, and the fatigue was catching up with her.

Windshield wipers on, but helping little to see past the dust, they navigated blind out of the sinkhole, down the main strip, and out of town. Fox Lake, that uninhabitable place, became officially uninhabited. If a town is a town because people live in it, Donny and Mary-Beth's had finally entered into communion with ruins. Mary-Beth felt a pang of regret in her heart. Donny

did not; in his heart this was home forever, and since it was home, he would find a way to come back. When they could see again, there was nothing but cornfields.

They drove through farmlands, each peppered with barns hundreds of years old, their façades peeling slowly away. “Water is the number-one eroder,” Donny explained. “It’s probably why they’ve lasted so long.” He remembered the names of the families who used to work there. “This,” he pointed out a big, grey A-framed barn tailed by a long, dirt driveway, “was where my Great Uncle Clarey lived. He used to put out a sign every Friday afternoon advertising FRESH FARM EGGS, for the tourists, you know, heading out to the Chain o’ Lake, or up to the Dells. Poor Uncle Clarey, his wife died early, so it was the only socializing he got to do. So if the hens weren’t putting out, he’d be out there anyway, selling whatever he could get at the grocers.”

How could Donny be talking about chickens and eggs at a time like this, after all that had happened? Mary-Beth hoped that his monologues would peeter off after a few hours, or else she may not bear the next five days. Mary-Beth leaned her forehead against the window. She hoped Donny would get the message, but he carried on talking.

“I come from a family of working men,” he said. “Hard-working men who built walls and machines, men who put food on other people’s tables.” Louder, he said, “Men who knew how to take care of themselves. How to survive.”

Mary-Beth thought about Aida. When Aida talked about survival, she meant something very different than simply being strong or working hard. Survival could be about care, too. And desire. And joy. “What do you know about survival?” she grumbled.

“Kid, do you know how many roofs I’ve fallen off? How many motorcycle crashes I’ve been in? How many fingers that I put through the skilsaw and sewed back together. Your old man is a survivor.”

That’s not survival, Mary-Beth thought. That’s putting yourself in danger and getting lucky. She wondered if Donny had ever known real danger—as Aida had, as Gigi had—or if he had only ever created it for himself. She thought about finding him with the gun in his mouth and closed her eyes. She didn’t know whether to pity him or be furious with him.

They turned west on Lake Cook Drive and headed south. Donny become agitated, as he always had, as the prairies his fathers plowed gave way to suburbia. Its cookie-cutter houses and

four-story shopping malls. The same pay-less shoe stores every ten miles, the same donut shops and 24-hour restaurants. Nothing but parking lots between them. It still surprised him how many miles the city sprawl crept, as if it were contagious, spreading strip malls like cancerous cells along its highways.

Donny supposed he could take a bit of pleasure out of seeing all these places go decrepit, their poorly-manufactured walls cracked half to ash. But as he took the on-ramp to Interstate 53 towards Joliet, Donny got the implacably dispiriting feeling that the disease hadn't stopped spreading, that its course was aimed for him, threatening him with shiny promises. Donny missed the dirt roads of his childhood, the sunburns, the scraped knees, the fights with his brothers. Things that made him tough. Things that reminded him he was in the world, and a man too.

On the overpass there hung a billboard of an orange-skinned couple, sitting in adirondack chairs and cheersing glasses of iced tea. *Retire in style,* it said, *in Naples, Florida.* Donny grumbled. He refused to believe that his wife would want to live in a place like that. Cora had always been brash, blunt, and tomboyish. Donny liked that about her. She had been the first girl in their high school to try out for the football team. The coach, as a joke, let her on, but only ever to watch from the sidelines, bring cups of gatorade out to the bigger, older boys. Donny's friends used to bully her relentlessly. "I'll take care of that sweet little ass of yours if you want it pummeled so bad," they would say. "I'd rather fuck myself with a wet rag than be humped for eighteen seconds by your weasel dick," she'd spit back. She was like that. A fighter. Donny needed that. Someone who complimented his tough-guy attitude. Someone who could protect him when he was feeling weak. The other guys couldn't understand why he started going out with her, and practically ostracized him when he proposed at their senior prom. Donny didn't mind. Donny felt, still, that Cora was the best thing that had ever happened to him. And, he was sure, he was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

"She'll be back," he said out loud. "She won't last ten seconds in that bogus hole. Whole place is probably under water anyway."

Mary-Beth watched the telephone wires dip and rise out the window. She couldn't help but wish there was some way to call Cora and make sure things were okay. She hoped that they

had found a place to stay. Maybe a hotel room with an ocean view. Or, if it was true what Donny said, that Florida was underwater, they could live in a houseboat, or a house on stilts. She wished she could call Maddie-Lynn and tell her a story about mermaids. She wished she could tell Cora that she and Donny were together and safe. Their goodbye had been tearful but too fast. She wished she could say goodbye one last time.

She gazed at her father. His brow furrowed, crow's feet pursed, knuckles pulled taut around the steering wheel. She wondered what he would say if he had been given the chance to say goodbye. She shuddered thinking about it. He wouldn't have let her go.

Then, as if to confirm her fears, Donny jerked the truck to the left, scaled the partition, and crashed into the northbound lane. They were heading back the direction they had come. *He's going to trap me there forever*, Mary-Beth thought, panicking. She considered the possibility of rolling out the car and running. Or maybe she could knock him out and leave him on the side of the highway. She would do anything, but she would not let him stop her. She would not let him take her home.

"Dad!" she shouted. "Turn around right now!"

"Relax, kiddo," Donny said. "Just stopping for some coffee."

Mary-Beth put her hand on her heart as Donny pulled into a gas station. Its glass door had been cracked open, but the shop looked a lot less looted than the other spots they had passed. Donny knocked some of the loose glass away with the stock of his rifle and climbed in. He returned with an armful of roadside snacks: Bugles, Fun-Yuns, Ho-Hos and, unbelievably, two cups of coffee in styrofoam cups. Donny handed one to her and shoved a cake into his mouth, smearing icing white as plastic over the gristles on his lower lip.

Mary-Beth sipped at the coffee. It was slimy and cold. She opened the passenger side door and made a big deal of dumping the black sludge on the pavement before wrapping herself in the mohair blanket and pretending to sleep.

"A little respect around here," Donny grumbled under his breath. "Is that too much to ask?"

He's going to get us both killed, Mary-Beth thought, and drifted into blackness with that omen on her mind.

Joliet, Illinois

Mary-Beth woke to the sound of Donny's voice, singing loudly. "I'm a soul man! Do do do do dodo do. I'm a soul man!" Through watery eyes, she saw him pointing to a string of buildings on the outskirts of the fields. "Stateville," he said. "Blues Brothers? John Belushi? Ever heard of it?"

Mary-Beth rubbed the crust from her tear ducts and looked again. Brown cement buildings rose up from the brown earth. A large cement wall was further skirted by a chain-link fence, which was crowned by an electric wire that sparked in the light. Smokestacks were guzzling cheerfully away at thick, grey clouds.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A prison. They say it's the toughest in America. Hotel Hell they call it."

"Why are there still people there?" She assumed that any semblance of a formalized police force would have dissipated when the government shutdown.

"What makes you think there are people there?" Donny asked.

"Why keep an electric fence on if you're not trying to keep somebody in. Or out?"

Donny and Mary-Beth were so preoccupied with the spectacle of the penitentiary that nearly pummeled into the barricade in the road in front of them. Donny slammed the brakes, and the truck jerked forward, digging their seatbelts into their chests.

A young man with razor bumps on his pale face rounded the hood to the driver's side window. He wore a tie, aviator sunglasses, and a badge that said *Stateville Borehole.* He looked ridiculous, like a child playing dress up. Donny and Mary-Beth each hated him instantly.

"What brings you to our little neck of the woods, sir?" he asked. Chewing gum slapped against his cheek as he spoke.

"Just passing through," Donny said. Then added, "What's it to ya?"

"I won't take sarcasm sitting down," the cop said. "This is a high security clearance area."

Donny laughed in his face. "High security? For whose state? Don't you read the news?"

"I mean it. No funny business." He took out a clipboard. "Name."

"Cobb. Hubbard Cobb."

"Can I see some identification, Mr. Cobb?"

"What are you gonna do, arrest me?" Donny said, angering. "You're not a cop. I'd be in my right mind to give you a good clobbering right now. Wipe the sweat off my ass with that cute little badge of yours."

"All right, I'm going to have to ask you both to step out of the car."

"Oh, be my guest!" Donny shouted, whacking the cop in the hipbone as the door swung open.

Mary-Beth stepped out of her side and stared down at her shoes. Her heart was pounding. She had no idea what would do if this ended badly. *Calm down,* she nearly said, *Just do what he says.* Then she tried to think about what Aida would do in her situation. Aida would stand up for herself, she thought. Aida would not be complicit.

The cop started rummaging through the back of the pick up truck. "Where's your warrant, officer?" Donny badgered him. "If you're gonna play the game, play it right!"

The cop smiled when he got his hands on Donny's rifle. "Look what we have here!" he said. "Just passing through?"

"It is my God-given right to carry that gun," Donny said. "How else am I supposed to defend myself? It's the End of the World, for Christ's sake!"

The cop cocked the gun and aimed it in Donny's direction. Donny's face puffed up and went red. He backed off and fell silent. "Not another word," the cop said.

Fear and hatred erupted in Mary-Beth. She took a deep breath and shouted, "You put that down right now, filthy pig!"

The cop, caught off guard by her voice, dropped the gun. He scrambled to pick it up and pouted, as a little boy pouts when he's lost his game, and to a girl no less. Mary-Beth smiled slightly then, knowing that he was somebody who could only see himself, and people who can only see themselves are easily outsmarted.

“I’m going to have to take you in for questioning,” he announced, alarmed. Donny and Mary-Beth each eyed the holster on his hip—whether he had a real gun or not, they did not know—and decided to follow him.

The cop lead them into a reception hall. There, a thin man with long, white hair sat, signing papers by the dim light of a green desk lamp. A Bach Cello Suit played from a record player.

“Tommy,” he smiled. His voice was so serene, like a polished stone. “Who do we have here?”

“Trespassers, Mr. Oberlin.”

Donny harrumphed.

“No such thing, my darling,” Oberlin cooed. “Everyone is welcome here.” He flashed a row of square teeth. “I apologize on behalf of Tommy. He’s a bit paranoid. Poor thing. And you are?”

“I’m Hubbard Cobb,” Donny said. “And this is my daughter—”

“Aida,” Mary-Beth answered.

The man rose. He towered over them all, taller even than Donny, though much skinnier. His white hair draped down to his knees. He clasped his palms together and bowed. “Phoenix Oberlin. I’m the warden here at Stateville.”

“I thought there weren’t supposed to be prisons anymore,” Mary-Beth said.

“Oh, this isn’t a prison,” said Oberlin. “It’s a transformation center.” He motioned them into a long, fluorescent hallway. “The Collective, of course, believes in the abolition of the carceral state,” he explained. “But one can’t be too nit-picky when infrastructure is so limited. Take this place for example,” Oberlin waved his hands. Each of his fingers was adorned with its own turquoise ring. “It was a terrible place, yes, where terrible things happened, and innocent people suffered. But what if it could be reconstituted, to make something for the greater good?” There was a steel strongroom door at the end of the corridor. Oberlin laid his thumb on the scanner and the door thrust open.

They stepped into a round atrium, as wide as a football field, and crested by a magnificent glass ceiling. The crossed a bridge which lead to a panopticonal tower at its center.

Mary-Beth peered over the railing and nearly fainted from the vertigo. The room spiraled deep into the earth, at least one hundred feet down, maybe more. Workers in teal lab coats were illuminated by the bright lights which beat down from the tower. They hurled against the rock with shovels and pickaxes. Their faces were almost indistinguishable, so caked were they in filth.

"Welcome to the Big Hole!" Oberlin announced, his voice undulating like a priest's in a cathedral. He called over the edge, "Morning, comrades!" A few workers squinted at the lights. It seemed most couldn't hear him over the sound of their machinery.

"Are those—" Mary-Beth searched for the right word. "Are they being detained here?"

"Of course not, precious," Oberlin said. "These are volunteers, not inmates."

When they reached the tower, Oberlin scanned his thumb again, and two double doors slid open. They stepped into a hexagonal elevator, entirely cased in glass.

"What are they mining, diamonds?" Donny asked as they descended. The tower lights smashed against the elevator and then refracted in all directions.

"This," Oberlin said proudly, "is a borehole. The biggest the Collective has ever made.

"What's a borehole?" Mary-Beth asked.

"We're digging for water. There are whole lagoons of freshwater just a few strata below the surface."

Mary-Beth watched five women hoist a large drill up on their shoulders. The drill roared to life and the plunged it into the rocky wall. The earth rumbled in resistance and the women pulled back. Some were old and some were young, but they all cursed loudly when they set the drill back down, rubbing their lower backs.

"Why would anyone choose to do this?" asked Mary-Beth.

"Well," Oberlin sighed. "Most of them were *formerly* inmates. When the Collective took this place over, we explained to them that they were free, that they could go as they pleased. But I think they realized freedom is a much more dangerous endeavor than it used to be. So we offered them jobs. And a clean bed to sleep in. Good rations. No one's watching them. There's even a Shakespeare group, and a daily meditation session, and a—"

"Have you struck water yet?" Donny interrupted.

"Not yet," he admitted. "But we're close. I can feel it."

The elevator stopped at a platform about halfway down the Big Hole. Oberlin locked his beady, amber eyes on Mary-Beth. There was something lifeless about them, like they were mirrors. “Would you like to meet some of the comrades?” he asked. Before Mary-Beth could answer, he called, “Esther!” An old, thin woman turned and blinked at them through her thick prescription glasses. Oberlin bowed to her as he had bowed to Donny and Mary-Beth, then waved her over. “Esther has been with us a long time. Haven’t you?”

Esther did not respond to Oberlin. But she did shake Mary-Beth’s hand, and then Donny’s. “How do you do?” she said. Her voice was raspy, and she was missing several teeth, which gave her a lisp, but Mary-Beth could hear the hint of her southern accent. She wondered what in the world an old woman from the south was doing mining for water in Joliet, Illinois.

“Do you like living in the Big Hole, Esther?” Oberlin asked.

“The Collective saved my life,” Esther spoke mechanically and without emotion, like it was something she had been told to say. “I finally feel I’m a part of something greater than myself.” Then, she turned from them and shuffled back to her work.

“Doesn’t it just warm your heart to hear that,” Oberlin said, and he really seemed to be moved. His mirror eyes flashed. “This really is the heart of the New Beginning. You’re here at the center. We’re making history!” He patted Donny on the shoulder. “And I am so happy to have found some fresh, new recruits. We could really use a strong man like you around here.” He squeezed Donny’s bicep.

“That’s not why we’re here,” Donny snapped.

“Oh, my darlings, don’t be modest. There’s plenty of space for you here. And if you want to stay together we can arrange for couple’s quarters—”

“This is my *daughter*, you perv!”

“Oh right, my mistake,” said Oberlin. “You just let me know whatever it is you need, you’ve got it. We’re all in this together, remember? Consider Phoenix Oberlin your brother.” He stretched out his enormous arms to embrace them both, but they backed away. “That’s all right. You’ll warm up soon, I’m sure. Let me get some cloaks for you.” Oberlin clapped and ordered someone to bring the lab coats out from the dressing rooms.

“Listen here—” Donny started, clenching his fist. Mary-Beth grabbed his wrist. If he started a fight, down here in the unforgiving belly of the earth, it would be impossible to get back out. She pulled the letter from her jacket’s inside pocket.

“We’re just passing through,” she reiterated. “I’m joining the IPALU.”

Oberlin skimmed over the letter, and his face lit up. “This is wonderful!” he said, bouncing girlishly on the balls of his black leather shoes. “What a brave and honorable decision to make. The IPALU is an excellent program. Putting Universal Body theory into practice is essential to the sustainability of our New Beginning. You’ll really be helping the cause.”

“I look forward to it,” Mary-Beth said, wrapping her hand around Donny’s waist, half to protect him, half to hold him back.

Oberlin ushered Donny and Mary-Beth back to the elevator. He sung the praises of the doctors at Good Samaritan hospital, ensuring Mary-Beth that she was in good hands and, as they returned to the front office, wishing her luck on her journey. Donny ground his teeth together. *Hang on,* Mary-Beth tried to communicate, squeezing him. *Trust me.*

Tommy escorted Mary-Beth and Donny back to the truck. Begrudgingly, he handed the rifle back to Donny. “This isn’t a toy, kid, kapeesh?” Donny said. The boy nodded and opened the security gate so that they could pass through the barricade.

“Do visit us again!” Oberlin’s genteel voice called from a loudspeaker. “I’ll be especially thrilled to see you again, big guy!"

The truck careened forward as Donny laid his boot down on the gas, speeding away. Mary-Beth watched the penitentiary flatten back into the landscape as they drew further and further away. She thought of Esther, and the women with the heavy drill, and all the other people who were stuck there in the dirt and dark. She should have done something, she thought, to help them get out too. “Let’s go back,” she said.

“Are you out of your damn mind, kid? To Nosferatu and Dennis the Menace? No thanks!” He tried to laugh, but Mary-Beth could see that he was shaking.

“There are people trapped down there. We can’t just do nothing.”

“You heard what the guy said. They chose to be there.”

“They were probably tricked into it, like we would’ve been, if I hadn’t saved your ass.”

"Those are convicted criminals there, Mary-Beth."

"As if that wannabe pig is any better. He could have killed you. Again, if I hadn't saved you."

"You did not save me," Donny chuckled. "I had the situation under control."

"You and I both know you wouldn't be here if it weren't for me," Mary-Beth snapped.

Donny's face flushed. He pressed even harder on the gas pedal.

Mary-Beth's face flushed, too, and she looked out the window. It wasn't her fault that Donny had wanted to hurt himself in the confessional. In fact, she deserved to feel proud of herself for stopping him. Instead, she felt ashamed. She should have left him to make the decision on his own, she thought. She would, obviously, rather have her father alive than dead. The problem was that the control had shifted, leaving her responsible for whether Donny lived or died. She couldn't take that on. Not right now, when she had her own body to worry about, her own death.

"What was that stuff you two were rambling on about anyway?" Donny asked.

Mary-Beth searched her father's face. He looked pained and bewildered, like she had insulted him in a language he didn't understand. For the first time, it occurred to her that her father had never read the IPALU letter. That, in his desperation, he had agreed to deliver her to Los Angeles under no pretense, save for the fact that he wouldn't be alone. He did not know that he was taking her to die.

"It's too complicated to explain right now," Mary-Beth said. "Just drive."

Wilmington, Illinois

Not one hundred miles into their journey, Donny began to panic about gas. He bought the Ford F150 the year Mary-Beth was born and had seldom driven it farther than Our Lady of the Lakes. As they drove—and Donny liked to drive fast—the old engine ate away at fuel. They were already running on empty, and if Donny filled up the tank now, there wouldn't be enough left to fill it up a second time.

The towns they passed through were about as dead as Fox Lake had been. Silent and not a soul in sight. Donny kept stopping at the stations anyway, banging on doors, as if anyone were around, and even going so far as to stick his nose down the mouth of the fuel pipe to see if anything was left underground. Mary-Beth began to grow impatient with him.

"You're not going to find anything in these small towns," she said after another one of his failed attempts. "We're going to have to go back to the city to find gas."

"Part of the deal was that we would do old Route 66. It's always been a dream of mine. And your mother's."

Mary-Beth rolled her eyes.

"This day and age, you won't get the craftsmanship, the good old-fashioned American pride, as you did these joints in their heyday. I mean, look at that," Donny pointed to a twelve-foot-tall fiberglass statue of a spaceman, looming over the parking lot of an old drive-in restaurant. "Isn't it adorable?"

Mary-Beth thought it more out of place than anything else. Not the least because it seemed, compared to everything else in Wilmington, pretty well taken care of. She looked closer as they drove past. The giant was slick with fresh, green paint. It cradled a rocket in its hands, and over the original advertisement, in the same green paint, someone had written the words, *Puerta a las estrellas*. "Dad, look," she said, pointing to the parking lot. "Cars."

There, in front of the entrance, three identical, baby blue Cadillacs sat in a row. They looked too clean to have been abandoned. Not only did they have the tires on, too, but not a single one was flat. Donny pulled up beside them. A neon sign flashed O-P-E-N in the window. A little bell chimed as they pushed the front door, unlocked, open. There was a specials board: carne a la tampiqueña y chilaquiles. At the cash register, two women—one Cora's age, the other almost Gram's—were arguing in Spanish and banging on a small television set. They wore matching pink puffer jackets and their hair was sprayed into curly halos around their heads, one black, and one grey. Noticing Donny and Mary-Beth, they did not seem frightened or even phased. They smiled warmly and gestured to one of the open tables. Too intimidated to refuse, Donny and Mary-Beth sunk into a booth. The younger woman gave them each a laminated menu

and smiled. Purple lipstick was smudged slightly on her grey teeth. Mary-Beth smiled but Donny did not. She returned behind the counter and resumed her argument about the TV.

The menu was full of colorful pictures and dishes she could not read. She watched Donny squint and fidget in his chair as he tried to make out the words. Then her eyes wandered to an altar-of-sorts at the back of the restaurant. It was decorated with paper marigolds, rosaries, and votive candles. At its center hung a black-and-white photograph of a young man in a NASA uniform.

"I can't understand a goddamn thing they're saying," Donny whispered sourly.

"It would do good for you to learn a little bit," Mary-Beth hissed back, though she spoke no Spanish herself. "English is about to be an ancient language."

Donny scowled. He did not mind that the country of his birth had fallen apart or that its leaders had fucked off to islands they built for themselves in the middle of the ocean, or so he had heard. He did not mind that the country of his birth was now an open home for people from all over, all languages, all backgrounds. But the thought of his person being threatened—his tongue, his values, his lifestyle made irrelevant—that struck a chord in him.

The younger woman appeared, again, at their table. Mary-Beth ordered the chilaquiles. The woman snickered softly at her poor pronunciation, and Mary-Beth blushed. Donny simply pointed to a picture on the menu. The woman nodded, but as she walked away, covered her laughter with her hand. Donny noticed the two women whispering to each other and his face got hot. "I think they're talking about me," he confessed.

"For the love of God! Open your eyes. They're just trying to fix their TV." Mary-Beth slumped into the worn leather seat and added, "You can't afford to be this paranoid. It's the End of the World. Either we kill each other, or we do our best to help. They might know where we can find fuel, so please, be nice."

Donny rose then, knocking over a salt shaker and a bottle of Tabasco sauce. He approached the counter and motioned for the women to step aside. He cracked the back of the television with a fork and began to fiddle with the wires, twisting some, reattaching others elsewhere. After a few minutes of this, the television blared, loud and bright. A woman in a

beautiful evening gown screamed as another woman in a beautiful evening gown pushed her into a swimming pool. The women howled and embraced Donny, one on each of his arms.

"Señora Mejía," the older woman said, shaking his hand. "Gracias."

"Señora Mejía," the younger woman said, shaking his other hand. "Gracias."

"Nice to meet you, Donny. It's nothing. All in a day's work."

Señora Mejía looked at her mother and raised her eyebrows. The other Señora nodded. "Venga," she said. She pulled on Donny's flannel jacket, dragging him through the kitchen. Mary-Beth followed them out into the back lot, where a man was welding a large metal sheet onto a towering, silver structure. "Miguel!" Señora Mejía called. Miguel lifted his welding visor. It was the man from the photograph, though quite a bit older now, and with a mustache. "Donny va a ayudarte."

"What is it?" Donny asked.

"Astronave," Señora Mejía said. She shot her hand in the air and whistled through her teeth. "Outta this world!"

"A rocket ship?" Donny jumped up and down like a child. "No shit!" He ran towards the structure and disappeared inside it. Mary-Beth smiled and shook her head awkwardly, by way of apology to the Señoras Mejía, and trailed after him. Inside, the rocket was built like a movie set, all chrome and yellow flashing lights. Sunlight poured in through the gap at the top of the cone. Donny was playing with the buttons, steering the control stick, growling into a pretend walkie-talkie with a pretend accent. "Ground control, do you read me. Ten four, ready for take off."

"Dad!" Mary-Beth shook him on the shoulder. "We don't have time for this."

"Come on, Mary-Beth, I'm just having a little fun." Donny pretended to shoot oncoming battleships with lasers. "Pew! Pew! Pew!"

"They think you're going to help them build it."

"Why would they thing that?"

"Because you said you would."

"I did not! I just helped them with the TV."

"Then explain to them that you can't help."

"I can't. You do it, Mary-Beth."

“This is your mistake,” Mary-Beth said. “If we’re going to make it through this, you’re going to need to learn to talk to other people like real people.”

Donny looked at her with pleading eyes. He had the very same expression as a dog’s when you take away its toy. Mary-Beth stood her ground. “Fine,” he grumbled, and together they crawled through the hatch at the base of the rocket. The Señoras Mejía were waiting expectantly, smiling a bit too wide, with the dishes Mary-Beth and Donny had ordered in their hands.

Donny took a deep breath. “Thank you. Gracias,” he pronounced it *grassy ass,* “for your hospitality. Unfortunately, this—” he knocked on metal sheet, “Not my area of expertise. Comprehendo?” Mary-Beth stepped in front of him. “I’m sorry for bothering you,” she said, and tried to drag her father away. “We’ll just be going now. You have a nice day.” As she dragged him, Mary-Beth dug her fingernails into his hand. Who in their right mind would speak to another adult like that?

“Espérate!” said the Señoras Mejía, running after them with the trays of food. “Quédate!”

Mary-Beth felt Donny let go of her hand. She groaned, thinking he had accepted their offer to stay and eat, therefore subjecting her to further embarrassment. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught him disappear again behind the ship. “Dad!” she shouted. “Let’s go!”

Donny came running back towards her with two large jerry cans in his arms. The Señoras Mejía dropped their plates. “Come on!” he shouted. Before she could think, she was running after him back through the restaurant and out to their car.

The Señoras Mejía and Miguel were not far behind. “Hey!” they called. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Mary-Beth took the keys out of Donny’s back pocket and started the truck while he threw the gasoline in the back of the car. By the time he made it to the passenger seat, the younger Señora Mejía was at the window. “It’s people like you I can’t stand,” she said. “You’re the reason why I want to get out of this country.” The older Señora arrived behind her with a bottle of Tabasco sauce and shot a few drops in his face. Donny screamed. Mary-Beth put the truck in reverse and pressed on the gas as hard as she could. She heard the crunch of metal as the truck pummeled straight into the legs of the giant. The statue wobbled a bit but did not fall. “You’ve

broken him!" Señora Mejía shouted. Sure enough, as Mary-Beth looked up, she could see one long, thin crack tear up the giant's leg all the way to his silver bullet helmet.

"I'm sorry," she called out the window as she sped away from the drive-in. "I'm sorry," she said over and over, even after they were miles out of Wilmington and back in the world of ghost towns. She felt cold, and implicated in an evil she would never be able to undo. It wasn't just that they had stolen something from innocent people, nor that they had angered or offended them. What really bothered Mary-Beth was that she had lived up to their expectations. Like what Aida said, *I'm sick of white girls always asking me to take two steps back.* Why was she incapable of helping other people, succeeding only in detachment, or worse, making their lives more difficult? What was it inside her that always acted in defense? *You don't get to do that. You don't get to absolve yourself,* Aida had said.

She felt a knot in her chest. It was her knot, her guilt, her pain. But as she gazed at her father in the rearview mirror—he was wincing and rubbing his red, watery eyes—she decided to blame him for it. He was the one who wouldn't go back to Stateville. He was the one who had stolen the gasoline. Mary-Beth let her own implication in these events melt into the contempt she felt for her father, and the knot, for a moment, felt better.

Donny could feel the disappointment emanating off of her. He didn't understand it. Why was she trying to make him feel bad about it? He did not deserve to be admonished like this, and especially not by his own daughter. Having your own child treat you like a child was awful, completely immobilized you. He felt like admonishing her back, but knew that losing his temper would only make matters worse. When the stinging in his eyes began to wear off, he looked at Mary-Beth again. She was staring straight ahead, her knuckles stretched white over the steering wheel. He looked at the freckles on her face. He remembered how cute they had looked on her when she was little. It had sincerely never occurred to him that she would ever grow up.

"You have to admit," he said, finally. "That was pretty awesome."

Mary-Beth slammed on the brakes. The truck shuddered as it idled in the middle of the road. Mary-Beth did not look at her father. Did not say anything. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel and sighed deeply. As frustrated with him as she was, she figured that frustration wasn't going to help get her to Aida any sooner. She closed her eyes and thought of Aida's gap-

toothed smile. All she wanted was to see her smile again. If that meant pacifying Donny for a few more days, then so be it.

"That was pretty awesome," she said.

She drove on.

Donny smiled, stuck his head out the open window, and, of all things, began to whistle.

St. Louis, Missouri

On the highway, the mind wanders. Especially when there's nothing left to look at but road. Memories crop up without meaning to, then disappear behind the next mile marker.

Memory: Summer. Cicadas clamor for attention in the heat. Donny and Cora are wrestling on the football field. Donny is bigger, taller, stronger, but Cora bites. She smells of canned peaches and armpit. She puts her arms around his waist, and Donny lets himself be tackled into the dry grass. Cora rests her white sneaker on his chest and poses proudly. Her baby hairs frizzing in all directions. The sun so bright everything else is dark. He is so happy.

"I cannot wait to take your mother on this trip," Donny said as sunset leapt over southern Illinois. With no clouds, the sky was a solid pink, like white linen dyed accidentally by a red sock. "We talked about doing a road trip for the honeymoon but the finances just didn't cut it at the time. Look at this." Mary-Beth looked around. The earth was as flat as a piece of paper. "She would just love this."

Memory: Mary-Beth is in the backseat. Maddie-Lynn is a baby in her mother's lap. Donny is driving like hell on wheels. Cora begs him to slow down. He doesn't. He takes a turn too wide, and the car drops headlights first into a ditch. Sound of airbag thundering out. Sound of baby crying. Daisies on Mary-Beth's dress. Mother hitchhiking home.

"I'm sure she would, Dad," Mary-Beth said.

Memory: Aida's lips. Aida's hands cradling Mary-Beth's skull. Sand rustling around them. Bits of it landing on tongues, lodging itself between teeth. Sound of squishing and Aida's soft breath.

"Can you remember when you were happiest?" Mary-Beth asked her father.

Memory: Bouncing a tennis ball against the garage door and catching it. Bouncing a tennis ball against the garage door and catching it again. Bouncing a ball against the garage door and his brother catches it, runs with it as fast as he can down the dirt road. Little Donny chasing after him.

"I had a very happy childhood," Donny said. "We had it a lot better back then."

Mary-Beth drove on as night crawled over. The truck hammered across the bridge that took them over the Mississippi River and into St. Louis. Clay shards of the river basin broke off in chains beneath. An orange fog rose like steam from between the buildings, probably from drum fires, making the city seem volcanic.

Memory: Smell of vomit. Sound of angry organs inside. Mary-Beth rubbing the curve of Aida's back, feeling altogether helpless.

"What is love like for you, Dad?" Mary-Beth asked.

Memory: The couch sunk in so much it is like they are sitting on the floor. Donny and Cora watching bodybuilders pull jet airplanes across a runway on TV. She is pregnant. Red manicure on her big belly. Her hair tickles his nose.

Donny shrugged. "Love's the same for me as anybody else."

Night fell like a stage curtain as Mary-Beth drove out of the city and into the dull edge of more country.

"Getting tired?" Donny asked.

"Not at all," Mary-Beth said, although she felt immeasurably tired. "We should keep going. As far as we can."

"Suit yourself," Donny, looking out the window and into the dark.

Memory: Donny and Mary-Beth are riding this same truck down country roads in the middle of a crisp, black winter night. Bruce Springsteen on the radio. *Hey, little girl, is your daddy home?* Donny turns the heat on high in the cab so that they can roll the windows down, watch the stars. *Did he go and leave you all alone?*

Devil's Elbow, Missouri

Mary-Beth glanced at the dashboard clock. It was four o'clock in the morning. Donny had fallen asleep about an hour ago. His head was tossed back over the headrest, his snores loud and brutish. Mary-Beth fiddled with the radio to drown out the noise. There was nothing but static, but she decided to leave it on, pretending it was a broadcast from the ocean. Thinking about the ocean made her feel closer to Aida, and it calmed her.

It was difficult to navigate in the dark, with nothing but the truck's cloudy headlights for help. Mary-Beth would have stuck to the straight shot of the interstate, but some parts were so badly demolished—whether it was time, or force, or both, she did not know—that it was too risky to try at night. She was forced to stick to backroads.

As they moved further into Missouri, the landscape began to undulate. Elevation was something Mary-Beth was not used to. The in-and-out of valleys, the sharp bends round dragon's-back hills, each dip and turn made her nauseous. Nausea did not help her exhaustion. Her head spun. She could barely see. She tried to speak gently to her body: "Don't give up now. We've come this far. We're almost there."

Careful as she tried to be, Mary-Beth could not have been prepared for Devil's Elbow. She took the curt, rock corner as if it were a curve, and the truck went battering off the road. *Please, no,* Mary-Beth thought. *Not now. Not yet.*

Donny awoke with a fright. He could feel the front axle buckling underneath him, about to break. He grabbed the steering wheel and pulled it towards him, spinning the truck to the side. They skidded halfway down the slope before coming to a stop. The engine cut and the headlights went out, leaving them stranded in the dark. The rosary swung wildly, tapping against the windshield.

Mary-Beth could barely speak. "Oh my God, I… I—"

Donny felt strangely calm. He was happy that he had been the one, this time, to save the day. And seeing Mary-Beth falter grounded him. He was allowed to be her father again. He reached his arm over and rubbed her gently on the back. "It's okay, kid. Believe me, I've seen much worse." Then he got out to survey the damage. In the bed of the truck, he touched his rifle, his books, his beer. "Doesn't look like anything flew out." He checked the body on all sides. It was caked in soil, but otherwise no more dented than it had been before. One headlight had

shattered and blown out, but they could live with that. He opened the hood. “Alternator belt’s loose. Some oil’s spilt. But other than that, she’s clean.” He slammed it shut. “The problem’s going to be getting her back on the road.”

They had no choice but to go in search of help. Donny packed a few of their belongings in a duffel bag: the food, lest it attract any critters, the Bible, his gun. They climbed back up the hill on their hands and knees. Mary-Beth hadn’t seen any signs of life in the direction they had come, so they took off in the other. With nothing but her denim jacket to keep her warm, Mary-Beth could not stop shivering. The air was so full of silence. It hurt to listen.

It wasn’t until dawn that they realized they had veered off course, or else the road had become inherited by the woods. Bramble scratched at Mary-Beth’s bare legs. Twigs snapped loudly under the weight of Donny’s work boots. The uneven sound lead Mary-Beth to notice that Donny was limping. She felt hopeless. They were lost in the woods, their car was broken, and Mary-Beth wasn’t sure how much longer her father would be able to walk. What would she do then? Try to drag him? Stay with him? Leave him in the forest alone? She could feel the tears coming on. It was all her fault that they were here. She was of no use to anyone.

Donny, sensing her panic, could think of little else to do but take the harmonica out of his pocket and play the chords he knew from that John Denver song. *Take me home to the place I belong.* They kept walking, and Donny kept playing. The sun rose higher in the sky, warming their faces, and Mary-Beth started to feel better. She looked around at the exposed roots of the dead, grey oak trees, the lacework of the sparse canopy. Donny caught her looking. “You cannot deny this is a beautiful country,” he said.

“It has some beautiful things,” she conceded.

Around mid-morning, Donny and Mary-Beth spotted an outcropping on the horizon and headed towards it. Much to the dismay of their tired feet, the outcropping was not a building but a big, stone arch. It seemed to neither announce anything or lead anywhere.

“It could been have been a tourist trap,” Donny said. “That means the main road won’t be far off. But first, let me take a leak.”

Donny limped behind one of the columns and unbuckled his belt. He aimed for a crescent-moon-shaped scrap of metal, which hummed as his piss drummed against it. As he

peed, a layer of rust began to erode away, revealing text that had been hidden underneath. Just as he had made out *Trail of,* he felt a prick in his throat. He coughed but the prick did not budge. He put his penis back in his pants and coughed harder. The prick felt like a seed which sprouted in his trachea and weaved like vines into his lungs, choking him out. He doubled-over. Mary-Beth ran to him and struck him, hard, on the back, but this only seemed to make the coughing worse. He put his fingers in his mouth and clawed, trying to remove the thing that was strangling him, but he couldn't feel anything here. The choking was coming from inside.

Terrified, Mary-Beth covered her mouth with the palm of her hand. When she bent down to help her father again, her hand was covered in blood. She touched her face again. Her nose was bleeding. "Dad," she said. "Don't breathe too hard. Take short breaths." She tried to pry Donny's knees from his stomach, his arms from his chest, to free up his passageways. "Focus, Dad. Breathe. It's going to be okay."

Donny twisted onto his hands and knees. He took one, deep breath and puked. Chunky, black dirt dropped out of his mouth. He managed, somehow, to cough up a small pile of rocks and brown, flaky leaves. Then, he coughed once more, spitting out the thing that, he was sure, had been choking him all this time. It was a tooth. A human tooth. He looked up at his daughter, whose face was smothered red with nosebleed. Donny ran his finger inside his mouth, once, and then once more to make sure. None of his were missing.

Lebanon, Missouri

At last, red neon light flared across their faces. Mary-Beth grabbed her father's hand. He held his breath, trying not to get his hopes too high. But he was sure he wasn't dreaming: the lights were on at the Munger Moss Motel.

Donny and Mary-Beth cried out, "Hello?" in their feeble voices. They had walked all day and hadn't seen a soul, or even heard so much as a bird peep. They nearly burst into tears when a woman slid open the window of her little office booth, her many long, silver braids tumbling to the tarmac. A plastic name tag was pinned to her wool cardigan—Hello! My Name Is: Mooney June. Mary-Beth guessed she was as old as Gram, maybe even as old as Aida's Gigi, so worn in

were her wrinkles. She fixed a pair of glasses over her clouded-over eyes and gave the travelers a once-over. They must have looked a sight. Donny's teeth stained black from all the soil he had vomited. Mary-Beth's face caked with dry blood.

"What's gotten to the two of you?" Mooney June asked.

"Car trouble," Donny said.

"Took the curve too wide at Devil's Elbow," Mooney June said.

"How did you know?" asked Mary-Beth.

Two canaries rested on Mooney June's right shoulder. As she spoke, she tossed them pumpkin seeds. "I've been here a long time, girl. Seen it all. I've had folks wander into my motel carrying their left leg in their right hand and their right leg in their left. Once I had a sailor show up here who hadn't had no food nor water in several weeks. A sailor! In Lebanon, Missouri. Can you believe it? Skin so sunburnt I was scared the nice spring breeze would rip a chunk clean off. Much better than a bloody nose."

"This isn't from the car crash," Mary-Beth said.

"No?"

"Yeah, agh—" Donny scratched his hair, searching for the right words. "Something happened in the woods."

"Oh, that was probably the ancestors then. What can you do? You should have seen what they did to that good-for-nothing fracker who tried to buy my land off me. Hornets. Thousands of them. Oh my land. I never saw hide nor hair of them again. And then there were those collectivity punks. What do they know about revolution? The ancestors did them in too."

"Ancestors?" Donny asked.

"That archway you saw, there? Those stairs to nowhere? Built by this guy, Larry Baggett, who had plopped his property right on their land. Stolen land that's been stolen again, I mean, you can imagine the insult. 'You're blocking the way!' the spirits said, but you know how old white men are with these things, they don't listen. They sent spirits to knock on his door every night, you know, to grab his attention. And every night, he gets up, checks the door, thinks he doesn't see nothing, and crawls back in his warm bed, none the wiser. So, the ancestors came together and sent a flesh-form to go talk to him, to speak his language, you know. 'We have been

made to walk hundreds of miles, and now you have gone and put a wall in the middle of our road. Do kindly build a set of stairs so that we can pass through. Please and thank you.' Very polite, those ancestors, more than I would've been. So he built those stairs that seem to go nowhere and the ancestors were happy and the knocking stopped. Then! This man gets it in his head that he's some sort of spiritual messenger and goes and builds that ostentatious gateway. Calls it Trail of Tears, which only pissed off the ancestors more. Just before he dies, Larry goes and puts up a statue of himself, right there next to the steps so that the spirits have to look at his god-awful-ugly face every time they try to pass back and forth. They waited until his soul passed on - polite, the ancestors, as I said - and then they knocked his statue-head right clean off. 'That's not the point' the ancestors said, and they hid the head somewhere deep in the hills. What'd they do to you?"

Donny pulled the tooth from his pocket and offered it to her. Mooney June lowered her glasses and brought it between her eyes.

"I don't know what you did to spook them," Mooney June said. "But I would have a good, long think about it. They don't go around just beating up anybody. They probably think you've got some sort of agenda. As for me, I don't discriminate. Everyone is welcome at the Munger Moss. Just know I won't be tolerating any funny business. Now, do you guys want a pool view or a lawn view? Top deck or bottom?"

"I don't know if we can stay," Donny said. "We just need some help with our car."

"Don't be ridiculous. Your car's forty miles down that way and it's going to take a while before I can get my tow guy over here. I'm not going to entertain beat-up white folk loitering about in the parking lot. It's bad for business. Here." She handed Donny a key with a flamingo keychain. "I'll give you a double room for the price of a single. Poolside. Room 16." Donny's hands were stuck firmly to his sides. "Come on now," Mooney June said. "I'm throwing you a bone here. It's your loss if you don't catch it."

"We'll take it," said Mary-Beth. She was so exhausted, the thought of a clean, warm bed made her whole body ache. "How much?"

"That depends," Mooney June said, twirling one of her braids, "On what you got, and what you think you owe me. Keep in mind this is not just any motel. This is the Munger Moss.

Where all the film stars came to get away from Hollywood in their private choppers. Kelly. Sinatra. Dean - oh, we had good times, Dean and I. Room 28. But I was younger then. Even Reagan, the bastard, he was here once, when he was still just a Western film yoke. And not just actors. Real cultural icons too. Where do you think Kerouac and his ilk nursed their hangovers? By my pool. Hemingway wrote half of *Old Man and the Sea* in 22. Raucous man. Guests complained about his typewriter clacking away at three in the morning. Hell, I've even had giraffes stay here. Old Susie slept over by that big oak tree on her way from Chicago to the San Diego Zoo."

"How about a bottle of whiskey?" Mary-Beth suggested. Donny pinched her. She elbowed him in the ribs. "When we can get it from the truck, of course."

"Jack or Jim?"

"Jim."

"Deal." Mooney June's canaries chirped in agreement. "Take your first left after the entrance. 16's the door second-to-last. I'll call my guy now and he'll leave the truck in the lot here. You can work on it tomorrow morning."

Mary-Beth took the key. "Is your name really Mooney June?" she asked in a whisper.

"I swear on my grave, or I wasn't born on the first full moon in June," she winked.

Their room wasn't much—stained carpet, popcorn ceiling, wood paneling peeling off the walls—but for Donny and Mary-Beth, after the day they'd had, the place felt palatial. Donny crashed into one of the double beds, dimpling the the pink polyester. Mary-Beth switched the bathroom light on and off, marveling at the ease of electricity. Then, she studied her face in the mirror. Bloody face, blue eyes terrified-wide, she looked like a piece of roadkill. She took off her jacket and wiped her face in the lining. Better. But, she swore she could see seams in her face which hadn't been there before. Dark patches which didn't rub clean off. At first, she worried that Aida might not recognize her. Then she remembered how she looked in the little mirror at Aida's house, the one above the player piano. Pink and chubby, too sheltered, too young. She looked more mature like this, she thought. More settled into her bones. When she saw Aida again, she would not fumble over her words or break down like a baby. She would have the

confidence of a woman weathered. Bright with beauty earned through pain. And she would die that way too, with dignity.

Donny, equally awed by the electricity, had found a remote and was surfing through channels on TV. There were five programs to choose from, six if you counted a game show which was just white fuzz and the faint sound of Wheel of Fortune in the background. They were all reruns. Donny settled on an episode of *I Love Lucy.* In it, Lucy is hiding in a bunker underground, mourning all those who were lost to the nuclear explosion, convinced she'll starve to death in the fallout. At the end of the episode, Desi finds her and assures her it was only dumpster men she heard rumbling down the street, not an atomic bomb. She embraces him, smiling sheepishly at the camera to a pre-recorded backtrack.

Mary-Beth lay down in her own bed and gazed up at a wall of picture frames. They gave her a taste of what the Munger Moss was like in its glory days. A freshly-painted sign advertising air conditioners. Bathers in tight trunks and swimming caps, no one paying any mind to all that water wasted. There was the giraffe, towering over her trainer. And there was James Dean, lying in the grass next to a twenty-something Mooney June, her silky, dark hair draped over her bare breasts. Mary-Beth smiled to herself. Her eyelids grew heavy. She fell asleep vowing to be a girl more like Aida, more like Mooney June. A girl who refuses to make herself small.

Mary-Beth awoke in the dark to the sound of crossfire. She shot up out of bed. The television was still on, showing a movie about World War I. There were gunshots and men running out of trenches into billows of smoke. One of the soldiers—although Mary-Beth thought he looked too beautiful to be a solider—pulled a small photograph out of his pocket. The camera zoomed in. In the photo, the solider was clean, and especially beautiful, with his arm around a similarly blonde and beautiful boy. They were wearing old football uniforms. Mary-Beth decided they must be lovers, and her heart ached for the solider, who must be missing this lover of his about as much as Mary-Beth was missing Aida now. The solider stuck the photo back in his pocket, lit a rolled cigarette, and climbed out of the trench.

Mary-Beth had fallen asleep in her clothes. Her high tops had muddied the comforter. Donny was sleeping in a tangle of pink sheets in his tighty-whities. Mary-Beth gazed at his

tattoos in the blue television light. The eagle that spread across his broad shoulderblades. The barbed wire that choked his forearm. A set of praying hands. She still had a lot to be angry at him for. What had happened at Stateville and the restaurant. For hurting Gram. For pushing Cora and Maddie-Lynn away. But she couldn't fight the fact that she was also grateful for him, that without him, she would have hardly made it past the state line alive.

Is that what love is? she wondered. Loving someone no matter what? Loving someone in spite of their misgivings? Or can love only be earned by those who are deserving of it? Can love live in anger, or does it go dormant? If the anger lasts too long will the love die out? Mary-Beth knew that love and pain had to constellate somehow but she didn't know how. Donny rolled onto his back. The sacred heart tattoo on his chest swelled and then softened. His snores as loud as locusts.

Mary-Beth put on her jacket and left the motel room. In the parking lot, the tow truck driver was easing their car into a parking space. Mary-Beth thanked him, found the Jim Beam, and walked to Mooney June's office. The old woman was passed out face down in her palms. The canaries crooked their necks at Mary-Beth as she set the bottle down on the desk. Mooney June's eyes fluttered, and she reached for the handle instinctively. She mumbled something like, "It's a river, not a backwards look," and fell back asleep.

Mary-Beth returned to the truck and fished for her pajamas. She changed in the cab, taking a moment to linger in the feeling of being naked, enjoying the release from her dirty clothes. Cold slid across her body. She wrapped the mohair blanket around her bare shoulders and lay down. Her teeth began to chatter, but she did not want to have to put her pajamas on, go back out into the cold, and attempt sleep with Donny wrestling beside her all night. She tucked her icy hands between her thighs to warm them. She lay down. Closing her eyes, she tried to meditate on warmth.

Memory, or perhaps it is a dream:

All bodies are bodies of water, whispers an angel's voice. Aida's voice. Mary-Beth's face locked between her thighs. Showering her clit with kisses. Pubes tickling her nose. Warm all around.

Imagine, if you can, she says, *the logistics of water. You have to be adaptable, ready to perform any number of tasks at a moment's notice. Rush. Spill. Swell. Wave. Pump. Drip. Rain down. Bubble up. But then, there are things water is not allowed to do. Like rest. Like desire. Like disappear and never return. Water is not allowed to stop being water. It can be ice or vapor, momentarily, but after that it has to start being water again. People expect water to be limitless, the way time is limitless. Which is why water has to set boundaries. This is why water hides.*

Mary-Beth licks and licks, may never grow tired of licking. Astringent taste of salt. As she works, Aida's sex gets wetter, and wetter still. So wet now that the bedsheets are soaking. She does not stop.

Water's favorite place to hide—the best way for water to live out its fantasies—is in a body. Water loves to coat eyelids, to fill mouths, to pool between thighs.

So wet now that Mary-Beth is swimming. Brine pearly and warm as bathwater. She has made it, inside now. Can hear Aida's voice reverberate through her bones.

Water possesses us, then makes us thirst.

Mary-Beth screamed. She could see the shadow of a man outside the window. She scrambled to wrap the mohair tight around her. The car door opened.

"Relax, kid," said Donny. "It's just your old man."

Mary-Beth sat up and slipped her fingers out of her vagina. She wiped them on the inside of the blanket, but the cab now stunk of her, sweet and fleshy, like Christmas ham. She prayed Donny wouldn't notice, or at least, wouldn't ask.

"Were you looking for the weed?" Donny asked, scooching into the driver's seat.

"What?"

"I can't sleep without it either," he said, unlatching the glovebox. Inside the old rusty tin where Donny kept his childhood treasures, he had hidden three crisp, carefully pre-rolled joints. He struck a match and lit one. Mary-Beth watched, awestruck, the twisted tip curl as it burned. Donny took a few deep hits. The cab grew dense with smoke, driving Mary-Beth's smell into the corners. He passed the joint to her. She wanted to refuse; Mary-Beth had never smoked before, not even a cigarette, and was afraid of losing control and embarrassing herself. But she figured sitting with her Dad in the parking lot of a motel in Lebanon, Missouri at the End of the World

was as good a time as any to try something scary, and anyway, she had only a few days left to live. She pursed her lips and breathed in. “That’s really good stuff,” she said, trying to swallow a cough.

“Good,” Donny said. “I was worried that freezing it would ruin the shelf life.”

Mary-Beth laughed. She had so many questions to ask, but her mind was already starting to slip. Her vision blurred, which gave the impression that objects were melting one into the other—the rosary, the Munger Moss sign, the streetlamp in the parking lot.

“I’ve had some time to think,” Donny said, “about your question.”

“Which question?”

“What is love like for you? Felt I was a bit too brief before.”

“And?”

“Well, it’s like, when you’re cutting two pieces of wood that are meant to join at a corner. The measurement has to be perfect, and I mean, down to the milli-millimeter, to the get the right angle. If you get sloppy, then the framing won’t hold.” Donny pulled at the joint again and sighed. “Love is like, when you eyeball it, and you get the cut just right, and you know you’ve gotten it right, you don’t even have to measure it. It’s one of the best feelings out there.”

Mary-Beth lay her head on Donny’s shoulder. Poor thing, she thought. He may have taken Cora for granted, or needed her too much, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t loved her. How heartbroken he must be. She wanted to tell him about Aida, to explain that she, too, had known love and was heartbroken to be without it. But she was too high to know where to begin.

The smoke cleared from the windshield. The stars were out and bright as knives. Donny and Mary-Beth sat watching them for a while, thinking about all the big, blank distance in all that light.

Stanton, Missouri

“Please, Mary-Beth,” Donny said, folding and unfolding one of the tourist brochures he had commandeered from Mooney June’s lobby. This one was for Meramec Caverns, an underground

cave network whose only claim to fame was that it was once, supposedly, used as a hideout by the outlaw Jesse James.

"It's been five days," Mary-Beth protested. "We were supposed to be in LA by now, and we haven't even made it outside of Missouri." It had taken longer than anticipated for Donny to sort out problems with the car. Being interrupted by one of Mooney June's long, embellished stories about the Munger Moss's past every half hour certainly didn't help. But Mary-Beth got the feeling that Donny was delaying their trip intentionally. Making up excuses for the car, obsessing over pointless little day trips. Mary-Beth was getting impatient, and irritable. What if Aida was there already? What if she had found another donor? How, then, would Mary-Beth be able to prove herself? What if the surgery didn't go well and she had gotten hurt? What if, somewhere along her journey, Aida had met somebody else? Mary-Beth stepped hard on the gas, not wanting to waste a single second.

"Look!" Donny said, pointing to what was possibly the fortieth advertisement for the Meramec Caverns they had seen that day. The signs cropped up on the side of Interstate 44 every five miles, on billboards, on barns, on bump stickers stuck to lampposts. "It must be good if they can't stop talking about it."

"It's the End of the World, Dad. What do you think we're going to do down there?"

"It's a cave, Mary-Beth, not the county fair. Come on, I may never get to do this drive again."

"I thought you said you were taking Mom on the drive."

"Nah," Donny said, tossing his head back. "She's got her own plans. Let her live her life. I'm sticking with you, kid. You were the only one who ever really got me, anyway. California, here we come! The Sorensens are taking on the sunshine state!"

Mary-Beth sighed. Donny liked to assume an ambivalent, carefree attitude with her, but at night, when he thought she was asleep, Mary-Beth had heard him weeping in the bathroom. Unsure how to comfort him—or if she should be comforting him at all—she pretended to be convinced by his performance. But she feared for the misery and panic that could ensue when she was gone. If he decided to go back to the confessional, as it were, there wouldn't be anyone around to stop him.

“Okay,” she said, relenting. “Let’s go see Missouri’s greatest hidden treasure or whatever.”

“That’s my baby girl,” Donny said. She winced as he kissed her on the cheek.

Even with the candles they were carrying, it was too dark inside the cavern to see. They could smell the tall, cave walls though. Earth unnerved has a musk to it. Their footsteps echoed on the tile floor.

“This is the ballroom,” Donny announced. “They used to host square dances down here. Should we try it?”

“Dancing? In the dark with no music? No, thanks,” Mary-Beth said.

Donny took the harmonica out of his pocket and played a few chords from “Country Road" again, making an awkward attempt at an Irish jig as he did. Mary-Beth rolled her eyes. “Come on,” Donny said, taking both their candles and setting them on the floor. He pulled Mary-Beth towards him. Her one hand dwarfed in his, the other gripping his shoulder. He tried to sway them both back and forth, but Mary-Beth was making her body go stiff. Donny tried to sing in his low, shaky voice:

Oh, how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
Oh, how bright the path grows from day to day,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Donny rested his cheek in Mary-Beth’s thin, blonde hair. He tightened his grip around her fingers. Holding her always comforted him. It was like holding a baby bird. Being responsible for something fragile, something newborn. It takes a different kind of strength to do that. But holding Mary-Beth now, something felt different. She felt different. Not so relenting. Not so trusting. No so much like his. His voice trailed off, “Leaning, leaning…”

“Come on, Dad. Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” Donny said, wiping his face. Their embrace broke. Mary-Beth inched away from him.

“Okay,” she said, picking up her candle. “You dragged me all the way down here. Let’s have a tour.”

Donny pushed his feelings down—he was good at doing that—and lead them from the ballroom to the upper levels. “The caverns were formed from the erosion of large limestone deposits over millions of years,” Donny read from the brochure. “400 million years and growing. You see? We’re going to be just fine.”

“What do you mean we’re going to be fine?”

“God created this great earth to fall apart so that it could put itself back to together so that it could fall apart again. You get me? It’s a cycle.”

Mary-Beth nodded, somewhat impressed. It was kind of like what Aida had said. *The world’s* been *ending.* And then, *It would do you well to think about your hand in all that.* Mary-Beth still didn’t know what that meant.

They stepped through a narrow passage and came before a massive sheet of rock. Its thousand jagged teeth draped from higher than they could see. Donny read, “The Greatest Show on Earth! Enjoy 60 lighting effects played out on the State Curtain, an onyx mountain 70 feet high and 60 feet wide.” The wall seemed a thing alive. Disturbingly so, for two people who had long since given up on seeing a tree move through its seasons, or overhearing the collective sound of spring. They dared not get too close to it, for fear of being swallowed.

Donny was about to suggest that they head to another room when he spotted something out the corner of his eye. He moved his candle away from the Curtain and noticed the man who had been standing next to them. Suspenders hung loose around his waist, and his tartan shirt was unbuttoned. His lips were curled around an old calabash pipe, and his eyes blinked rapidly. Donny smiled and the man smiled back. Donny waved and the man waved back, then went blinking on.

“Are you the infamous Jesse James?” he whispered.

The man nodded serenely, dragging from his pipe.

“What did you say?” Mary-Beth asked.

“I didn’t know Jesse James was black,” Donny whispered in Mary-Beth’s ear, trying to be polite.

“He wasn’t. What are you talking about?” Mary-Beth looked in the direction that Donny was looking. She saw nothing but more limestone wall.

Donny looked back into the stranger’s ever-blinking eyes. “You got something in your eyes there?”

“Don’t see very well anymore,” Jesse James answered.

“From all the dark down here?”

“Yes. All the dark.” With the echoes in the cave, his voice travelled on and on. “Will you tell me what’s going on up there?” he asked.

Donny shrugged. “A lot less than what was going on in your day, I imagine.”

“It’s safe to go up there?”

“Some might say so.”

Then the stranger squared his jaw. “What will you do to make sure I get out of this alive?”

Donny didn’t understand the question. Jesse James look frightened. He felt the urge to help but didn’t know what help was required. “It’s simple,” he said. “You just go through here,” he pointed to the narrow passage, “down the stairs, through the big hall, and out the door. Same way you came in, I imagine. Here,” and here he took Jesse James’s hand, which was light as a corn husk, and put it on the railing. “Follow this if you can’t see.”

Jesse James didn’t let go of Donny’s hand. “Alive,” he repeated, pulling the pipe out of his mouth. Then he got real close to Donny. He put his nose on Donny’s nose, his lips on Donny’s lips. His eyes did not stop blinking. Donny did not have enough time to act, or remember the fear that so often held him up in the world. So when Jesse James blew his smoke into Donny’s parted mouth, Donny breathed it in deep. The tobacco rushed straight to his head.

Memory: Men twirling iron around their leather-gilded fingers. Smell of saltpeter and gunfire. Men looming over Donny on big, mean horses. The slap of leather across Donny’s naked back. He tries to cry out. Discovers that his tongue has been cut off. One man dangles the tongue in front of him, then throws it in the sand. The horses take turns stomping on it. The men

point and laugh at Donny and whip him some more. On his legs, belly, his bare butt. Skin on fire. Throat oozing blood. But worse, worst of all—all the men's faces looked exactly like Donny's face.

Donny breathed the smoke back out, then gasped. He looked around for Jesse James but Jesse James was gone. There was only Mary-Beth, who was shaking him and shouting something he could not hear over the ringing in his ears.

Memory: Breath leaving mother's body.

Memory: Daughter missing far from home.

Memory: Cora breaking all the dinner plates.

Memory: Hearing the whole house moan.

Donny gripped the railing in front of him. He tried to push it down. He heard Mary-Beth yell his name. He tried to push it down. He felt tears heavy as bowls behind his eyes. He tried to push it down.

Donny tried to focus on the words the angel spoke to him. *Love. Body. There's nothing greater.* He grasped at words in hymns. *Leaning, leaning, safe and… safe and…* There was too much to remember. He did not want to do it anymore. "Lord, don't make me remember," he prayed. "Lord, let me forget."

Mary-Beth watched her father's legs wobble and his eyes roll back into his head. She did her best to catch him, but his body was too big, and her arms too feeble. She had to let him fall.

Miami, Oklahoma

Donny was in a stupor for most of the day. Half-asleep or half out of it, me muttered things. "All it takes is one little knock to the head. That's the price of the ticket. Are you digging me or are you drowning me?"

Mary-Beth, tired of trying to talk sense into him, drove out of sullen Missouri and into Oklahoma. She had had a terrible headache ever since coming out of the caverns. The kind that came with chills, sweats, and nausea. The kind that made her feel all the vessels in her brain at once. The bright blue globe of the sky made it hard to keep her eyes open. Same with the ashy

plains. The old zinc mining towns that cropped up between, each one identical to the last, gave Mary-Beth the impression that she was driving in circles, inspiring a dizziness she could not curtail. Donny's word salad didn't help.

"They play this same commercial every year. Get a life!"

There must have been some weird chemical trapped down in those caves, she thought, that was making her blood boil and her father go crazy. Or else, Donny was tormenting her on purpose. Like a child who pretends to be sick to seize his mother's attention, to garner her sympathy. Mary-Beth refused to play that game. She would not let him sabotage this trip more than he already had. Her migraine, on the other hand, would be a tough opponent to fight.

"No way," Donny said. "That is a God-awful color."

Distracted by pain, Mary-Beth didn't notice that the truck was running low on fuel until they got to Miami. The exhaust sputtered, and the gas pedal started to feel loose. Mary-Beth squinted at the gauge and groaned, exasperated.

"Be careful with that," Donny said. "Bone conducts electricity."

Mary-Beth got out of the truck and pulled one the jerry cans they had stolen from the Señoras Mejía out of the back. She flicked off the cap. The strong, petroleum smell made her stomach lurch. She did not want to throw up when they had so little food to spare, so she lay down on the asphalt and crossed her forearms over her eyes, trying to hide from the light. She was so sick of having a body. It was always making up new ways to betray her. Rumbling with hunger when it knew there was no food to be had. Dying of thirst when it knew there was no water left. Desiring when it knew there was no one around to be loved. And her body never looked right. Sometimes too puffy, sometimes too thin. Never strong enough. Never old enough. And all this white skin, which was like walking around with the word betrayal written all over your body. She could not wait to be rid of it. She could not wait for Aida to be the one to take care of it. She could not wait for Aida to love her body for her.

"Mary-Beth," she heard her father whisper. He tapped the sole of her shoe with his own foot to stir her. She groaned. She did not want to have to open her eyes and confront the light again. Then he said, "Stand up. Slowly."

“Or what? I’ll get a speeding ticket?”

“Open your eyes.”

Mary-Beth felt a gust of hot breath on her forehead. She thought maybe Donny was being weird again. Then she felt a glob of spit dribble on her hands. She tore them away from her face and opened her eyes. It was not Donny above her but the snout of an enormous animal.

“Don’t spook it,” Donny said.

Mary-Beth shimmied out from under it and stood up carefully, trying not to make a sound. It was as big as a bull, maybe bigger, with gnarled hair like a bear. It huffed again, steam rising from its nostrils. A buffalo. Mary-Beth thought they were extinct, not from the End of the World, but long before. She squeezed her father’s arm, terrified that the buffalo would charge at them, stab them with its big horns, paw them with its hooves. But the buffalo just looked at them, inquisitively. *Another survivor*, its eyes seemed to say.

They watched the buffalo turn and saunter down the main street. It seemed fascinated with its own reflection in the shop windows. It shook the dust off its far. It moaned. It shat.

“Should I shoot it?” Donny asked.

Mary-Beth whacked him in the chest. She knew they were witnesses to something miraculous, and to claim it for themselves would be to take the miracle away.

“But I’m so hungry,” Donny whined.

Mary-Beth watched the buffalo scan the ground with its muzzle, perhaps smelling for grass. It looked so thin and scraggly. Mary-Beth’s stomach roared. “Not this one,” she said. The buffalo disappeared behind the brick wall of a diner and out of sight.

“You’re right,” Donny said. “It was probably a sign.” He crossed himself. Then, he picked up the jerry can and and filled up the gas tank, as if every were ordinary again.

“So, are you back?” Mary-Beth asked.

“From where?”

“Wherever it was you went.”

Donny stretched his body out long. He stuck his hand down his pants and scratched his ass. “All I know is that I just had what was possibly the best sleep of my life.” He yawned. “How long was I out for?”

"A couple of hours. I had to drag you out of the cave by myself."

"What cave?"

Mary-Beth crossed her arms and gave him a harsh look. "The one you begged me to take you to?"

Donny ran his fingers through his beard. "I do not recall a cave of any kind."

Mary-Beth buried her face in her hands and groaned in frustration. "I do *not* have time for you to mess with me right now."

"Relax!" Donny said. "Let me drive. You're just grumpy cause you're tired. Take a load off. Believe me, it does wonders."

Blood rushed through Mary-Beth's head, and her temples pounded. She was in too much pain to argue with him. Tossing him the keys, she slumped into the passenger's seat. She stuck her head out the window as Donny drove, letting the wind cool down her face.

"I dreamt up the most beautiful idea for the church's renovation," Donny said. "Source some river stone for the pulpit. Give it an organic look, you know?"

"What about California?" Mary-Beth asked, then regretted bringing it up.

"California's no place to live. No offense, but your old man was not made for the land of fruits and nuts. I've got plenty of unfinished business back home. Plus, I would miss your mother too much."

"You're going to miss her plenty at home, too."

"Why, is there something wrong with her?"

Mary-Beth studied the side of her father's face. The same wrinkles were there, and age spots, and silver hairs. But there was something different about it, something lighter, something missing. Maybe he wasn't teasing her. Maybe he was, really, losing his mind.

"This is so much fun," Donny said, smiling. "I'm so glad we did this. Father daughter bonding." He grabbed Mary-Beth's shoulder and jostled her. "Aren't you having fun?"

Mary-Beth put her hand on her forehead. "So much," she said.

"Oh highway I travel!" Donny shouted. "Do you say to me, do not leave me? Do you say venture not? If you leave me you are lost? Do you say I am already prepared, am well-beaten and undenied, adhere to me? Oh public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you,

you express me better than I express myself." Then he winked at Mary-Beth. "I may not be a college-educated man, but I still know my Dickens from my Dickinsons."

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

The horizon was flat and nondescript for miles. Then, just outside Oklahoma City, Mary-Beth spotted something bobbing in the distance. She sat up and looked closer. There was an old man walking on the side of the road. He wore a bright, red tracksuit and a cowboy hat too big for his head. He was waving wildly at them with one arm. The other stuck out in the street, thumb pointed skywards. She felt determined, this time, to do the right thing.

"Dad. Pull over," Mary-Beth said.

Donny pretended not to notice her, or the man.

"Dad. This man needs our help. Pull over."

Donny sped right past him. Mary-Beth checked for the man in the sideview mirror. He had his hands on his hips and was shaking his head. "We have to turn around," she said.

"I am not getting robbed today," Donny said.

"What makes you think that man is going to rob you?"

"This is the End of the World. You can't just pick up strangers off the side of the street."

She heard Aida's words in her ear, *God forbid, help a girl out. For once in your stupid little lives.* The knot corseted. "Turn this car around right now or *I'm* hitchhiking the rest of the way!"

"Fine. Jesus," Donny said. "But if something bad happens it's on your head." He slowed then spun the truck around. Mary-Beth saw the man perk up again. He put his hands to his lips, then rose them to the sky, then lips, then sky.

"Thank you, praise Jesus, thank you," the man said as Mary-Beth opened her door. He removed his hat and crawled in right between them with his long, lanky legs. His knees knocked against Donny and Mary-Beth's. He smelled of stale crackers and menthol cigarettes. "The name's Pope Mills. You can call me Pope or Mr. Mills or El Padre, as some people like to refer to

me." He shook Donny's hand and then Mary-Beth's. When he smiled, she noticed that he had a few gold teeth. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too," Mary-Beth said.

"Where you headed?" Donny asked.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Anywhere West."

"Good. That's where we're headed," Mary-Beth said. Donny shot a fiery glance in her direction.

"You are really helping me a bundle, you two." He jangled the rosary on the rearview mirror. "Good God-fearing Christians I see. One might say I'm a bit of a lost flock in the Lord's eyes, but I'm heading back to him. I'm straightening up my life. I came to OK City to look for a job, but nobody'll take me. Not with my credentials."

Mary-Beth looked out beyond the overpass to the small, abandoned city. Most of the windows on its tallest buildings were busted-out. All the traffic lights had faded. A few plastic bags floated about in the wind, but other than that, the place was bankrupt of life. Mary-Beth wondered what kind of a job Pope Mills had expected to find there.

"I just got out of the slammer, you see." At this, Donny tensed. "Don't worry," Pope said, sensing his discomfort. "I'm not a killer or a perv. I went under a drunk driving charge. Stupid of me. I was a younger man then. Fifteen years sober now."

"They kept you fifteen years for a DUI?" Mary-Beth asked.

"That, and I had struck some swank man's prized longhorn, a debt which I refused to repay, on account of my principles, and they kept me in for that. Plus I think they lost my paperwork along the way, and were biding their sweet time looking for it before they released me."

"Bastards," Mary-Beth said, wanting to align herself to Pope Mills, wanting him to trust her.

"You can say that again."

"Did they turn your prison into a borehole?" Mary-Beth asked.

"A what?"

“Never mind.” There was a long, blank pause. Tension flickered between Donny, who wanted desperately to be rid of Pope Mills, and Mary-Beth, who wanted desperately to keep Pope Mills close, as if this one favor would right all the wrongs she had made, and Pope Mills, who was desperately hungry.

“Have you got family, Mr. Mills?” Mary-Beth asked, to clear the air.

“Not since I went in. I had a wife, Iota, but she stopped callin years ago. I had two daughters, Roberta and Josephine. Beautiful girls. Last I heard they was headed out West too.”

“Is that where you’re going? To find them?” Mary-Beth asked.

“Sweetheart, I’m not sure where I’m going or how I’m gonna get there. All I know is that if I don’t get something to eat pretty soon I’m not going anywhere.” Pope Mills put his hand on Donny’s shoulder. “Forgive me, I didn’t catch your name early on.”

“Donny Sorensen,” he said, agitated.

“Ooo! That’s a nice name. Fancy name. You must be a mighty rich man to afford a name like that.”

“I’m a carpenter,” Donny said, as if this would justify his position either way.

“A fellow tradesman, then! I used to do my fair share of handiwork back in the day. Plumbing, electrical, that type of thing,” Pope Mills said. “So, speaking from one hardworkingman to another, how’s about lending twenty dollars to an old man? Just for a bite to eat.”

Donny blushed and wriggled in his seat. “I don’t know about that.”

“Come on, hear me out now. I’m gonna get myself one of those 72 ounce steaks from Big Texas State Ranch out in Amarillo. They say the meat’s free for any customer who can finish it in less than an hour. And I’ve been preparing. I know I don’t look it, but I’ve got a mighty appetite. So really, Donny, it’s just a loan.”

“Yeah, right,” Donny spit.

“Come on, Dad, what are you going to do with twenty dollars?” Mary-Beth asked. There was very little you could get with American money those days, but Mary-Beth knew he kept some bills in his wallet for nostalgia’s sake. He was being spiteful.

“I do not know this man. I do not owe him anything,” Donny said, as if Pope Mills weren’t right next to him, as if they weren’t rubbing shoulders, breathing the same air.

“You may not know him, but that doesn’t mean you don’t owe each other something,” Mary-Beth said.

“The young lady has a point,” said Pope Mills. “Your ancestors owe my ancestors, don’t you think? We could settle the score, right here, right now, call it even.”

Donny stopped the car. He was fuming. “I don’t wanna hear another word about anybody’s ancestors. There’s no such thing. There’s only the here and now. Right now I’m trying to move on with my life. Right now *you’re* trying to rob me of my hard-earned money. And right now I’m going to have to ask you to get out of my car.” Donny opened the driver’s side door and stepped out.

Pope Mills crawled out behind him, shaking his head. “You know what, I won’t be angry at you. I pray you have a nice life, now. May God kindly bless your soul,” he said bitterly as Donny got back in the truck. Donny sped away, grumbling unintelligibly.

Mary-Beth watched Pope Mills fasten the too-big cowboy hat back on his head and stick his thumb out. He became smaller and smaller and then disappeared altogether. She had ruined her chance to prove herself, again. No, it wasn’t her fault. If she was doing this trip alone she would have taken Pope Mills as far as Santa Monica if that’s what he wanted. She would have taken him to Amarillo and tell him to order whatever he wanted from the menu, don’t worry about the bill. It was Donny who was afraid of helping other people. Donny who could not think about anybody but himself. Mary-Beth began to laugh. “You’re such a hypocrite,” she said.

“Hypocrite? Pssh.”

“Only the here and now? Coming from the man who thinks he can speak to the ghost of Jesse James? Coming from the man who’s trying to restore a church that should have caved in decades ago? Coming from the man who keeps every little scrap of trash he can find that reminds him of his childhood?” Her voice croaked as she shouted, “What is wrong with you?”

Donny searched inside himself for a rebuttal. There was so much anger inside of him that he could not find one. Why was Mary-Beth always getting mad at him? He always did the right thing. He saved her from being trapped in that underground hellhole. He made sure to find fuel

before they got stranded. He brought the truck back to life after she nearly went and totaled it. He kept her from being swindled by some freeloader. Where was her gratitude? Where was her sense of respect? He should be the one punishing her, not the other way around. Why did she want to get to California so bad anyway? He wished he could be back at home right now. He wished that everything could go back to normal. Cora by his side, Gram in her chair, his daughters playing at his feet, good movie on TV, rain battering the window. How had it all got so fucked up?

Donny tried to wrangle the fear that was washing over him. He stopped the truck in the middle of the road. He looked at Mary-Beth. Her face was so foreign, so accusatory, that he almost didn't believe she was his daughter, that it was another one of Jesse James's tricks. He raised his hand, about to slap her across the face. Then, she recoiled from him, becoming his daughter again. Baby bird. Terrified of himself, he spilled out of the car and took off down the road.

Mary-Beth watched him run for a dozen feet or so before he fell to his knees. Hot tears wrung out of her. The last thing she wanted to do was go out and comfort him, again. How many times did he expect other people to pick up his pieces for him? When would he learn to take care of himself? Mary-Beth saw Donny flailing his arms. There were small specks of blood on the pavement. She thought he must be punching the ground. *This is why the world ends*, she thought. *Because men love to destroy things*. Still, although there was a part of her that wanted to teach Donny a lesson, her heart ruled over, overwhelmingly so, and her heart could not standby while Donny was in pain. *And then there are people like me*, she thought, opening the car door, *who love them and make excuses for the things that get destroyed.*

Donny's face was bright red from rage. No, that wasn't it. Mary-Beth inched closer. It was red with blood. Donny was punching himself, hard. "I don't know. I don't know," he said, sobbing. "What's wrong with me."

This is why the world ends. Not because men love to destroy things, but because they love to destroy themselves.

Mary-Beth drove. Donny held a bandana soaked in beer to his bloodied face. They did not speak. Mary-Beth played with the radio dial. She found a station where she could hear the faint voice of Doris Day behind the static. *Love me, or leave me.* They had passed into Texas, where there seemed nothing but blanched-dry grass and rerun sky. Their minds wandered off.

Memory: Dad comes home limping. Broken ribs. Skin peeling off in places. Mom wants to take him to a hospital but he refuses. Beer on his breath. He asks me to draw a bath, and I do. He asks me to wash his bloody parts, and I do. He asks me to dress his wounds, and I do. I'll love him forever, but I'll never forgive him for it.

Memory: I limp all the way home. My ribs are busted. Cora wants to drive me to the ER, but I don't want her to know I've been drinking. Mary-Beth draws me a bath because she loves me. She cleans me up and licks my wounds clean. She's the one who always forgives me.

West of Amarillo, Mary-Beth saw three men standing in the road. More hitchhikers. She was so tired that, for once, her knot had nothing to say about it. Still, on principle, she had to find a way to help them, or else she'd be the hypocrite. She decided to throw them in the back, that way she wouldn't have to make conversation with them, and Donny wouldn't be tempted to misbehave. She slowed down beside them. The men wore denim jeans and jackets with messages painted on them. *God isn't dead - he's terminally ill,* one said. They were gaunt and white and had a wildness to their hair and eyes.

Mary-Beth rolled down the window. "Do you guys need a ride somewhere?" she asked as nicely as she could.

Then, one of the men pulled out a gun and pressed it against her temple. A hot lump caught in her throat, like she had just swallowed a sun-baked stone. "Out," the man said. His wrist was shaking. Mary-Beth slid out of the driver's seat. "You too," said one of the others, who had his own gun pointed in Donny's direction. Mary-Beth heard her father's labored breathing but did not dare turn back to look at him.

The one whose wrist shook lead Donny and Mary-Beth off the road and into a ditch, where he told them to get comfortable, and not to make a sound. The whole time, Mary-Beth could feel the cold, metal barrel against the back of her neck. He lay them face down on the ground with their hands behind their heads. Mary-Beth swallowed and swallowed at the lump in

her throat but nothing would cool it down. She couldn't see, but heard all their voices. She listened to Donny grind his teeth.

"Anything good there, Chip?"

"Not much, hey Marquez? Your typical middle American past times. Beer. Bible. Bullets."

"Bag it," said Marquez. "How's about this for a performance piece. We drink the booze, then use the Holy Book pages as rolling paper, then swallow the bullets."

"Call it, *Shot and Crossed: The American Dream Resurrected*," said Chip.

"Bellisimo, Chip Lord. How are the witnesses there, Dongle?"

"No complaints from you two, okay?" Dongle's voice was as shaky as his hands.

"Did you read them the statement?" Marquez asked.

"They don't really seem up to it."

"Dongle! Read them the statement!"

Mary-Beth heard Dongle unfold a crumpled piece of paper. He cleared his trembling throat.

"What you have just witnessed, or are just about to witness, is yet another cultural intervention by the Art Farmers, the last bastion of the avant-garde. As denizens of the End of the World, the Art Farmers are art-makers who embrace, rather than resist, the antechamber of a cultural milieu that insists upon its own demise. Against a history marked by unrealized utopias, the Art Farmers become a purveyor of destruction, appropriating private ownership for public discourse, hastening capitalism and consumerism towards their logical conclusions."

"Viva! Mortem!" They all shouted in unison. They honked the car horn.

Dongle bent down low and whispered. "Sorry we had to get you mixed up with the project. Best of luck to you." Mary-Beth heard laughter and running and things being catapulted to the ground, then the truck sped away. Then, she felt Donny's arms groping around her.

"Mary-Beth, my baby girl, are you okay?" He showered her face with cold, wet kisses. His face was swollen and still stank of alcohol. Mary-Beth tried to wriggle away from him, but he gripped her desperately. "I thought you were dead," he said. "Lying there, I thought you had died."

"Let me go," Mary-Beth said, but Donny squeezed her, wrapping one arm around her waist, and the other around her neck. She couldn't believe this was happening again, after all the horrible things that had stemmed from last time. He put his wet lips on her mouth. "Get off me!" she shouted. His grip loosened, and she stumbled away from him. Donny stood and reached for a piece of straw that had stuck in her hair, but she swatted his arm away. "Stop it!" she said. His face was mangled, his grey hair matted and sticking out in all directions. "You're scaring me."

"I'm just so happy you're alive!" he said. His face was purple and pulsing, like a big, exposed heart. "I thought those punks would shoot you. Or take you. Oh, my baby bird." He took her face in his leathery hands and again tried to kiss her. She yanked herself away and stormed out of the ditch.

The Art Farmers had left barely anything: only her tampons, the mohair blanket, and her father's *How To Build Your Dream Home for Less than $3500* book. She picked up the blanket and threw it over her shoulders. She crushed the box of tampons as she grabbed it. She kicked the book, hard. "I don't know why you insist on carrying that stupid thing around anyway," she called as she stomped along on the highway. Her stomping turned quickly into a jog, and then a run, and then a full-on sprint. *If I run this fast all day I can make it to California by tomorrow night*, she thought. She let the blanket slump to the ground and hurled her tampons into the fields. Pain pooled in her side and she began to run slower. *If I run this fast all day I can make it to California in two days' time*. Her lungs heaved. Her feet panged in her worn-out sneakers. *If I walk all day and all night I can make it to California in five days*, she thought, her shoulders slumping, her face clamming, her head pounding. *All I wanted was to help someone I loved. Was that too much to ask?* Exhausted, she stopped. She looked straight up at the sky. Blue beyond blue. Not the faintest drop of cloud. She was so, so thirsty.

Adrian, Texas

Mary-Beth walked thirty feet in front of her father for many miles. Donny watched her ponytail bounce vindictively at him. He knew that he should apologize—hurting her, scaring her, getting her into trouble—but he could not bring himself to do it. Not because he wasn't sorry—he was

very sorry—but because he didn't think she would accept it. Since the robbery, she had refused to look at him, refused to answer his questions, refused to acknowledge his pleas to stop or slow down. Donny's legs hurt. His left knee in particular—the one he had hurt in the car accident in Missouri—ached like a motherfucker. Still, he dragged himself onwards. He did not think Mary-Beth would wait for him if he faltered, and he could not afford to lose her more than he already had. To distract himself from the pain, he tried to thumb through the memories that comforted him most, but even those were fading away.

Memory: Cora walking down the aisle, her hair towering, her gown trailing acres behind her. Donny is overjoyed, like he has just won the lottery. But why is her face like that, unmoved, smiling stiff, as if a photograph of her face were taped over the real one?

Memory: Running through cornfields to the train tracks. Sharp stalks scrape against little Donny's elbows. Suddenly, the air gets groggy. His legs move slower and slower, like he is running through molasses, until he stops and cannot feel them anymore.

After a few hours of walking, the gaping panhandle sky began to darken. Donny's body felt like one big firepit. He didn't know how much farther he could go. "It's getting dark," he called out. "What do you say we stop and rest awhile? I can make a fire!"

Mary-Beth, thankfully, stopped in her tracks. Donny limped. By the time he caught up with her, he noticed that she hadn't stopped for him, but to read a roadside billboard. Midpoint, it said. Chicago 1139 miles in one direction. Los Angeles 1139 miles in the other. Mary-Beth picked up a rock and aimed it at the sign, but her arms were so weak, she could hardly throw a few feet in front of her. She knelt down her head hung low. "I'm sorry," she said, tears running down her face.

"It's okay," Donny whispered. He went to rest a hand on her shoulder.

"Not you!" she said, swiping his hand away. She cried into her hands. "I'm sorry, Aida. I got in way over my head."

Who's Aida? Donny wondered, but figured now was not a good time to ask. Now was, probably, a good time to offer his apologies. He took a deep breath. But before he could speak, a siren blared through the stillness. Donny and Mary-Beth looked back at the road. A semi truck was headed their way. An arm stuck out of the window, blowing an airhorn.

Mary-Beth scrambled to her feet and wiped her face. As the semi approached them, the rider stuck his torso out the window. Why wasn't he stopping? Why weren't his hands on the

steering wheel? “Jump!” he shouted when the truck was in earshot. At the back, the trailer door was wide open. There were people standing there. “Hurry!” they shouted. The semi moved slowly, but nevertheless faster than Donny and Mary-Beth had been walking. With nothing to lose, Mary-Beth ran after them. Two women in long, black cloaks grabbed her forearms and eased her up.

Donny ran too. Pain shot through his leg at every step. Every time he got close enough to jump, his knee buckled, and the semi inched forward, just out of reach. He flailed his arms and called out Mary-Beth’s name. He fished for her arms, but she had disappeared into the back of the compartment. The two women who had helped Mary-Beth reached out for him. Their silk cloaks billowed in the wind. Black makeup smudged across their faces. Donny pushed his body past its breaking point and pushed on. One woman pulled his arm while the other managed to hoist him up by his belt. He tumbled into the compartment and let out a great growl of relief. Sitting up, achingly, he thanked the women who had rescued him. They touched their long, gold-ringed fingers to his chest. Someone instructed him to take off his shoes.

Donny scanned the compartment. At least a dozen people appeared to be living back there. Mothers, children, grandmothers, teenagers, and even one orange, fluffy cat. Donny gazed blankly at their faces, searching for Mary-Beth’s. There were blankets of many fabrics and patterns strewn about the floor. Little paper lanterns hung from loose bolts on the ceiling and walls. Small toy cars and dinosaurs lay here and there.

There she was, curled up in a dark corner. Her face was buried in her hands.

Santa Rosa, New Mexico

Billboard after billboard after billboard. Mary-Beth dangled her bare feet over the conveyor belt road and read the advertisements to pass the time:

A baby is a baby, born and unborn

Fully XXXposed, full bar, 18+

JESUS, your only way to GOD, Call 1-575-FOR-TRUTH

Donny and Mary-Beth had been traveling with the Ghost Riders for two days, and they were barely halfway through New Mexico. The truck was powered by solar panels, so it never

needed fuel. It did not, however, go any faster than twenty miles an hour. Sometimes, when the roads got steep, everyone had to get out and push. Still, it was better than walking. She prodded at the blisters that still ballooned at the bottom of her feet.

The semi used to be a self-driving delivery vehicle, left now to roam back and forth cross-country until its tires wore thin. The Ghost Riders explained that this was how many of the homeless and asylum-seeking got around. The women who had saved them, Dounia and Shirin, were cousins from Tehran, each with a five-year-old son. There was a family from Martinique—Clémence, mother of four, her sister Cléotilde, and their father Laurent, who was deaf in one ear. Mishka and Paulina, two teenagers from Poland, kept largely to themselves, playing patty-cake games that seemed to last for hours. The man who stayed up front, Anathi from Cape Town, kept watch. The cat belonged to an old woman who refused to give her name or say where she was from. She called the cat Butter Bean.

Mary-Beth had managed, all this time, not to speak to her father. Though she felt his eyes on her constantly. It forced Mary-Beth to become cold and detached, alienated from the rest of the group. Donny, on the other hand, was amicable, charming even. He schmoozed them with his funny accent and boisterous tales about Stateville, spaceships, stick-ups, and so on. Mary-Beth laughed sourly to herself as Donny conjured up an elaborate story about his late wife's terrible illness, how he looked after her until her last breath. The ladies fawned over him then, thinking he was one of them, someone who had grieved. they shared with him their traumas—Clémence and Cléotilde's home had been flooded in a hurricane; the reservoir in Dounia and Shirin's neighborhood had been sold by a local politician to an American soda company, leaving them stranded. They cleaned his battered face. They washed his clothes with an industrial-smelling powder. They fed him stale biscuits and picked the crumbs from his beard.

Mary-Beth could see that the care they offered was more for their sake than his. They honored him in such a way that inspired the hope of being equally honored. Donny, meanwhile, relished in the attention. Mary-Beth kept an eye on him in her periphery, waiting to see if, and if so, when and how, he would reciprocate.

Now, Donny was playing "Country Road" for the children, and they pawed him like he was the long-lost uncle they had been waiting for. Mary-Beth couldn't understand him. Why was

his character so flickering? His tantrums so unpredictable? His love given so sporadically? He was cruel, selfish, and frightful one moment, then warm and nurturing the next.

The sky was cooling down, making room for planets, the rising moon. Mary-Beth tucked her shins under her thighs to warm them, but stayed with her back to the compartment. A recluse. She listened to the humming of many-tongued voices, and the drone of the harmonica, and her father's growling song. She couldn't help but think, bitterly, how precious it all was.

At nightfall, the Ghost Riders gathered in a circle for their evening prayer. Each night, a different Rider assumed the role as preacher, and was encouraged to proceed in whichever style or language they chose. The ritual helped quell longing for the homes they left behind, and strengthened the tenuous bond between them all. On this night, the third night of Donny and Mary-Beth's stay, the group agreed that Donny should be next to deliver prayers. He was coy at first. But the adults egged him on, patting him on the back, even getting the children to chant his name. "Donny! Donny!" He relented, grinning.

The group was silent then. Dounia and Shirin bent over their knees. Their sons imitated them, though their heads popped up from time to time to gaze curiously about the circle. Clémence, Cléotilde, and Laurent each took mother-of-pearl rosaries from around their necks. Mishka and Paulina held hands. The old woman held her cat tightly to her chest. Donny closed his eyes and drew his palms together. Mary-Beth bowed her head, but watched him beneath the veil of her eyelashes.

"God our Lord, we thank you for this day, and the days before us, and the days that have yet to come. I don't know where this road will take me. It's sure been one hell of a road thus far. There were times when my faith in you was tested, when I nearly strayed from the path. But I have followed the road you laid out for me all my days. And I will keep riding on it until you decide my soul is ripe for picking. Sometimes I feel like I'm there already, like I'm so close, I can smell it. The weeds and the water. Heaven's like a big lake, isn't it? A big, calm lake that never floods or dries up. With all the angels playing and fishing and waterskiing, making those big human pyramids like they do. And there's my family, coming towards me in a little rowboat. I can see Dad in his uniform, smiling at me. And there's Mom in her two-piece suit and her Sunday bonnet. And beside them my beloved wife, she's been waiting for

No, Mary Beth thought.

"She's reaching out for—"

Stop.

"She's calling out to me. Donny, I—"

"You're lying," Mary-Beth said aloud.

Their eyes met for the first time in days. He looked at her as if the look could crush her, and indeed she felt diminished, but she stared at him unwaveringly. None of the other Riders seemed to register the interruption. They hadn't really been listening to Donny, but were lost in their own meditations. "What was that?" he said.

"You're lying," she said again, and her voice had a sadistic edge.

Donny's face was frightened but smug. Boyish, like a child avoiding admonishment, refusing to take blame. "Pray tell what about?"

Mary-Beth didn't know what to say. It was obvious that he was in denial about her mother. She wanted to defend Cora. And she was still angry with him about what had happened in the ditch. But the thorn was somewhere deeper. She wanted him to stop being so tender. She wanted to cut through the innocence he was hiding behind.

"Mom left you." At this, eyes started to flutter open.

"Sadly, yes."

"Mom didn't die. She left you. She didn't want to be with you anymore. You've been lying."

Those who had been kneeling sat up straight. Those who had been counting Hail Mary's now hid their rosaries away. The Ghost Riders looked back and forth between Donny and Mary-Beth, feeling suddenly surrounded by imposters, not sure who to believe.

Mary-Beth sighed. "All I want to know is," and this was true, "why lie?"

All the color seemed to wash from Donny's face.

"What are you protecting?"

He looked down, despondent.

"What are you trying to preserve?"

He clutched at the blankets on the ground, turning them over, as if he had just dropped

something.

"*Why*?"

And then he lunged at her.

Malpaís, New Mexico

Donny didn't know what he would have done had the old woman not grabbed him and pinned him down, if Dounia and Shirin hadn't huddled close around Mary-Beth, shielding her with their gowns, if Clémence and Cléotilde hadn't belittled him in a blend of French, English, and creolized curse words. All he saw was a white flash, and then later, Laurent's wrinkled finger, dabbing saltwater on his forehead. He didn't know what had come over him. He would have never hurt Mary-Beth, never, never. And yet, she cowered from him as if he he already had.

Although they allowed him to stay in their compartment, the Ghost Riders nevertheless abandoned him. When they slept, they left no blankets for him, and he shivered. When food rations were allocated, he got scraps. The tough chores—like washing the bucket they used to poop and pee in—were handed down to him. Conversation stopped when he asked a question, and people turned their heads as he moved near, as if repelled by a commanding stench. It was decided, eventually, that Donny was a nuisance, if not a hazard, to the group, and should relieve Anathi as watchman. He fixed himself onto Mary-Beth big, blue eyes, begging her to forgive him, to object. All she did was crouch and look away from him.

Alone in the cabin at the front of the truck, there was little landscape to look at to keep him company. Barbed wire, rye rock. Every once in a while, a diner would pop up on the side of the road, or a gas station, but to Donny they offered little comfort, having already been claimed by the wasteland. The only signs of life, as far as his eye could see, were the wind turbines that dotted the hills. They seemed somehow ominous to him. Like they did not belong here, in this desert, in his country. He fantasized about pushing one over and knocking the rest of them down like dominos. Or, maybe he would paint them brown and yellow so that they looked not like windmills but overgrown daisies.

With nothing else to do, Donny laid out his belongings on the dashboard. Here was Hubbard Cobb. The spine was peeling away from the pages, and a corner was bent back where Mary-Beth had kicked it. The book had been a gift from his wife. His wife. My wife. Donny tore himself up trying to remember her name. Here was his wallet, containing his driver's license, forty-five US dollars, and a picture of his two little girls, wearing matching white dresses. They were posed in front of a big church, but which church? Our Lady of the Lakes? Donny tried to remember what it had looked like from the outside. He saw the color of the stones, but not their shape. Here was his flannel jacket and frayed jeans and the dirty t-shirt on his back. Here was his wedding ring. Here was his harmonica. He brought it to his lips and sighed. It made a high-pitched, wheezing sound.

Donny lay back, sprawled out between the driver's and passenger's seats. He tried to meditate on nice things, but could remember only snippets. An acorn in his palm. Cream melting over cake. Donny put his hand down his pants and tried to masturbate, thinking of his wife, but her body had flattened, her face blurred. One of the billboards outside, an advertisement for a pornographic website, showed a woman dangling a cherry above her tongue. He tried to think about her face instead. That served not to please but sicken him, and his penis went limp in his hand.

The only memory that emerged clearly to him was Mary-Beth's face, after he had kissed her in the ditch. Why had he done it? The robbery had sent him into a panic. He kept thinking, *They're going to take her away from me,* and then, of all the unspeakable things they might do. When it was all over, Donny was elated. His daughter was his again. His alone in all the world. In his kiss, he wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how he would do anything for her, anything to keep her beside him. But instead, he had terrified her. Why was that always happening with them? Like some magnetic force that made sure Mary-Beth was repelled each time he reached out to touch her. Donny looked at the photograph again. The little Mary-Beth in the picture was a stranger to him. The Mary-Beth in the back of the truck was a stranger to him. He was all alone.

He sat up. The word clambered in his head. Alone. And when this truck stopped in California, where would he go? With Mary-Beth? What if she had not forgiven him by then?

Would he turn around and go home? But the trip had been so arduous, and now he had no car. His wife, his daughter, where were they? He wished he had asked. Goddamnit, why couldn't he say their names. He closed his eyes and offered his palms up and pleaded again with the Lord, "Show me what to do with these hands." Then, as if by the grace of God, the *How To* book slipped off the dashboard and onto the floor. Donny picked it up and held it over his heart. He spotted a small, grey building coming up on the road ahead. "I am a carpenter," he reminded himself. "If I don't have a home, I make a new one."

Donny bundled his things up in the flannel jacket and opened the passenger's side door. Wind stung his face in the places that were still sore. Donny closed his eyes, tucked his knees into his chest, and let himself fall. Sharp rocks scratched his skin as he rolled through the dirt. He had forgotten about his knee, and now he felt it swelling pulsing, the wound freshly wounded.

Donny winced as he staggered to his feet. Dusting himself off, he took a good look at the building. It wasn't much bigger than a shed. Its siding had gone brittle with heat. The roof concaved. Beer bottles lay splintered on the ground. The one window that wasn't busted in caked in dust. There was a lot of work to do. Donny felt faint at the thought of it. He wished he had his tools. He wished his body didn't ache so much. He looked up to the sky. Blue bluer than blue. With parched, cracked lips, he prayed softly, "Lord, give me strength."

Then, he felt someone's arms around him. His first instinct was to fight them off. But then he touched their hands. Small hands. Mary-Beth's. Donny felt his heart dilate. She came back for him.

He turned to face her, smiling. Mary-Beth was not smiling. She looked dirty. She looked tired. Donny got the feeling, then, that her return did not come with her forgiveness, that this would be his last chance. "Why?" Donny said. "Why, why, why?" He poked her belly and her shoulder and her nose, teasing her. She smiled dully and pushed his hands away.

"You are so stupid," she said. "How could I leave you behind."

Coconino, Arizona

Delirious with hunger, Mary-Beth and Donny hadn't realized how far from the path they had strayed until it was too late. They wandered, lost, through the canyons. So hungry they plucked

the petals off ponderosas pinecones and chewed on them like sunflower seeds. So thirsty they sucked on twigs of scrub cedars all day, praying for a drop of water. And when there was no food, they gorged themselves on stories. Donny especially. With his memory shot, he was greedy for them. They made him feel tethered to the world.

"How do you remember me?" Donny asked.

"Big. Too big for me. I remember being so happy when you finally came home."

"From work?"

"Yes."

"Was I gone a long time?"

"By the time you came home, Mom had already bathed me and put my PJs on. You smelled of sweat and oil. And sawdust."

"So your mother took care of you then, for the most part?"

"She put me to bed every night. She read to me. She rubbed my back and sang to me."

"Was she angry with me?"

"I think so. I didn't realize until I was older."

"When did you realize?"

"When Mom would ask to sleep with me, instead of me asking to sleep with her."

"Were we ever in love?"

"You used to be. She said that when she was my age, your house was the only place she ever wanted to be."

"Did we ever seem in love, to you?"

"I saw you hold Mom, once, for a long time."

"Was I good to you?"

"Yes and no."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes I think you asked too much of me."

"Did you love me?"

"Absolutely. There was a time when I wanted nothing more than your arms around me."

"Do you love me now?"

“I take care of you, which is a kind of love. At the same time, it means I love you less.”

They walked for many days, heaving their bodies up and down the mountains, following dried riverbeds, forgetting what is was they were looking for. Donny’s knee swelled to the size and shade of a beetroot, making it difficult for them to get very far. Mary-Beth, for her part, had never felt the betrayal of her body more. Her stomach howled. Her head ached. Her heart never caught up. She could hardly stand up or sit down without feeling faint. Sometimes, instead of looking for food, Donny and Mary-Beth spent the day chasing the shade around a single piñon pine, trying to rest their choking legs. Donny kept asking Mary-Beth for more stories. Mary-Beth relinquished them lavishly, viciously. All the words she had bitten back all those years came spilling out.

“How do you remember me?”

“Gory. A hazard to yourself. Always coming home with one injury or another. A sawn-off pinky finger. Skin shaved off. A broken back from falling off a ladder. Hypothermia from working through a snow storm. Gangrene in your elbow.”

“Didn’t you think I was tough?”

“No. I thought you wanted to die. I thought you didn’t want to be with me.”

They dropped into a bowl surrounded by mesas, where they happened upon the carcass of a wild boar. It took every last drop of self-control not to sink their teeth into it raw. They cooked it over a small fire, chewing on the fibers of yucca plants to keep their mouths busy. When they ate, they ate sparingly, vultures that they were. Mary-Beth spent the rest of the evening picking little black hairs off her tongue.

“How do you remember me?” Donny asked as Mary-Beth was falling asleep.

“Barely. As if you were a void.”

Donny couldn’t fight back. In his own mind he was a void.

The next morning, Mary-Beth made them crawl over the lip of the bowl into a great, flat meadow of nothing. Donny’s knee felt like a basketball about to burst. He begged Mary-Beth to lie down with him.

“We’ve lost so much time already,” she said. She tried to count the days they had been gone. Aida could have recovered from surgery by now. She could very well be on her way back

home. What if she had not recovered? What if she was hurt? Worse still, she could have been denied a donation entirely. She could be wandering around Los Angeles, sick and helpless and alone. Mary-Beth was determined not to abandon her. “If you drag me down any more,” she aid to Donny, “I’ll leave you here alone.”

Donny winced and tried to stand with his one good foot. He fell back to the ground several times and held his hand out to Mary-Beth, but she did not help him. She simply watched him with her rawboned, vexed face, and said, “Don’t be a wuss.”

“How do you remember me?”

“I hated you. For all the subtle ways you found to hurt me. Honestly I wish I hadn’t saved you from yourself, so I wouldn’t have to be so goddamn confused about what to do with you.”

She had him in tears, but she didn’t care. She felt loveless and unloved, and her own stories had convinced her that it was all Donny’s fault. She needed to get to Aida. She needed Aida’s cool, calm arms to wrap around her. She needed Aida to forgive her. She needed Aida’s love.

Her feet screeched with pain but she kept on walking. *Oh, please God,* she thought, *let me get there, let me love her, let me be loved.* She would give Aida her body, all of it, whatever she needed—stomach, heart, lungs, whatever—she would hand it over, proving to Aida how loved she was. She would hand her body over, and then they would be together as long as Aida lived. She would hand it over, and then Mary-Beth wouldn’t have to carry herself anymore.

Mary-Beth lead him up the summit of a bloodshot mountain, thinking from there she might be able to see a road. Donny pulled himself along on his hands and his one good knee. He dragged the other behind him. He begged intermittently, “Please wait,” and, “Don’t leave me behind.” By the time they reached the precipice, Mary-Beth felt in her right mind to throw Donny, or herself, off of it. Instead, she sat and dangled her sore legs over the edge. Fatigue made her a dead thing, motionless, held up only by air. She thought, if a gust of wind came up through the valley, she would go with it.

Donny collapsed next to her, his breath fuming, his skin as red as the rock and sweating.

“How do you remember me?” he asked, his voice bubbling in his throat.

“You should know.”

"I don't. I don't remember." He cupped his palms over his eyes and began, again, to cry. "I am so in over my head."

Remember that you volunteered for this experience. You agreed to get in over your head. Aida's words rang in her ears, as if she were hearing them now for the first time. She remembered how scared and intimidated she had been that first day they were together, how racked with guilt. She thought that loving Aida had helped her grow out of it, but now, after all this time, she was no better than she had been then. She began to cry. What was she thinking? This was not a body that could be given over. Not this dreadful, damaged, culpable thing. *What is love like for you?* Perhaps Mary-Beth could not answer the question because her body was incapable of loving. Perhaps she had not loved Aida after all. Loving her required risk, and she had failed to risk herself. Not her body, which she was willing to surrender, but something harder to lose, something so embedded in her it would take a lifetime of reckoning to undo.

Aida didn't need her. She needed Aida, and her need was not love, but begged for love.

Mary-Beth looked down at her father, who was hopeless, hurting, and frightened. How much he needed her. She put her hand on Donny's back, and it all came back to her. Not just her pity, but her love for him, and her grief. She put her hand on his back.

"You've got to leave me, Mary-Beth," he said, sobbing. "I can't go on anymore."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"I mean it. This is it. This was the test."

"What test?"

"What the angel said. Greater love has no one than this, that you lay down your body for your life. I know what it means now. I have to let my body go. Not for me, but for someone else. You have to let me go."

Donny looked ravaged, beaten, like the life had been sucked out of him. Mary-Beth knew she was to blame. Out of spite, she had nearly killed him. And if Aida was really gone, if Mary-Beth had let Aida slip through her fingers, then Donny was all she had in the world.

"Listen," Mary-Beth said, bending down to whisper in his ear. "I can either let you go. Or I can love you. Right now, I'm doing neither."

He looked at her with wet, pleading eyes. Blue eyes. Her eyes. "Please love me," he said.

Big, grey flumes floated overhead, grumbling their songs.

Sedona, Arizona

Thunder clapped and shook the rock beneath them. The sky burst open like a cork from a bottle and came frothing down the mountains. It didn't matter if Donny and Mary-Beth were imagining the putter of rain on their faces. They felt the putter of rain on their faces. They licked their lips. They let the rain fall into their open eyes. They inhaled it through their noses and coughed it back out. They gurgled with joy like babies. Despite the cold, they took off all their clothes, and let the rain hammer down on their unloved skin.

Lightning speared the mesa like a hairpin. They were not afraid. They praised the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, Jehovah, Saints Peter, Paul, Francis, and Teresa, and Mother Mary, Queen of Heaven and Earth. They rolled around in the mud. It molded to their naked bodies, and they became creatures of the earth, sprouted from red clay. They sucked on their fingers, swallowing chunks of wet dirt, licking the grit from their teeth. They slid down the mountain in bare feet, drenched clothes in hand, and into the valley, where water pooled around their ankles. Mary-Beth cupped a handful and poured it over her spine. The rotten fist of flesh on Donny's knee broke, bled out, and washed away. Donny jumped in puddles. He splashed his daughter. They held each other close. They were not embarrassed to be naked and touching, but rejoiced in the feeling of skin slipping past skin. They smiled and held each other's eyes. This was not mercy, but it could be. This was not forgiveness, but it could be. This was not love, but it could be.

Flagstaff, Arizona

Donny and Mary-Beth lay together on the train tracks, their bellies bloated, under blushing stars. With rain-soaked clothes to lift their spirits, Donny and Mary-Beth found their way to a road, which brought them to Flagstaff, where there were many quaint restaurants, bars, delis, and

dwellings to be ransacked. They stuffed themselves with their findings: pickled herring and condensed milk, canned tuna and strawberry preserve, stewed tomatoes and beef stock.

"I could really use a drink right now," Donny said.

"Me too," Mary-Beth said. She still wasn't enthusiastic about the taste of alcohol, but it felt like there was cause for celebration. One drink couldn't hurt.

They walked through the cool, dank, empty city. Donny was still limping, but was using now an umbrella they found on their raid as a cane, which kept the pain at bay. With his good leg, he kicked open the boarded-up door of a bar called Joe's Place. They lit up some candles, which they had pilfered from the Episcopal Church, and placed them around the room. Mary-Beth wiped the counter with her denim jacket and plopped on the barstool. A cloud of dust coughed out between the lining. Donny jumped behind the bar and began to scrutinize the foggy bottles.

"What can I get for you, miss?"

"What's the best bourbon you've got?" asked Mary-Beth. She didn't know what bourbon tasted like, but had read the line in a romance book awhile back and thought it would make her sound adult.

Donny squinted his eyes at the label. "How's about my friend, Elijah Caine, small batch, Kentucky straight?"

"Are we going to get drunk off it?"

"It's 130 proof."

Mary-Beth didn't know what that meant. "Pour it," she said, slapping her hands down on the bar. Donny spit in two glasses and cleaned them with his shirt. He filled each nearly to the brim.

"To living forever," Donny said.

"To die trying," Mary-Beth said.

Their glasses clinked. Donny gulped his down in one fell swoop, then slammed his empty glass on the counter and rasped. "That really puts the hair on your chest, doesn't it?" Donny said, pouring himself another glass. Mary-Beth took one sip of hers and instantly felt woozy. Donny slugged another back. Amber beads dribbled out the corners of his mouth and hung like ornaments from his beard. Mary-Beth laughed.

"What you laughing at?" Donny asked.

"I don't get you," Mary-Beth said. She forced herself to have another sip. "You can be so vulgar. And then, other times, you are so… cool." She forced herself to have another sip. "Why is that I hang onto you?"

"That's the price of time, I guess. The more time you spend with something, the less you understand it." Donny poured himself a third glass and sat down next to her. This one, he drank slowly. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't get me either."

"Don't you want to? Get yourself? You know, *deal* with yourself. So you don't repeat the same mistakes again and again. So that you're not trapped in the past."

Donny rubbed his forehead. He had hoped that a belly full of food and a strong drink would help him get his head in order, but it had not. "I don't think there's any past left for me."

"You really don't remember, do you? What happened with Mom."

Donny pouted.

"Do you remember her name?"

He felt the pang of loss, sorrow for all the things he could not name, could not even imagine. Donny pressed his hand against his chest. "I feel it, though. The love. Like there's something still burning in me. A fire that's keeping me going."

"Her name is Cora," Mary-Beth said. Seeing her father look like that her stomach felt suddenly empty.

"Cora. Cora. Cora." Donny tossed it around his tongue, feeling it out, rehearsing.

"Do you remember why we're here?" Mary-Beth asked.

He chuckled to himself, but Mary-Beth could see he was on the verge of tears.

"You're driving me to California. Do you know why?"

Donny shook his head.

"There's someone there whom I love very much."

"Oh yeah?" He pinched Mary-Beth's shoulder. "You got the bug too."

Mary-Beth started tugging at the frayed ends of her jacket. "Her name is Aida. Someone I met the day the water got stolen from the lake, not that you remember. The day I ran away. She was just some girl I happened to meet, and then, all of a sudden, she became the center of my life." She drank. "I don't know. It all happened so fast. It seems stupid when I say it out loud. Being so committed to someone you hardly know. And then when she told me she was sick, I

was devastated. I mean… Really." Mary-Beth's words were starting to slur. "I would have done, anything… everything to help her."

"So why didn't you?" Donny asked.

"I wanted to. But she wouldn't let me. Or… I'm starting to think… maybe I misinterpreted her… what she wantedfrom me." Mary-Beth tipped the glass once more to her lips, but it was empty. She had finished the whole thing, absentmindedly. "I was prepared to give her… To open myself up and say, take what you want, it's yours. Everything. You know? My life for… her life. I just wanted her to live. I didn't know how else to give it back to her. Because…" Mary-Beth burped. "She had given me my life." She began to waver in her chair. "Am I making sense?"

"Is that what it's like for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The question you asked. What is love like for you? I realize I never asked you back. Is it, like, wanting to give up yourself?"

Mary-Beth closed her eyes. The bourbon had made her insides hot, even the underside of her eyelids. A low humming throbbed in her ears. She tried to think about Aida. Not what she wanted from Aida, or what Aida had awakened in her, or how desperately she longed to see her, or what was missing from her life now that Aida was gone, but Aida, just Aida, and what it was like to really be with her. Perhaps it was all she had to drink, but she could think of nothing solid. No words, no images; she only had a feeling that sat deep in her heart. So deep that it hurt to think about. Not the knot, but it's unraveling, which was far more painful than the knot, and far more terrifying, because without it Mary-Beth did not know how she was supposed to live. That was how Aida made her feel. So beautifully, terribly undone. She began to cry.

Donny put his big hand on her back and rubbed it. And for the first time in weeks, his touch felt good. Not like he was taking something from her, or putting something on her that he himself did not want, but like he really wanted to be there for her. Just be there. Mary-Beth calmed down enough to wipe her nose and laugh. "Let's just forget about it," she said. "It's probably too late now. Let's just stay in Flagstaff, Arizona forever. How about that?"

Donny leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be right back," he whispered.

He was gone before Mary-Beth could get a word in edge wise. She was so drunk, so exhausted, the room felt like it was spinning. She folded her arms over the bar counter and rested her head. She succumbed to dizziness, to longing, to sleep.

The next thing she knew, Donny was shaking her. She woke with a queasy stomach and sour mouth. She squinted at her father. He was blowing out the last of the candles.

"Where did you go?" she moaned.

Donny came over to her and dangled a set of keys in her face. "I got us some wheels."

Mojave Desert, California

Driving through the Mojave Desert in the middle of the night was like driving across the bottom of a big, black lake. There was no brim to the desert, no shoreline of night, so Donny sometimes got the feeling that he was driving underwater, with no where to go but up. Only the moon reminded him where he was.

The Fiero they stole ripped down the highway, splitting the air in two. Donny passed a joint to Mary-Beth. Mary-Beth breathed deeply. The desert wind came in through the open window and snatched the smoke away. The leather seat hugged Mary-Beth, and she sunk into it. Mick Jagger's voice on the fuzzy radio. *Burns like a red coal carpet. Mad bull lost its way.* Mary-Beth's thoughts wandered away from each other. She passed the joint back to her father. His rogue face glowed orange for a moment, then disappeared behind a cloud of smoke. He shifted gears. They sped on. *Murder!* Merry Clayton's voice seemed to pierce the membrane between body and machine, road and sky. *It's just a shot away.* Donny stuck his head out the window. His long, grey hair whipped back from his skull. He howled.

They went on like this for some time. Singing, speeding, and smoking the weed Donny found, miraculously, in the Fiero's glove compartment. With every drag, Mary-Beth felt the edges of her body begin to dissipate. It was good, thrilling even, not to have to be so aware of her limits. *I'll tell you love, it's just a kiss away.*

Donny and Mary-Beth thought they would be able to make it to Los Angeles on a single tank of gas, but the Mojave went on and on. But around three o'clock in the morning, the engine gave way. No matter how hard Donny throttled the gas, the Fiero could not compete with the

many, swelling desert miles left to go. It rolled slowly across the flat salt plains, then stopped. Too high to panic, Donny and Mary-Beth sat there, saying nothing. The world was silent around them. Moon quieter than ever.

After a while, Donny dropped his forehead on the steering wheel. "Mother. Fucker," he whispered.

"What should we do?" asked Mary-Beth.

Donny stuck the roach they had been nursing behind his ear. "Nothing to do but start walking again."

The Mojave so cold they could see each other's breath. They wrapped their jackets tightly around their torsos. Mary-Beth walked on wobbly legs, acclimatizing to having a body again. Donny shuffled next to her, relying heavily on his umbrella-cane. Mary-Beth's vision was still hazy, but she swore she saw stars falling out of the sky. She wished, briefly, for one of them to hurtle towards the earth. That way, the End of the World wouldn't have to be so drawn out, so precarious, so uncertain. Then she remembered Aida, and how close she was to seeing her again. She knew it wasn't going to be easy. LA was a big city, and Aida might be difficult to track down. Not to mention the lurking possibility that Aida might not want to see Mary-Beth at all. But if she had made it this far—if she could handle the death of her grandmother, her mother's departure, the dissolution of her home, and her father's attempted suicide; if she had survived being robbed, starved, threatened with a gun, nearly kidnapped, and nearly killed—then she owed it to herself to see Aida at the end of it. If not to give her body away, at least to tell her how she felt.

"Do you hear that?" Donny asked. He pointed off road. They could hear thumping in the distance.

"Do you think there's someone out there?"

"I don't know. But I know if we don't figure out a plan by dawn, we're screwed." Donny was right. There was no way he could walk far with his leg. And even if it was cold now, they wouldn't last a day in the desert heat.

They walked through the brush in the direction of the noise. As they got closer, Mary-Beth could see embers flickering. The thumping they heard was music, with a bass loud enough to shake the gravel beneath their feet. It was getting louder.

Yes, there was a fire, and there were people dancing around it. Sub woofers boomed in the open hatchback of a mini van. One dancer plucked a flame from the fire and started whirling it around her waist. Another took it and juggled it gracefully before tossing it to a third dancer, who cast it at the sky and waved it like a kite. Two more still were sitting on a sheepskin blanket by the minivan, constructing a tower of small stones. When the tower fell, they rolled with laughter, then started building it up again. They all wore fur coats, which wafted dust wherever they moved. They were naked, or nearly naked, underneath. Glitter covered their faces. It sparkled like snow. They were in a trance and did not register Donny and Mary-Beth's intrusion.

"They're circus freaks," Donny said.

Mary-Beth pinched his arm. "Don't be rude."

"Let's go back."

Mary-Beth pinched him harder. "Don't be stupid."

One of the tower-builders spotted Donny and Mary-Beth out the corner of her eye. She whistled, and the dancers awoke from their spell. All five looked at Mary-Beth and Donny and smiled brightly. Someone killed the music, and the desert sunk once more into silence. A bell chimed. Once. Twice. A third time. "Blessed be," they said in unison, still smiling.

"Thank you," Mary-Beth blurted out.

"Blessings be with you," Donny added.

One of the dancers skipped up to them. Their hair and beard curled in tight ringlets around their face. Their voice was husky, their body exquisite and lean, agile as a ballerina. "Where are y'all from?"

"Fox Lake," Donny said, proud at himself for remembering what to say. "Near Chicago."

"Y'all drove here, then?"

"We did," said Mary-Beth. "And then we didn't. And then we did again."

"Well, it's a *joy* of you to join us. Welcome to King Clone. We call ourselves the Deserters. I'm Ceres, this is Joshua, Juniper, and over there is Our Mother of Cups and the Fox.

Tonight is a very special night, as I'm sure you know." Mary-Beth and Donny shook their heads. Ceres fanned at the sky. "It's a lunar eclipse! The first of this year. *And* a full moon in Pisces. It's an especially powerful time for healing." Ceres gathered that the visitors had not a clue what they were talking about. "To purge ourselves of last year and set transformative intentions for the new. We were just performing a manifestation ceremony." Ceres took Donny and Mary-Beth's hands. "Oh. You two definitely have *a lot* to let go of," Ceres winced. He pulled Donny and Mary-Beth closer to the fire. Ceres sniffed the air. "Do y'all have weed?" Donny pulled the roach from behind his ear. "Ugh! You are an angel!"

All five Deserters sat in a circle around the fire. Donny lit the joint and passed it around. Each took a long, lingering sip.

"Do y'all want something to drink?" asked Ceres. Donny and Mary-Beth nodded. Our Mother of Cups tossed back her blue hair and ladled a piping, milky-white tea into two mugs, which she gave to Donny and Mary-Beth. The steam warmed their cold, dry faces. "Be careful," she said. "This batch is very strong."

Mary-Beth and Donny exchanged a worried glance, but slurped at their drinks anyway, figuring they had nothing to lose.

The Deserters stared at Donny and Mary-Beth expectantly. Juniper couldn't take her eyes off Donny's bad leg.

"So," Mary-Beth said, "who's King Clone?"

"All around you," said the Fox.

"I see." Mary-Beth drank her tea. It was generously honeyed, but left a fungal taste on her tongue.

"Right now, we are cradled by a ring of creosote bushes," Joshua explained. "They're clonal organisms, meaning that, as the creosote bush grows older, and its branches die out, its crown splits. That way, many bushes can be reproduced from one seed. This ring is a single organism that has survived close to 12,000 years."

"Even now? It's alive?" Mary-Beth asked.

Joshua didn't answer. He simply plucked a leaf from the bush and pressed it against Mary-Beth's nostrils. The waxy, green leaf smelled of rain. It cleared Mary-Beth's sinuses of

sand. Joshua offered another to Donny. They thanked him, and he beamed. Joshua was a large and bulky man, but he had a fairylike demeanor.

By the time their mugs were empty, Mary-Beth and Donny's senses were beginning to slip. Joshua was telling the group about a prehistoric lake that reached from the San Bernardino foothills to Anza-Borrego and its accompanying conspiracy. Mary-Beth felt suddenly compelled to remove her shoes and bury her feet in the ground. The earth was silver and crumbled voluptuously at her touch. She wanted to take off her clothes, dig a hole, and lay her whole body in the belly of the desert. But Mary-Beth could feel Joshua's voice moving towards her. She snapped herself back to the conversation. So-called geologic demigods are under the impression that Lake Cahuilla dried up along with the whole of the Holocene, but Joshua tells her that American Expansionists of the 1890s dammed up the Colorado delta in an attempt to reroute its resources away from Mexico.

Donny listened vaguely. He was squinting up at the moon. It shrunk and it swelled the longer he looked at it, as if it had a pulse. He felt the urge to reach up and grab it, to crack it like an egg against the ground, see what life throbbed inside.

"Donny," Ceres said. Donny shivered out of his meditation. He didn't remember giving out his name. "Juniper is asking if she might take a look at your knee." Donny gripped his denim jeans, which covered the wound. How did she know he was injured? "Don't worry," Ceres said. "Juniper is the best healer out of all of us." Donny nodded.

Juniper crawled over to Donny and straddled his shins. Her black hair was shaved close to her skull, and her skin was covered in tattoos, each one a long, winding sentence, in hieroglyphs Donny could not understand. She had calm eyes, but she did not blink, which made Donny uneasy. Her long, flat palm hovered just above Donny's knee.

"It was a car accident," Donny tried to explain.

"This wasn't an accident," Juniper whispered. She pivoted her gaze in Mary-Beth's direction. Mary-Beth found herself too frightened to look Juniper in the eye. She turned back to Donny. "This is worse than I thought." Juniper raised and inspected their empty cups. "In about twenty minutes, you both will start to hallucinate." She touched Donny and Mary-Beth each

lightly on their chests. “There is nothing to be afraid of. We’re here with you. We’re going to help.”

Our Mother of Cups and the Fox ran back to the minivan, and returned with piles of fabrics. Sheepskin and furs, woven carpets and colorful cotton quilts. Mary-Beth and Donny were swathed in them. Joshua encircled them with stones, then gave each one stone to hold. Ceres tangled bundles of palo verde in their hair. Juniper burnt a slab of bark and lay it at their feet. When the trip started — when flat lines corrugated and colors erupted, when light roared and all sounds became urgent — Donny and Mary-Beth felt both naive and extraordinary. Like babies, seeing the world for the first time. They were lucky to be doted on by many mothers.

Juniper asked them to lie back. They lay back and gripped each other’s fingers. The stars were crystals eroding down. Night, a throat, swallowing sky. The moon envious of them all, her face ablaze. Strange, how everything appeared so clearly, yet they were numb to their own bodies. Juniper knelt between them. The others huddled at a stone’s throw, holding hands and humming.

The bell chimed again. Once. Twice. A third time.

Juniper’s eyes rolled back, but her lids did not flutter. She ran one palm down Donny’s face, smoothing his eyes closed. She placed her hand on Donny’s forehead. She clawed her fingers in his hair. “You think you have lost so much,” she said. “But you have stolen what belongs to you. All your life, you’ve tried to run away from the truth. That you are a thief. You had no idea what you have had to leave behind in return.”

She ran her other hand down Mary-Beth’s face, but Mary-Beth wouldn’t close her eyes. “Silly blue eyes,” Juniper cooed. She willed them shut and placed her palm on Mary-Beth’s forehead. “The sun that once favored you shines on you no longer. You are no longer a child, which means you can no longer be innocent. This is how you were born. Without splendor to inherit.”

Darkness swirled. Memories crowded and bled into one another. Mary-Beth and Donny felt stranded within themselves. Juniper instructed them to sit up, and they obeyed. She tilted their chins up. She snapped her fingers. They opened their eyes.

“May I?” Juniper asked, gesturing to Donny’s leg. Donny unwrapped himself from the blankets. Juniper took a knife out of her black fur coat and slashed the fabric of his jeans, just above the joint. The wound festered. To the psychedelic eye, it seemed almost planetary. It had its own craters, atmosphere, volcanic mountains, storms.

“Both of you are wounded,” Juniper said. She looked at Mary-Beth. “You have allowed him to carry it for you.” She gripped Donny’s shin, where an infection had spread. “This is going to have to go.” She pointed at Mary-Beth. “You are going to have to be the one to do it.”

Juniper pulled them up and lead them to the fire. Our Mother of Cups gave Donny a vial. “Drink this until it’s empty,” she said. Donny finished it in three, heaping gulps. It left the taste of gasoline in his mouth. His legs began to tingle. Pain melted away from his wound, then his whole leg went numb. His knees wobbled and he fell to the ground. Our Mother of Cups held one of his hands, and the Fox held the other. Ceres tapped Mary-Beth on the shoulder. She turned to him, frightened. He handed her a hacksaw. It trembled in her hands.

Juniper took Mary-Beth’s shoulders. “It’s okay. Your father will soon be free of pain.” Juniper knelt at Donny’s side. Mary-Beth followed suit.

“Donny Sorensen,” Juniper said, “the life you have tried to hold together with such effort is all pieces, it’s unusable. You do not need to carry it anymore. You can build yourself back up again.” She turned. “Mary-Beth, all the fears you have been harboring, all the things you’ve been made to feel guilty for, all the guilt that you assumed was your responsibility, you need to let it go. You must be responsible for your actions, not your guilt.”

Mary-Beth felt the knot in her heart protest. She had nurtured it for so long.

Juniper pointed to a spot on Donny’s leg. “Cut here.”

Mary-Beth broke the skin, and Donny began to bleed out. The pain was unbearable, butthe vial that Donny drank had paralyzed him. He gnashed his teeth. He shook down to the bone. A scream hung at the back of his throat, but his lips would not let it budge. Meanwhile, Mary-Beth cut and cut, and as she cut, she sobbed.

Juniper said, “Repeat after me. You are headed towards light. You are headed towards love.”

“You are headed towards light,” Mary-Beth croaked. “You are headed towards love.” Blood spurted up Mary-Beth’s arms and pooled in her lap. Donny’s eyes went white. “I don’t want to kill him!” she shouted.

“Good,” Juniper said. “Keep going. You won’t.”

Mary-Beth closed her eyes and railed harder against Donny’s leg, grinding down the bone. “Youaregoingintolightyouaregoingintolove,” she hissed between her teeth.

At last, the last frayed bit of flesh snapped. It was done. Mary-Beth collapsed, exhausted, disgusted, but suddenly relieved of a heavy burden. Our Mother of Cups and the Fox worked quickly to reassemble muscles around the exposed bone, then swaddled the stump in bandages. Joshua took great care to wrap the amputated leg in a strip of fine, blue satin. He mumbled several prayers to himself before tossing it in the fire. Ceres burnt sage and bay leaves and palo santo to mask the smell.

When Donny’s scream finally escaped from him, it did so in the form of raucous, uncontrollable laughter. “I remember,” he said, searching for Mary-Beth. “I remember the day you were born. It was such a bloody, fucking mess, just like this. They cut your mother’s stomach open and laid her organs out on the table. Then, there you were.” He held Mary-Beth’s face, splattered with flecks of his blood, with both his leathery hands. “Now we’re even.”

Mary-Beth hugged him. “I’m so sorry.”

“No. Thank you.”

Juniper lay a large, golden pot beside them. It was full of freshwater. “Wash each other,” she said, and so they did. Mary-Beth carefully poured fistfuls of water over her father’s skin. Donny dunked Mary-Beth’s arms in the basin and scrubbed them like laundry. They even washed the parts that weren’t bloody. Their faces and their hair. Their three dirty feet. When they had finished with the ritual, Joshua and Ceres took the pot of bloodied water far out into the desert, to bury it.

Juniper stood before them. She crouched and took Donny’s hands in hers. “You know *precisely* what to do with these hands,” she said, shaking them.

She stood again and addressed Mary-Beth. “Love is not like this.” Juniper looked down at her bare, toe-ringed feet. “Love is like this.” She looked straight into Mary-Beth’s eyes and

held them for a long time. Then, Juniper's serious expression fell away. Her lips curled into a smile as bright as the year was new.

Los Angeles, California

The city skyline wore a layer of smoke thick as a petticoat. Donny and Mary-Beth could see it from miles away. They had made it, at last, to the city where the freeways were as wide as parking lots. Where the car washes were made to look like palaces, and the mountainside palaces made to look like display cases. Hamburger bars sprouted at the margins of the freeway, one after the other. Donny couldn't believe how many buildings there were. Mary-Beth couldn't believe how many of these buildings' sole function was the sale of mattresses. Donny couldn't believe the Lord's master plan had brought him to this extremity. Mary-Beth couldn't believe how far she had come, how close she was now.

Mary-Beth raced the Fiero down the San Bernardino Freeway on the last quarter-tank of gas given to them by the Deserters. They had the windows down and were enjoying the warm, if ashy, breeze.

Donny massaged his leg. The healing would take a long time, but he was hopeful. Mary-Beth watched her father in the rearview mirror. She thought, surprised at herself, how handsome he looked. Lighter, for lack of a better word.

"Are you going to be all right when I'm gone?" Mary-Beth asked.

"I think I'll figure something out," he said. Donny tapped the front cover of *Your Dream Home: How To Build It for Less than $3500*. "That's why I keep it around," he said. "To remind me who I am."

"And that means?"

"That I'm gonna get to work. Something groundbreaking. State of the art. An architecture of consequence. I've already started drawing up blueprints," Donny said, patting his temple.

Mary-Beth followed the 10 to the 101, and they dipped into downtown. Murals exhibiting the good deeds of Collective leaders were painted on the walls beneath the overpass. Folks

wobbled along with their whole lives packed into shopping carts. Donny rested his hand on Mary-Beth's as she shifted gears. It seemed already that everything that had passed between them was far away. Like it had occurred on another planet. Memories petered out and were laid to rest on the road from which they came. Home was just another word.

They drove along down Spring Street. Tents lined every inch of sidewalk, while the highrises up above seemed largely unoccupied. There were people everywhere, more so even than Chicago, Mary-Beth thought. There were arguing, selling toothbrushes, playing dominos on milk crates. Mary-Beth looked around at the lampposts and the tall windows and the hoopskirt sky. She thought there was supposed to be an ocean around. Where was the water?

Through the fashion district, where laundry hung from blasted-out warehouse windows, and stopping for directions in Westlake, Mary-Beth and Donny made their way at last to Good Samaritan Hospital. Donny gasped when he saw it. Part church, part resort, part mausoleum, it seemed to him an architecturally holy thing. Mary-Beth scanned the windows and wondered if Aida was in one of the rooms. Her heart lurched, and she smiled giddily in spite of herself. She wanted so badly for the journey to have been worth it.

Mary-Beth parked the Fiero in the lot across the street. She helped Donny out of the passenger seat, flinging one of his arms around her shoulder while his other gripped the cane Juniper had fashioned for him out of the stump of a Joshua Tree. They hobbled towards the entrance, where Collective nurses, in the same lab coats as the miners at Stateville, scurried in and out. One young man, skinny and head-shaven, scampered straight to Donny. "Sir," he said, "let's get you a wheelchair. What's your name? What country and or state are you from? Do you have identification? Can you tell me what I need to know about your medical history?"

"Hold your horses," said Donny. "I know I may not look it but I feel better than ever. I'm here with my daughter."

The nurse looked Mary-Beth up and down, searching for impurities.

"I'm also fine," said Mary-Beth. "Better than fine." She handed him the torn and faded IPALU letter.

The nurse's face lit up. "This is wonderful. Welcome to Good Samaritan, comrade." He put his hand on her back and lead her through the revolving door. Mary-Beth looked back at

Donny, who was stumbling after them. In the foyer, there were dozens of people, crunched on waiting room benches, or else slumped over on the tiles. They coughed, or massaged sprained ankles, or buried their face in their hands. The nurses pulled Mary-Beth straight up to the reception desk. “Comrade,” he said to the secretary, “get a room ready for Miss—” he searched Mary-Beth’s face for a name.

“Sorensen,” Mary-Beth whispered.

“Miss Sorensen,” said the nurse.

The secretary pushed a few buttons and mumbled something into a walkie-talkie. Donny caught up with them and grabbed onto Mary-Beth’s hand. She squeezed his. “Room 605 is ready for you, Miss Sorensen.” She passed a clipboard across the counter. “If you will just sign the bottom of this form for me.” Mary-Beth scrawled her name without thinking twice about it.

“We can begin tests right away,” said the nurse, taking off Mary-Beth’s jacket and putting a paper nightgown in her hands. Another nurse, this one with a thick, red beard, arrived with a wheelchair. Suddenly, she was alarmed. It was all happening so fast. Too fast. The nurses edged her down, pulling Donny’s hand away. They began to push her down a long corridor.

“Wait!” she said. “My dad, he needs to be here. He needs me.”

“No need to worry. We’ll take good care of him,” said the nurse.

“No!” Mary-Beth craned her neck to look at him. His face had sunk into a panic. He was running, as much as he could run, after her.

“Sir!” the secretary shouted. “You’re not authorized to go down there!”

“Dad!” Mary-Beth cried.

Two men in lab coats grabbed Donny’s arms and threw him up against a wall. Mary-Beth was about to jump out of the wheelchair and run back to him, but then she felt the cool prick of a needle in her arm, and everything went dizzy.

With all his strength, Donny pushed the guards away, losing his balance and falling to the floor. Before they could come after him again, he grabbed his cane and whacked one of them across the cheek. “Stay away from me, you jags!” Donny screamed. The one guard rushed to the other’s aid as Donny staggered to standing.

He looked at the guard's blood on the floor, the secretary's eyes wild with fear, the fluorescent lights, the crying children and broken legs in the waiting room. Where was he? Why was he here? He looked down the corridor, knowing that something important to him was down there, but he could not remember for the life of him what it was.

Donny hobbled out of the hospital and into the parking lot. There were sun-bleached palm trees and buildings he did not recognize. Where was he? He couldn't understand why he couldn't walk, and was horrified to look down and find that one of his legs was missing. He tried to remember the route home, but no names or landmarks came to him. All he could think of was the cold he felt in his chest. He tried to remember the name of his mother, his wife (was she alive?), his children (did he have any?). His mind was as bright and blank as the smog in the sky. Donny spotted a crucifix at the top of the hospital and began to cry. "What has become of me, Lord? Where did I get so lost?"

When Mary-Beth came to, she was in a hospital room. The nightgown chafed against her hips and nipples. Fluorescent light beat down. Nurses in their teal lab coats and paper masks poked and prodded her from all directions, calling out statistics.

"Where's Aida?" Mary-Beth whispered.

"I'm sorry, comrade?" asked one of the nurses.

"Aida. I'm supposed to donate my organs to Aida."

"I'm sorry," said the nurse, "I don't think there's anyone in this hospital by that name."

Mary-Beth's heart rate went up. She could watch it dip and soar on the screen.

"Aida Parker," she said, delirious. "The letter. She needs me."

Another nurse spoke up, "I can confirm we've never had an Aida Parker receive a grant from the commission."

The shaved-headed nurse held up the paper Mary-Beth had given him earlier. "We send this letter out to every able-bodied comrade between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six," he said. "Not that your commitment isn't appreciated. It's so rare to find willing and eligible donors these days."

Mary-Beth had stopped listening. It felt like her ears had been injected with cement. Her tongue dried. Her eyes swelled with tears. “Aida,” she chanted helplessly, as more needles and thermometers and monitors and markings were placed all over her body. “Where’s Aida?”

Part III

Nail

Los Angeles, California

When I received the phone call that I was not, in fact, going to die after all, I was having a bath. It did not matter to me much that the seawater I had boiled kettle by kettle was black, even if it stuck streaks of tar to the crevices of my body. I needed to think.

For the longest time, I could not do it. I could not think, by which I mean, I could not explain to myself what was going on. The dissolution of the university where I had worked for thirty years. The death of Michel, my husband, and the disappearances of my friends. The End of the World, as it had become so flippantly described. All my life, I had been able to think through the things I did not understand. I was an anthropologist; I saw things from a distance. Suddenly, I could not see things from a distance. I was left stranded. It made me sick.

I looked down through the dirty water at the illness of me. Skin yellowed, entangled in a web of purple veins. Belly and ankles swollen. The parts of me left unscathed by disease surrendered to age and fatigue. I embarrassed myself. I had not had a decent thought in years.

But, I had found, at the very least, an opportunity. I applied to the Collective Grants Commission, promising them, in exchange for immediate medical attention, an anthropological history of the End of the World. It was a shot in the dark; I thought they might have no use for scholars. But they liked the idea. Talked about the importance of being remembered. They accepted my proposal. Now, it was a matter of waiting for a compatible donor.

That still left the problem of the study. What to write about. How to write it. All around my house, I left crumpled-up notes. *Where to locate the End of the World? Who were its writers, its participants? When did we mourn? Prevail? Is archive useful in post-apocalyptic times? How did it feel? What did we want?* I had to admit I felt like a fraud, cooped up in my bungalow by the oil-soaked sea, sleeping fourteen hours a day, a sixty-seven-year-old woman with liver failure. I had lost touch.

My bath was getting cold again. I rose out of the tub and dabbed myself with a towel, leaving grease patches in the cotton. I took a pot and walked, naked, out my house and onto the sand. I did not worry about being seen; hardly anyone lived in Malibu anymore.

The beach was empty save for the smog. Desalination plants rose from the sea in the distance, chain linked to their oil rig ancestors. The walk from my house to the water's edge felt long and arduous. Each step I took seemed to stretch the sand, making me feel like I was walking and going nowhere, the way it is in dreams. I felt faint.. *This is how it is for a weak woman*, I thought. I considered the possibility that the sea might feel very much like a weak woman.

The tide was low, leaving fragments of plastic bags and bottle caps in its wake. I stepped around the wreckage and dipped my pot into the shallow water. *Where does* the world *locate the End of the World?* I thought, wishing I had brought a pen. The pot was heavy. Cold water splashed at my pubic bone as I shuffled away from shore. Despite the smog, the air was so bright I could barely keep my eyes open. I analyzed the footprints I made in the sand. *A history of the End of the World is incomplete without the history of the land,* I thought, then shook my head. There was no time for such a history.

Back at the house, I set the water on the stove to boil and searched for a piece of paper. In my study, I ripped the flyleaf out of one of my old textbooks. I hovered my pen over the blank page and tried to retrieve the thought, but it was gone. I growled and pinned the sheet to the board where I kept all my other half-muttered questions. The kettle whined.

Adding hot water to my bath, I settled back down and tried to relax. I ducked under, hoping silence would help me focus. But my abdomen, as if to betray me, lurched with pain. I sprung out of the water, spluttering and spitting out its contamination. I gripped the edges of the basin and hung my head low, trying to feel through it, my body eating away at itself.

Then the phone rang.

I staggered up and ran back to my study, gripping my side and trying not to slip on the puddles I left on the floor.

"Hello? Yes?" I answered.

"Is this Dr. Maria Camphor?" said the voice on the other line.

"Yes, yes."

"I have a beautiful new liver for you at Good Samaritan."

My side knotted up again, and I hissed through my teeth.

"I can schedule an appointment for you next week Thursday," said the voice.

"No, don't do that," I said, trying and failing to keep my voice steady. "I'm on my way."

I dried off and went to my room, where I confronted, again, the teabags molding in their mugs, the dust on the lightbulbs, the watermarks on the windows and furniture. This state of things depressed me, but I was always too tired to do anything about it. *That will all change,* I thought to myself. *That and more.* I dressed quickly, using the first things I could find: plaid pants, red cowboy boots, black turtleneck, an old windbreaker of my husband's. I brushed my hair before the vanity mirror, examining the rough, grey tufts that fell out and running my fingers along the leftover webs of scalp. I did not want to put my glasses on, for looking at myself always seemed to make the fact of my decay not simply an interruption, but an inevitability. But I would have to see to drive. I put my glasses on but turned away from the mirror as I did.

I sprawled back out to the bright, smoked morning. Michel's old Stingray Corvette sat in the driveway. It had been years since we last drove it, on a failed anniversary holiday to the Bay, which ended in a heated ethical dispute as to whether or not the Collective's newly-announced leadership was a viable, transformative move. It was Michel's view that history would repeat itself. I was convinced that history would be forced to change. We never resolved the dispute. Two weeks after the road trip, Michel went for a swim in the sea and never returned. I'd never know if he had been poisoned or caught in a bad current, if it had something to do with his weak heart, or if he simply decided that he wanted to die. Perhaps this one unknowing was the root of my being unable to think.

I slumped into the driver's seat. The keys were still in the ignition. The Stingray purred. All these years of living on the coast, and I never dared to drive. Despite living in Southern California my entire life—my father, a life insurance salesman, moved us everywhere from Davis to Riverside, Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo—there was a hostility particular to the canyons and cliffs of Malibu that I never overcame. As I gripped the steering wheel, I realized that I hadn't left the house since Michel died. I scrolled through the glovebox, looking for something that would help me muster up the courage to back out of the driveway. It seemed Michel listened to nothing but Stravinsky. Silence would have to do.

Smog was thick on the Pacific Coast Highway. I could barely see ten meters in front of me. Although I knew I was the only driver on the road, my knuckles were as taught as buttons.

Visibility amended up in the hills by Monte Nido. I looked back towards the ocean, but all I saw was a blanket of cloud, as if I were high up in an airplane. It had been a long time since I was in an airplane, or even heard one flying overhead. The mountains' winding roads made me nauseous. Several times, I stopped the car and heaved out the window. Dehydrated and fatigued from my convulsions, I drove through the city dispossessed, unable to make out words on billboards, nor the starched feathers of the palms.

I threw up once more in the parking lot of Good Samaritan before going in. I must have looked a fright because of it, because the woman sitting at the front desk jumped as if she'd seen a ghost. Perhaps that was another reason for not leaving the house: to avoid, at all costs, the way people look at the dying. "Good morning." I did my best to put on my most resentful smirk. "I'm Dr. Maria Camphor. I believe you have something of mine."

"Dr. Camphor!" called a voice from behind me. There was a young woman, tall, her shiny, black hair parted down the middle. She had the Collective logo pinned to her teal lab coat, as well as one which read, *Love Has No Borders.* She reached out her tan, manicured hand. "I'm Dr. Shaw."

"Pleased to meet you," I said, thinking she was perhaps the healthiest woman I had ever seen. Strangely, this made me anxious.

"The Commission was so thrilled to receive your proposal," Dr. Shaw smiled, her teeth glossy. "We're on the edge of our seats waiting for your report."

"So am I."

Dr. Shaw chuckled blankly. "Right this way." She stepped into an elevator, where a man, catatonic, lay down on a gurney, hooked up to a variety of catheters and tubes. There was no nurse in the elevator. Dr. Shaw did not look at him as we ascended. I watched bubbles of condensation form in his oxygen mask and held my breath, worried suddenly that I smelled like vomit. We arrived at the top floor. Dr. Shaw stepped out of the elevator, leaving the man behind. I followed, watching the man's body until the doors slid closed, a question I did not know how to ask aching in my chest

Dr. Shaw lead me into her office, a glass-encased room overlooking Wilshire Boulevard's fast food restaurants and art deco buildings. She asked if she could take my coat. I told her I'd

rather she not. She insisted. I obliged and sat down, clutching the windbreaker with my knees. Dr. Shaw asked me to roll up my sleeve. I held it out for her, trying not to blush when she revealed the degenerate state of my arm, the skin of it thin as gauze over a rotten bone. She wrapped a rubber bracelet above my elbow and it squeezed, making me dizzy. Dr. Shaw said my blood pressure wasn't good but it wasn't bad either. Next she examined the inside of my mouth, nostrils, and ears. I took a good look at her, then. I noticed that she was not tan but had used some sort of cream to make herself look that way; you could tell at the edge of her hairline. I discovered furthermore that she was wearing a wig, which wouldn't have bothered me, although hair loss seemed an odd thing for a doctor at one of the last functioning hospitals at the End of the World to be worried about. Dr. Shaw removed my glasses and shined a light in my eyes, which put a stop to my analyzing.

"We're going to be taking a small blood sample," said Dr. Shaw, removing a syringe from her pocket. "If you have no serious infections, we can go ahead with the surgery."

"And that will be?"

"We'll set you up in a room for tonight. If all goes as planned, we're hoping to operate tomorrow morning." Dr. Shaw pulled a few sips of blood from my vein. I clenched my teeth, willing myself not to faint. "We're very busy, you see. It's best to get these things out of the way as soon as possible."

"What can you tell me about the donor?" I asked.

"All we can tell you is that it belongs to a young woman named Mary-Beth. We don't know much about her, other than the fact that she arrived at Good Samaritan in a 1984 Pontiac Fiero with a Colorado license plate and a psychotic amputee in tow."

"What a story," I said.

"Both the car and the amputee disappeared shortly after her admission." Dr. Shaw placed my blood sample in a plastic envelope, labeled it, and slid it through a narrow window.

"I would like to meet her," I said. "It's not everyday you meet someone who's agreed to give up their life for you."

"I would strongly advise against it," she said. "It's unwise for donors and beneficiaries to meet. Attachments make the process tricky."

"I'm a scholar," I said. "It's my job not to get attached."

Dr. Shaw remained unconvinced.

Thus, I waited until the nurses had removed my barely-nibbled dinner tray and drew the curtains closed. I hid a tape recorder in my underwear and shuffled out the hospital wing in my johnny gown and slippers. The floor they assigned to me was largely empty. I climbed into the elevator and selected the floor below. There, nurses ran about with face masks and blood on their latex gloves. The surgical unit. Not where Mary-Beth would be. I tried floor 6. The sign at its entrance said *Hospice Care.* I stepped into the corridor. Two doctors cut their conversation short and glanced at me suspiciously. I averted their eyes and began to mumble gibberish to myself. Luckily, most people don't look twice at a jaundiced old lady dragging her IV drip up and down hospital corridors in the middle of the night. They carried on talking, something about hepatic arteries and positive CT scans. I pretended to push the buttons on a defunct vending machine until they were gone.

All the doors in the corridor were closed. I tried to see if any of them, at least, had names. They did not, only numbers. I tried one handle, but it was locked, and anyway I wouldn't have been able to recognize Mary-Beth from anybody else.

I heard footsteps around the corner and put on my senile act again. A nurse walked into room 605, jostled about for a few minutes, then walked out again carrying a two liter bottle with a biohazard warning on it, filled to the brim with blood. I had a good feeling about that.

I managed to slide my hand between the door and its frame before it locked. The person laying in bed did not not register me when I walked in. She lay motionless, cocooned in a thin, fleece blanket. She would not look at me. I sat on the stool beside her. Still, she did not move.

"Mary-Beth," I said.

The patient's eyes fluttered, and she looked at me, confused.

"It is Mary-Beth?" I asked.

She nodded only slightly.

"My name is Dr. Maria Camphor," I said. "I'm not supposed to be here."

At this, the patient rolled over and scrutinized me. Her face was pale and gaunt, her lips blue. She had probably undergone several blood transfusions already. That's how the program

usually worked: start with a few liters of blood, here and there, then upgrade to an organ the donor can live without (a kidney, for instance, or in this case, a portion of the patient's liver), more blood transfusions, then finish strong with a heart or bone allograft, after which all useable organs are extracted and stored, and nothing goes to waste. Mary-Beth looked withered. Withered was a look I was used to, but there was something about Mary-Beth in particular that unsettled me. A desolate look in her eyes. Something inconsolable.

"I am—or at least, I used to be—a professor in anthropological studies," I explained. "I am writing a dissertation of sorts about the End of the World. Live organ donors such as yourself are a phenomenon unique to this time period." I retrieved the tape recorder and rested it between us. "Can you tell me what brought you to the point of dying voluntarily so that others may live?"

Mary-Beth was silent, but she did not take her eyes away from me.

"Don't you see a future for yourself? For us? Or is the world futureless for you?"

Silence.

"Maybe let's start with something simple," I tried. "Can you tell me where you're from?"

Mary-Beth narrowed her eyes and spoke in a thin voice. "Not supposed to be here?"

I paused the tape recorder, for fear that the committee would discredit me if they knew about my intervention. But with Mary-Beth I was unafraid to speak plainly. "The doctors worried that we might form a bond, which would make the surgery difficult."

"What are they taking from me?"

"Don't you know?"

"They don't tell me."

"Liver," I said, embarrassed for taking something from someone who was so incredibly weary. Although it would be unprofessional, I felt the urge to lift my gown, to slice the skin which veiled my diseased organ, to show her how mangled and beaten it was. To show her how much I needed a new one, how much I needed her.

Mary-Beth buried her head in a thin, canvas pillow. She murmured, "Take what you want. I have no use for it anymore."

I turned the tape recorder back on. I wished I had gotten that line; there was no way I would remember it by the time I got back to my room. "So, you're unhopeful about the future?"

“I’m unhopeful about this useless body.”

I thought about that for a moment. “I’ve been so weak for so long. There are times when I feel, too, that I have a useless body. But you are so young and so healthy. How could you think your body is useless?”

Beads of sweat crawled across Mary-Beth’s forehead. Her face went pale and her eyelids drooped. “Dad is…” she whispered, slurring. “You can’t do that. Aida. Dad.” Her eyes closed shut.

“Mary-Beth,” I said, shaking her shoulder. She groaned. “Mary-Beth.” I snapped between her eyes, and she startled awake, blinking fast.

“Who are you?”

“We’ve just met. Maria Camphor.”

“You’re not a doctor are you?”

“I am a doctor, but not like the other ones here. Mostly, I’m a writer.”

Mary-Beth giggled. Spit pooled at the corners of her mouth. “A writer at the End of the World. That’s funny.” She turned to me again. “Have you ever been in love?”

I thought about Michel in his too-tight yellow sweater, scrunched over his typewriter. “Many times.”

“What is love like for you?” she asked.

I chuckled. “I’m afraid my answer would require an anthology’s worth.”

Mary-Beth shook her head. “My body won’t let me love. Not in the right way. I tried. But everyone I tried to love just slipped out of my hands.”

I hung my head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. I reminded myself that she was young; young people who are in love, but who find themselves alone, drive themselves towards impossible ends. Yet Mary-Beth did not seem so naive. Perhaps love is simply more urgent for those who grew up at the End of the World, the loss of it more commanding.

I felt Mary-Beth’s hand on my arm. “You!” she shouted, gripping me tight, pulling on me. “You’re going to get me out of this. You need to help me. My dad. My—” tears pooled in her eyes, “There’s someone named Aida who needs me. You need to find her. I need—” Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her grip hurt. She seemed to daze out again, then she deflated, letting me go.

I looked down at my arm. I was already beginning to bruise where she had touched me. I wondered if the doctors would notice the bruises and interrogate me about it. Then again, these days, I got them easily, and everywhere. I tried another question. "Mary-Beth, why did you ask me about love?"

She sat up suddenly, and stared at the doorway. I followed her gaze, but there was nothing there. "Mary-Beth?" I asked. She slumped back down in her bed and turned away from me. She mumbled something. I brought the tape recorder closer to her mouth and asked if she could repeat herself. This time I heard her. "There is more to having a body than being alive," she whispered. It didn't seem like much of an answer to me, but before I could prod her further, the lights flickered and went out. I heard the sound of machines shutting off, people running and shouting directions. I had many questions for Mary-Beth. *How do you prepare yourself to die? Are young people less afraid of death at the End of the World? What do you mean by love? Is it possible to love each other in post-apocalyptic times?* But time was running out before someone discovered us together, so I settled for one.

"Do you want to die, Mary-Beth?"

She was quiet for a while, then swallowed. "All my life, I think I was waiting for someone to live for. I'm tired of waiting now."

Back in my own room, beneath the tepid red light of the hospital's emergency generator, I began to transcribe the interview, taking notes, as I did, in the margins.

The End of the World normalizes encounters with illness, death, etc.

Theorize world/people as a 'useless body'

Why would love cling to a doomed experience?

None of these notes did much to push me in the direction of an argument, or even a hypothesis. I could not stop thinking about Mary-Beth's blue lips. Guilt lodged itself between my thoughts. I looked at my forearm, already purpled. I wondered about this father, this Aida she mentioned. Why did she want me to find them? She was on drugs, I told myself, and was talking nonsense. But what if they were looking for her? Did they know that she was dying? Did they know that she was dying for me? It wasn't my fault, I tried to remind myself. The program wasn't

mandatory. Mary-Beth volunteered for this experience. I wasn't taking anything from her that wouldn't have gone to someone else.

I shook my head to abandon those distractions and returned to the transcription. *What is love like for you?* What a strange question to ask at a time like ours, in a place like this. I scribbled down some possible responses. *Abandonment of self,* I wrote, remembering meeting Michel at a departmental dinner and accepting his proposal, although I was never one to be impulsive, to drive to Joshua Tree and sleep with no blankets and no tent beneath the Blood Moon. *Pleasure/addiction*, I wrote, mourning the sex I still craved, the afternoons Michel and I spent in bed when we grew tired of working. *Risk,* I wrote, but there were too many memories to parse through and arrive on a solid conclusion.

I began to resent the question. I fought the overwhelming desire to sneak back to Mary-Beth's room and demand that she take the question back. Or, at least, ask me something simpler, something I could work with. How much time would there be before the surgery tomorrow? After? How many more days did Mary-Beth have left? There would be no second interview. There was no time.

I felt a breeze against my legs. I looked down and noticed that I had gotten out of bed, that I had been pacing and muttering to myself. Had I also opened the window? As I reached to pull the sill down, I noticed shadows flitting about in the garden below. I looked closer. There were people in black hoodies and bandanas. They were spray painting the cement walls that bordered the hospital grounds. *21 DAYS* the graffiti read. They wrote it again and again. "21 days of what?" I hissed, trying to get their attention. Only one of them looked up at me. She was young, I could tell, and terribly thin under her baggy clothes. Then, sirens blasted. They stuffed the paint cans in their pockets. Flashlights bounced around the corner, but by the time security got there, the vandals had scrambled up and over the wall.

I closed the window and crawled back in bed. I took my glasses off and rubbed the bridge of my nose, feeling way in over my head. Tomorrow was a new day, I told myself. Tomorrow, I was getting better, and then everything would fall back into place. I put my glasses back on, and decided to make one more note before my last sleep as a terminal woman. *How to cope with numbered days?*

Morning light paraded through my window. My body went raging one last assault against me, the pain in my side so astounding I nearly wept. “How are we on this beautiful day, Dr. Camphor?” chirped the anesthesiologist. I bit my tongue until I tasted iron. One nurse checked my blood pressure while the other tied my hair into a ponytail. A needle pricked the stint in my labor vein, and relief settled in. “You’re light as a feather,” said the nurse as he lifted me from my bed to the gurney. I remember, vaguely, asking him to save a piece of my liver for me. “I want to see it,” I said. “I want to give it a piece of my mind.” Lights too bright. I close my eyes. And then, Michel is there. I am counting the freckles on his scalp while he sleeps. Before I make it to a dozen, the void opens and I fall under.

When I awoke—even with the spotlights beating down on me, even with the nurses and the scraps of my tissue in their plastic bags—I remembered everything. The puddle and Our Lady of the Lakes. Donny. The dunes of Lake Michigan. The champagne and the bathtub full of sand. Aida. Cora’s flipflops and Gram’s freshly-lipsticked corpse. I remembered the borehole and the tooth and the ghost of Jesse James. Mooney June. Pope Mills. The Art Farmers. The Ghost Riders. The Fiero. The amputation. I remembered as if those memories were my own. I felt the heartbreak in them, the guilt, the uncertainty, and the fear. And the love in them, and the moments of relief.

All my years of scholarship—years in which I cultivated the virtues of distance, detachment, objectivity—could not have prepared me for this. Mary-Beth. Suddenly I knew her as if she were me.

I searched, frantically, for my own memories. They were there, too, still in tact: beer foaming on my father’s mustache, my first lecture, Michel bringing me a cup of coffee. I sighed, relieved, for a moment, before I began to consider seriously the unbearable weight that had been relinquished to me, the impossible responsibility which was now mine, and the reality—which I had so long avoided, which seemed so silly to have avoided, because it was barreling towards me, now, lethal as a wave—that my life would never, ever, return to the way it was.

I began to scream.

I was put on twenty-four hour surveillance. To monitor my recovery, they said, though I suspected it had more to do with the fact that I was displaying the symptoms of a full-blown psychotic break.

This is how it usually worked: I am in a fever dream. The world is Mary-Beth's, not mine. I follow a trail of details. I remember the bathtub full of sand at Aida's house in Washington Park. Mary-Beth's face in the mirror. Hair long and silky. Skin awash with freckles. Blue eyes, guilty and surprised. Terribly alive. I study Aida as Mary-Beth rubs sand into her legs. Elegant, commanding, but with a fragile edge. They kiss, and the kiss consumes me. Myself surrendered. I try to grip the edges of the bathtub, but now I am somewhere else. White wisps of Gram's curls. Then she is in the ground. Throwing rocks into her grave. Now we are in a ditch in Texas. Metallic smell of sweat and the gun at the back of my neck. Donny's wet, angry mouth. And then Aida is there again, her breath pooling hot in my ear. I awaken, wet and frightened, back in my hospital bed, strapped to many needles and wires. I shout at the nurses. "Let me out! I need… I need—" I don't know how to explain. I think about Aida, and my heart breaks. I think about Donny, wandering aimlessly around this godforsaken city, his memory shodden while mine is more than I can bear. I think about Mary-Beth, two floors below me, full of sorrow and shrinking away. "Take it back!" is all I manage to scream, suddenly sideswiped by tears. "Take it back," I whisper, as the sedatives sieve my world away, and then I am back on another thread, in another fever dream.

This went on for some time—eight days, according to my medical records—before I woke up in the middle of the night and asked the tired nurse guarding my bedside for a legal pad and pen. I wrote then. Desperately. I filled hundreds of pages, recording Mary-Beth's story. Writing did not take the memories away, but they gave me, at least, a sense of structure, a means of convincing myself that the thoughts were things I had could control, rather than things that were happening to me. I ate and slept little, but the writing quelled my outbursts, and the hospital staff began to worry less about me. They left me alone during the nights, which I spent writing, so fast and so devoted to my project that the skin on the knuckle of my middle finger broke, and my wrist developed a permanent shake.

On the twelfth night, I had written most, if not everything, that I could, up until the night that Mary-Beth and I spoke over the tape recorder. I laid my pages out in large arches on the yellow tiled floor and began organizing them, chronologically, and then by geography, grouping the pages in piles labeled by their locations: Fox Lake and Chicago, Coconino and Cadillac Ranch.

I crossed my arms and surveyed the work. I had to laugh out loud at myself. Ten years of writer's block, and I had written an entire book in four days.

Then, it hit me. My report. I could take Mary-Beth as my subject. The text could serve as a case study of how people lived and loved and hurt and thrived and created and grieved in post-apocalyptic times. It would have heart. It would have scope. It would not be without its complications, but better that than dry, sweeping arguments. It would not speak too fondly of the Collective. I wondered how they would interpret that, if they would tolerate dissent, as they said, or if they would coerce me into censorship.

Surely, what was done was done. They wouldn't be able to reverse the transplant. Or, perhaps they could. Chills ran down my spine as I remembered the waiver the secretary shoved in Mary-Beth's face, the way the security guards tossed Donny around. These memories angered me. I wondered if I should confront them, tell them everything I knew. But then they would really think me crazy, and my situation would never improve.

I considered the possibility of sneaking Mary-Beth out of the hospital. But then what? Would I take her home with me? What would I say? Would we drive around the valley together, searching, perhaps pointlessly, for her father? It was all too uncertain, and anyway impossible to go about it unnoticed. The most I could do was find a way to buy Mary-Beth more time. Perhaps I could go before the commission and explain to them the new direction of my report, implore them to keep her alive longer so that I could conduct interviews, build an archive. I would anyway have to develop an excuse as to how I came to know Mary-Beth in great detail. Otherwise, the work wouldn't have a leg to stand on. They might even grant us time together alone. Yes. That was the plan. She and I would figure it out from there. If she believed me, that is. If she wanted to speak to me, regardless. If she was still alive.

Dawn rose outside my window. If I acted on my best behavior, they might let me out. The sooner the better. I tidied up my pages and, hiding them behind my pillow, crawled back into bed and pretended to sleep.

"Good morning, Dr. Camphor!" chirped the nurse who arrived with my breakfast tray.

I faked a stretch and a yawn. "Good morning, comrade," I said, playing my part. "What's the time? I must have been asleep for twelve hours."

"You'll need your rest, Doctor," he said, edging a straw to my lips. I slurped and tried not to wince at the acrid taste of orange-flavored juice.

"What I really need is to get home and get back to work," I said.

"Oh yes, we think it's wonderful what you're doing, Dr. Camphor. It's important to have a record of all the good work we're doing, so that future generations can follow the Collective's example."

"Don't you think you could speak to Dr. Shaw for me?" I asked, sipping a bit more of the juice. "So that I can get a head start?"

"If you finish your breakfast today, then yes." His walkie-talkie sounded, and he rose to leave. "Promise?" he said. I smiled wide.

I waited a few moments after the door closed behind him, then took my breakfast tray to the window and hurled its contents outside, leaving only crumbs. I noticed that the *21 DAYS* had been painted over, that the vandals had returned to write *13 DAYS*, and that their message had been painted over once more, the white veneer just thin enough not to obscure their red letters. The first message seemed curious enough, but this one felt like an omen. I tiptoed back to bed and got under the covers just in time for Dr. Shaw to walk through the door.

"Feeling better, Dr. Camphor?" she said. She smiled at me but sounded irritated. Her mascara smeared slightly below her eyes.

"Very much, thank you."

Dr. Shaw dropped a wax paper bag and a stack of papers at my feet. She scraped her wig with her fingernails. "Listen, Dr. Camphor, we're very sorry to do this to you. If it were up to me I would have you stay another few nights but—"

“Oh, there’s no need for that, I’m feeling fit as a fiddle,” I said, mimicking the same naive chitter I had heard from the nurses all week.

“Thank you, Dr. Camphor. We’re at full capacity at the moment and we need more room for—” Dr. Shaw gazed at the door and bit her lip. Perhaps she had said too much. She shook her hair and the big smile returned. “Anyway, here are your belongings and your discharge papers. Please sign them and return them to the secretary. I would escort you out but we really must get back to work.”

“Not a problem,” I said, swallowing relief.

Dr. Shaw sighed and patted my sheets. She turned to leave, then spun around abruptly. “Before I forget, the Grants Commission asked me to relay you a message.” She pulled a note out of her pocket. “The presence of Dr. Maria Camphor is requested at the next Committee Meeting, to take place this Saturday at noon at Union Hall,” she read.

“And, when is Saturday?”

“Tomorrow, Dr. Camphor.”

“I must get going then,” I said.

Dr. Shaw nodded and set off.

I signed the discharge papers without reading them and tore open the bag. There were the clothes I arrived in: plaid pants, cowboy boots, windbreaker. They had an industrial smell to them—likely disinfectant soap—but they still felt like they used to. I laughed out loud. I did not feel at all like I used to.

There was no mirror in my room, but with the light shining through and I caught a dim reflection of myself in the glass windowpane. I let the johnny gown slide off my shoulders and put my glasses on to survey the damage. Most of me was just the same: devastatingly frail, pale, sun-blotched skin, grey hair springing from my ponytail with a mind of its own. But I thought my new scar a terrific thing: raw as an animal, and yet somehow electric, flaring across the underwire of my ribs and up over my heart. I wondered what Michel would think of it, how he might kiss me there. I wondered if Mary-Beth’s scar looked the same. I wondered how our livers looked side by side: mine pustuled and screeching, hers opulent as an apple. I put on my clothes, and the world seemed to resume a sense of normalcy.

I slid the hundred crumpled pages of my manuscript out from under the pillow. I held them close to my chest as I left my hospital room behind, slipped into the empty elevator, and selected the hospice floor.

I expected the corridor to be as quiet as it was those nights before. Instead, there were nurses everywhere, shouting directions and trafficking gurneys. There were lots of young people connected to breathing tubes, and lots of plastic sheets over corpses. My stomach dropped. I made my way, frantically, towards Mary-Beth's room. Everyone was too busy, too panicked, to notice me. Room 605 was no longer a single room, but crowded wall to wall with beds, stinking of iron and shit. Mary-Beth was still there, much to my consolation, but she looked even worse than I had seen her before. Her hair had lost all its color. Vertebrae hammered out of her back. She lay motionless, her eyes closed. I placed my fingertips on her lips. She did not wake, but I could feel her warm, feeble breath. I wanted to cry.

Quickly, I scribbled a note on the title page of my manuscript, crumpled it up, and stuffed it inside Mary-Beth's sock, where I hoped the nurses wouldn't notice it.

Hold on, it said. *I'm coming back for you.*

In the lobby, more panic. The waiting room, over-crowded, buzzed with frustration. A nurse shouted over them, "Universal health care does not necessarily mean universal health care on time! We must all wait our turn!" Another nurse hobbled about the crowd with a tray of pills. The sick chewed on them like candy. More people stood waiting outside. They sighed on the glass. The doors were locked.

Many radios scratched on the secretary's desk.

"What's going on?" I asked her.

"Please, wait in the lobby until we call out your number," she said, not looking at me.

"I'm trying to leave, miss." I slammed my stack of papers on her desk.

"Unfortunately, that won't be possible. The doors aren't opening until we can get this crisis under control." The secretary went back to answering her radios.

I turned back to the glass, locking eyes with a woman with a bloody nose, clutching the arm of a boy with a rotten eye. I felt a knot in my chest, a knot I had never felt before, or hadn't felt in a long time, not unlike the feeling of Mary-Beth's. I made a beeline for the door, twisted

the deadbolt, and disappeared into the crowd. The staff at Good Samaritan, flooded, outnumbered now, had no time to chase after me as I sped away down Wilshire Boulevard, an uncharacteristically wide smile on my face.

Going back to my house seemed imprudent, if not impossible. And so I drove.

Los Angeles was still a city made mostly out of freeway, so I drove for a long time, blowing stoplights on 6th Street, lane-jumping on the 101, deserted, crawling up the winding roads of the Hollywood Hills and coasting in neutral back down. The city was not at all how I remembered it. Same roads, same buildings, same bones, but different. Extended families had taken over the hillside mansions. Their laundry hung out on the frangipani branches. Same with the hotels. People had turned shady parking garages into markets, where they peddled jugs of water, straw hats, toothbrushes. There were few cars on the road, but hundreds were left flat-tired on its edges. Children seemed to have good fun smashing their windows with rocks. The smog was bad, the heat was bad, all the trappings—which at once point lead the world to believe in paradise—had all but shriveled away, but people seemed to be making do.

Just outside Los Feliz, I came up against a wall. Or rather, a barricade. It was made up of mismatched concrete blocks, likely sourced from condemned buildings, stacked high and impossible to climb. A marquee was stuck to its facade. *Reservoir levels: 60%* it said. I followed the wall for blocks and blocks. Marquees popped up from time to time, each advertising something contradictory. 40% here. 80% there. The wall trailed along Sunset Boulevard all the way down Silver Lake and into Echo Park. I found an entrance, finally, where Sunset met the highway. *THE CONSERVATORY,* a sign read, *AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.* Two blonde girls with stun guns guarded a roller shutter door, which opened only for unmarked delivery trucks coming in and out. One of these trucks, I noticed, was graffitied as the hospital walls had been. The message was faded—someone had tried furiously to wash it away—but still discernible. *10 DAYS. YOU CAN RUN, BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE.* One of the blonde girls spotted me snooping and started towards me. I floored, spinning the tires as I did, and sped under the overpass, rounding towards Chinatown, my thoughts racing. What in God's name was happening to this city? And how did I not see it for so long?

I looked down at my manuscript—which only hours ago had seemed to me the key to understanding the nonsense the had befallen the world around me—seemed now an incomplete and downright naive document. I almost hurled it out the window. Then I saw the Fiero. Same Colorado license plate. I pulled over to investigate. I scratched a window of dust—probably from the Mojave—and peered inside. There were a few spliff butts in the cup holder. I looked up and down the street. There didn't seem to be anyone in Chinatown, but I could hear music. I followed the tune down an alleyway to an unmarked doorway and through a set of velvet, dusty curtains.

It was dark inside, black except for the faint red glow of a few lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Two men stood behind a bar. They poured themselves shots with shaky hands and dribbled all over their faces. They were pointing and laughing at their friend, who had a microphone in his hand, and was slurring along to a Fleetwood Mac song,—"Th-th-th-thunder only happens when it's rainin"—prompted by lines on a small karaoke machine. And there, in the corner, downing a glass of whiskey, hunched over, drawing on a napkin, was Donny.

I walked up to the drunks at the bar and asked if they had any bourbon. Giggling, they handed me a glass and pointed to where Donny was sitting.

"Excuse me," I coughed. Donny looked up at me. If I hadn't known it was him, if I hadn't felt it in my bones, I wouldn't have recognized him. His hair and beard had grown wild and wiry. His face had scarred and wrinkled into the face of a different man. His blue eyes absent. I held out my glass. He poured up to the brim, then took a swig for himself straight from the bottle. "Do you mind if I sit with you?" I asked. He huffed and hunched back over his drawing. "What are you working on?" I asked.

"Blueprints."

"For?"

"A home for the end of the world."

"May I see them?"

Donny passed the napkin over to me. He had drawn a small, rondavel-type structure, with a roof hatch that lead into a deep, subterranean room. Then were notes written throughout the design that I didn't understand—natural self-contained ground moisture hydration system, geo-thermo energy heating and cooling, strap iron every 3rd course, half lap, TYP masonry standards,

solid fill black below grade, etc. I decided to take this opportunity to ask Donny how much he knew. “So, you’re an architect?”

He chuckled. “No ma’am, just a craftsman.”

“Of what sorts of things?”

“Oh… You know…” I felt I could see his thoughts, testing the waters of a great abyss, and then, frightened retreating. “Everything.” He filled his glass and drank again, returning with a fragment. “Right now, I’m renovating a hundred-year-old Catholic church.”

He could remember Our Lady of the Lakes. That was a good sign. “Where is the church?”

“It’s… Agh…” He runs his fingers through his hair, breaking tangles. “Not far from here.” He poured himself more bourbon, then offered the bottle to me. I shook my head and sipped at my own glass, tasting alcohol again for the first time since my illness started. The pelvic-deep heat reminded me of the many late nights that caused it. I watched Donny gulp down the rest of his drink. His nose red and eyes foggy. I felt annoyed and weirdly protective over him. I wanted to take the bottle from him and pour the remainder of its contents down the toilet. But frightening him would have done me no good. I had to find a way to get him home with me.

“I’m Maria,” I said.

“Hubbard Cobb,” he said. I noticed the book sticking out of the pocket of his jacket. I offered him my hand, and he shook it. His hand was twice the size of mine and raw as leather, and yet his grip gave me a sense of safety.

“Mr. Cobb, I’m quite interested in this home for the end of the world. Recently, I’ve been wanting to do some renovations myself. I wonder if I could hire you for a project like this.”

Donny smiled. His teeth were yellow. “I’m afraid I’m a bit outta sort at the moment.” He tapped at the black velvet seat where his leg should be.

“Well, why don’t I take you on as a consultant?”

Donny pursed his lips. I was losing him.

“I can pay good money. My late husband left me a substantial sum.” That wasn’t untrue; I would have inherited thousands from Michel, if he had died in a world that cared at all for capital. “And I can pay cash.”

“Well, I’ll be damned if I don’t at least take a look.” Donny squashed his fist on the table. “When do we start.”

“First thing in the morning. You got a place to stay?”

Donny shook his head.

“Good,” I finished my drink in one gulp, sighing to let the burn off my throat. “Get your coat.”

Donny shielded his eyes as we returned to daylight. He looked spent and sweaty. I wondered how long he had been drinking. Perhaps since the guards threw him out of the hospital. He burped and spit on the pavement, then skipped along on his crutch with a bravado that was both painful and touching to witness. On the street, Donny leaned against the hood of the Fiero, fumbling for the keys and catching his breath.

“Let’s take mine,” I said.

Donny’s eyes beaconed as a child’s. He ran his hands along the car’s chrome lip and long, yellow curves. “69 Chevrolet Stingray,” he whispered. Funny which memories were lost, and which remained. “Hot ride,” he said conclusively.

Quickly, I rolled up the manuscript and managed to hide it in the glove compartment before he sank into the low-riding seat. I drove. The city hushed as dusk approached. Nighttime meant total darkness, and it seemed all signs of life had retreated behind boarded-up doors. I revved the engine, hoping to make it back before sundown.

Donny’s head rose and dipped as he followed the mountains’ crests and falls. I watched him in the rearview mirror. I wondered about his mind, how much of it had disappeared, how much of it endured, and how I would go about finding out. But before I could ask him any questions, I heard the guttural, gurgling sound of Donny’s snores, turned, and found him fast asleep.

Back at the house, I managed to get Donny’s big, drunk, clumsy body out of the car, through the front door, and onto my threadbare linen sofa. I rifled through the medicine cabinet for some extra strength Tylenol and found can of a Coca-Cola in the back of the fridge, my long-time

hangover cocktail of choice. “Here, drink this," I said, crushing the pills into a tumbler of warm soda.

“Give me a hand, wouldya?” Donny was trying to shimmy out of his jacket. I helped prop him up while he yanked the sleeves inside out. The jacket stank, so I left it outside on the balcony. The white t-shirt Donny wore underneath was stained with dirt, sweat, blood, and what could have been mustard or vomit or both. I helped take that off, too, and threw it directly in the trash. I held the glass for him while he drank. He needed a comb and a bath and a tall glass of water, but I could see underneath his decrepitude he was still the handsome man from Mary-Beth’s memories. Strong, scarred, and tattooed, not at all like my soft and lanky Michel. Somehow both cowboy-tough and cherubic. I could see why Cora might have, years ago, wanted to sneak into his house. I could also see why, staunch and blind-spotted as he was, she was in her right mind to pack up in the middle of the night and take off.

He gulped the last of the drink down and rasped. Knowing he wouldn’t fit into any of Michel’s old clothes, I wrapped a quilt around his shoulders and kneeled down on the faded rug beside him. Donny stared up at the ceiling. “Nice place you got here,” he said. “Exposed beams. Crown molding. Original oak hardwood, I imagine. Must’ve cost a fortune.” He laid his bright, blue eyes on me. “You’re husband’s gonna turn over in his grave when he hears you’re paying me to tear it all down. What’d you say he did again?”

I was pleased. Perhaps his short-term memory was still in tact. “Michel. He was a writer, like me. Although we had our differences, he being a political theorist, and me a social anthropologist.”

Donny rolled his eyes. “Speak English, please.”

I smiled. “I tended to write about people. He tended to write about ideas."

“And that’s how he made his money?”

“He happened to be the godson of a laughably wealthy French aristocrat, but don’t let his Marxist colleagues get wind of that.”

Donny twiddled his thumbs. “How did he pass?”

“He went out to sea and never returned,” I said. Of course, I had admitted this to myself many times, but somehow, saying it to Donny, out loud, brought a brief rush of sadness back.

Donny sprang up suddenly and looked outside. “I thought I smelled the ocean.” He smiled gaily at me. “Can you believe it? After all this time? I made it. My wife, she—” And then he seemed to come up against a wall. “She always wanted to—” Donny sunk back down and stared at the ceiling, his eyes forlorn.

“Yes? Your wife?” I prodded. “Did she have a name?”

Donny ran his fingers nervously through his beard. “You know, I never did tie the knot,” he said. “Romance was never my forte.”

So, that line was botched. I tried again. “So, no children then?”

Donny grumbled. “What’s it to ya?” he said. “Let’s keep this professional. No more personal questions.”

“I don’t know if asking whether or not someone has children qualifies as a personal question,” I said. I meant it as a joke, to keep the conversation light, but it struck a chord in Donny, and he began to shout at me.

“I’m sick of this!” he said, throwing the quilt at me. He tried to stand, but lost his balance, and fell back on the couch. “Look at this!” He picked up his stump and shook it as if it it did not belong to him, as if it were some kind of prank. “I can’t work like this. Let me out!”

“Donny,” I said as calmly as I could, putting my hand on his knee.

“Donny?” he cried, smacking my hand away. “Who the hell is that? Who the fuck are you?” His voice sounded as deranged as it had when he was punching his own face back in Oklahoma. He pulled at his hair and began to whimper. “Why does everybody know so much more than me?”

I don’t know what came over me. Perhaps I was afraid he would hurt me, or himself. Perhaps I was afraid of all the love I had for him, which was both Mary-Beth’s and mine. But I could not bear to see him broken and floundering anymore. I slapped him across the face, then pinched his cheeks together with my hand. “Listen to me. I know you’re confused. I know you’re scared. But if you continue to act like the victim, so help me, I will dump you right back at that bar and see how many days it takes for you to wind up dead in a ditch.” Donny looked bewildered, but he did not try to resist me. I let go of him and buried my face in my hands. Images were coming up all around me, threatening to pull me under.

Memory: I have always been a drinker, but Michel's death gives the word a new meaning. I stay awake all night waiting for him, praying that he will come back. In the morning, when the fact of his absence washes over me, I take all Michel's "special occasion" bottles of fine wine and whiskey from the cellar and bring them to bed with me. I drink in big, tasteless gulps, until the room spins and my body gets swept up by sleep. When I wake, I drink some more. I sleep for days, vomit sometimes, become nothing more than a toxic house of bones. When my supply runs out, I break into my neighbors' houses and steal their bottles too. I can't say how long this goes on for—months, a year, perhaps more—so possessed was I by the desire to obliterate the world around me. I refuse to face my misfortune. I refuse to face my grief. All I know is that I wake up one day sicker than I have ever been, my skin yellow, my ankles swollen, my abdomen bursting with pain, and the smell of liquor repels me to my core.

I looked up at Donny. He was crying. I was crying. We had both lost so much. We had both made mistakes which we could not face. And if we did not face them, they would swallow us whole.

I said, and this was was much for him as it was for myself, "You've lost a lot. I know that. But it wasn't taken from you. You're the one who let it go." Then, I crawled up next to him on the couch. I lay my head on his sacred heart tattoo and let him cradle me in his big, naked arms.

The following morning, I found myself walking down the marble aisle of LA City Hall's former Council Chambers. Many faces fixed on mine, their smiles taut, as if ready to snap. I was wearing a black dress and stockings. I had a bullet-pointed list of reasons why Mary-Beth Sorensen was the prime, indeed the only, candidate for a case study on the End of the World, and therefore, why she should be kept alive. And I was worrying whether or not the painkillers I left her father—who was snoring off his hangover—were expired.

I approached a lone podium and offered myself before a large crescent conference table, around which all twelve members of the Collective Grants Commission sat. I read the titles on their placards, which, to me, sounded like aliases: Luna B. Leopold, Wilhem Mulholland, Hollis Monterey. I felt as if on trial. Or, given the ecclesiastic design of the room, an unfortunate bride.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning, comrade,” the chorus replied.

I swallowed. “It has come to my attention that I have been summoned by the Commission to issue a progress report on the project for which I received a grant. I come before you with such a report, as well as a few simple requests. For starters, I am happy to announce that the surgery you granted me was successful, and my health has improved considerably since.” The Commission gave a round of applause. Some patted each other on the shoulder. “I am also happy to announce that I have settled on an angle for my report, and that research is well under way.” Another round of applause. I noticed sweat stains pooling in the margins where my thumbs were pressed. I swallowed again. “This project attempts to profile the strange historical period we now find ourselves in, known commonly, if not a bit ironically, as the End of the World. This project attempts to bear witness to that history by centering on the life of an ordinary girl. An ordinary girl who was born into a country that promised her freedom and then skedaddled with its tail between its legs at the advent of collapse. An ordinary girl who watched the hometown of her mothers and grandmothers fall into isolation, and then, irrelevance. An ordinary girl who wanted to live in a better world, who was willing to sacrifice herself to make it better. An ordinary girl who made the perilous journey across a continent wracked by economic and ecological devastation, encountering, along the way, the characters and kinships that have been left in its wake. An ordinary girl whose story sees pockets of utopia in a dystopian world, moments of healing in a history geared toward destruction, and, most astonishing to me, and against all odds, the capacity to love.” I scanned the members’ faces. They were hooked. “That ordinary girl is Mary-Beth Sorensen, who just so happens to be the brave individual who donated her liver to me so that I might stand before you here today.” I looked up from my notes again. The members’ smiles had faded away, and they began to whisper amongst themselves. I tried to speak as quickly as I could. “Which brings me to my requests. First, is that Ms. Sorensen be kept alive and in good health long enough for me to conduct a series of interviews. And second, if possible, that she be permitted to leave Good Samaritan, so that the interviews might take place in the privacy of my own home.” I held my breath as the conversations between the members grew louder.

Finally, a woman with big, curly red hair—Lynda Rae, according to her placard—spoke up. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“And why not?”

There was more whispered talk among them.

“It’s a matter of security,” said Lynda Rae.

“Security of what?” I asked, trying to blanket the anger in my voice. “Security for whom?”

“Security of the New Beginning,” said Lynda Rae, rising. “Security for the future of us all.”

Just then, I heard the big double doors behind me open. I saw the members pull back in surprise, and then, panic. I heard footsteps running in, running towards me. The members pushed and shoved each other, scrambling towards the two exit archways. I may have run after them, but the crescent table blocked my passage, and anyway I found myself too startled to move. I turned around, coming face to face with several bodies in black outfits, their faces obscured by bandanas.

They grabbed me, ripped my glasses off, gagged me, and tightened a blindfold around my eyes. They picked me up like a rag doll and carried me out City Hall. They threw me in the backseat of a car, squashed between two tall boys with spindly arms. The blindfold smelled like bleach, the car like smoke and sugar. And a familiar, oily smell, which I could not place. The car shook violently as it sped away, and the exhaust fumes coming up from beneath the floorpan made me dizzy. I could hear the car rush underneath several bridges, which lead me to believe that we were on the I-10, headed west. I was scared, but not for myself. I was scared for Mary-Beth. I had failed her. I had broken my promise. There was no hope for her now.

The car plummeted over a pothole, rattling all our bones. “Jesus,” hissed the person sitting in the passenger’s seat. “She’s not going anywhere, Aida. You can lay off the gas.”

Then it hit me: the smell of rose and patchouli, sandalwood and sand. Just as Mary-Beth remembered her. Just as I remembered her now. Aida. For a moment, I was happy I was gagged, or else I may have screamed, or swore, or who knows, showered Aida’s face with kisses. “Sorry,

Lupe," said Aida. The boy to my right must have felt the change in my heartbeat as I heard the sound of her voice, because he asked, "What's the matter? You scared?"

"Serves you right," said the boy to my left, spitting in my ear. "You can only imagine the hell you've put us through. What are you gonna do about it, huh?" He took the gag off me. "Do you think water is just going to fall from the sky? Or are you planning on hoarding it for yourselves and leaving the rest of us out to dry?"

I wanted to ask him several questions, like what gave him the impression that I was one of the Collective, and what he thought the difference was between rain and water falling from the sky. But I kept my mouth shut. I needed to wait until I could speak with Aida. Alone.

"Don't interrogate her here, Rodney," Aida said. "Wait until we get back to the nest."

"Shu," the boy said. He rolled down the car window. The car curled around an exit ramp and over several blocks of pothole-cluttered streets. With the window open, I could hear voices, people shouting and singing, people trying to sell things, the crack of fire in a basin, the sound of a slap.

"Where are we?" I whispered.

"Why? Nervous?"

"Not nervous," I replied, "Just curious."

The car stopped. The boys lead me out of the car and into a building. The door chimed as we walked in. I heard the boys bumping their knees against chairs and tables. The boy called Rodney pressed me into the wide lip of a leather booth. The other sat beside me. Lupe slid next to me on the other side and began to unribbon my blindfold. I kept very still, with my hands folded over the marble countertop in front of me. When I opened my eyes, the room was dark, lit only by a tea light candle at the center of our table, and I had a hard time making out the details in the faces before me.

I asked for my glasses. Aida procured them for me, and I thanked her.

I could see, then, that we were in a restaurant, one of the old relics from the railway era, with cracked leather seats and penny tile floors. The four of us were alone. The two boys, who looked like twins, were long and thin, had high-faded hair. The one called Rodney wore a mustache and a single gold hoop earring. Lupe was a lot shorter than her deep voice had let on,

though her oversized men's suit, beehive, and dark purple lipstick seemed to prove that she was the tough one out of the group. Aida looked about the same as she had in memory: skin that caught the light, eyes deep and unfathomable. Her cheeks were, perhaps, more sunken than before.

There was a tape recorder on the counter next to the tealight. Aida eyed me from under the shadow of her hoodie and switched it on. I smoothed my hairline and my dress before I spoke. "Now, tell me what it is you want to know."

"We want to know how many days you have left." Aida said.

"I'm not sure what you mean by how many days."

"Don't act stupid!" Rodney slammed his fist on the table. His brother tried to pat him on the shoulder, but Rodney shrugged him off. "Are you aware that your organization is responsible for over three million people in this city? Three million people who believe you when you say that you're going to rectify the inequities of the generation before you. Three million people who believe you when you say you're going to take care of them. Three million people who rely on you."

I searched Aida's face. She was watching me, searching my face for signs of guilt, while I searched hers for recognition. I wanted to reach out across the table and touch her, to know that she was real, to explain everything I knew and demand that she explain the things I did not, but I had no idea where to begin. The others were watching me too. Lupe sucked nervously on a toothpick and picked at her long nails. Rodney was shaking. His brother refused to even look at me.

I turned to Rodney and said, "My dear, you are very good at asking questions." I pushed my glasses higher up the bridge of my nose. "I won't pretend not to be implicated. But I can assure you I don't know what you are talking about." I sighed. "I am a scholar. An anthropologist. I received an award from the Collective Grants Commission to write a case history of the End of the World. What you interrupted today was a defense of my dissertation before the committee. I really wish I could be of assistance to you, but I'm afraid you have the wrong person."

"She's lying," Lupe said, squinting.

“What’s the grant?” the brother asked.

“Hush up, Marquette,” said Rodney. “Don’t play her game.”

“No,” said Aida, leaning towards me, “I wanna know too.”

I swallowed. “My liver was eating away at itself. The Collective granted me a new one.”

“You’re kidding,” said the twin called Marquette.

“May I?” I asked, laying my palms down on the table. The group nodded. I stood and lifted my dress to reveal the fresh, wishbone-shaped scar.

“I can’t believe it,” said Lupe. “Where’d the hell they get a liver from?”

“A donor,” I said, smoothing my blouse and resuming my seat. The others seemed dumbfounded, perhaps a bit frightened, but Aida simply sat back in her chair and stared into her lap. “The IPALU receives many applicants eager to donate their bodies to those in need.”

“Hold on,” Rodney said. “So, is the donor—”

“Dead? No.” I could feel Aida’s knee jostling under the table. “At least, not yet.”

“So it’s true? They’re killing people?”

“People are dying, yes.”

“It’s worse than we thought,” said Lupe.

“The IPALU is supposed to operate on a volunteer basis. Donors tend to ascribe to the Collective’s idea that sacrifice for the common good is our only hope at survival.” At this, Rodney pshawed. “But I have reason to believe that my donor was enlisted in the program against her consent.” I looked down at my hands. “This organ wasn’t for me.” Then, I looked up at Aida. “It was for someone else.”

Aida squinted at me. “Why are you giving me that look?”

I reached my hand across the table, and without knowing what else to say, whispered, “Mary-Beth.”

Aida backed away from me as if from fire. She began to pace about the restaurant, shouting, “What the fuck?” and, “This was never supposed to happen."

“Aida,” said Lupe, rising. “What’s she talking about?”

Aida did not seem to hear. Lupe tired to embrace her, but Aida slithered out of her arms. She sat and buried her face in her hands. “How could she be so stupid?” she whispered. She

wiped her eyes and ran a knuckle underneath her nose, sniffling. “Okay,” she said finally. “Let me explain. This donor, Mary-Beth, we knew each other, back in Chicago. She helped me get water to folks who didn’t have access to the collection points. Once. Just once. But then I moved to LA and never saw her again.”

“You moved to LA to ask for a grant,” I said. “Like I did.”

“Aida?” said Marquette. “How come we’ve never heard about this before?”

“Okay, sure, that’s why I came in the first place. My community needed me. Relied on me. I had to get better. For them.” She tapped her nails nervously against the tabletop. “I was going to use the grant to implement the same system I started in Chicago here in LA. Getting resources to the elderly, the disabled, people who live too far from the collection points, people who don’t have the energy to wait all day. It’s a good system, and a necessary one. Once I got it up and running, I would go home, wiser, healthier, and take care of my family again.” She slouched in her chair. “But the Commission wasn’t keen on me. Said their way of doing things was more egalitarian. Then, they had the audacity to pull up records of water that I ‘stole’ in Chicago and claimed I couldn’t be trusted. I knew, after that, once and for all, that they didn’t give a shit about us. All that pseudo-communalist bullshit is just a façade to quell dissidence and keep our attention away from what they’re really doing. That is, taking what they can for themselves. Which leaves us in the situation we find ourselves in now. With only a week’s worth of water left.”

“Are you the ones who are responsible for the vandalism?” I asked.

“Vandalism connotes criminal activity, and we’re not criminals,” said Rodney. “But if you’re referring to the Countdown, then yes, we’re responsible.”

“Just the four of you?”

“There’s a few dozen of us, interspersed throughout the city,” answered Lupe in her deep voice. "Fighting for water justice.”

“How do you know there’s only a week left?” I asked.

Marquette leaned over to me. “Los Angeles is presumed to have survived this long because of the desalination plants. But, we have reason to believe the Collective has been implementing the same water politics California always has, that is, stealing water from rural

areas and siphoning it towards the city. Since the Collective took over, enormous aqueducts have been erected secretly as far as Oregon and Colorado. We believe this water is then stored in the old Echo Park and Silverlake reservoirs."

"The Conservatory," I said.

"The only problem is that the aqueducts have been out of commission for two months now. Which means the city is running out of water, and they're not telling us."

"And the desalination plants? Why not use them?"

"The seawater is too polluted for them to work," said Aida.

I nodded, remembering the ring of oil slick on my bathtub.

"Services are shutting down across the city," said Marquette. "Not just collection points, but hospitals, electric grids…"

"Good Samaritan was out of power the night before my surgery," I added.

"And from what we've heard, as of yesterday, it's about to shut down altogether."

"We think that the activists might be trying to flee," said Rodney.

"That's why you stormed the chambers today," I said.

"We were hoping to find out where they are going, and how much water they really have left, so that we can inform the city," said Marquette. "Make a plan."

There it was again. That knot in my chest. "Is there something I can do?"

All four of them looked at me, feeling out the edges of my loyalty. Finally, Rodney spoke. "They trust you, don't they?"

I sighed. "After today, I'm not so sure."

"Why's that?"

I looked into Aida's eyes again. "I was trying to convince them to keep Mary-Beth alive."

Aida crossed her arms. "How did she even get here?"

"Hold on," said Rodney. "Remind me how this girl plays into all this."

"Mary-Beth was ready to give whatever she could so that you could live," I said. Aida looked away from me. "But when she arrived at the hospital you were nowhere to be found."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Aida asked, shaking.

I felt cold, and angry. As Mary-Beth had been when Aida kicked her out. I did not want to blame Aida, but emotions not my own took over me. “You should see the state of her now. She can barely breathe. A frail, heartbroken creature.”

“And me? Do you think I wasn’t heartbroken?” Aida’s voice broke. “You think I wasn’t heartbroken when she said she would happily martyr herself in front of me? Leave me with that guilt forever? That’s not sacrifice. That’s not love. That’s a savior complex.” Aida swiped at her tears. “That’s her saying she’d rather die than be with me.”

Lupe and Marquette each put a hand on Aida’s shoulders while she wept. I stared at the candle flame as it licked its pool of wax. I remembered Mary-Beth’s legs dangling over the precipice in Coconino, not loving Aida, but needing her. And I thought of the taste of bourbon in my throat, all those nights I lay in the bed that Michel left empty, drinking until I passed out or threw up, throwing fuel on the fire of my illness. Becoming sick beyond comprehension. Poisoning the body he loved. Needing him, not loving him. I felt Aida’s cool hand, her long fingers, resting lightly on my palm. We looked up at each other, acknowledging, I think, the reality that our lives were now beyond disentanglement, that we were, whether we liked it or not, both responsible for and indebted to each other.

Aida caught her breath. “You know, I’ve thought about it. I really could have done it. Loved her. I think I could have. But then, she just, ran away.” She sighed. “Now I’m the one who feels guilty. Why should I? It’s not like any of this is my fault.” She shook her head. “Still,” she said, closing her eyes. “Fuck me,” she said, under her breath. And then, “We have to get her out of there.”

We arrived at Good Samaritan just before midnight. Slouched in our seats, we staked out the hospital’s entrance from the parking lot across the street. I struggled to see from such a distance —especially under the shadow of night and the black hoodie Marquette had lent me to put over my dress—but as far as I could tell, nobody seemed to be coming in or out. To make matters eerier, there did not seem to be any lights on.

“Where is everybody?” Marquette whispered.

“A few days ago you would have thought this place was a military operation, the way they chased us around for drawing pictures,” said Lupe.

“Maybe it’s a trap,” said Rodney.

“I don’t think capturing a handful of young rebels is high on the list of the Collective’s priorities right now,” said Lupe.

Aida was quiet, but I could hear her pounding heart from the backseat. I leaned over, offering her my hand, and she squeezed it. “Let’s go in,” I said, impatiently, with not a little bit of fear in my voice. Marquette waited in the driver’s seat of the car, in case we needed a quick getaway. We snuck out into the night, crawling silently. Our paranoia, however, was misplaced, because by the time we got to the waiting room, there was nobody there, only the dim, red glow of the emergency lights. It seemed impossible; only the day before the room was flooded with hundreds, maybe more. I would have thought my memory misleading, had it not been for their remnants: a soiled handkerchief, an empty bottle of cough syrup, a child’s flip flop. We crept down the corridor. “Sixth floor,” I whispered, although I doubted there was anyone watching us, anyone listening. Rodney tapped on the elevator buttons. Of course, it wasn’t working. I kicked off my black pumps and followed the others up the cold, dark stairwell. As we climbed, I kept listening for the sound of footsteps, whispers, machines exhaling, any sign of life in that godforsaken place.

I suppose I wasn’t surprised when I heard Lupe’s voice at the top of the stairs. “There’s nothing here, Maria.” Still, I collapsed on the cold, tile floor. My still-raw scar throbbed, taunting me. I wrapped my arms around it and squeezed, making the pain worse. I wished more than anything to take it all back. “I’m sorry, Aida,” I said. “It shouldn’t have been me. It should have been you. Not me.”

“You’re probably right,” said Aida. She helped me stand. “But your pity doesn’t make it any better.”

“Sorry we couldn’t find your girl, Aida,” said Rodney. “But can we please get back to work now? Lord knows the clock is ticking.”

“Almost. I still want to see this girl. One more time. Not for her. Not for you,” she shook her head at me. “For me.” and then she took my hand. “Maria? What floor is the morgue?

Down in the bowels of the hospital, fluorescent lights flickered. One, lone security guard—a big, burly man with a mustache—leaned against the cement wall, snoring. A taser rested limply in his hand. Carefully, so as not to wake him, Lupe pushed the handle down on a big, stainless steel door. The security guard grumbled but did not stir. We pulled the door closed behind us.

The morgue was bright and cold. I had expected the bodies to be stored neatly behind refrigerator doors, but instead they were out in the open, shelves and shelves of corpses on silver trays. Many of them had large scars like mine crawling across their torsos. Others were missing eyes or large grafts of skin. The smell was awful, like rotten metal, if metal was something that could rot. I pulled the hoodie up and over my face. I did not want to smell or see or hear anything more. I did not want to see Mary-Beth in this place.

"I can't do this," said Rodney, plugging his nose.

"Wait a second," Aida whispered. She moved towards one of the bodies and waved her knuckles over his lips. "Oh my God." She covered her hand with her mouth. "They're still alive."

I noticed, then, a faint beeping sound and a complex web of wires, connecting the bodies to drips. I took another look at the silver trays. Lists had been written on them, which I guessed referred to the organs which remained to be harvested: heart, lungs, pancreas, thymus. The patients' names were no where to be found, and they were all so lifeless, so thin and grey as stone, I wasn't sure we would be able to identify Mary-Beth from the rest. The morgue was one, long corridor; there must have been more than fifty bodies there. But some force, like gravity, like muscle memory, carried me through. And I found her. Splayed out peacefully on her steel plate. Hair thinned to the consistency of cobwebs. Breathing slow and shallow out of parched lips. I put my hand on her forehead. She was clammy and cold. She did not wake, but her right fist tightened over something. I ran my thumb along her wrist, willing her to relax, so that I could pry it from her grasp. It was my note. *Hold on… I'm coming back for you.*

Aida crouched beside me and stared into Mary-Beth's face. Her expression was opaque, not relieved and not sorry. She looked almost like she was betrayed.

"Sorry, Aida, but really? This girl?" Rodney said. "You've got some freaky taste."

“Shut up,” Aida said, backhanding him in the belly.

“Let’s get her up,” Lupe said, “Before the pig wakes up.”

“Even if we manage to wake her, I don’t think she can walk,” I said.

“We’ll have to carry her then,” said Rodney, and he wrapped his long, delicate arms around her ankles. “She can’t be that heavy.”

“Wait,” Aida said. She rose and ran her fingers through Mary-Beth’s hair. White strands fell out and floated away. “Who’s to say we should save her?”

“Come on!” said Rodney, dropping her. There was a terrible clang as her feet hit the tray. We froze and went silent. The security guard hadn’t seemed to sir. Then, Rodney hissed, “You’re the one who dragged us all the way here.”

“This is what she wanted isn’t it? To save somebody? To die as a martyr and ease her sorry soul?” whispered Aida. “And what have we got to hope for the world she comes back to? Who knows what’s going to happen in this city when the water runs out. She can’t fend for herself in this condition. I certainly don’t have the time to take responsibility for her.”

“Isn’t that the point? That’s why we’re doing all this? Because we’re taking responsibility for each other?”

“You know as well as I do responsibility isn’t a single word, Rodney,” Aida said. “We’re responsible for each other. That’s the only way we’ll survive in this world. But I can’t be responsible for someone else’s ego. Or someone else’s guilt.” She looked at Mary-Beth. Her voice was trembling. “You have to take responsibility for yourself, Mary-Beth. If you’d rather die than do that, then be my fucking guest.”

Mary-Beth’s chin dropped to one side. Her lips parted. “Aida,” she whispered. We all went silent, watching, waiting, holding our breath. Mary-Beth’s eyes fluttered somewhat open. She tried to lick her lips. “You don’t have to worry about me, okay?” she croaked. “I don’t need you anymore.” Her eyelids grew heavy. She seemed to be fighting some great internal battle to keep them open. “But I want to love you,” she whispered, somber and shallow. “I want to try.” Her head fell back, her eyes closed, and then again, she was silent.

“Mary-Beth,” Aida said. She snapped her fingers between Mary-Beth’s eyes. Aida called her name again, but she did not move. Aida put her ear against Mary-Beth’s lips, to see if she

was still breathing. She lay her head on Mary-Beth's chest, to listen to her heart. She looked into her face, her eyes wide, unsettled, as if she were seeing Mary-Beth for the first time. She kissed her forehead for a long time. When I saw a tear ring out the corner of her eye, I looked away.

I wondered, again, *What is love like for you?* Not about the answer, but about the question. Perhaps, the question is itself a form of love. Perhaps, when Aida asked it first, in the dim light of that room, it was not a test, nor an interrogation, but an invitation. A way of saying, *I want to know you in a profound way.* Or, *I am willing to go to tough places with you.* Or, *How might we answer for each other in the unanswerable?* When I looked back again, Aida was smiling. "Fuck," she said, laughing. "All right." She shimmied her arms under Mary-Beth's shoulders and began to lift her up. "Here goes nothing."

Aida and Rodney took Mary-Beth's torso. Lupe and I were in charge her lower half: she held her hips, and I her hairless and skeletal legs. Rodney picked up Mary-Beth's drip and slung it over his shoulder so that it wouldn't screech against the ground.

"On three," whispered Lupe. "We're going to kick down the door and run for it. Ready?"

I closed my eyes and ran. I heard the security guard growl as he fell to the ground, and the crash of the barstool he had been sitting on. I heard the taser strike, echoing all along the hallway. Although Mary-Beth was little more than bag of bones, my old thighs burned carrying her up the stairs. I know as well as anyone that the body, even a half-dead one, is still a heavy, formidable creature.

Even so, the security guard didn't follow us very far, and Marquette was already outside waiting for us with engine running. Rodney jumped in the front seat while Aida, Lupe, and I were in the back. Mary-Beth lay sprawled unconscious across our laps.

"Jesus Christ," Marquette said. "Is she dead?"

"She will be if you don't drive," Aida replied.

"Drive where? We can't bring a dead white girl back to the Nest," said Lupe.

"We'll take her to mine," I said. "Drive towards Mulholland. And quickly. Please.I have her father there. I want to bring his daughter back alive."

"This shit just keeps getting weirder," said Rodney.

"It's the End of the World," said Aida. "Are you surprised?"

I kept my fingers on Mary-Beth's neck, feeling for changes in her pulse. It was faint but steady. We rolled down the windows to let out the rotten metal smell. And as we cut back out into the world of the living, I had the feeling of being simultaneously terrified and transcendental, the way I imagine mothers must feel the day they bring their newborn babies home.

Mary-Beth did not wake up for five days. I did my best to take care of her as she had taken care of me. I let her sleep in my bed. I kept a washcloth perpetually cool on her forehead. I massaged oil into her small, soft feet. I pipetted drops of tea through her unmoving lips. Mostly, I lay next to her while she slept, writing. I remained desperate to record all the events that had transpired since my manuscript left off. I read all I wrote out loud to her. I wanted her to know that the people she loved were not, in fact, slipping out of her hands. We were healthy, sort of. We were safe, relatively. And we were all waiting for her. Although she could not hear me, I hoped that it would speed up her recovery. Or, at least, keep her from surrendering to the dark. I told her about Donny, who spent all day on the beach, playing his harmonica and roping Rodney or Marquette or whoever else crossed his path into helping an old, disabled man dig a twenty-five foot foundation into the sand. I told her about Aida and her compatriots, who had taken to using my bungalow as their new headquarters. Their attempts to track down the Collective's higher-ups had failed, but they succeeded in breaking into the Conservatory. There, they lay an alternative irrigation line, which would keep the activists from hoarding what was left of the water supply from the public, should the Collection Points shut down. I reminded her that Aida checked up on her every day, that her few free moments were spent humming softly at her bedside. Gradually—whether as a result of my care, or her will—the pink in her face began to come back, her freckles darkened, her hair recovered its sheen.

One night, as I was sleeping, I felt a body stir beside me. In my half-waking state, I rolled over and wrapped my arms around the body's chest. "Michel," I whispered. I reached up, feeling for his soft scalp. When I touched hair, long hair, I gasped, and my eyes flew open. Mary-Beth's eyes were open too. I expected her to be frightened—or, at the very least, overwhelmed—to be

awake and weak, in bed with a stranger in a stranger's house in a stranger's city. But instead, her expression was serene, albeit a bit far away. "Mary-Beth?" I whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Maria," she said. She must have been listening to me when I thought she was asleep. "Before I go out there, will you help me brush my hair?"

Relieved, I ran my fingers along her forehead."I hate to say it, love, but you don't have much hair left."

We laughed together, wincing as it pinched the identical sore spots on our bellies. Mary-Beth said, "Maybe we should just get rid of it then."

I helped Mary-Beth stand and wrapped an old silk robe of mine around her. I found a pair of scissors and threw open the rotten doors to my balcony. Mary-Beth gripped the banister and stared out at the white, rolling water. She cupped her hand over her mouth. "Is that really the ocean?" she asked. She looked down into the trench her father made made in the sand. "Is that Dad?" she asked.

"Be careful with him," I said, helping her sit down in a folding canvas chair. "He's lucky if he remembers to call himself by the right name."

Mary-Beth snorted. "And we still can't let him go, can we?"

I searched Mary-Beth's face, wondering how much she knew about that *we*. Her eyes looked different. More grey, because she was weak. But also older. Less afraid. I had known those eyes, now, like the back of my hand. For a moment, I mourned our separateness. Mary-Beth's memories, even if they had scared me at first, had delivered me from my loneliness. And although Mary-Beth and I would be forever entwined, I could no longer be a participant to her changes, privy to every intimate detail.

I realize, now, why Mary-Beth might have wanted a bond like that with Aida, even if it was not meant to be. If another person cares enough about your past to house it, you have a home forever.

I put my hands on Mary-Beth's shoulders. "Do you trust me?"

She did not flinch.

With all the tenderness I could muster, I cut the remaining strands of her white, dry hair. In that instant, she became, at least to me, anew. No longer the freckled, baby-faced, country girl who moved through the world as if a piece of cotton wool, fragile, and averse to hurt anyone. She was now rawboned, handsome, and bore the air of someone who had risked it all and who had, by the skin of her teeth, won. She became a Mary-Beth I could not hope to possess. I was so proud of her.

When we were finished, I handed her a compact mirror. She studied herself for a long time, running her palms along the soft, spry scalp. Then, she snapped it shut, turned to me, and asked, “Do I look like someone who’s ready to take accountability for herself?"

I said, “You look like someone who is no longer bound up in other people.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m ready.”

Downstairs was abuzz. Rodney, Marquette, Lupe and Aida were there, as well as a dozen or so other members of their coup who I had only met in passing. The energy was frenetic enough that no one noticed Mary-Beth and I hobbling down the steps. It was difficult, at first, to hear what they were talking about; everybody was talking over everybody else.

We should open the aqueduct now, while they’re distracted.

Why don’t we hear what they have to say? Maybe they’ve come to their senses.

I’m sick of waiting around for compromises. It’s about time we instigate riot.

What if we stage a die-in?

I say we try the kidnapping mission one more time, this time, make it public.

We should bump off those motherfuckers one by one.

Eventually, Lupe stood up in the center of their circle. Short as she was, her suit and her big head of hair imbued her with an authority that made her tower over everyone else. She wolf-whistled, and the room went silent. “We don’t have time to talk circles around each other,” she said. “Which one of us has an actual plan?”

I asked what was going on, and someone handed me a piece of paper. “Comrades of the greater Los Angeles area,” it said.

A public service announcement will be made outside City Hall on this Saturday, the 22nd of February.

We ask that all willing and able members of our community attend, as important information regarding changes to the Equal Access Water Pact will be discussed.

This message is not to cause panic. It is purely a formality. In the meantime, let us continue to fight together for a New Beginning.

More justice. More peace.

"So this means what?" I asked.

"We thought they would disappear quietly," said Rodney. "But I guess their propensity to theatrics knows no bounds."

"Even if it puts them in danger," Marquette added.

Then the arguing erupted again.

We need to take action!

How can we take action against a problem we've only been able to speculate?

No matter what they say, now's a good time to fight.

We can't discredit ourselves by resorting to violence. You forget how much support the Collective has garnered thus far.

The Collective owns the world of rhetoric. The only way we can challenge them is by out and out violence.

Who's to say we have the resources for an attack? What if there's security? What about police?

Police? No ways. They would never stoop so low as to pull a stunt like that.

"Quiet!" Aida shouted. She had been watching, waiting from the sidelines. She uncrossed her arms and stepped forward. "I understand that our response to the Collective is crucial, especially if it's our last chance to make a statement. But we're forgetting the most important

thing, the reason we're all here, which is, how are we going to make sure the people of this city have enough water?"

"And how do you suggest we do that?" said Lupe.

"We refuse their terms. We fight back. We resist, as the people who came before us resisted being pushed and put down and told what to do every step of the way. We riot, if we have to. Not to push them away, but to keep their attention. Make the possibility of a quiet escape impossible." I scanned the faces in the circle. Some nodded as Aida spoke. Others twiddled their thumbs and looked away. All in all, outrage was bubbling hot beneath the surface. I felt its boiling point would soon arrive. And when the kettle whistled, all hell would unleash on the sorry souls who had stoked the fire. Aida clapped her hands and began to chant, "No justice. No peace." People joined her one by one, clapping and snapping. I heard Mary-Beth add her shaky voice. Even I, who always played the role of spectator, got swept up in the heat of the chorus. "No justice. No peace." Louder and louder until the house seemed to shake, rumbling angrily along with them. And just beyond, the sea, champion of the wayward and ungovernable, crashed rhythmically against shore, egging them on.

"Rest up tonight," Aida said when the room became quiet. "Tomorrow, we show them what collectivity really looks like."

After a round of applause, plans were hatched, addresses were swapped, carpools were arranged, and the crowd began to clear out of the house, leaving me, Aida, and Mary-Beth alone. Aida fell back onto the sofa and wrapped her forearms over her eyes. "Jesus, if this doesn't kill me," she sighed.

Mary-Beth inched towards her. "Aida," she said. She rested her hand, lightly, on Aida's knee. "Why don't we go sit on the beach. Watch the sun go down."

When she heard Mary-Beth's voice, Aida's body seemed to change. She loosened. Softened. Still, she pursed her lips at Mary-Beth and said, "I'm too tired."

"All the more reason. Let the sand hold you for a little while."

Mary-Beth held out her hand. Aida rolled her eyes but took it. The corners of her lips turned up.

I went back upstairs with the full intention to give them some privacy. But I must confess —and I hope that you do not think ill of me because of it—that as I lay in my bed, horizon goldening, waves thumping, salt breeze cleansing my stuffy room, I could not bear to close the windows, and as Mary-Beth and Aida could not walk very far along the beach, I eavesdropped a good deal of their conversation.

It began with Mary-Beth saying, "I'm so sorry that they wouldn't help you get better. It's bullshit."

"I feel less resentful now that I saw all those people down there in the morgue with you. I don't want that kind of blood on my hands," Aida said. "But trying to do this work while I'm still sick, it sucks."

Then they were quiet for a long time.

"How's your family?" Mary-Beth asked. "Have you heard from Gigi? And Kay and Nella and Octavia?"

"I don't know how to get a hold of them." Aida was silent for a while, then sniffled. "I miss them. Everyday. But the people here have taught me that I have family everywhere. That if you're willing to give yourself to a community, they'll accept you as a daughter of their own."

"You're lucky. I haven't got a family anymore. Unless you can count the amnesiac amputee, or the stone-faced academic who takes a note down if I so much as sneeze."

They laughed together softly.

"You have me too," Aida said. She sighed, seeming to let go of something very long and deep. "I'm not saying we belong to each other. Or that I'll take care of you. But, I'll be here for you."

"Thank you," Mary-Beth whispered, her voice gushing, perhaps relieved. Then, she took a deep breath. "Aida, I want to say I'm sorry. I have a lot to be sorry for. I have a lot to account for, and I'm still accounting. But I want to say, specifically, that I'm sorry for what I did to you. Is it all right if I try to explain?"

Aida must have nodded, because Mary-Beth went on: "When I met you, and I mean this, I had never met anyone so true. Truthful, I mean. Someone who took the truth so seriously. And you were unafraid. And smart and brave and, oh my god, so beautiful. And being with you, it

made me feel ashamed. Ashamed of the way I looked. Ashamed of my upbringing. Ashamed of how I thought about the world. Ashamed of how I had participated."

She cleared her throat. "And I realize now that, when I thought I was loving you, sacrificing something for you, what I was actually doing was trying to get rid of my shame. In fact, I was so scared to deal with myself, that I was making you responsible for getting rid of my shame. That was what had happened in your room that night in the dark. I had to come face to face with my shame. And I could not bear it. I could not bear it for a long time. But in the past few weeks, as I lay there in that terrible place, so sick, so alone, and so close to death, the only thing I had left to do was to search through the depths of my heart. There, I found things I did not want to admit to myself. That there is violence in my legacy, and fear, and theft, and lies. That legacy has eaten away at me in ways I may never know in full. And that legacy works to keep me from loving, or at least, loving honestly, well."

Her voice seemed to be reaching, searching backwards and forwards, trying to find, anywhere, a crack of light in a dark place. She sighed. "Since we met, I've thought long and hard about love. And, to be honest, I have no fucking clue what it is or what it means to me. I know a lot about what it's not. It's not throwing yourself on the sword for someone else. It's not expecting someone else to fix you. It's not finding someone to affirm or placate you. To be honest, I don't know what love is. But, fuck, Aida, I want to try. Maybe not with you, if you don't want me. I get that. But I want you to know that I am ready and willing to love as freely, as openly, as honestly as I can."

Aida's voice, when she spoke, was calm and clear. "Mary-Beth, you were raised Catholic, correct?"

"Mhmm."

"Good, then you will be able to follow this analogy. You'll recall in the Catholic tradition that water is not interested in anyone's redemption. Babies are baptized in holy water, but that does not make them innocent. Believers are sprinkled with Holy Water at every mass, but that does not make them saved. Water can be healing, but it does not heal. Water is only a salve. Salvation is an ongoing enterprise.

“All this to say, I’m glad that you’ve started to heal yourself. But I want you to know that one confession will not absolve you. Revelations don’t mean anything to me if they’re not met with work. Forgiveness has to be earned through actions, not words.”

Aida was quiet for a while. Mary-Beth seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

“I think I’m ready to forgive you,” Aida said. “I might be ready to love you. But only if you promise me that you’re going to wake up and do the hard work every single day.” I heard her kiss Mary-Beth on the cheek. “The hard work of loving me.”

“I promise,” Mary-Beth whispered.

The next morning, I awoke to static. A strange lack of current in the air. The sea as still as a big, black mirror. Not a swell in sight. Having lived in California my entire life, I knew that stale air meant heat, and heat meant wind, and wind meant a fire was about to bloom.

I peaked down over the railing. Donny was up early, arranging a labyrinth of pipes he had likely sourced from my neighbors’ abandoned houses. He was shirtless, already sun burnt, and dragging himself along the sweltering sand on his big arms.

Downstairs, I saw that Mary-Beth and Aida had fallen asleep together on the rug. Their legs, naked, tangling out from under a layer of quilts. Mary-Beth’s bare back had a map of sorts drawn on it, with each of the dark spots labelled in blue ink:

This is the House of Effort.

This is the House of Forgiveness.

This is the House of Trauma.

This is the House of Healing.

Hot sun poured through the windows, scaring even the shadows away. It seemed unfair that—at the long-awaited moment of reunion, retribution, and realignment—our little world should be, quite literally, set aflame. I pressed my palm to my heart and prayed a little silent prayer, asking for more time.

A thousand or more had gathered in the plaza outside City Hall. The stage set up beneath the corinthian columns was cordoned off by metal barricades. When we arrived—Aida, Mary-Beth,

the few dozen members of the circle, and I—the crowd was strangely calm and quiet. Perhaps it was because of the heat. They fanned themselves with flyers. They shared the shade of umbrellas. They passed around bottles of soda. They swapped drops of yellowed, expired sunscreen. Some had come prepared for battle; I spotted knuckledusters, switchblades, canisters of mace. Others saw the event as more of a picnic, had set up beach chairs and blankets.

For now, all were patient, each of them with their own reasons for waiting. Waiting for affirmation from their leaders. Waiting for an explanation for their suffering. Waiting for someone to blame. They were patient, but beneath that patience, there seemed a great gravitational force which, if agendas were not satisfied, threatened to pull the veneer of order apart.

I had not planned to go to the announcement, lest it turn ugly, but after several failed attempts at convincing Mary-Beth that she was still too weak to participate, I decided to rather go and keep an eye on her than stay at home and worry. The funny stares I received—wondering what the hell a tiny old lady was doing in the middle of a militant youth group—reminded me how off course my life had steered in such a short amount of time. But, looking around at my new friends—resplendent and resolute, bandanas worn proudly over foreheads and wrists instead of covering their faces—I was happy. It made me question why I had chosen a profession which left me always on the outside. An observer, never a participant. An analyst, not a fighter, not a lover. I hoped, perhaps childishly, that it was not too late for me to try this other life, to give myself unto others, to make amends. Mary-Beth and Aida were holding hands. I made a note to myself that, when all this was over, I would thank them for all they had done for me.

The sun beat down. Trapped between the masses and the concrete buildings, the plaza began to bake like an oven. It wasn't until around midday that the Collective activists emerged from their crypt. I recognized several members from the hearing—Luna, Hollis, Lynda Rae—as well as a few oddballs from Mary-Beth's travels—Phoenix Oberlin was one—that worried me about conditions in the rest of the country. Their arrival was met with an odd chorus of heckles, laughter, and cheers. I could not make out the details of their expressions, but even from far away, I could tell that they were skittish.

Lynda Rae held up megaphone up to her red lips. She switched it on, and it screeched. “Good morning, comrades. Thank you all for coming out on this most beautiful day.”

As she spoke, members of the crowd interrupted her, each time inspiriting more interruptions, more exasperated rumblings, more disdain.

“For the past few years, the Collective has successfully run an equal water redistribution program in the city of Los Angeles despite extreme limitations on resources.”

“In recent months, cutbacks have had to be made—”

“How is my family supposed to live off twenty liters a day?”

“—restrictions enforced—”

“Your security dislocated my daughter’s shoulder, and what happened to the hospital I was supposed to take her to?”

“—and alternative supplies found.”

“By stealing water from *our* reservoirs, crippling our community!”

Gradually, those who had come to the plaza for individual reasons became usurped by the mob. They scrutinized the Collective’s every move. If Lynda said something they did not like, the protesters roared. If she smeared mascara across her sweaty cheek, they cackled at her. If she so much as paused, they hurled insults at her. Liar! Snake! Champagne socialist! Waterbed! She began to look frightened, and the crowd lurched forward, all together, frightening her more.

“It has come to our attention that the water shortage is more drastic than we thought.” Lynda had to shout into the megaphone to be heard over the sound of the crowd. “Reservoir levels are at an all-time low, and the Collective has no choice but to implement emergency water restrictions.”

“What happened to the desalination plants we broke our backs to build?”

“The desalination plants never worked,” Marquette interjected. Our group followed him, as if a shield, closer to the stage. “It was just a way to keep us unquestioning.”

Lynda was shaking, becoming angrier, more desperate. Her comrades kept looking behind their shoulders, calculating their escape routes. “We inherited a broken system,” Lynda said. “We did our best, but there was simply no way of digging ourselves out of the hole the capitalists had left behind.”

“Don’t displace the blame!” shouted Rodney. I saw him take his brother’s hand, preparing for the commotion to come.

We moved closer. Lynda’s whole face pierced as she recognized me, then Mary-Beth. When she registered the significance of the bandanas, she shrieked. “You can’t imagine how difficult this situation has been for us.”

“Why are you hiding the water from us?” Lupe yelled. There was another wild surge forward, pushing us up against the metal railings. “Where’s the water you’re hiding?”

Lynda Rae dropped the megaphone. She began to sob. “I swear, I swear, we’re not keeping anything for ourselves. There’s nothing left. Nothing!” Her voice was so crazed, so full of terror, that I actually believed her. “I don’t know what you expect us to do!"

Aida raised her fist in the air. Our whole group followed suit. “No justice! No peace!” she crooned. We repeated her call. Fists sprouted across the crowd. Voices began to ripple around us, further and further until everyone in the plaza erupted into common song.

There was anguish there, but there was also longing. There was terror, but there was also hope. There was rage, and there was camaraderie. Or even, dare I say, love. It was the sound of people who refused to die. Or, at least, people who refused to be told that they were going to die.

I don’t know who threw the first stone, by what impulse or intention they were propelled, or whether or not they meant to hurt anyone. But a stone was thrown, nevertheless, directly into the face of Lynda Rae. There was a splatter of blood. It drizzled on our faces. An eye flew out of its socket on a long, pink string. Then, Lynda was on the ground, bleeding out. Some of her comrades rushed to her aid. Others saw it as an opportunity to flee.

Protesters knocked down the barricades and stormed the stage. Those who ran were seized quickly and knocked out cold. Collective activists were being dragged by the hair, kicked in the ribs, bashed in the face with chunks of concrete protesters ripped up from the sidewalk. The crowd fractured, halved into those who were eager to join the bloodbath, and those who, worried for their own safety, chose to run away.

In the chaos, someone knocked me down. I scraped my knee, badly, and cracked my glasses. When I managed to stand upright again, I saw only strangers’ faces. “Mary-Beth! Aida!” I cried. No one could hear me, and I began to panic. I tried to push my way through the pulling,

running, shoving bodies. But I was still very thin and old and weak, and did not get very far before I was knocked over, again. “Mary-Beth!” I screamed, flailing about on the ground. Someone, accidentally, stepped on my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. I tried to scream again, but I could not. I could not even breathe.

By some grace, Mary-Beth’s hand appeared amidst the throng. She helped me rise. Just over her shoulder, I could see Rodney carrying Aida in his arms. Her legs were limp and her head bobbed as if disconnected from its spine. Mary-Beth was horrified. I was horrified. Breath came back to me in short sips. We fought our way through the plaza, trying to stay upright against the riptides which tried to hurl us one way and then the other. I was terribly lightheaded. I was terribly weary. My knee throbbed, and with my cracked glasses I could barely see where I was walking.

For a moment, I thought of Michel. I thought about how hard he must have fought against the surf, how beaten and spent it must have made him. How, in a moment of delicacy, it must have been such a relief to succumb. And in that moment, I forgave him for leaving me. I forgave him, and I pushed forward, until the four of us made it back to the car.

“What happened?” I shouted. All around us, a nauseating sound. Some cheers, some screams.

“I don’t know,” said Rodney. “She just passed out.” He lay her gently in the backseat.

“She’s probably dehydrated,” Mary-Beth said. She ran towards the people gunning for the plaza. “Please help me! My friend is sick! She needs water! Please!” They ignored her. She aimed at the people running away. “Do you have water at home? Please! She might die! Please!” They simply shoved her out of the way. We did not have time for this. I motioned for her to get back in the car.

Rodney looked warily in the direction of City Hall. “Go make sure everyone else is okay,” I told him. “Meet us back at the house."

Mary-Beth got in the backseat and rested Aida’s head on her lap. “It’s going to be okay,” she whispered. “I promise I’m going to take care of you.”

I drove as fast as I could, dodging pockets of people who were reuniting after the chaos, or else regrouping to go back in. I rolled the windows down, hoping a breeze would help keep Aida from sweating and losing more fluids.

Now, I could smell smoke. Whether it came from the protesters' arson, or the wind tearing through the dry brush, I did not know. Perhaps it was both: the people responding to the pain of the land, and the land responding to the pain of the people.

Whatever the case, fire, like water, is not a subject to be toyed with. Once there's too little or too much, fire, like water, ceases to be a metaphor and becomes the center of one's life. Fire was a bad omen. Fire in a city with no water left was an omen I could hardly bear.

Years ago, when it became clear to us that the water situation was bigger than the droughts Los Angeles had ever seen, bigger than the country could resolve, bigger than the world could get a grip on, Michel went through the trouble of purchasing an obscene amount of water bottles. It kept us going for a long time. After he died, I used the water sparingly, when I was sober enough to remember it was there.

When we arrived home, however, the water was gone. All of it. I imagined that Rodney or Marquette or Lupe had taken it and decided to redistribute it wisely. I couldn't be mad, of course. I had opened my home to a community; I had given them whatever they needed to do their jobs. But Aida was lying limp and dry on the soda, breathing shallowly. I didn't know what else to do.

I tore through every cupboard, dresser, and drawer in that house. It appeared I had nothing to my name but empty bottles, expired prescriptions, a dead man's wardrobe, and books, books, books. Why had I wasted so much time on such a useless, sisyphean task when disaster had been playing out all around me? The world was burning and all I could think to do was theorize about it. Someone who I loved very dearly was dying on the sofa and all I had were scribblings.

I picked up the tattered pages of my manuscript and threw them out the window. I watched them float down like petals on a grave.

In the living room, Mary-Beth was holding Aida's hand sobbing. She looked back at me and said, in an accusatory voice, "The least you could do is give us some more time."

I was stranded. I did not know what to do. I had the strange impulse to run outside and pick up all the pages again, smooth them out, reorder them, and read them all over again, so that they might give me some clue. So that they could tell me what to do. I needed the writing to tell me what to do.

Then Donny hobbled in, redfaced and smelly and trailing in sand. His t-shirt was bunched up into a ball and dripping. He said nothing, just sat down beside Aida and began wringing out the t-shirt in front of her face. At first, I was repulsed, thinking it was sweat that was dripping into her mouth. Then Aida took one scratchy, gaping breath. I fell to my knees beside them all. I touched the bundle in Donny's hand and tasted it. My whole body shivered. It was freshwater. I stared at him wide-eyed.

"Don't you remember?" he said. "The Home for the End of the World has a ground retention moisture system."

Aida licked her lips. Her eyes fluttered open, and she saw Mary-Beth's face. She smiled a weary smile. Mary-Beth kissed Aida on the lips, then licked her own. She threw her arms around her father's shoulders and covered his face in kisses. If he was confused or surprised, he did not show it. Perhaps, although his mind could not make sense of things, his body remembered the things that were important. How to cradle. How to caress. How to love.

I write the last of my notes now from a beach chair I have set up on the sand outside my house. From where I sit, I can see smoke billowing in the hills, from brush fire or riot or both, I cannot be sure. Because of the heat wave, I am taking refuge under the shade of a sunhat and wearing an old red bikini Michel bought for our honeymoon many years ago. I can feel the Santa Ana rasping against my weathered skin. From where I sit, I can see Aida and Mary-Beth wading knee-dip into the glossy water and holding hands. I can hear Donny rattling away at the bungalow, tearing it limb from limb, and instead of melancholic, or mournful, I feel relieved. This is my new, strange little family. This is our home for the End of the World.

I will not pretend to be romantic about what is, frankly, a tragic state of affairs. And I will not endorse hope when hope has long been used as a rhetorical barricade between people and praxis. I realize that it is not going to be easy. People will continue to hurt each other. People will continue to break faith with one another. A lot of people are going to die, both sensibly and senselessly. But if I've learned anything from writing this report, which I'm well aware may never be read, it is the following:

First, is that there *was*, indeed, life after The End. People lived it, people survived it, and often, despite evidence to the contrary, found moments within it for joy.

Second—and this might sound mythical, given the narratives of destruction and exploitation that have come to characterize our world's sorry chapter—is that the body—by which I include a collective of bodies, or bodies that rumble beneath us unacknowledged—is equipped with the capacity, against all odds, to heal.

And finally—and this, in post-apocalyptic times, might be the most difficult to believe, and was certainly the most difficult to prove—is that love—love which is an inexplicable, terrible, obliterating thing—love, in the end, remains important after all.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my fellow students in the Creative Writing programme at the University of Cape Town. Special thanks to Imraan Coovadia, for tough love and guidance throughout the project.

I am very grateful for the support and encouragement of the international postgraduate funding office at UCT, without whom this book may not have been completed.

Thanks to students in the creative writing seminar at Pitzer College who read the very first drafts of this novel, and encouraged its fruition, especially Brent Armendinger and Roz Naimi. Daryl Smith, for clarifying to me what dystopia means. Myriam Chancy, for clarifying to me what love means.

Thank you to those from Komposjaart at Kleinood—Heinrich Groenewald, Libby, Gerard, and Katharien De Villiers—for providing much-needed space to write and, more importantly, to take my writing seriously.

Thank you to Jaques and Margie for loving me and housing me at many stages throughout this project.

I am forever indebted to the writers—known and unknown, living and dead—whose works guided and encouraged me throughout the process of writing my book. Immense gratitude to James Baldwin and Anne Carson, the two writers who influenced this book more profoundly than all others.

My love and thanks to the many friends whose conversations and blessings helped to make this novel a reality. A partial list includes, in no particular order, Sajo, Elana, Fel, Libby, West, Barrow, Ariana, Sara, Jonathan, Priya, Billie, Evelyn, Avey, Stephanie, Emily, Drew, Sara, Nina Lee, Everest, Sheenie, Nina, Nick, Cam, Zander, Rebecca, Steph, Rupert, Nthupula, Nandi, Igsaan, Cristina, Liv, Bex, Damon, Theresa, Kayla, Lily, Claire, and Jono.

Neelufar Franklin and Kay Calloway, this book is dedicated to you because you taught me how to love.

Endless love and thanks to Dominique Cheminais, collaborator and best friend, for listening to me, editing for me, dancing with me, and most of all, believing in me.

Dominic Pretorius. Husband, lover, editor extraordinaire, cocoon. Thank you for being the reason I wrote this book. Thank you for being the reason I am a writer. I hope this book makes you feel as proud as I am of you every day.

Thank you Sandy. Thank you Jeff. Thank you Liv.

Thank you Kathy, the bravest woman I know.

Thank you Dan, most of all. For your holiness. For your openness. For the drive.