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I'm Supposed to be Telling This

Danielle M. Clevenger

In her dreams, Ellen watches the car coming at her. She doesn't scream this time, just grabs the wheel and pulls the whole steering column out of the dash. She wakes up at the point of impact and vomits. In the shower, hot water streaks down her body, searing the silver-pink scars that scale her stomach. The silence of her black, black apartment drives her from the shower to a small downtown diner where she's spent nearly every night since Emmy died.

I vomit all the time now. The same way I live my life in the third person (but I'm sure that's developed from too many people talking about me like I'm not in the room). I've lost really more weight than I should. Sometimes I can feel myself melting away into nothing. Everything I eat, which isn't much in the first place, comes gushing back up at the slightest provocation. I've reached the point where I'm out of tears and there is nothing left to do but vomit.

I'm supposed to be telling this to my therapist, but I can't tell him anymore than I can tell myself. I find myself tiptoeing through the house, forgetting that it's quiet, not because it's nap time, but because she's dead. I can't talk about it. I sit through our sessions staring blankly at this man who's supposed to be curing me of my grief. I don't know what he says to me. I don't know how I respond. I just know that for two hours, twice a week, I sit in his office and stare at the purple folds beneath his eyes. When we're done he stands up and walks me to the door. It must be a frustrating job for him.

Jane is coming over for a visit, and although she didn't

say so, I'm sure she'll be bringing my mother. The only thing more pathetic than a mother who's lost her child is a mother who's child has lost her child. They'll sit on the sofa and I'll sit in the rocker. I'll concentrate on the sensation of my vertebrae fusing together as my neck slowly folds down into my tail bone. They'll carry on a conversation about me, around me, without me, because they know I can't participate. What am I supposed to say. "Yes, I heard it's going to rain tomorrow." It doesn't matter to me if it never rains, if it never stops.

Jane and Ellen's mother let themselves into Ellen's apartment and settle themselves on the couch. Ellen sits in the rocker and the longer they sit, the more she seems to shrink into the chair. Jane tries to keep a light repartee going, to fill in the abysmal silence of the room, to try to void the disgusting figure of Ellen's folding, shrinking body from her mind. She tells Ellen's mother how thin Ellen's become, how they must take her out for dessert soon. Ellen goes into the bathroom and vomits, splashes her face with water and returns to the rocker where she immediately begins to absorb her spinal cord, one disk at a time.

Joe calls every so often--my mother must put him up to it. He sounds no more eager to talk to me than I am to him. He tells me how horrible this all is, how much he misses her, and to please call him if I need anything. I can't think of a thing I'd need. I just stumble from room to room waiting for my stomach to dislodge whatever I put in it last. How could he know? He hasn't been here for the last three years of her life--the literal last three. When he wakes from a nightmare there are soothing arms to cradle him, rock him back to sleep. First thing in the morning he hears his new son crying, walks in and holds him, pats his smooth belly and kisses his purple nose.

No one's made the suggestion yet, but I wait and wait

and wait. It's coming. It hovers around everyone's head like a bee around a rotten apple. Will you have more? You should, you know. It will help. I know it's hard to think about, but maybe you should try again. Like Emmy was some vague hypothesis I was testing. See if you can keep this child alive, and if not, try again. When she slept, her mouth folded over on one end and dangled open on the other. Her cheeks smoothed out and fluttered with every breath. The blue veins in her eyelids, the down that never left her shoulders and back, her fingers curled around a pony that chirped "I'm pretty" when she squeezed it. How do you try again for that?

It's so hard, and so easy, for people to die. An ashtray to the temple or a little lead cylinder lodged in a lung. Or Ellen's friend, dead from flying through a windshield, resuscitated, in a coma for three months, planning an April wedding now. What was left to wrap up for a gift? Ellen told her good-bye in the hospital, bent over a swollen, blue face that looked nothing like the person Ellen had come to see. Those tubes that made her shudder, shoved through skin in the most unlikely places, dripping with some sweet, secret force, had brought her back to life. How can something so hard to do be so easy? How can one body forcefully exit a car and go on to marry and another be smashed inside the car and never go on to see second grade?

Ellen sits in the waiting room until her therapist comes to call her name. She walks dully back to his office and sits in the leather chair she's been sitting in for seventeen months. He smiles--she knows because the purple folds under his eyes become shorter and fatter for a few seconds. He starts talking and she's aware that she's answering. He's asking about Joe. And her mother. She's telling him something she can't quite hear. "Are you

there," he asks and she answers no.

Walking to my car, I inhale deeply and for a second the air stings my throat. It reminds me of something far away. Spring, track team, high school. I remember gasping for air and the icy-hot sensation as I bent forward and sweat ran down tendrils of hair and dripped into the cinders of the track. I walk back into the therapist's office and tell the receptionist I need to speak with the man I just saw. She buzzes his desk and he comes out. "I don't know your name," I tell him. "Les," he says. There's nothing else to say, so when he nods, I leave. I walk back into the open air and start to run.

Visiting Ray Chapman

Su Fidler

She had always been called Kathryn Blue, never mind that her mother had insisted til her dying day on calling the Blue kids, all of them, by their given names (Carolyn Jane, Kathryn Jane, Theresa Jane, Jay Junior, and the dead baby, Jay Harry Blue.) Her dad had tried to call her Katie Jay for a while, and she herself had tried out Kate. But everybody (except her mother) just naturally said "Kathryn Blue," as if the name itself were a force of some kind. She had decided early on to accept it. She decided to live as if she had her own gravity.

Now. Here, 500 miles north, where no Blues lived (where no Blue, traditionally, could ever live), she worked downtown in a dark suit and minimal jewelry. At night, come summer, she stood in her driveway and, without flinching, watched the star Vega coming straight at her at 8.5 miles per second. On special occasions, she visited the grave of Ray Chapman.

And that was the point. She came here often enough, she should have known the gates closed at 5:30. Now it was 9 or so, just past dark, still and hot. The sky was dirty, the air had a tinge of pink and a buzz you could taste. As a matter of form, she rattled the rusty handle of the tall iron gate, then turned around and stared at the street.

It was lined up and down with parked or abandoned cars but few signs of life, no one looting in the Free Clinic bins, no light escaping Safe Space, nobody hunkered under the portico. Naturally, the moment she thought "no one, nobody," here came the rusty pink pick-up around the corner. This time it rattled to a stop just past the ce-

metery gate and blocked her own car in there. The driver lit a cigarette, the other guy drank from a can, and then they both turned around for a better look at her.

Her nerves tingled and for a single moment she considered standing her ground, letting them look, the hell with them. Instead, caution prevailing, she took off walking in the opposite direction, east along the cemetery wall, head up, shoulders back, as if she knew exactly where she was headed, and she did. She was headed into the neighborhood where response time to 911 calls was almost two hours. Glancing back, she saw the pick-up back up and park at the hydrant just behind her car. She continued walking east.

The cemetery's tall stone wall ran straight into the dark, but at intervals narrow spaces had been left in which to hang a gate, and when she came to the break in the wall just opposite the deserted greenhouse, she sidestepped into the patch of darkness there. The gate here had been chained shut from the beginning, apparently, since the iron bars and iron ivy, chains, and locks all seemed to be rusting at the same rate. She peered into the shadows of the cemetery but could see no farther than the dark border of laurel. When she gave the bars a shake, the gate slipped off its rusty hinges and swung inward, as if "Goddam it" were the magic words after all.

She stepped through, shoved the gate back onto its hinges, and took a few steps into the shadowy laurel. It was darker in here, and she had to stand a moment before she could see. She intended to locate a memorial bench and sit there until she heard the pink pick-up start up and clatter away, then she would run for her car and get out of there, drive back to her house, eat brownies.

Almost as soon as she brushed off a boulder and sat down, she heard sirens approaching--an ambulance, may-

be a squad car--and perversely she glanced at her watch, calculating that it would be past eleven o'clock before she could realistically expect another ambulance to pass by. Before she could even pretend to consider whether or not to jump out and flag this one down, the sirens excited the muggy air in front of her then immediately waned, disappeared, followed by nothing, no significant noise at all, on the street side of the wall. No engine coughing, no can tossed at the gutter, no cry or shuffle out there. In here, she heard a rustle in the leaves. It could have been anything, it could have been air, a crow, a rat.

She stood up, looked around. This cemetery, noted for the enduring wealth, fame, or power of its dead, was vast and whimsical; its patrons had been arranged in neighborhoods along avenues that meandered up daffodil hills, down through bogs with ducks. Still, she knew where she was. She could make out a stand of obelisks she recognized, the profiles of familiar statues. Just up the hill, sitting on a bench atop the Garnets' memorial boulder, a female angel (long bronze hair, muscles in her arms, streaked face, eyes open and strong proud wings) shuddered not quite imperceptibly.

She watched, horrified, while the angel shifted the weight of those wings. (She was in here, she might as well make the most of it even though of course she knew that the shiver of movement was that of light trying to flow through hot air; stars twinkled from the same effect, although not tonight; tonight the August haze obscured heaven, except for the sliver of the moon.) But the thing was, she was in here, closed gate notwithstanding. She had come this far, good sense notwithstanding, already. Who would know or care if she wandered around a little? (She could almost hear her baby brother whining, "Mommy'll find out, and then she'll kill us, and then what?

Then what?") Sifting the air in front of her for spiders, she walked in through the laurel til she arrived at an edging of geraniums and stones, and stepped across it onto recently mowed grass.

She pulled a paper towel from her jeans pocket, spiked it onto a dusty laurel leaf to mark her exit, and then set off toward the rise. Unsure which rules of survival applied, she kept to the shadows at first, moving from hedge to hedge like a kid playing ninja, feeling foolish, collecting dust on her face, parched leaves in her hair. After seeing, that is, after imagining more movement among the statuary--but this time it was the dark, not the light, that shuddered--she switched to the paved road and strode straight up the middle of the Section 24 avenue til she came to Ray's plot.

She pulled her ticket stub--July 22, home game, Tribe beats Oakland 1-3 in 11 innings, rookie Joey Matos hits his first major league home run--out of her pocket and placed it at the base of Ray's squat granite marker and then sat down on the iron bench under the locust tree at the foot of the plot. But she felt exposed, as if every dark-adapted eye in the city were watching her, and so she got down on the grave itself, sitting cross-legged in the deepest shadow of the tree.

Ray wouldn't mind, he was dead. "Raymond Johnson Chapman 1891-1920." Short and sweet. No poesy, no RBIs.

Footsteps approached suddenly, stopped abruptly, just short of treading on her. Startled, looking around and up, she witnessed a wavering shadow monster mutate and divide into two thin men--one tall, one short--and her heart sputtered, her brain said "I told you so," and then it misfired; it informed her she was seeing Old Scare Joe.

Old Scare Joe was long dead (both versions of him--the

bogeyman and the actual man, emaciated, syphilitic, with an oozing cavity of a nose, who lurched around corners and dozed under the cannon on the courthouse yard in the deserted county where the Blues lived). But these men here were real. Moreover, they seemed startled, as if they hadn't seen her sitting in the shadow until they were right up on her.

The extra moment or two she had on them, however, didn't alter the situation. They were standing almost on top of her and, if she tried to jump up and run, could easily grab and stop her. ("And then what? Then what?") Until this arrangement shifted, she would have to rely on the most primitive defense tactic of all: she tried to think what she would do if she were, well, who she was.

"I was here first," she said in her downtown voice. She gave them each a courteous yet dismissing glance and returned her gaze to the inscription on Ray's gravestone.

She heard one of them chuckle and the other one say something too hushed, fast, and vowel-ly to understand, to which the first one replied with a grunt, maybe a chuckle, or a sneer, impossible to know without seeing. She didn't look. She ignored them. She reached into her back pocket and slowly, casually, pulled out her car key, then she leaned back on her hands and slowly, casually, straightened out her legs, as if she were relaxing, settling in, as if she considered them gone.

The short one took a beer can from the pocket of his baggy slacks and placed it unopened at the base of Ray's marker next to her ticket stub. When he walked around her to sit down on the bench, she saw that his face, at least the shadows of it, bore the stress and the cut-diamond shape she associated with the Cambodian restaurant where she always got the pink noodles. The other man hunkered beside her in the shadow, close enough to

touch her, if he decided to. Again her brain whispered, "Old Scare Joe."

She couldn't help it, she had to look at him. So she looked, then couldn't breathe. Her gut constricted with the sudden-fright feeling of the known world dropping out from under her, the long black vacuum of eternity rushing in. She'd had the breath scared out of her as a little kid when Old Scare Joe had staggered and nearly fallen on her, his bones, his stink, catching himself at the last minute but not before she had seen into the stinking, oozing abyss where his nose had been. For a while she'd had nightmares about him, but later--she'd never told this to any one, nobody--when she was scared, she would imagine the black-hole face of Old Scare Joe. She'd chant "Does the New Scare scare more than Old Scare did?" over and over until the new fear waned and Old Scare still scared her the most.

Now. She looked into this guy's thin, craggy face--indistinct in the shadow of the locust, then etched in fire, then obscure again, as he lit a cigarette with a paper match--and she recognized it as Old Scare Joe's face, with nose. Despite the paralyzing horror, she was almost glad to see him--which meant she must be dreaming. In fact, yes, she must be dreaming because despite safety classes, habitual paranoia, all those locks on her doors, here she was visiting with the bogeyman and his Cambodian accomplice on the grave of a Cleveland Indians shortstop, and she would not be this stupid in real life, she would be this stupid only in a dream, thank god.

"I seen you out at the gate," he said in a voice so still, calm, that it scarcely disturbed the hot heavy air. "From the tears on your cheeks, I figured you had somebody dead in here."

"My mother died this morning." God knows why she

said this, though it was true, but so what? She followed it with a shrug and returned her gaze deliberately to the inscription on Ray's marker, "Raymond Johnson Chapman 1891-1920." If he so much as flinched in her direction, she'd jam the key into his eye, swivel on her butt to kick upward into his accomplice's groin, then jump up and run.

In the hedge to her left, a shadow moved. Old Scare didn't notice, or didn't seem to.

"What'd she die of?" he said.

"Lung cancer."

The other man spoke, over on the bench, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. Besides being very soft and very fast, there was something dizzying about his accent.

"He says did she smoke," Old Scare said.

"Well, yes."

The man on the bench flipped a twig toward the hedge. But Old Scare didn't move, didn't draw on his cigarette. He just sat there, calm, still, ten seconds, thirty seconds. Finally she had to say something.

"But the thing is, she lived her whole life next door to a smoldering slag heap. Every breath she ever breathed was full of sulphur and smoke. Nobody can tell me it wasn't a factor."

He didn't say anything.

"Clay County, on Uncle Charlie Creek, in deepest darkest Appalachia. It's got postcard scenery, and the air tastes like hell. Literally like hell, like fire and brimstone." She made herself quit. She'd made herself quit delivering this speech to strangers five, six years ago. The rest of it went: "It started as a coal town. The mine closed and the company abandoned the place to the natives almost two generations ago, but they left the slag heap smoldering.

So now we've got nineteen shacks plus the community hall, all rotting, at the foot of a smoldering slag heap, and forty-two hillbillies, all related, who dream of damnation every night and die early and don't care because they think it's normal. It'd be pathetic if it weren't so metaphorical."

Something in the dark of the hedge moved, and Old Scare glanced over there.

"Anyway, she died," she said. 'Everything she cooked tasted like rotten eggs. She wouldn't let you eat til you said grace. Say grace, pass the ketchup."

The short man said something she didn't understand, and suddenly, finally, Old Scare lunged at her. He clasped his hand over her mouth, knocking her backwards flat across the grave, pinning her down. The other man dove off the bench to land stretched out taut alongside her, not touching, but so close she could smell his beer breath, his greasy shirt. One of them said something, but all she could hear was her heart thumping. She could see lights approaching, and if they were real they were probably headlights, but she couldn't move, couldn't scream. She was about to die, maybe; she was a little bit glad.

("In an ironic turn of events in Lake View Cemetery last Friday night, Kathryn Blue was murdered--death instantaneous, suspects in custody--atop the grave of Ray Chapman, after going there to mourn her mother who had died in another state earlier that day. Baseball fans will recall that Chapman, popular Tribe shortstop, was struck in the head by Yankee pitcher Carl Mays' fast ball on August 16, 1920, and died the next day. According to Blue's employer, 'She admired Chapman's timing. She said there were worse things than getting hit in the head with a fast ball while you're still batting .300. Of course,

she was from West Virginia. Not that that means anything. But you really couldn't tell, I mean, you really wouldn't know it to talk to her.'")

The headlights passed on without disturbing the darkness the three of them lay in. She watched the taillights glow red in Old Scare's eyes and then blink out. He took his hand away from her mouth, though she still had the taste of his sweat on her lips. Nicotine. Dust.

"Security," he said. "He sees us here, he calls the cops."

"Mm," she replied as if she agreed--as he seemed to think she would--that calling the cops was a bad idea. She sat up, shook grass out of her hair, pretended to care for a moment that it was tangled. The other man got up and returned to the bench. She came slowly to her feet, casually stretching her legs, brushing dirt off her jeans. (She was on the downhill side of the grave now; it was time to act, time to run after the security car, she'd always been fast.) Her heart thudded again when Old Scare also stood up, but he didn't move toward her. He placed something on the base of the marker then, standing up straight, looked at her. He just looked at her.

"I'm going now," she said, adding, like an idiot, "It's late."

He nodded. He patted his shirt pocket twice as if feeling for cigarettes, then glanced off into the dark. The other man said something, and Old Scare started to translate for her.

"He said we ought to--."

"He said I look like . . . what? The green what?" She had finally comprehended that the Cambodian man was speaking English with the cheek-full-of-tobacco Spanish accents of West 25th.

"He said we could call you Garnet," Old Scare said. "Since you resemble that angel over on the Garnet plot.

What with them streaks on your face."

"Fine, but why would you call me anything?" Turn and run, her nerves and bones were telling her, turn and run now or forever hold your peace.

"For respect. We have names for when we come here. I'm Nobody. He's the Dia de los Muertos. That guy over there, we call him Specter." He indicated, with a nod, the darkness behind her. "He's what you might call shy. Lives down behind the Scofield mausoleum just about year round."

Forcing herself to look, she peered into the bank of hedge and shadow--her exit route--until she thought she saw some part of the darkness draw back, thought she heard an intake of breath in there. Her skin crawled. The sweat all over her body went cold.

"I'm leaving," she said to Old Scare.

He nodded. His stillness (like gun oil, twilight, old cold water), his calm and stillness could hypnotize you, if you consented. A monstrous shadow passed overhead with a rattle and shush, momentarily blocking the scant moonlight that hung now like dust in the air. But she knew it wasn't spooks, she knew it was only a crow. She took a couple steps backwards and turned her back on him to walk away.

She walked off the grave, out of the plot. Without turning, as if she believed herself alone, she walked along the hedge where she sensed, maybe smelled the third man, maybe. Maybe no. If there was danger in there, her senses weren't dealing with it. So, rather than high-tailing it in the direction the security car had taken, she decided to continue walking straight down the hill toward the laurel thicket, opting for the quickest way out, hoping, hoping-to-god, her gall ("It was your mother's last wish, it was her last wish, goddam you, for you to be at her

grave") would last til she located the paper towel. Hoping-to-god she could find the paper towel that marked her exit because she had to get herself out of here. Because what she felt, instead of menace or good old fear, was another round of sorrow coming on ("Her last wish, doesn't that mean anything to you, goddam you, don't any of us mean anything to you?"), like it or not.

She walked head up and held her breath, listening for movement behind or ahead. Listening for footsteps, whispers, any kind of change in the silence behind her.

When she heard his voice, though, it was so quiet, it was not so much sound as charged air, and she didn't so much hear as breathe it in.

"They clear off the graves every Thursday to mow, so we're here most Friday nights putting stuff back on," he said.

He paused a moment, looking down toward the Garnets' green angel's streaked face in front of the moon. She looked that way too, saw it shiver, and shivered herself. She had recognized herself in the angel in broad daylight, the very first time she'd seen it, but she had never told a soul. ("Just who do you think you are, is what I'd like to know, goddam you, who do you think you are?")

"Garnet don't seem quite right, though. I reckon we'll call you Blue. Or maybe Kathryn Blue," he said. His buddy on the bench shrugged but said nothing. In the shadow, a bit of darkness went still, for just a moment.

She wiped her streaming tears and nodded, consenting to it, the solace and stillness, for a moment, for just a moment.

Doing Own Thing

Joe Taylor

Yes, it so: Oldcat, him like a good politician: him only spearmint with drug in college, and here's how it happened:

At frat-jock party, when him vying for king of drunken get-crazy hill, his new, pretty-tit Ft. Lauderdale girlfriend who just as dumb as he, goat him on: "Little town boy from Kentucky 'fraid of big city life?" It not like, after all, Gainesville, Florida really big city, but noneless, him smoke a joint to make city girl happy and prove he a man.

Hack-hack, duuuuuhhh. That his total experience. This the big city?

Now some pablums will tell you pot good, that it create no more harm than silly dare or joke, lot less than alcohol or tobacco smoke. Maybe so for them, but after Oldcat watch this girlfriend slip one night, two night, three night and more down marijuana's slippery slope, him never again believe in pot of gold. These all the happens in four months that happen:

1. She quit physics class. "It stupid."

2. She laugh at all her singing sorority sisters that had been her friend. "Them stupid."

3. She listen only to tiny tape and record collection, she watch only tiny color tv. "Want to go out?" Oldcat ask. "Canoe down Sewanee River? Party at Tim's? Shop at mall?"

"No," she manage to whisper, her voice cracking like dry barn board curing in hot sun, "No, them all stupid." Then she turn music low, raise sound on sitcom TV; shake head, turn tv down, music up.

4. She quit sorority, sorority quit her?

5. Same ditto-like with college.

6. Her get apartment. Woo-hoo, Oldcat chant to jock friends, licking lip, buying big box prophylactic. I soon go jumpity-bump until little Oldcat, him get red-eye sore and squawk surrender. But little Oldcat no have chance, cause big Oldcat forget about girlfriend's tape, record, and TV: "Oldcat, listen to this sad 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' song. Don't Simon and Garfunkel just make you want to die? Oldcat, stop that! stop that! Let's watch this funny funny Saturday Nite Live rerun."

Stop, listen, look. Oldcat hear this so much that he think he dating a train.

And list of bad happenings just grow:

7. "Parents stupid," she say when they no send no more money.

8. Her get waitress job in fancy steak house. Her big tits go away. Wherever to? Oldcat wonder. Marijuana smoke dry them up? That possible? And though she a waitress, she no wear make-up anymore. "Make-up stupid."

9. Her no longer smile when she see Oldcat. Her just look, like glaze-eyed hen laying an egg. Eggshell, it going to break open soon? Oldcat worry. "Want to smoke a J?" she ask, giving first big grin of night. Oldcat, him shake head. Last time him smoke, him cough all next day during windsprints. Though him explain reason, his refusal upset girlfriend, make her worry him a narc or something worse -- Southern Baptist maybe, she joke. Her dark eyes so serious though, that Oldcat forget to laugh.

10. Her lose waitress job in fancy restaurant, get another in pizza house. She and Oldcat fight, she scream: "My pizza boss stupid, college stupid, your sport team stupid, politics stupid, born-again religion stupid, this hick Florida town stupid, you stupid!" That Sermon on Mount finished, they go to bed and screw. "Screwing stupid," she laugh,

head smothered in pillow.

11. Oldcat no know what to do. Him call, she no answer. Him believe she probably no hear phone cause she smoke pot and listen to record, tape, TV -- all at same time.

"She do her own thing," friend advise.

"Yes," Oldcat answer.

But him wonder, as him drive by time and time to see new sadeyed, hippie supposed friends smoking J's on front porch -- yes, him wonder: she do own thing, or thing, it do her?

scripr
see Chapter 5).
life-threatening
urination
ain

Chitin

Jason P. Holtman

Isaac stood at thc kitchen door, wondering at the moth hour, waiting for the car to come. The cobalt air, percolated by the sound of insects and strung with red-beaded clouds, reminded him of dark rooms with tapestry, smoke clinging to the sound of a sitar. The door chain gently tapped on the aluminum, pushed by the evening breeze. The odor of wild onion lay heavy on the dusk. The house was quiet. A bat dove out of the sky, jagged sharply three feet from the ground and darted back into the night, a small, unseen meal in its jaws. Alone on the one side of the screen, Isaac could smell the night through the rusted, wire mesh, telling him that the mountains were still far off and how deep the dew sat in the brush pile out back.

He stood in the light of his back porch--moths dancing in the orange glow--staring at the tire tracks in the gravel. The eight inch furrows stopped at the edge of the patio and began somewhere in front of the house, out by the road. Karen had come the past two nights, always leaving before he had time to wake up and make coffee. He stared for a few minutes longer. Attempting to count the gravel, he lost track as the stones blurred together. Karen must have put new tires on the car; he could see the zigzag ridges twirling through the stones like licorice. How much did four tires cost? Karen never bought retreads. The fingers of his right hand rolled on the jamb, callouses thrumming on the whitewashed wood. He flicked the ash from his cigarette with his left, not noticing until he tried to take a pull, that he had knocked it out as well. The cherry burned a hole in the linoleum before he could step on it. He ex-

amined the cigarette and moved away from the door back into the kitchen. He lit another.

The kitchen was spare. A spring arm lamp was mounted into the table and a fluorescent tube shone bare above the sink: the only light in the room. Old nails marked where ornaments used to hang. Where a clock once ticked, a thick-headed screw protruded from the wall. A double-boiler clattered on the stove, gas hissing beneath it. Isaac smoked absently, tapping ashes into a colander in the sink. The wax in the double-boiler was nearly melted. He took some pans from beneath the sink. The pans were the size of notebook paper, stacked inside of each other, dots of baked grease in the corners. He had bought them from a bankrupt soup kitchen when he came back from Madagascar. He couldn't imagine what they had used them for: too wide for bread, too small for cake, and too shallow for just about everything else. He used them as molds for his pallets; they were the perfect size for collection slabs. He had not had to buy any since his return, just wax by the pound.

He removed the lid. The wax would be done soon, only a few white lumps floated in the hot, clear liquid. He returned to the table and laid the trays out in two lines. Finishing, he moved to the door, waiting for the wax to melt.

The fence row was grown over completely with kudzu from the neighboring lot. He could barely see the vines themselves in the near dark, only the flat shape of their collective mass tumbled out over the fence rails. He would have to clear it soon, maybe even dig a small ditch around its periphery and fill it with chlorate. He hated to do that. It would scorch everything under and around it: fiery chemicals dripping through the capillaries of the soil.

Smoke swirled from his nose as he exhaled. He closed

the inside door and looked out the windows back into the yard. Fireflies were beginning to sparkle on the tree line at the back of his property. Isaac watched them thicken the dark band of black forest with their tiny luminescence, each bright wink punctuating the inky brush behind, defining it, making it move and creep along. ***Photuris pennsylvanicus, elongated, flat***--the list was begun out of habit--*flashing once every two or three seconds while in flight, three overlapping generations per season, diet consisting of various soft-bodied insects....* He shut the burner off, sat down at the kitchen table, and pushed aside the wax molds. He was running out of blocks to pin specimens on, but these could wait until tomorrow along with the kudzu. He hadn't done anything all day and could feel his inertia holding him in the chair. He knew he was flagging and did not care.

Slumping against the chair, his legs stretched and crossed beneath the table, he thought about his daughter. Last summer, Isaac had taken Becky out to the back of his property, and they had emptied the beetle traps together. They dug through the compost piles he had placed back in the woods, all the while finding beetles and grubs which Becky had never seen before. She had giggled nervously when he brought his hand out of one of the traps covered with checkered beetles. He had explained how the tiny beetles killed gall and horntail wasps and kept the oaks from being overrun with their larvae. He told her the names, subspecies ***cymatodera, Tremex columba, Palmodes dimidiatus,*** as the slender bodied beetles wove in and out of his spread fingers. She liked the name cymatodera--even though she would not touch the beetles themselves--and chanted it all the way back to the house: simon-toad-era, simon-toad-era. He had enjoyed himself that day and thought Becky had as well.

Her blond curls had been matted by the end of the af-

ternoon, and Isaac, who had never looked forward to his weekends with her much before, felt regret when her mother came to pick her up that evening. He gave her a hug and detected the traces of scent the shower had not been able to rinse off her: the woods, compost, and sugar solution he used for bait. She had waved at him from the front seat as the car pulled back out the gravel driveway. He had waved back. Karen only looked behind her, her arm stretched over the back of Rebeccca's seat as she maneuvered around the puddles and pits in the drive.

Becky was somewhere in upstate New York right now, and had been since Sunday. Since Karen had called to inform him of her plans, he had not been able to work. The secretary at the college had called him after three missed days. He had forgotten what he told her, but she had not called back. Somehow the thought of his thirteen-year-old daughter at a camp bothered him. She didn't like such things, did she? He took another lungfull of smoke and ran his nail across the edge of one of the aluminum pans: the wax bunched up under his nail and cracked away from the sides of the pan, creating soft, white needles on the formica tabletop.

He had not been to school, emptied the traps, or cut the kudzu yet. He ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth. His palate was raw from all the cigarettes he had smoked during the past week, and he could feel the thick film collecting just below his nasal cavity.

Karen had been dressed up when she came to get Rebecca. She had worn dark glasses even though the day had been clouded over. He picked more wax off and pictured Becky eating in some dining hall with girls her age. How long had Karen said camp lasted? He jammed his thumb into a large roll of wax and felt the flat edge bite under his nail and go under the skin. He turned off the light, locked

the door, and walked down the hall to the bathroom, tasting blood as he sucked his thumb.

The wax already hardening into a thin disc across the surface of the double-boiler, Isaac went to bed.

In bed, Isaac turned and pulled at the sheet until he was wrapped tightly.

In his dream, the car pulled up around the backside of the house. Before the red hood came into view, Isaac knew who it was and went into the back rooms where he kept the terrariums. He liked the smell of this side of the house. The low lights in the first room gave it a wet, soft odor which reminded him of the dark forests of Madagascar. Spiders and slugs cluttered the corners, and a large glass box in the center held close to twenty elephant stag beetles, ***lucanus elephus,*** his livelihood and fame. This was the room where he worked. Behind a large plywood divider was a desk cluttered with folders and half-used legal pads. A single lamp sat on the desk with its stand pinned under a tall stack of denim binders. Within one of the drawers of his desk—one of the only ones that still opened—he kept a tape player and a collection of beaten, dirty tapes. Music to soothe the beasts—*beast*. Around the confines of his cubicle, memos from the university hung alongside pictures of his friends from Africa. A few of the pictures contained Karen, but most were of trees and nests.

The amplified crunch of chitin as it bumped into glass or scraped against itself came from the terrarium. Often he thought there could be a pattern in the rhythmic, crusty sounds of his study. Karen and Rebecca had never bothered him while he worked.

The car stopped, and he could hear Karen walking across the concrete patio as he fumbled through his tape

drawer in the dark. He didn't know why he wanted music. He couldn't turn on the light because of the study he was conducting on the stag beetles. He could hear them as well as Karen. They were aware of his presence and a few of them had begun flying into the top of the terrarium, their large bodies causing the screen to click and buckle as they hit it. Isaac began to wonder if they might damage their wings ramming the screen as they were. He knew a lot about them, but doubted even in his dream—whether he could mend any of them if they caught themselves in a corner or broke one of their tusks.

He found the tape he was looking for, identifying it by the loose label, peeling off the top like a tiny scroll. He got it in, pushed play, and rolled the desk drawer shut. The steel front clanged unevenly against the sides of the desk. Something began to play from inside the thin metal drawer, but Isaac could not place it. The beetles, alarmed by the sound of the desk, jumped harder and Isaac moved to the door. The music from the drawer was garbled and incoherent. He thought the tape broke by the time Karen walked into the study and flicked on the overhead light.

"Honey," she said. She touched him, her hands cold and slick like the abdomen of a wasp.

He woke halfway off the bed, his arm dangling to the floor and the tip of his middle finger shaking against the hardwood floor.

The next day, Isaac found some old gloves and a spade, determined to do something about the kudzu in the back yard. Nothing had changed.

The morning air was already thick with the heat of the oncoming day. Isaac had to squint to see clearly through the bright, blue light. Coming from the back rooms where he had worked all morning, the glare of the sun stung his

eyes and forced tears into their corners.

He talked to himself as he worked. His discussion was about ***lucanus elephus***. Two of the males had fought that morning, and Isaac had spent three hours watching them try to tumble each other onto their backs. One of them had finally gained a steady hold on a twig and rolled his opponent, and once the fight was over, the victorious beetle turned and crawled up the twig onto a larger branch. It wasn't necessary for the more powerful beetle to complete the battle, the loser would never be able to right himself in the wild—at least not soon enough to avoid a hungry bird or lizard. Isaac had righted the vanquished creature and noticed that it was momentarily disoriented, as if it had never expected to live: ***lucanus e.*** twirling its six legs wildly, clicking its jaws in thick, desperate resolution. Perhaps he should have run it through with one of his long pins, fulfilling its expectation. He would go back into the room tonight and not know which of the males it had been. All of them would wave their tusks, and throw themselves at the sound of his body in the room.

It took him another three hours to lift the blanket of heavy weeds off the splintered fence slats. On top they were shingle upon shingle of dark, broad leaves; but underneath they had tightly curled stems which held fast to their purchase. The matted kudzu ripped like velcro as he tore it off the posts and rails. By the time he finished, his arms ached and his hands were slick from the fluid in the stems. He went inside and cleaned himself off, then returned outside. Before lunch he had dug a small ditch in front of the fence and sprayed it with chlorate, enough to keep the vines from crawling into the yard again.

For lunch he had a cigarette and a bowl of soup. He finished the last spoonful when the phone rang. He reached behind him and picked it up.

"Hello," he said, setting the receiver into the crook of his neck.

"It's me," said Karen. "How are you?"

Startled, he didn't reply.

"Isaac, it's me. Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"I'm coming tonight. Before I leave to get Becky." Her voice sounded deeper on the phone. He could hear her breathing.

"No, you're not."

There was another pause. He imagined her licking her lips the way she did when putting on lipstick, her tongue wet against the sticky, red wax.

"All right." She sounded like a coy lover. He pictured her dipping her head down, making plans anyway.

"Isaac?"

Her voice called his name twice before he hung up the phone.

He knew what the red-bodied stag had felt, tumbled over under the cold, florescent lights, looking up at the screen, expecting to see treetops and a yellow sun.

Waiting for the car again, he collected the aluminum pans he had left in the kitchen. As he found each—for he had left some in the cabinets and others under the table—Isaac removed the wax block from its belly, stacking them in the center of the table. He then took the wax slabs into his study, being careful not to crack any as he walked down the hall and turned the corner. The desk was clean now. Isaac had gotten rid of all the binders and legal pads leaving only the lamp on the desk.

Karen was trying to play with him, get him to want her again as he had years ago, on another continent. Sending Rebecca to camp was a ruse: a game to infuriate him.

He pulled the tops off of a number of coffee cans before he found what he was looking for. He dumped the canister of long pins out onto the desk's surface. It was not going to happen tonight.

He walked out of the house taking the smoke canister, it was the same one he had rigged up in Madagascar, a cross between a tea kettle and an oil can. The woods were just beginning to paste over with the gray light of evening. The moon was rising. From the pond deep in the back lot, Isaac heard the high, punctuated bell-buzz of peepers- *hyla crucifer: boreal, mixed deciduous, oak-hickory; congregational, extremely common.* The front of the tree line was already flecked with lightening bugs, and Isaac doubted he needed the smoker. With their density, he could scoop them up alive in a seine-bag with only a few passes through the air.

But he did not want to retrieve the net from the house, so he let out the contents of the smoker in a large flourish covering nearly twenty feet from side to side. He heard the tiny particles settling on the trees in front of him and to the sides. The mist whispered as it touched the waxy leaves and fell on the stems and branches. Coughing once, Isaac looked into the black he had created. The forest was empty. It took him a moment to realize that the peepers were still ringing. At his feet was a thick line of weakly lit insects. He had made aerial collections before, but had not expected the number of ***photuris*** he found in front of him now, all fallen in to a neat, foot-wide row.

He stooped over to gather some into his bag, scooping the bodies up by the handful. When he was finished, he turned to go back to the house, anticipating Karen. She would find him in the study later. Not tonight, he said to himself again.

Halfway through the yard, he moved through a cloud

of gnats. Snatching out at them with his free hand, Isaac made little effect on the whispering annoyance. The wet grass began to soak through the front of his shoes. Moths spun in cracked orbits around the orange porch-light. He left the door unlocked and walked down the hall into his study.

Once there, he pinned each of the tiny bodies to the wax. Counting, making tiny numbers for each. The width of the pins was suited for his work with ***lucanus e.***, so almost a third of his quarry became too cracked and ragged to hold on the sheet: these he would wipe off with a cloth leaving a tiny streak of glowing yellow. He worked furiously at first hoping that Karen would come in. He wanted her to see him like this, when she put her head around the plywood divider. It would make her leave: a tight checker board of bodies pithed with surgical steel ten times their size.

After a while, he abandoned the cloth and began to drag the shells off the wax with his fingernail. He thought of Karen seeing him and began to draw large ditches through the specimen board. She would not sleep with him again. Coming three hours drive to see him, press against him with her car-tired body: this he could not stand again. He wanted to hate her. Be jealous of her. Do anything but want her the way he did. He could not accept her again.

He listened as he pulled insects from the bag, his fingers pushing through them like sunflower seeds. All he heard was the sound of the stags behind him, crashing into one another with their too large heads and under-balanced jaws.

His eyes stung from the sweat collected under them: the sockets deep, black crescents he wanted to scratch. He

had finished four of the slabs: five across, seven down--three hundred pins.

Isaac left his study. It was late. The crunch of the car tires had not come.

He went to the kitchen door and lit a cigarette. His lips ridged around the filter, hard and tight. The yard was still. A mat of clouds pressed down on the tops of trees. He drew heavy, deep; the ember glowed, then grayed. Crickets chirped—*oecanthus nigricornis* --and Isaac stared through the screen into the dark yard, his eyes half-closed as he took another pull.

Effect of agreement on a language

Runny Mustard

Natalie Walston

Grandpa used to bring a kind of warmness into this house, a feeling of clean sheets around me after my bath, a feeling I used to get from the house I lived in with my parents before they died.

He was always so sweet--he put up with Granny like he knew he had to because he married her or something. Grandpa's smile that showed off his dentures made Granny's talks about God go a lot faster. With him around I could sleep easier when the lights went out and shadows from monsters moved a little when they thought I wasn't looking.

Even though some things and feelings are just so cozy, like they should keep on lasting, nothing can make them stay that way. About two years ago something made his heart stop beating. Granny was praising televangalists when he turned a strange shade of purple; the color of a dried up old plum. He plopped over onto the wooden floor holding his chest like he was keeping his heart in with one hand and pointing at the telephone with the other. Granny started in on the Lord's Prayer and I took my cue and dialed nine eleven.

After that he was sent to the hospital and put on machines with plastic tubes going in and out of his nostrils and his mouth. Granny would just sit by his hospital bed holding her Bible that had wispy pages and pictures of little glowing angels. I felt really bad when I saw him like that, like I ate something rotten and it was burning holes in my stomach, like I wanted to just puke it up or bawl my

eyes out. Red dots were flashing and carrying on and liquids with little bubbles were going through the tubes to Grandpa's body. He had on this mask that got all foggy and made a loud scary sound when he took breaths in and out, the same as wind going through tunnels, or the way Darth Vader sounded.

I couldn't decide what to do when I saw him so I just froze and stared, as if I didn't have any emotions--kind of like one of Granny's chalky busts at the house. When it sank in about what happened to him, I started to panic and cry real hard, until my body shook and my face got red and splotchy and hot. I ate lots of ice-cream and other things with lots of fat so my arteries would get as clogged as his were. I thought that if he died I could go right along with him to Heaven, where people float around half naked in the clouds just like the picture in the back of Granny's Bible. The more I thought about it, the more I just wanted Grandpa to go up there with them. And I thought he deserved to go, he was so old and white looking anyway.

Dr. Oates told Granny that she could keep Grandpa, but he'd have to stay on those humongous machines until he could breathe for himself. He said it would take a miracle if he did start breathing, which was the wrong thing to say to Granny, my Granny that believed God would do anything for her if given the chance. Just like some kid taking home a puppy, she took Grandpa home with a twinkle that started in her old made up eyes and went to her veiny hands that were always shaking.

For two years he stayed in there, looking dead, collecting dust between his yellowish toes. He just turned into this big lump of old skin taking up space in his bedroom. When he first came home I used to cry when I had to touch his leathery skin or comb his hair that felt like straw. His face reminded me of my dad's face that night

when I thought that he was just sleeping and he could hear me but really couldn't.

Deep down in my heart I knew that Grandpa was like that, dead inside. He was just another spooky thing in this house.

And the summers here with them had to have been the absolute worst. I've heard lots of stories from Granny about fiery pits in Hell where bad people go to live with-some big devil with sharp horns, which sounds pretty bad but I think that summers at this house would top that.

With my school being out for three whole months and all, I had just about twenty-four hours to spend indoors with them. Granny would sit and crochet all day and talk about God even though she wouldn't go to church because she wouldn't leave Grandpa home alone. Granny likes to talk, like she just wants to hear herself over and over. And I know that sometimes she even talks to herself even though she says she doesn't. But no matter how much she talked back then I still felt like I was all by myself, like there was something black in the house that covered me when I walked in the door. The air always felt so heavy and dusty and it formed a cement ball in my heart.

Alone in my room I'd look in the mirror that was cracked and speckled with black dots that made my face have measles or moles like the ones covering Grandpa's body. It was old, just like everything else in the house. I just wanted to see myself, to see what kind of changes were coming about, to fix my hair just like every thirteen year old girl, to be like Heather Corbin who was so neat and pretty like her name. I would whisper Heather in front of the mirror, until it was like breathing, like a sleeping baby with a pink mouth or a dog panting with his tongue hanging out. Heather Corbin was like one of those girls on TV shows who wore clothes like soap opera stars

and whose picture the boys always looked up first in the yearbook. Heather Corbin walked around Prospect Jr. High always laughing and tossing her hair with little curls over her shoulder. She'd sigh like the way I said her name when she told us in the bathroom that her curls were *natural.*

Light would seep in through my windows and bounce around in my room full of Granny's weird antique things. I'd look up and see the ceiling with rough bumps moving in on me and the dirty gold chandelier that at night turned into serpents from Bible pictures that tempted and later ruined the first people on earth.

I'd look around and miss what I knew of my old house--the smell of my mom's perfume from the frosted glass bottle with lilacs stenciled around the cap or sweet fabric softener on my sheets and my clothes, and the house always being so breezy from the back door always opening and closing. A feeling like love was always with me, a feeling that I thought I would always have, like boxes jammed full of souvenirs that you hope and pray doesn't get burnt up in a fire.

From the first time I saw Grandpa in the hospital I knew that I could never be normal. I had seen more in my life than all of the girls my age that followed girls like Heather into bathrooms or the mall, and bumped into each other when someone would stop.

I had other things to think about, like my Grandpa being held down by tubes that kept him alive.

***

It was a super hot day that kept coming in through open windows where june bugs were making tapping noises on the screens. I was putting the drippy warm mustard on hot dogs when Granny started talking about my mother. She laughed like some old witch when she

brought out faded brown pictures of my mom and me together, on vacation at some beach with mountains sticking up behind us. There she was holding me on her lap, her chin sitting on my shoulder, smiling bright for the camera that my dad was probably holding, turning it on its side to get the angles right.

I wanted to cry right there over the hot dogs. It wasn't fair that Granny had so many happy memories of my parents. It wasn't fair that she laughed instead of cried when she thought about them. I wanted to be able to whip out pictures in a flowery scrap book and say here, here's my mom and dad, this is the time when we went to the beach, this is the time when my mom held me so close that I got her perfume on my neck and went to sleep smelling just like her. I wanted to be the one to laugh when I saw those pictures or when I thought about the times I had with them.

Yellow mustard ran over the sides of the hot dog bun and I kept squeezing and squeezing. I felt crazy, like one of those weirdos they lock up forever in a rubber room. I wanted to scream because of everything that seemed to be hitting me at one time. I couldn't stand the thought of rubbing Grandpa's body down with alchohol when he couldn't tell if he was clean or dirty, or clipping moldy toenails that made me gag and gave me the chills.

***

I started down the stairs to the chilly basement when Granny plopped down in her rocking chair. The lights were on and humming but the corners were dark where someone could've been hiding.

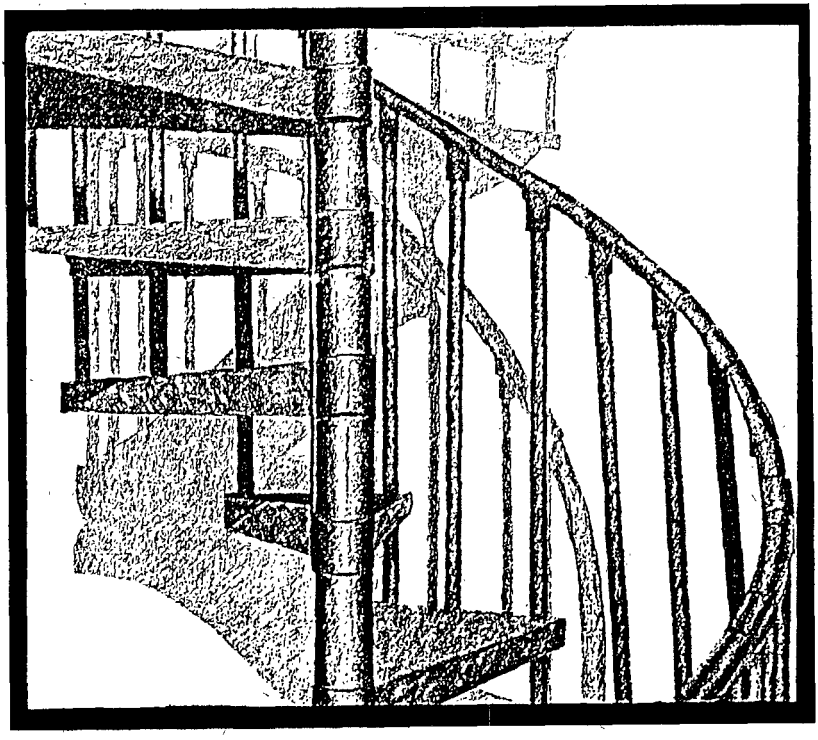
My hands were shaking fast right along with my breath. All of my old stuffed animals with shadowy faces

that were lined up on a shelf were telling me not to do it. It was like they knew it was a sin --one of the biggest sins-- and they didn't want God to punish me for it. But something strange was happening; I was cold, like the dampness that breathed in the corners clouded around me, seeped into my pores and crept through my veins. Layers of cement seemed to be poured and hardened over the rock that was already growing in my heart.

Long winding snake-like cords were guarding the fuse box covered in dust and dirt and I wanted to turn around and run. I spotted a handle that I reached out to pull but then I stopped myself. I remembered the padded rubber rooms and the Hell that Granny warned me about. Then I saw Grandpa's dead looking body and the tubes and fluids and the Preparation H.

The humming noise from the fluorescent lights stopped the same time the creaking in the floorboards under Granny's chair stopped. Spiders could've crawled into my mouth and died for all I cared, I just stood there with it hanging open, staring at the handle pushed down with dust buzzing around it.

And then I just plain started laughing, until my eyes filled up with water and my side hurt for the first time in a long time, laughing loud enough for even Granny or the devil to hear.



Oasis

Jenny Cornuelle

It's early evening and many hours have passed since Mo and I hid our tanker in a secluded spot, checked the brake and left it in the dust of Dirt Flats and started out across the Sun's Anvil, towards Mexico.

Mo and I bought the tanker eight years ago and we've been hauling crude on and off ever since. We're the only female team in the business. The guys kid us a lot. It pisses off Mo more than me; I mean, if you're a babe in this line of work, you've got to expect a certain amount of ribbing; besides most of the stuff is harmless, like our nickname on the CB is Double Deuce because we both are, how should I put it politely, top heavy. Mo flat out refuses to answer those calls and has pulled the handset out of the dash three times.

Our visit to the desert was personal. We had to bury Mo's dad. He was too heavy for one of us to lug solo so we cut him in half and constructed two toboggan-like contraptions from a hollowed-out cactus. Mo pulled the head half and I pulled the bottom half. Needless to say, we thought it best to put his pants on for this leg of the journey. We had a long discussion about the proper etiquette in this situation, and we decided that the daughter of the deceased should haul the brain to the burial, not the balls.

The evening was so still it was soothing. Have you ever noticed that shadows don't creep up on you in the desert? Instead the darkness comes like a quick curtain. We walked until we could see no hills ahead or behind us. Mo announced that this was the spot. I was much relieved be-

cause my knapsack was heavy and the head of my shovel, which at the beginning of the hike had been just a nuisance to the small of my back, had rubbed me raw and it hurt like hell. I hadn't said anything because I felt it inappropriate to disturb Mo's mourning so I bore the pain and every time Mo turned to see if I was still with her, I forced a constipated grin and she would nod and continue to walk, following the cracks in the earth as if they were roads on an ancient map leading us somewhere, to Babel maybe. I remember Mo telling me once that all the bridges in Japan or China, she wasn't sure, were zigzagged because evil spirits could only travel in a straight line. That must be why we had walked on diagonals.

After putting the cactus cradles together Mo covered them with her tarp. She stood motionless, staring at the lump which now resembled a covered barbecue.

I poured two straight bourbons and handed one to Mo. I drank mine in one gulp and poured another. It had been a long day.

I had known for a long time that Mo and her father had a stressful relationship. Over the years and the miles we've had a lot of time to talk and she rarely talked about him. The odd thing was sometimes he was a saint or sometimes he had to reach up to hit the bottom, I mean, worse than the slim who slid into Mickey's Bar on Friday nights looking for a quickie, and from my perspective, there is no life lower.

I don't think I ever told Mo about my dad. I know she never asked. There's not much to tell since I never met him. He died in the Korean War. His plane was shot down and his remains were never found. Growing up, I spent many afternoons imagining he'd escaped and become a ruler of a lost kingdom on an unmapped island. But when

I was mad at him for being dead instead of being at my father-daughter picnic or something I imagined he looked like that dweeb in "South Pacific," the sailor who dressed up like an island babe for some USO show; the one with a coconut bra and a grass skirt and combat boots.

This morning, in Mo's apartment, I inspected the body. There was no question that Mo's dad was dead. Mo must have stabbed him close to a hundred times. His heart was on display and it was not beating. I had no words. I waited. Mo paced and smoked without inhaling. She had quit smoking when we bought the rig, so she was out of practice. Every once in a while she inhaled and coughed up a storm.

Mo didn't feel like talking and I didn't push her. I knew Mo had her reasons.

Deserts are peaceful places. I took the sawdust log out of Mo's knapsack and used sagebrush for kindling. The needles shimmied as they shot into flame. For a moment the sizzle caught Mo's attention but then it fizzled out and her stare returned to the horizon.

"Let's rest for a few hours and then start digging," I said, startled by the calm in my voice.

II.

I lay down opposite Mo. I couldn't see her features through the flame. I struggled to stay awake but exhaustion got the best of me.

A few hours later I woke with a start. Mo was in the same position, staring into the fire. A line of tears plodded down her cheeks. Her eyes were blood red, but she didn't sob. I watched her. She was beautiful. I'd never noticed that before. She was like one of those statues of Mary on

Vatican postcards usually around Easter time: sad but not too sad because she's stone and the tears aren't wet.

I tried to get back to sleep but I couldn't relax, so I picked a spot close to the fire and began digging. After about an hour Mo joined me. We dug in silence. When Mo stopped the hole was a few feet taller than me and I'm close to six feet. I scrambled out and helped Mo roll her father into the grave and for some reason I had an impulse to laugh. I tried to swallow the outburst but it exploded as a kind of burpy giggle and echoed across the desert.

"I'm sorry. I'm overtired."

Mo just nodded and started to shovel the dirt in. I glued my eyes to the pile of dirt and when I rested I watched the light on the horizon. Dawn was approaching and the day was going to be a hot one; my palms moistened; sometimes the expectation of heat is worse than the heat itself.

We had to wait until dusk to head back; hiking in this heat would be stupid if not suicidal. Mo had not spoken; in fact I had to lead her to the shade as if she were blind or something. She took no notice of the sun. She just stared at the disturbed dirt and picked the dried blood from beneath her nails with her front teeth.

"Jen, if I ask you to do something important would you do it?"

"Sure. What?"

"No questions asked."

"Sure."

I was getting a little testy. The way I looked at it, I'd just sawed her father in half, hauled him across the border and buried him at least ten feet under; what more could I do?

"I'm going to go to that pile of dirt and kneel. When

you're ready I want you to hit the base of my head as hard as you can with my shovel. If you hit me hard enough it won't hurt. So give me everything you got, for old time's sake."

The tone of her voice was decisive and casual like she was ordering a ham on rye, hold the mayo.

"Don't bury me. Burn me. Cover me in sagebrush."

I opened my mouth a few times but nothing came out.

Mo walked over to the rectangle plot and fell to her knees . She placed her palms on the dirt.

"Forgive me, daddy," she said, then she straightened up and bowed her head. Her arms were at her side; her palms were opened and caked in dirt. Her palm prints on the grave were perfect.

It must have been five or six when I started back to find the truck. I had a handful of Mo in my pocket and a heap of thinking to do. After I had walked two or three miles I felt an urge to go back. I can't explain it. My shoes had left no footprints. The basin was so dry, even my hiking boots left no marks. The crinkled surface was unbroken, like puffed rice cakes. Following the smell of smoke more than my compass I began to make my way back.

I had hit her as hard as I could, and had covered her with sagebrush and used my last match from a pack I had gotten at a bar on Melrose to set her on fire. I was mad at Mo. She didn't even say goodbye. I knew she had heard me walk up behind her. "I'll miss you" would have been nice.

I've always read that bodies buried in desert graves are best left unmarked and perhaps undisturbed; along the logic of a tree falling in the forest, if a man is buried in the desert and there are no witnesses is he really dead. Sand likes to keep its secrets. But finding Mo's grave, or funeral pyre to be exact, is turning out to be a bitch. I've been wan-

dering around this sand pit for days. Yesterday I lost my compass. I've got about a day's worth of water left. Today I fantasized I was walking through an ancient city, that mound over there was a fat aristocrat's pad, that mound was the temple where virgins were sacrificed by the hundreds.

In the middle of the night I wake up and realize that I never changed my life insurance: Mo's my beneficiary. Son of a bitch, the tanker is going to go to the state.

An eerie blue surrounds me like one huge bruise. My hands sift a handful of grains. The earth seems as worn out as I am. What am I doing here? I'm going to die in the desert and be eaten by birds with unwashed beaks. I'm going to be pecked to death. I remember reading an article about the Valley of Martyrs in Egypt. No one ever left the desert valley once they were sent there. It was Egypt's answer to overcrowded prisons. They just herded the suckers into this secluded canyon, you know the kind with just one tiny trail leading in and out, and then made the condemned close themselves in with stones. Quick and easy.

The sun rises and I see the silhouette of my father in the distance. I don't even bother to pack up my gear. I just start running for him like one of those Kotex commercials except I'm not feeling confident or wearing white. As I get closer it looks like Dad is standing on a grave-size oasis. He stands in the center of a lawn measuring about three and half by seven feet. I run faster. He is black and white, a breathing duplicate of the photo I carry everywhere I go.

When I get just outside of an arm's length of Dad, Mo with eyes blazing steps out from behind him and stands directly in my path. The earth must be regurgitating their dead one by one or Mo has used my dad as a lure and had reeled me in.

"I loved you, Jen, and you didn't care."

"What?"

"I loved you."

"And I love you, Mo."

"No, I really loved you."

Mo and I are silent for ten minutes more. A kind of "you-heard-me" stare stands at attention in her eyes. Finally I break the quiet.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

I open my arms wide and walk toward Mo. My arms hug air and I lose my balance and fall head first onto the mini-lawn. I fall on something sharp and pain shoots through my body. One of the shovels pierces my heart. The shovels were the fold up kind and so the metal tip was sticking straight up. I had left the shovels because I was too beat to carry them back to the tanker. I never was good at putting things away. My mother always said that my laziness would kill me.

I count to three and throw myself onto my back, suddenly all is back. When I come to, I assess the damage. No question. I lie dying. I try to drum up the courage to pull the shovel from my chest but I can't. So I lie in the morning sun, waiting for death.

The oasis is just my size. It must look like I am lying on a green beach towel from above. Dad and Mo haven't re-appeared but that's as it should be. My Mom told me that every one must face death alone. Serves me right, for saying "I'm sorry" when I didn't mean it. A shovel in my heart; perfect, I know it's her shovel too; I can see the downstroke of an M on the handle. I rock back and forth and burrow into the grass. The blades are cool between my fingers. I can't wait to be shapeless and quivering.

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Stories came to life by folklore, or the oral tradition of storytelling, and are continued here as an exploration of midwest life from fields of newly plowed earth to jagged concrete skylines.

Running through the center of America are the textures and flavors representing the Midwest and captured in tradition are the voices from the heart of America, where a rhythm grows stronger through fiction and artwork.