

NOIR

A LOVE STORY

E RATHKE

BROKEN RIVER BOOKS

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Tom and Jerry were up all night but those aren't really their names. Gomez had this huge party and just about everyone was invited, even Tom and Jerry. Tom and Jerry on account of one being tall and blue and the other being short and brown, blue as in sad and brown as in color, get me? Well, Gomez has this big old shindig and the whole town's ready to show up and I think they all did.

It was to celebrate something, his daughter's nuptials or something. Lots of champagne, anyhow. Big tents that filled the whole meadow, that one north of town where all the kids usually play till they're too old to play but too young to drink, legally, anyway.

Yeah, I spent a lot of time in that meadow growing up. We all did. Everyone does. Nowhere else to go, if you want to know the truth. The town's always had a lot of kids around and that's the way we like it, little buggers running round and everyone kind of raising them together. I guess you could call it a commune in that regard. Everyone's kids are everyone's kids, but, no, our wives are our wives. We're

close, but not that close. Maybe some get by being less selfish, but there's only so much a man can take. Anyhow, we all spent years down there playing tag, cops and robbers, dungeon, you name it. There's this ancient Tree there, older than the town, older than the country. It's about a hundred feet around if it's an inch and it reaches up to the sky and cradles the clouds, the moon, and sometimes even the sun. People here, the old natives that we cast away and tortured in concentration camps, purebreds, they talked about that Tree as if the entire planet depended on it. If it falls or dies, the sky's gonna come crashing down. It's the last of an ancient breed, they say, used to have brothers and sisters in every corner of the globe, but the europeans, as is their way, burned them all down and made them into houses or forts and castles that barely last a millennium. They chopped down eternity just to leave ruins. Waste is all they know, all they've ever known, all they'll likely ever learn. Me, yeah, I got some of both sides, the indigenous and the invader, the purebred and the Puritan. Sometimes, in my drunken revelries, I imagine my great grandparents met that way, she being tortured, him lashing the whip or cranking the crank, and she gives him this look and he realized that he lost, that she won, and that he loves her, will love her till he dies, whether as a traitor or hero, depending on the side he chose.

No one ever told me the story to that tale, but I imagine it was much simpler and less deranged. This place never

had any of that, anyway. It was kept safe from the invasion and natives from all over the country found their way here. A kind of haven for the forgotten age. We're surrounded by forest here but we have that big old meadow with Mother Tree. Everything's made from wood and we ask before we take and we only take what we need from the forest. We exist because of it, not the other way around. It keeps this place alive and has allowed us to remain unchanged for all this time. So, no, never had the kind of torture and all that that I sometimes imagine romantically. That's a joke, you know? Even still, I am the King of the Mestizos.

The party, yeah, I went and it really was something else. Fireworks, drinks, gymnasts, dancers, bright colors and all that. The meadow was transformed from a grave for fireflies into this heaven of life and love and love of life. So many colors, so many faces, some masqueraded, some black tie and others just wandered in from work, from the nightshift because it really did last all night and half the next day. We don't usually have occasion to act that way and many took exception because of it, drinking too much, eating too much, certain indecencies in the corners of the woods, other indecencies beneath the glow of the moon and the boughs of Mother Tree. Such revelry, such excess.

It could've been our anniversary, come to think of it. The anniversary of the Tree. Oh, it's an old thing, old as lunar calendars and tribal tattoos and spirits. She's a holdover from the spirit world is how the story goes. When

the Parents created man, They left the earth behind to live with their Brothers and Sisters on distant stars, but They still watch over us from there because They're our parents in a way and children, even hated children, are forever loved by their parents. Anyhow, They grew these trees as a connection between the land of the Gods and the land of man, so They could help us if we asked. It's a holy place, get me? For centuries upon centuries, people have prayed beneath its shade and sang songs for Her eternal trunk and Her infinite boughs and leaves.

Oh, She was strung up nice and extravagant, too. She glows all by Herself without moon or sun. They say that's the Parents looking over us. It glows brightest on the moonless nights. Anyhow, it was a sight to see.

Where was I? Yeah, Tom and Jerry. They're normal guys, working class farmers and nightshift laborers. Graveyard, actually. They're the ones who saw him, the man from out of town. Well, we all saw him, a lot even shared a drink with him or spent some conversation on him. Hell, I think I had a beer or two with him. I mean in the morning. They saw him the next day.

Don't remember much about his face. Kind of plain and ordinary, very european looking, but in an american kind of way. Square jaw, thick almost blond hair, and gentle eyes. Blue or brown, can't recall. Anyhow, about the only thing I remember about him is that he was always smiling. You don't see that kind of fellow come around here often.

Mostly we get tourists or the lost or archaeologists trying to take samples of Mother Tree. We don't allow that. But this guy, Jim or John or, hell, maybe Ferdinand, no idea, I heard he came that afternoon. Just ambled on out of the mist of the outside world, get me? We're real insular folk. Born here, live here, die here, all beneath Mother Tree because you can travel the whole world and you'll never find a place as perfect as home. We got no crime, no cops, no judges, no government of any real kind. There are people like Gomez, relative newcomers, only a few generations in town, who hold a bit more sway on account of his money. Then there are people like me who know everyone, know everyone's birthday, their family history, and the history of this whole place. I guess, yeah, you could call me a sort of shaman or at least an elder, but I figure I've a lot more turns of leaves to see before I lie beneath Mother Tree. Oh, yeah, we all go there when we're done. She gives us life and when we're ready to go, we give it back. Hasn't been a fertile woman with a child who didn't get the blessing of Mother Tree. That's the kind of place this is. Anyhow, he didn't know anything about here as far as I can tell or as far as my ears have heard. He wasn't lost, though. Everyone agrees on that because the two aren't mutually exclusive. Just because you don't know where you are or where you're going doesn't mean you're lost.

Yeah, I guess he did know where he was going when it comes down to it. Things like that aren't accidents.

And him coming here wasn't random. Live here long enough and you come to realize that existence isn't as random as you once thought. It certainly isn't planned, but there are ways to predict. In a sense, yeah, that's what I do. People, everyone in the town, anyhow, comes to me for advice. King of the Mestizos! Yeah, it's kind of like that. My family's been here since the beginning, since the Parents left and the Mother Tree grew. My position's been passed on from father to son for as long as there have been fathers or sons. A blessing or a curse, our family only ever has one child at a go. All firstborns of firstborns. In most cases, that's a bad sign, bad moojoo, get me? But in the case of my family, it's the way it has to be. Oh, sure, most families have a lot of kids, but, like I sad, we're all children of the Parents, so we all come up together. We're all a family. Real lucky to get a seventh son. Even more lucky if you keep that trend going. We had some of those a long time, or so my grandfather used to tell me. Seventh sons marrying seventh daughters having seventh sons and seventh daughters and so on. The passing of time, the loss of the ancients, and we don't get them anymore. Died out, in a sense. The Blacks are like that, believe it or not. Whole line of seventh sons for as long as time's been recorded and even before then. Wars end those kinds of things and WWI ended the line, the seventh son was killed off on a shore he had never heard of fighting an enemy he didn't hate. Such is the outside world. Anyhow, lines like that don't just happen and I'm

the keeper of all this, of all the lore and secrets of this place. Each of his gets his own kind of knack, get me? My grandfather could talk to wolves, his grandfather spoke with different birds, and his grandfather was a healer. Yeah, skips a generation, so, I got one too. No, too easy for me to just tell. Let's leave it at the fact that I've yet to have a son, but there are more kids in town than there have been for years, even got a few seventh sons and daughters. There's a system if you pay attention. Circles.

This stranger from the real world, he entered our dream and took to it like he was born into it. He was dancing, not singing because he didn't know the words, but he was there with us, all around MotherTree. That night being what it was, it's easy to lose track of everyone, including yourself, and, sorry to say, that's what happened to me.

I did hear, though, that Tom and Jerry saw him come sun up. The revelers were still going strong and many gallons of wine--oh, we have the best wine and you'll never guess how we make it, so I'll tell you a bit about it, see, MotherTree provides all sorts of things, from life to death, but She also knows what it means for humans to celebrate, which is when we're closest to Gods, when the right chemicals balance out and the world's a swirl, because I imagine then that I'm experiencing everything with the clarity of true vision, the vision of our Parents and Their Brothers and Sisters, and it only comes with this kind of drunkenness, the drunkenness from our wine from the fruits

of Mother Tree that we harvest every autumn and ferment until they're ready and we take the juice out and, my God, I could cry just thinking about it--drunk, and Tom says Jerry was barely able to stand, but they both swear that they saw him. See, Tom and Jerry were out trying to find food, not cognizant of the fact that everyone was in the meadow, so they prowled around town looking for any place that would feed them. Near the southernmost end, they saw him emerge from the mist of their fogged sight. They say he looked happy, well slept, and ready to meet the world. Even passed right by him and they exchanged nods and Mornings. Assuming he was heading back to the party, they let him go, thought they'd see him in a few. They did, but it was different then.

They didn't notice at the time but recalled later, or so the whispers inform me, that, yeah, he was walking around in a suit like any normal person would, maybe a bit early owing to the hour and the day and the previous night, but the real extraordinary thing was that his tie wasn't a tie: it was a noose. Here this stranger is just walking around with a noose round his neck and saying Good Morning to people in the street.

We get a lot of types around here, and I would know because I know them all, but that's the first time I've heard something like that.

Anyhow, it'd be ten more hours till anyone realized what had happened to him. There he was, the wind blowing his

hair, the sun shining on his skin, and his feet some thirty feet above the earth, dangling in the wind like a stubborn leaf.

No one knows why or how he got that high and it took us till sunset to get him down.

You never can tell what desperation will make someone do, but you never ever expect something like that. My own sister, casket closed. The details never made it to me, but her face, or what was left of her head, was a real mess as I understand. Annabelle was always odd, allowed to be peculiar all her life by Jim and Alice. She had aspirations, high ones, in the art world, but she got caught up with that man, that man who didn't even shed a tear over her grave, or at least not one that anyone heard or saw. Such indecency. At least have the courage to fake it, the vile pig. He was an artist or musician, but he never made any art or wrote any songs. A real peculiar man, but he carved out a living the way most failed artists do, by toying the line and edging along in cubicles that they spent their youth scoffing, but he was purely working class, so it's no surprise he never rose above.

That poor girl, she must have all of his disease in her, the peculiarity, the bouts of rage, of depression, and now she's got the suicide to factor in, and I wonder whose

fault it was, that man's or our parents who allowed her to dream, to grow whims, and never tried to put her feet down properly, but they nailed mine down, oh boy, did they nail me down, and I'm glad they did, and I owe it to their recognition of past mistakes. Annabelle lived in another world all her life, head past the clouds, breathing smoke behind the house, under the light of the alley and the garage. She was always out there, halfdancing, eyes closed, probably hallucinating, waiting for him or her or whoever was coming to pick her up and drive her past the suburbs, out of these dead cities. She dreamt of New York, of Paris. They all do, the ones who think they're Picasso or whatever. I guess she was good, that's what people said anyway. Lines and scribbles and fits of agony. She'd rip her hair out over them, but they all looked the same to me and she screamed at me once because I threw one away. She left it on my bed for me, a big white sheet of paper with what looked like deer tracks near one of the corners. How was I to know? I crumpled it up and tossed it away. She said I didn't appreciate anything and Jim and Alice agreed that it was a mean thing to do, but, anyway.

That man stood there watching the casket like he watched her life fall apart and never offered a hand to help, only pulled her deeper into a world of shit that he created. I never liked him, even when Anna really loved him. Always an ass, always loud, always crass. They loved him, though, Jim and Alice, especially Jim took to him right away like

he was the real thing with his Morrison affectations, and is there anyone worse to emulate than that fat bastard? He wrote poems on the napkins, on the table, on the walls, and Anna loved him especially for that, I think, his unconventionality.

And I saw that poor girl that day, the day her mother was buried, and she seemed to be unaware. Her hair, usually curled and dark, like my sister's, was cropped and brutalized, like a patient in a mental asylum. All uneven and I cried looking at her, but I couldn't go near because I hadn't seen her since before she could talk, but Anna sent me pictures every year. She did things like that, took a picture of her daughter every six months, a way to record time, to trace the past as it was written. I didn't recognize her at first, my niece, until I saw whose hand she was holding. That man. I wanted to think he did it to her, that in his madness he tried to kill her, one inch of hair at a time, but I guess she did it. That man came home to find his daughter with scissors in hand, hair chopped unevenly and haphazardly, sticking to the blood of his newly suicided wife. The cops said she found her mother and was in the room for at least two hours before that man arrived home. She could read by then, I think, five years old, and there was a note. Can't quite remember what it said, but it didn't point fingers or scream of insanity or delusion. It was short and kind of sweet, but there's nothing sweet about finding your mother without a head.

That poor poor girl. Her dress was robin's egg blue and her shoes were bright red. I was mortified, at a funeral, at her mother's funeral, at the funeral of that man's wife, he couldn't even dress her properly. But that's what those types are like. No decency, not even a sense of it. My kids were afraid of her, the poor girl, and I cried through the whole ceremony, not because it was my sister, and not because I hadn't spoken to her in years, but because I knew we shared the same blood and even more so because of that poor girl. That poor wretched girl and the life she was forced to begin with.

Time eats you. Dead or dreaming.

That's what it said, the note, remembering now, and it still makes no sense to me, and I doubt she ever meant to. She was always like that, saying things, any thing, always sounding slightly philosophical, but meaning always nothing. Phrases that sound clever, empty stultifying phrases, and that's why they're always hard to remember. There's no meaning attached and she'd never explain what she meant, surely because she never meant anything. In worse moments, I think she did it, suicided, for much the same reason. Just to do it, as an act, empty of any meaning, or at least any meaning for her, because all it really means is that she left a beautiful little girl to meet the world without her, a little girl who would have her mother's blood staining her hands even on the day of her funeral. I never saw,

but I was told that her palms were still crimson, that color between dried blood and new blood.

She gives me the creeps, honestly. I almost talked to her, almost picked her up in my arms and wept over her, but, when I got close, she saw me, and her eyes, a pale fire, those eyes, I felt like a sand sculpture, disintegrating under her gaze, like she was made of water. It's like she never saw me, though, but bore through me, and I know she recognized me. It froze my heart and I couldn't breathe, and I grabbed Victoria and Timmy and told them that we had to go, that they could meet their cousin later. They did. Eventually. But I wasn't there and I can't see her.

Years later, her and Victoria became friends, and I was scared again, still picturing my five year old niece and the horror behind her eyes. I watched her from my window one night when Victoria left the house with her. She looked up to my bedroom and I could feel her in there with me, inside me, turning everything cold, to ice. I closed the blinds and rushed to Drew, but I couldn't sleep that night, her spectre everywhere, singing songs of doom in the room, and I knew, I think, for the first time what it meant to know my sister, what life was like for her, and what it meant to see her die, to see her die every single moment of every single day, in the faces of strangers, in the clouds at night, and buried in my retinas.

'Close your eyes. Listen to my hands.'

I looked into her eyes and saw the sky. She held my head, dark red palms over ears, and laid it on the metal track, then laid her own down. She smiled in her orange and blue Sunday dress, though she didn't go to church because she said her daddy didn't believe in angels, said only devils lived in rooms that big.

'Close your eyes,' she whispered.

I don't remember how old we were then, old enough to know whispers mattered, young enough to think it was a game. Her hair had grown back by then, but it was shoepolish black, dyed from probably shoepolish or oil, because things were never done easy. I closed my eyes.

'Do you hear the ocean?'

'I've never heard the ocean.'

'You hear it.'

I could hear her smiling, could feel the gravel on my bare legs, my skirt all bunched up, and my socks and shoes kicked off because she said I had to. It was hot, unseason-

ably so, and I heard the ocean and felt the salty water of sweat on my ears. The metal was hot against my head, but my hair was long enough to cushion.

'The sun's shining and the waves come in, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.' At each whoosh, she cupped her hands in varying degrees of pressure to create the illusion. Her voice was soft and aching, always on the verge of breaking. I think we were in first grade, or I was. She was from out of town and had stubble instead of hair on the first day of school, but never said why, and she did it again in third grade, because normal and easy were too hard. She didn't talk much and she already knew math and how to read. That's how I met her. Reading. It was something she always loved to do and our whole class, or all the girls, read better than the older kids.

'Feel the sand between your toes and walk to the water.'

'Have you ever been to the ocean?'

'We're on an adventure. You need to think hard.' Real pain in her voice, nothing as important as the illusion.

Giving in, I felt it, the sand, even the breeze, and the water seeping through, wetting my feet. It's easy when you're a kid, disappearing inside yourself, and she was a guru, always leading me to the ends of the earth, to places I'd never imagined, into the past, past the future. This was the first time, and, because of it, there's never been a last time, the way she built so much inside me, so many things I still barely understand.

'The earth shakes. The sand gets all pushed around and the waves whoosh harder. It's an earthquake. The sun sleeps and the moon wakes up.'

I was so taken I didn't even notice, thought it was real, that she was shaking the earth with her voice. I was in a dream of her creation, riding the waves of her voice, believing in her, until the whistle pierced through.

'A steamboat,' she said, but the dream was done and my heart panicked. I opened my eyes and she was smiling, looking past me. I ripped her hands from my ears, she protested, I got to my feet, and jumped from the track.

'Scaredy cat!' She sat up watching me with disgust, but the whistle cut through the air once more and I screamed for her to move.

Standing up, casually, the train was hundreds of feet away, but it felt like she was already dead, mangled underneath. Kicking her feet, she stared at it coming, the white plume shooting up like dragon's breath, the long body like a mechanized monster that only she could invent. I called her name, yelled it, screamed, cried, but she never heard me, never even looked away, like a statue waiting for its shadow. Life sped up, milliseconds lasting for the years I knew her, caught up with the memories I didn't yet have, of our first drink, our first kiss, our first nights, but I can barely remember anything real except the panic, but my heart in her hands, deep in my stomach, and conscious

that I would never forget what I was already trying not to remember.

The train screamed at her, begging her to move, pleading with thousands of tons of metal, but the driver never pulled the brakes to conjure sparks like violent shooting stars. Raging towards her, I could take no more, already looking for someone else to blame, for an adult to tell out there a mile from anything, she took a step that I can't remember, and then she was gone and there was only the train that lasted forever and I felt nauseous and my vision faded, and I might have fainted and I know I vomited because I swear, I swear I saw her explode to pieces, ripped apart on the track. In the gravel between pacing and running home and lying down and running away, the train passed and crows cawed because it was dusk too soon, but she appeared back on the track like a phantom, like the dream she gave me was too real to die so soon, because I knew she would last for years with or without me, train or no train, even then, though I never knew till years had come between me and that first day.

I ran. Not sure what I thought happened then, but none of it made sense in the way that life was supposed to be neat and ordered and memories are taught to fall in line, work like the hands of a clock. She was faster and caught up with me, shaking me through my tears, telling me, I'm not a ghost, I'm not a ghost, I'm not a ghost, and me yelling through sobs, You are! you are!

By the time we made it back to her house, it was dark and we were fifteen, drunk, her hair now platinum and one of her eyebrows shaved, wearing a black kimono with white trim that clung to her teenage figure, my life caught in the shadows that she cast, in the dreams she weaved for me, because she had no control of her own, so she gave me a thousand lifetimes to live in that night that lasted through hundreds more of her fights against life and her challenges to Death, with me always the unwilling protagonist in her improvised plays for me that began whenever her eyes touched the sky.

'Milly, I love you,' she said on the train on the last day, 'but this time the beach is real,' and off she went to dream her own dreams, I think, or to dream dreams not meant for me.

Near the end of my meadow days, I remember that party and the shock of seeing my first dead body. I was actually the first to notice him. I heard a thump against the Tree that happened every once and a while. After about an hour of hearing this far away impact, I finally managed to see what it was.

Way up in the Tree, maybe thirty of forty feet, right at the first level of branches, was a man being blown by the wind into Mother Tree. My first reaction was not fear or the thought that he was dead, but How did he get up there? It's the only thing about it that doesn't make sense. How did he get so high up in the Tree? I never even saw anyone try to climb It before. It's kind of taboo, touching the Tree. Only those in grieving, purebreds, and the King can touch It and he only touches It for blessings, usually fertility ones. I asked one of the parents how someone could climb the Tree. She told me that climbing the Tree was forbidden to little girls so I asked how the man got in

the Tree and she said What man and I showed her and she screamed real loud.

Word spread fast and the whole town was crowded around to see this man in the Tree hanging by his neck. Eventually, they figured out that it wasn't anyone from the community, so it had to be an outsider and there was only one outsider hanging around then.

All sorts of stories started to come out. How so and so had seen the stranger here, or so and so had talked to the stranger about this and that only so many hours ago, or how someone had seen him do it by himself. The purebreds and King sorted and sifted through all the stories to figure out what happened, so only they really know the whole story. The party made it difficult because everyone had been so drunk that it was hard to remember who did what and where this or that happened. They formed a committee and interviewed everyone in the town, brothers, sisters, parents, even purebreds. After two days of this, the King announced that the stranger had committed suicide by hanging.

Most of us had never heard of that so he had to explain. 'He killed himself.'

A lot of gasps and confused looks. I remember the buzzing crowd, all the words flying through them with a few phrases getting caught in the air, most of them wondering how and why such an act could occur. See, people here don't understand violence. We're passive and gentle

by nature, docile and hardworking. Murder is unheard of and murdering your own self just about blew everyone's mind. Even still, many of the older adults can't understand. I do, but I think my generation only understands because of how early we learned, and what we learned is something that no one else had really known about.

It hardened our resolve to keep the outside separate and the inside inside. Change is scary, especially when it shifts the fundamental beliefs one has about people. Now there existed a possibility to end your own life for no reason at all. It was pretty horrific.

I don't mind outsiders, though. I think I was just a little too old to believe it all, but the people coming behind me took to it right away. It was quite a story, a stranger coming in, partaking in our festivities, then killing himself in a public place for everyone to see.

His face was blue, his eyes black and red, his body so pale it was the moon. It was gruesome but they showed us and explained to us later the dangers of what can happen outside this town. I still don't buy it, but, I mean, that doesn't mean I'm taking my chances.

I like it here, with my brothers, sisters, and parents. They say that the outside world is so very different from here, different in the way that the sun is different than the moon. We are the sun, and they are the moon. We have the truth, and they have only a reflection of it, distorted by space and time and substance. The purebreds really hate america

and europe and have pushed for the expulsion of all things foreign.

Again, I think I was just past the cutoff date where you take things like that seriously because I never cared. Almost all the parents got behind it, but some people don't like the idea. They're typically radicals, though. Those who are trying to change time and place and take apart the Dream. There's nothing that scares them more, the purebreds.

It was a good thing that it happened, I think. The party brought the community together in a way that it hadn't been for a long time. At least that's how the older folk, especially the purebreds, talk. I felt it, too, this kind of surging energy that made anything possible. And then the next day, after everyone shared existence in this kind of perfect way, where everyone was connected heart to heart, spirit to spirit, and mind to mind, there comes an indirect attack and a direct warning. I think that's why people got so zealous.

Guardians of the bridge, the young children are being brought up alongside this militant ideology. It will keep us safe and keep us pure.

That little girl never had a chance, had a reputation in town before she was even born owing to the nature of who she came from, that asshole Denny and that sorrowful Malone girl, Annabelle. Nothing like Jennifer, her sister, a sweet girl, even with a stick up her ass half the time. Denny, boy, there was a wild one, and not the wild type that're fun to be round or make life interesting in a good way, but the scary kind. The Malones liked him. Jim never had no sense, even when we were boys, but they only ever met the humiliated artist who was endearing because of his ineptitude. They didn't know the drunk, the moodswings, the bitter depressions, the manipulator. I'll give it to him, the way he could sell anything, I mean, shit, he sold the Malones a line that they bought, sold poor Annabelle a deeper sack of shit that she even thought she fell in love with. Poor girl.

Don't know where Denny came from, but that should be good enough indication that he's trouble. A man without a past has no future worth knowing. No one got it

straight from him owing to his ability to talk, but some say he was from Cincinnati, others say Montreal, still others said Arizona. He had a way of talking that made him hard to place and harder to understand, though no one could stop listening to him. They say his daughter got that from him, the golden tongue. Tongue like that's as much curse as it is blessing if Denny's any indication.

Annabelle had a rough time of it most her life. Not because the Malones were bad people, and I still love Jim to this day, never met a kinder soul, truly, but they were too good to her, in a sense. The day she was born might as well have been the first day of Alice and Jim's life the way they lit up every time she opened her eyes, smiled. They had it all recorded in one way or another, journals, video, pictures, you name it, from her first step to her first word all the way to graduation and her first art exhibit. Never were parents prouder of a daughter or more appreciative. It hurt Jenny, though, her defying eccentricity and choosing normality. She thought being the opposite of her sister would make her stand out more, and maybe it did, but most forgot her, even Jim and Alice, to a degree. Because she chose normal, she was never exceptional, and so she never had star treatment, not like Annabelle.

In truth, wasn't only the Malones, but the whole town. Life was small back then and she tore up the streets and gave this town something to talk about. Even her disgraces, the drugs and the drinking, even those were badges of hon-

or to some round here, giving us little folk a big city sense of life, though there were many scandalized. In a sense, she had the whole town behind her. She was our celebrity, our debutante, and all our hopes and aspirations, all the dreams we shelved, all the desires we buried, she lived out and she did it loud, without regret and without faltering from her star's shine.

But then Denny came back with her one year after she wandered off to see the world, to see the bigger and better. If life was different after Annabelle hit stride, it would never be the same once Denny got here.

And those are the folk that poor child came from. I never knew her much, as two generation difference is a lot, especially these days, but I remember the way Jim spoke of her, how she looked just like Annabelle as a baby, the same Irish curls and eyes like Austrian skies. You'd think Annabelle was born once more and he was ready to give her all the world again, hope it worked out better this time, maybe give her a bit more guidance, make sure the strange never hurt her too deep, never hurt her the way only Denny knew how.

I remember her as a little girl at Jim's house one autumn, right when the season broke, leaves coloring like fire, and those cool breezes that make life worth living, make you forget the miserable heat of summer. This girl dressed in a purple tutu with bright red shoes and a navy blue cape, curls springing from her head like a mad scientist, and

her feet were on fire, running all over, dancing, jumping. She'd climb right up into anyone's lap and laugh with a cheshire smile that made anything tolerable. Humming tunes of her making, we thought she wasn't listening, but then she'd pick up a word and she'd be singing shits and damns like they were dee's and do's. Mostly, though, I remember her reading to me, to all of us before she went to sleep. Annabelle told her it was time to sleep and to say goodnight to gran and pa, but, instead, she whispered to her mother, she was always whispering instead of talking, ran out of the room, and came back with Dr Seuss, and announced that she was going to read. Plopping down in the middle of the room, she read from beginning to end with barely a mistake or a rhythm break. Couldn't've been even five yet, maybe a bit over four, and she read that book likely better than I could.

Never were there people so full of life as Annabelle and her daughter, and you could see the pride she felt, simply oozing out of her.

But then tragedy struck and Jim never recovered. Alice died, brokenhearted, surely, but Jim persisted, and I think he only lived for his granddaughter, who he barely got to see. That bastard Denny always disappearing and leaving no trace, no leads. I hired a PI for Jim once and they were in California grifting for the summer only to return back here in time for school. Jim died a few years back.

He wasn't doing well near the end there. Neither am I, though.

I hear things about her occasionally, and she's certainly the ghost of her mother. Every time I hear news, I wonder if that's why Annabelle did it, and I hope it's not true. That poor girl must carry canyons of sorrow. I never will forget her at the funeral, dressed all wrong, but so purely herself, with those eyes that didn't look at you, but at your soul till you withered. Nothing normal about a look like that, and I've only seen it in men who came back from Korea and Vietnam, call it the thousand mile stare, and this girl who once sang and danced right in front of me had the trauma of war already in her baby heart.

I saw her for the last time over a decade ago with a fellow when I was up that way to see my grandkids. About thirteen, maybe older, dressed in a long turquoise skirt with ballet shoes and a tanktop. Took me a minute because she's taller than I pictured, older, too, and her hair wasn't like her mother's, but cut real short, above her ears, like a boy, shorter than the boy she was with. He was goofy looking, awkward at that age with long black hair. I didn't catch her smiling or touching that boy or looking nervous, but she saw me. I know she can't remember as it's been so long, but she watched me for a full minute, eyes wide and, again, not looking at me, but in me. I get the impression that she read my life's story in that minute, my soul lay bare before her. Never in my life have I felt so uncomfortable.

I don't trust that guy and I wouldn't recommend that anyone listen to him. Tom and I saw him, sure, but that doesn't mean me or him knows anything more than anyone else in town. The way I see it, we're all guilty. That's what this is about, isn't it? Blame. Who do you point the finger at because some guy no one here knew, someone who was apparently unknown to everyone in the country, decided to die in our little town.

We're not equipped for this kind of thing is what it is. Gomez let things go too wild, let people act too freely. When you're having a party, you don't let the homeless guy wandering by inside, do you? Course not. Thing is, nobody sees it this way. Joe Nobody wanders in, blends in too well, suspiciously so, I might add, and people think it's okay. But that's the thing, it's not okay. He knew what he was doing, that's for sure. All smiles and cheer with free booze and food and lots of young girls. See, that may not be what brought him here, but it's what kept him here. Like I said, too much freedom and there were a lot

of underagers drunk. That's not so strange around here is another thing. We live by our own way is the thing and we don't need outside influence. So long as we keep to ourselves, no harm happens.

I've never even heard of someone killing themselves before then. It just doesn't happen here. People get sad, sure, and sometimes people do things that they really regret, but life ticks slower here and people mostly act right, treat one another right. It's because of the way the town works. We're all cogs in the machine. We depend on one another and everyone knows who who is and who does this and who does that and where and why and how and what their parents and grandparents back ten steps did. Outsiders come and some of the families have kids who leave to see the real world. Lots of them don't come back and I bet Bob didn't tell you why that is. He thinks he's something special because his family's one of the firstborns. That is, one of the oldest families here, oldest outside of the purebreds now that Saul died. Saul's kids were some that left.

People leave, but they never make it back because there's no way back. You get one chance here is how I think about it. Visitors can stay as long as they want, but they're just visitors till they have kids, no matter how many years they live here. Some like Bob will throw some mystical words at you and blame that big dumb rotting tree north of town, but it's more metaphorical than that. We're not lost, but our town is, and only those who are lost find themselves

here with us. Leaving is an act of identification. Coming is an act of forgetting.

Memory is the thing. We don't have a memory of the outside and the outside doesn't even recognize us.

Bob, King of the Mestizos, likes to lord over people every now and again, telling us to hold ceremony over that tree. He thinks because he still has some indian in him that he's a mystic. Nothing mystical about that asshole except maybe his mouth. He'll sell glasses to the blind and records to the deaf with all the bullshit he piles on. That tree's not even that old in terms of trees. Maybe four or five hundred years, but there are trees that have been here on earth since before we started recording our doings.

Bob loves the legends, though, and I don't blame him for it. Good stories are good stories, but some of the locals feed too much into it and that's what gives him his powers. See, he doesn't contribute, not like the rest of us. I work day and night while he just drops bullshit all over town. He weasels free drinks out of the bars, forages food from the poor old women. The old women, they're a dying breed, and not just because they're dying. The thing is, those broads are the last of the real deal indians. These are their stories that Bob's living on. Yeah, they're all of our stories and they're Bob's too, and we owe something to him for keeping our past alive, but they really belong to those old women, the last of the purebred, which makes them the true firstborns.

I don't know what it means when they go, but it may spell trouble for these seventh sons and daughters that have come up. Or that's how it goes is the thing. Don't get me wrong, Bob's got the legends right, but he's unscrupulous and too gullible. He keeps the tales but he helps embellish them and has no sense of skepticism. The Parents left us that tree, but, assuming that these Parents ever existed, there's no way that's the tree, maybe the great great great great great granddaughter of the original if I'm being exceedingly generous with Bob. But the firstborns, the true sons and daughters of the parents, when they go, things go backwards. Pestilence instead of harvest, death instead of birth, and a seventh son or daughter is cursed. Bob doesn't talk about that because Bob's trying to take credit for the re-emergence of this increased fertility we've been having since he's aged. Like people fucking has to do with some gift he has.

We lose our memory when they go is the real thing. This place ends. According to legend, of course. I don't believe it much, but certain things never leave your mind, and these ancient tales are like that. There's some kind of magic in words that happened thousands of years ago is the thing. As is, we're a monument to the past, to the land that america was before it became a dream, but the dream never entered here is the thing. This place held on strong to the old Dream, to the original Dream, that of the Parents and the firstborns.

I guarantee you no firstborn's ever offed himself. Whether they be purebred or mestizoed like me and Bob, they don't harm themselves. It's not in them, in us. This is a land of peace and tranquility and community. A real and earnest belief in humanity, in the Dream. He's a disease, that suicide. The thing is, the curse, if there is one, may have already started. People are getting sick, especially the youngest, the seventh. Kids get sick all the time, but the thing is that they were healthy before, but maybe I'm being superstitious. Like I said, it's not easy to forget what you've always known.

The fact of the matter is that a strange man came in and spread a disease of violence. That's what suicide is: violence. Sure, it's against yourself, but it's still violence. As long as I've been alive, we haven't had a serious crime, be it theft or assault. Sure, boys will be boys and they might steal some food or candy or come home with a black eye, but nothing like this. Even in our drunkest hours, we keep a level of civility because we respect one another. These people aren't just neighbors or coworkers, they're our family. We're all the same, brothers and sisters. That's how we're brought up and that's how we remain. Sure, we have fights, real serious at times, because you fight with your family more than anyone else, but, at the end of the day, you all still love each other, you all still hope the best for one another. You watch, this place won't be the same once these kids who had to see this are of age. Violence and

rage are a disease, a virus, and once they find a host, they replicate and swarm. I hope I'm wrong, that the legends are wrong, but you worry.

Jerry's hot tempered. We saw that guy. He walked right past us and said 'Good morning' with a short wave. Just like that. Course Jerry don't remember. Not after all that wine. I remember pretty clear. I didn't think much of it. Didn't even think about the fact that he's not from around here because of how he was the night before. He was just like another brother. It felt good and right to have him around so I didn't bother much with it in the morning. What they said was true, that he had a rope around his neck instead of a tie. I can't speak to it already being noosed, but it was there like an omen. Even when you know, you don't know. It was like that. I saw it, registered it, stored it, but I was hungry and pretty drunk. I don't remember how much wine we drank but that fellow drank a lot with us. That's partly what surprised us in the morning and Jerry was howling with laughter, said 'That guy can live!' Seems ironic now. He lived it up with us, woke up early, cleaned and neated hisself up, and then got up in the tree and died.

Mo got him down. He climbs pretty good and is real strong. Has the body and spirit of a purebred but I don't think he is.

The party was for Gomez' daughter. She came of age is all. We don't know how old the tree is so there's no point in giving it a birthday party. That don't make sense. Only Bob says things like that. Says it just about anytime anything good happens. 'It's the day of Anniversary!' He gathers all the little ones round the tree and they sing some of the ancient songs. I don't know what they mean. Even Bob probably doesn't. Not really. He fakes a meaning well, though, and he talks good, so he's never short of ideas. The purebreds mightn't even know anymore. My mother was a purebred but she married a firstborn, one of the mestizos. Me and Bob are actually cousins but he knows more. I'm a firstborn but I don't know a lot, never really did.

Carpenter. I can do anything with wood. Bob says it's because of my mother. Purebreds know nature so they can bend it to their will. I don't know about that. Wood just makes sense to me and I can fix just about anything so long as it's wood.

I think the secret here is that there are no purebreds left. We call those gals purebreds, but we don't know. No one really knows. That's what I think.

That fellow was a good guy. He talked about all sorts of things while he was still able. Told me about europe and

asia and south america. I bet that's where all the purebreds left to. It sounds like a place that they'd like.

His name, no idea, not even sure he told me it. Mostly what I remember about him was the way he talked. We all talk kind of slow and deliberate. Not him. He talked like he was running out of words and the only way to keep them coming was to keep on talking. Maybe he made it all up, but he told me about this lady he knew. Said her hands were always the color of blood and that she could take you far away, make your soul travel, make your spirit yearn, connect your waking life to your dream life, bring you out from the inside by knowing every little bit of your blood and your heart, and that she was the most beautiful woman in all the world with eyes like a meadow after the storm and hair that could stretch everywhere and keep all the stars as residents, or could be so shallow that even an ant couldn't drown, and he talked about her ever changing hide, how the clothes she wore described what was in her heart, because her mouth never could or never would, but she wasn't a mute, not in the physical or psychological sense, but in the manner that she never spoke in words, rather in gestures and flashes of pupils and irises and fingers and hips and a turn of her chin could mean a billion different things, but it was always in clear terms and the language never confused because she spoke the language of spirit and dreams, not the language of mouths, and he told me that she had more secrets than the world has names and

that her real secret, the one deep inside her was that she was already dead, that she died many many years ago under the light of a moonless night, that something precious leapt out of the world one night and she never could get it back no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many tears, no matter how many times she changed, not just her look, but the world around her, and even after being a thousand different people in the same lifetime or showing a thousand different people ten thousand different lives through her spirit touch, even after all that, it still never counted or changed anything, because she never had any dreams, he said, that she never had a dream in her life and that she only slept when she couldn't go any further, that she'd collapse for days and awake like only an instant had gone by because a night without dreams is time travel in your mind, where three days or three minutes or three blinks or three years all become the same thing to you, though the world never slows, no matter how hard you don't or can't dream, but he said that's what gave her the ability, the language of spirits, which is something the purebreds talk about and I thought she might've been from here but I don't remember no girl with bloody hands or blue eyes because all my sisters are dark and just about everyone here is dark except for Stan and Gomez who each had a nordic ancestor, or so they say, but, anyway, there's this legend about a people who didn't dream and didn't eat and didn't sleep, that they could dream for others, that they

entered minds and recreated the world, reorganized reality, that they were the most beautiful of people, and that the europeans called them angels back even before there was such a thing as a jesus or a merciful god, back in the world of gods and demons and men, the world of the purebreds, of the firstborns, of the Parents, so millions and millions of years, probably, and some say that these people are the same as the Parents or that they're brothers and sisters with the Parents, that they were the first to leave, the ones that lived in the stars that the Parents went to go reunite with because They got lonesome the way I get lonesome for my kin, even lonesome for those I don't much like, like Bob, but I need Bob just like we all need Bob because Bob keeps the Dream alive and I think that's what Jerry's always talking about, how this place ain't like other places in america, that this place isn't america's dream, but america is this place's nightmare, because our dream came first, our dream of a community that could last forever, so long as the purebreds were around, the Dream of the Parents and maybe the Parents got the Dream from the Angels, their Sisters and Brothers, who couldn't dream for Themselves so they dreamt for any and everything else, for the trees, for the oceans, for the firstborns and the purebreds, even for the Parents, and if the firstborns and purebreds are still around, it only makes sense that there might be a few people around with a bit of Angel in them, not pure, of course,

but maybe a few drops that somehow lasted through the many centuries of man and his wars.

I liked the idea and it got me thinking more than I've thought in a while. Thinking wears me out, so I avoid it. That's why wood. That's what I always say when people say, 'Tom, why are you a carpenter?' I just say, 'I never thought about it. I just did it.' And that's the way I live my life. I don't like it much when people question things like that. On account of a whole lot of things, but I just don't know what to say most times.

I liked that stranger. Gave me food for thought and didn't hassle me with existential questions. But I don't know how he got up there or what he did before me and Jerry ran into him in town. Might be real trouble to find anyone in town who remembers much about that night. Maybe Gomez. Maybe the purebreds.

I wouldn't believe a thing they say about that stranger that came around here. There's something real rotten about how that poor guy died. Can't get a straight answer out of a single one of them either. Tom acts like a retard which he basically is and Jerry's just Jerry. Those aren't their real names, though, but kind of nicknames that got stuck with them back when they were kids. They're brothers though they don't look it and Bob's their cousin. Tom's real big and pale and always morose looking while Jerry's short and has more of a native tint to his skin and a flatter nose.

I don't trust them or any of the people around here who really cling to those old tales and they all do, no matter what Jerry says or how Tom doesn't have an opinion about anything. Bob has too much pride and his position depends on promulgating those damn stories.

Natives didn't come here till after Europeans had already landed so the thing about this place being in some way more their home, the firstborns and purebreds or

whatever they call themselves now, doesn't hold. The tree's the same way. My family planted that tree not more than two hundred years ago and there used to be a lot more of them. He thought, my however many greats granddads, that would be the industry around here: tree farming. His son didn't care much for trees but he liked to build, built a lot of the houses people live in around here and he cut up those trees but never planted any more. Well, some of the native people, or people with some native in them, took offense to his reckless use of nature and kept him from taking that last tree. Sure, it's grown far beyond what you would expect, but it's not sacred or eternal or whatever.

Bob likes to paint himself as a fundamentalist with real belief in the stories. Maybe he really believes that deep down, but he's a schemer and a scammer like his daddy was and like his daddy's daddy was. That whole mess of firstborns are like that. Jerry takes a more mythic look at it, seeing metaphors rather than facts, but he's just the same as Bob deep down. They use the stories for their own purpose more than they do believe in them. Tom was raised just as much by those stories as all the firstborns but he's too stupid to bother using them for profit or even considering them. A believer through and through, though he doesn't know why. One of those types, the uncurious and unintelligent, led around his whole life by Jerry and, to an extent, Bob, at least enough to believe that Bob's position is justifiable.

Don't get me wrong, I love the stories, mostly because they're ours, even though they're really a mix of other people's stories that we borrowed or stole or changed and rewrote to fit what was here, like that big tree. The stories serve a purpose, especially in a place like this. Keeps the town alive, keeps people from leaving, and gives them a desire to grow old here, to have kids here. It really is something special and wholly unAmerican in terms of life. We don't have a big industry or nuclear family structures. We're a collective in the true sense. What's mine is everyone's and what's everyone's is mine. Things are changing, though, which is fine. Life can't remain forever the same, but there are people here who want this place to exist unchanged until their grandchildren's grandchildren die.

Everyone saw that stranger in town and everyone saw him that morning with Jerry and Tom and Bob. He wasn't all cleaned up or anything like that. All four of them drunk and singing around the town, waking up anyone who didn't stay out all night. Like a bunch of scavengers, rats, they prowled the early hours for food anywhere they could find it. We're a real small kind of place and everyone knows everyone so it's not uncommon to be let in for breakfast if you're up and around. Especially the old Elk lady. By the way, that's how you know these natives aren't indigenous to here but are a mix of all those old nations that were forced to migrate around the country when Americans decided they needed to be eradicated. There are no elk in

this part of the country so why should she be named after such an animal? Old lady Elk, she's one of the firstborns, the purebreds, even, and she lives near the east end of town by the woods with the rest of the purebreds. Not many other people live on that side, a lot of woods and some real nice gardens that are kept the ancient way that's not so ancient or even old. Purebred and firstborn talk. Real rich soil there that they blame on some communion between this world and the spirits, something only they can do, of course. To their credit, it looks great over there and people are really proud to call it our own. Bob, Tom, and Jerry are cousin and nephews to the Elk lady so they thought they'd bring the stranger there to get a real traditional breakfast to fill their wine filled stomachs.

The details get fogged up here and everyone has a different story. The only ones consistent are Bob, Jerry, and Tom and the purebred because they outright deny the whole thing, even so far as to say that Bob wasn't there. But, as I understand it, she lets them in and they stay for about two hours. Let's say from 6am to 8am. In that time they have many conversations but one of them doesn't go well because one of the old ladies hears shouting but she doesn't know when, just knows she was tending the azaleas. See, I've been looking into this whole thing because it doesn't make sense to me. A man doesn't just show up, party all night, and hang himself in the morning. It's rare enough that someone comes here and people rarely die here. Some

say this town is that fountain of youth because these purebreds live forever it seems. Lady Elk is at least one hundred, but no one knows how old they are for certain because it's their way to not keep calendars and they all have the same birthday, which is the first day of the lunar calendar. Yeah, different every time they celebrate, such is the inconstancy of the moon. But this other old purebred, I think it's Wolf but it could be Caribou, and, yeah, they all have names like that, trying too hard. Sometimes I think Bob named them all because that's the kind of thing he does. King of the Mestizos my ass. Boy's barely a drop in him.

Wolf or Caribou hears this shouting and then some pounding and then things go silent for a bit and then more yelling. Like I said, this happened between 6am and 8am, but by 9am they were no longer in Elk's house and by 4pm we have a man no one knows hanged in my family's tree.

Now, I can't prove anything but there's something not right here. Jerry's got a real temper on him. He was always fighting back in the meadow days and even just before he got married. Round here, fighting doesn't happen so often and people generally like one another, the whole big family, everyone is your brother or sister deal. It keeps even the most reckless and selfish of us civil, but Jerry liked to drink a lot and drinkers with short fuses tend to be fighters. People don't talk about those days much because, to his credit, it's been a long while since he's hit the bottle. Not since he got married. A lovely wife, a Magnusson with long

blonde hair and thick hips. We don't get many Scandinaves around here and she was a first generation towner, real young in terms of this place. Like most strangers, she just wandered on in one day, was greeted, and decided to stay. That decision to stay has become rarer and rarer in the last generation or two owing to the nature of this place and its relative isolation. The reason she stayed was Jerry, though. He made her feel more at home than she had ever felt before is how I heard it. Just goes to show how a pretty girl can change everything about a man.

Jerry hates outsiders, always has, but he took a real shine to her hips and hair. This foreign beauty that was so distinct and unique in a place of relative uniformity just took him over and he made his claim before the year was out. It was accepted by her and life changed for Jerry in a real good way for many years. He wasn't drinking, wasn't fighting, was even nice to the random people that lost their way and found our town of the past. All smiles and handshakes, he worked hard and loved harder. Jerry loved that girl in the truest way possible. Despite their differences, despite his natural inclination to rage, and despite his habitual drinking he was, by all accounts, a good husband and would've been a great father to her kids.

She died a few years back. Tuberculosis if you can believe it. Coughing blood and just shrinking to nothing before it was all over. Jerry was there the whole time, every day, and he held her hand when she bled her last drop, and

then he buried her beneath the tree in the same area as his family. Some people were against it like it was sacrilege but Jerry wasn't the type to be stopped because of ritual or ceremony. He did it without anyone knowing by digging at night and planting before day. By the way, I think all those dead bodies is why that tree's grown so large and so weird. It's not normal to do what's done here and I bet there are no other trees in the world that get fed human. And now she's a part of it, in the commune between the children and the parents as the stories go.

She didn't leave him any kids. Some blamed it on him being a firstborn and her being an outsider. Kind of a curse because there's nothing worse here than an infertile woman. Might as well have never been born if you can't have kids. It might have been Jerry's fault. We never talk about that, the fact that men can be just as infertile as women. Kind of comes with the territory of living in the past, in a land of dreams and memories.

The purebreds especially didn't like it, those old women. They wouldn't talk to Jerry the whole time she was alive and that hurt him though he pretends like he doesn't care about the stories. They even went to Bob to have him bless her before the tree. For all his railing against what Bob does, deep down, he's a believer. Desperation does strange things to a man, though, and he was desperate. Children are a sign of acceptance here. Because he's a firstborn he was expected to have kids, especially since all these seventh

sons and daughters started popping up again. It was a way to keep her safe, his wife, to justify her, to sanctify her, really, in the eyes of the purebreds. They used it against her, of course, her inability to procreate. That's the way of it. Curses and blessings and spirits and the parents and their children.

After she died, the purebreds returned to Jerry and consoled him and he became mean. Yeah, he always had a temper, but not like this. He was just downright mean to outsiders, especially when he got drunk. They hardened him against the outside, those old bitches. Choked the love of people out of him and tarnished the memory of his dead wife who he loved more than this town. Memories are all we have here and to lose them is to lose yourself. Jerry was lost, still is. He thinks he's found, that she made him lost, and now his legs are back on track, but nothing could be further from reality. He acts like a soldier and an asshole.

I guess he had a good time with that man, though. His square jaw and dirty blond hair probably reminded Jerry of her. His Scandinavian features that made him so foreign because he was so American looking. Shows that there's still a lot of goodness in Jerry, that he can connect so easily with even a stranger after all this time. Could've been a con because that's what they're like, the firstborns. Seduction and manipulation and all that. I've never trusted them, not really. I think, more than that, it was the purebreds, that lady Elk. Before they arrived there, those four were best of

friends, after they left there, a man ends up dead hanging from a tree that stands as a symbol to these people of their culture and their heritage. Their whole made up world.

Dreams and false memories of a place that didn't exist.

Her palms were always red. Like, always. Somehow she smeared blood all over the bathroom wall and it wouldn't wash off so they painted over it. And the teachers were all looking at us like we all did it, even took all the girls in the grade to a separate rooms during fifth period to interrogate us.

'Who smeared blood on the wall of the bathroom?' Mrs Liebonitz said and we were all like, What the hell are you talking about and some people were laughing because who does that? She tried to talk to us like maybe someone had their period for the first time and just got weirded out but everyone knew it was her and we were all looking at her or trying to get a look at her because it was so obvious especially because she just sat there bobbing her head like a song was playing and looking around everywhere but at Mrs Liebonitz.

She's a freak for sure but her dad must be rich or something because she always had new clothes and they always looked expensive. Crazy dresses like she thought she was a

model or something at one of those runway shows where all those anorexic Romanian bitches dress like peacocks or whatever. Like, one time, it was like this kneelength sleeveless kellygreen dress that clung to her really tight and she was so skinny that it was gross so you could like see her ribs and it had a really bright blue high collar that was kind of frilly. Who wears that to school? She must have gotten up at like five but I hear she never slept or ate like at all.

Shana told me she was a lesbian with Milly and that they did acid and weird stuff all the time by the tracks. Milly was all right but completely and totally in love with her and it was so obvious because like she followed her around all day and they were always together and like I don't know but it was really weird.

Like in study hall one year, the year she left I think, she always wore those big stupid headphones that supposedly blocked out sound and make the music really great but make you look like an idiot and she never took them off for like the whole semester. Everywhere you saw her she was wearing those stupid things and she wouldn't talk to anyone. Not even Milly but Milly was always next to her and sometimes Milly'd fall asleep on her shoulder but she wouldn't even look at Milly. That was when she was giving herself tattoos.

I don't know much about it but Aaron had a class with her and he said that one day she just picked up her pen--one of those really inky ones used for fancy letter-

ing--and just poked it into her skin at the wrist. Like drew blood and shoved the ink in there. He had a lot of classes with her that semester and he said she did it through algebra, social studies, lunch, and choir. All day jabbing that pen inside her like that's normal or okay and none of the teachers noticed I guess but he was so grossed out but like couldn't look away because who could believe that she would do that? He said he never got a good look at it but someone told me it said *The Sky's Gone Dim* and it wraps around the inside of her wrist. Later in the year on the other wrist I guess she wrote *The Moon's Gone Black*. It's like the most depressing thing I've ever heard and I bet it looks like shit.

She's really pretty, or was, and her dresses were sometimes really awesome but she always ruined her hair. It was always stupid. Like sometimes she would shave the side but leave it really long on top with like super long bangs that she pulled to the side or she dyed it pitchblack on top and platinum blonde underneath. She was super into white and black I think because she had tons of dresses like that. Like a black top, black skirt, but there was white patterns that look like lightning all over the back or a blizzard or just a chaotic mess of white that looks vaguely like a face or an animal or something.

I don't know much about her and I don't think anyone really does except the weird things like her clothes and her hair and the tattoos and I heard she tried to hang herself

in middle school during gym class and that she cut herself and tried to drown herself in the river past the traintracks but that could've been bullshit. I don't know. It's impossible to tell with someone like her. All she did was read and listen to music and ignore everyone like we never mattered and she wore all those dresses and even heels but like who wears heels to class? People said she dated college guys back then and that she was a slut but I don't know about that. I still think she was a lesbian.

The thing that needs to be understood about this place is that it does not exist. This place is not like other places in that it is affected by neither time nor space. The seasons change the same regardless of the world around it. People come and go and lives are lived in a way that makes clocks and calendars different here than outside. A year may last only a moment or it may last for generations. I have been here for my entire life and my whole life has lasted longer or shorter than you can imagine.

This town is the last beacon to the Parents. It is the umbilical cord of existence and that is why it is guarded so. If the connection breaks it is not only our town that ceases to exist but the very universe that ceases. Without the Mother Tree the land of the Parents and the Siblings will crash down upon the land of the children and every thing will stop.

No movement, no time, no escape.

MotherTree is older than all of us, but not as old as our race, but infinitely younger than the Parents and the Siblings. The Parents blessed us with the womb of existence and we continue on as we have because of the cord that breathes life into this plane. In the end of our lives, we can be reunited with the Parents and meet the Siblings for the first time but only because of MotherTree. That is why we bury the deceased beneath her branches. The spirit of the dead is pulled through the soul by the roots and gradually we make our journey into the tree. Every single bit of us until there is nothing but dirt where we once lay is pulled up through the roots and into the trunk and then to the branches that hold up the sky. There we will touch the Parents once more and they succor us. As leaves, we drop once more to our descendants and friends below until we are once again brought through the tree to the land of the Parents. In this cycle we remain until the end of the world when we become free of the bondage of temporality and become pure spirit. There we finally live with the Parents again.

Oh, the Siblings are an old tale told to us by the Parents. We have never known Them but if we listen close we can hear Their whispers in the wind and the trees and the beating of hearts. The Siblings and the Parents are the Originals. Before Them there was nothing but the Dream and after Them there will not even be that. Little is known about the Siblings because the Parents share only bits of

existence with us, but They are the ones that gave shape to existence. When there was only the Parents and the Siblings, nothing existed. All was vacant. All was colorless and lightless but the Dream existed. The Dream is a mystery but we hold it to be a key to existence and all that came from all that was not. The Siblings saw the Dream but could not reach It or understand It but They knew It was beautiful. The Siblings chose to share the Dream with the Parents who were blind to It though It was right before Them. The Siblings pointed towards It and tried to explain the vision but the Parents had only the colorless, the lightless, the void. But the Siblings discovered within the Dream the secret of language. Not of language the way we understand it but of pure Language: the language of the spirit. First, the Siblings danced and Their dance created color. Then the Siblings sang and Their song created light and dark. The final part was when the Siblings took hold of the heads of the Parents and breathed the Dream into Their very spirit. In this way the Parents saw the Dream. The difference between the Parents and the Siblings is pivotal and one is that the Siblings can see the Dream and recreate the Dream but They cannot understand it. They only know that It is beautiful, that It is perfect and so They are drawn to It. The Parents cannot see the Dream but They understand It. And so the Dream came to the Parents and shape, form, everything came: existence existed. The Dream became reality. In that moment, however, the

Dream disappeared from view. The Siblings spend eternity chasing the Dream and so they live in the furthest corners of reality because They believe It to be somewhere past existence, somewhere past comprehension and understanding, into a place that even the Parents cannot know or reach. And so They search and They will continue to do so until They find It again. At that moment, the Dream that is our reality will cease to exist and the universe will return to its original state, that of lightlessness and colorlessness and void. There will only be the Siblings, the Parents, and the children and that will be enough. That is our dream and that is why we exist here as we have since the Parents created us.

The Dream is not a lie for the Dream is all there is. When the Siblings find the Dream, the Dream of existence, which is the Dream of the Parents as given by the Siblings, the Dream will end and so shall the world of the children and so we shall migrate to the void with our Parents and Their Siblings.

Outsiders are a threat to the connection between worlds and that bond must never be severed by the hands of a child so we keep it safe for as long as eternity lasts.

I did not meet the stranger.

It was October but it was still nice out so me and Billy decided to walk home instead of take the bus because the bus is a pain in the ass and the older kids are dicks. We should've had our bikes but you always think of that afterward. The leaves were changing and that's my favorite time of year, right in the middle of autumn when it's not too hot and it's not too cold because summer sucks and winter's even worse.

'My dad has some beer in the basement.'

'Have you ever had beer?'

'No, you?'

'Yeah,' I lied. Not sure why, it just kind of came out that way. Kind of a thing about being thirteen, always trying to outdo everyone in the world, especially when it comes to things you're not supposed to do, like, one time, me and Scott took some Grand Marnier from his dad's liquor cabinet. We thought we were gonna drink it and maybe hustle up some cigarettes somehow. Scott asks me if I've ever drank and I lied like I did this time, and he tells me

that he likes his on the rocks like that's going to impress me, which it probably did, but not in a real way, more in a way where it made me want to do it too, just so that he couldn't lord it over me. You don't think about it at the time because you don't know better, but nobody drinks Grand Marnier on the rocks, and it was obvious from our faces that we hated it, but no one wants to be the guy to slow down.

Billy says, 'I bet we could steal some without him noticing.'

'Yeah?'

He picks up a stick, waves it around, and nods, 'He never keeps track of how much he has and my mom usually buys it anyway.'

We get to his house and no one's home.

'Come on,' Billy leads down to the basement, which looks like a great place for a thirtysomething businessman. Pooltable, bar, big TV, and classic stars on the wall. Billy looks nervous and it makes me nervous but we make our way into the bar constantly looking around because when you're a kid and you know you're stealing and you know getting caught is the worst thing that can happen, you're always on edge until the deed is done.

'What kind do you want?'

'Uh,' there are all kinds in the refrigerator and it's stocked full. 'I don't know.'

We look at each other and laugh because we know we're caught in a lie but the laughter makes it all right because we're in it together now and he knows I'm just as inexperienced as he is, so the laughter ties us together in the lie that's known but never acknowledged but that we're now ready to make into a truth. Drinking bonds people. We grab a few beers, no more than six, stuff them in our backpacks and head for the woods.

'What do you think of Milly?'

Billy always had a thing for Milly, ever since fourth grade when they kissed. Those schoolyard kisses that mean nothing but everything. 'She's cute. Weird, her and that girl.'

'What's her name?'

'I don't know. She's hot.' We were halfway through our first beer and our lips were already loosed, walking through the woods, the sunlight trickling through the reds and oranges and greens of the leaves. It was beautiful and sometimes I wish it was always that time. Not just that time of year, but that time of life, when you're too young to know the troubles of the world and too old not to think about girls, and you fall in love at nothing more than a flash of the eyes or a glimpse of black panties through white jeans.

'Yeah. She might be crazy.'

'I don't believe all that. She's the only girl with any spirit at school. You know how I know? Because she doesn't talk to any of us! She knows what we're like. She sees us.'

You think she doesn't, that she just sits there listening to her music and drawing in her notebooks, but she knows what we're like. And we're not so great, all these people in our school. The guys are all assholes and the girls are all bitches. That's why we think her and Milly are weird, because they're not like that, and they stay away from everybody. If we were smarter, we would too, probably.' I threw the bottle and it exploded satisfyingly on a tree as punctuation. Billy threw his but it missed by at least ten feet and we were on the ground laughing. Laughing at nothing in particular but laughing for all we were worth, not yet aware that this wouldn't last, that we'd grow up and care about so much, that we'd meet heartbreak after heartbreak and feel more heartache than any amount of beer can console. But, then, for that day, man, we were kings and we didn't give a damn.

We got back to our feet and brushed ourselves off when Billy looks at me, 'Do you think they're lesbians?'

I laughed myself back to the ground with that and by the time I recovered we were drinking another beer.

I found a rusty hatchet and we took turns cutting down branches and chopping at already fallen logs to make a fire.

'We'll have to get more beer if we're gonna be out here all night.'

'You're right,' I swung and missed a branch, losing balance and falling over the wood.

'Your face was priceless!' Billy's holding his stomach with laughter and I'm thinking we may not need anymore beer. The humor takes me once more and the red sky and the leaves and the orange sun swirl together like paintings I never dreamt of.

'I've got a flask,' I say when we've cut wood for about an hour and are ready to light it.

'Here?'

'No, but we need to get something to start the fire with.'

'Right.'

We sit there and finish our last beer with the sun going down. 'Should we go to your house?'

'I thought we were getting your flask.'

'Yeah. No one should be home.'

We sat for a while longer and talked about Kevin who says he had sex with a girl from a different school, which we knew, even then, was a sure sign of a lie, because we all lie to each other about everything that doesn't matter, especially when we think it does. We decide Kevin's probably queer and stumble our way through the woods.

It's dark and finding our way is slow and we're drunker than we imagined we'd be, and we end up by the train tracks that I always thought were deserted, but Billy swore he'd seen trains go by as recently as the start of school. Seemed reasonable at the time, but Billy had no reason to be by the train tracks, so I wonder why he knew, assuming he told the truth, because we may have told a lot of lies, but

they were usually to prove something, not just to lie. Lying for the sake of lying is what liars do, and we weren't liars.

'Wanna smoke a cigarette?'

Billy looks surprised in the moonlight. 'You have some?'

'Yeah. I took them from my dad a few days ago and forgot till just now.'

'Have you smoked before?'

'No, but I got the urge now.'

'But we don't have a lighter.'

'Shit! We'll smoke on the way back. It would've been cool to smoke on the train track.'

'Yeah.'

We heard a noise like a rock being thrown into the water. It made us nervous, being out in the woods drunk at night. I didn't want to go because train tracks signal potential bad news to me, but Billy was always like that, investigating. We crept over the tracks and make our way to the river.

It's not a deep river, but it's wide, and we knew you could drown in there if you got sucked in. I think that's what made Billy need to see. He knew he couldn't live with himself if someone we knew drowned that night and we just walked away. In the water, we see someone but it's too dark. We can tell it's a girl because a boy, especially a drunk one, knows these kinds of things. Watching her for a while, I felt like a thief, more so than for stealing the cigarettes or the beer, because this was private, whatever it was that we were seeing. She swam back to shore, climbed out of

the river, stood completely still with her head to the moon. Clouds wisped by, making the moonlight haze, and she was only a silhouette, but we knew she was naked, because a boy, especially two drunk boys, can feel that immediately. She walked over to a tree and climbed it, climbed it like nothing could be more natural, primitively, and expertly. Then, she dove headlong in and Billy screamed because it's not deep enough to do that. Everyone knew that.

Before I can even think, Billy's already taking off his hoodie and his jeans and his shoes, racing towards the river. I don't see her come back up and I don't see Billy go in because it all happened too quickly. I remember her naked on the shore and Billy shivering and I think I was crying and considering leaving her there, pacing back and forth, panicking, and cussing, because I couldn't think of anything else to do, but Billy wouldn't leave. Turns out she wasn't hurt, but we didn't know till Billy thought he should give her mouth to mouth. Without even speaking, she covered his mouth with her hand. They stayed there like that forever, his face a foot from her, her palm on his lips, and me staring from the bushes like a pervert. She sat up, didn't say anything, only picked up her clothes. Billy tried to wrap her up in her coat, but she took it from him, not bothering to cover up, and she left in the direction of the train tracks. I didn't see her face, but I knew she was bleeding.

I couldn't move and I couldn't think. Billy was standing, staring off in the direction she left. A shadow, featureless beneath the moon, Billy didn't say anything and neither did I because there was nothing to say.

Eventually, we left, but we didn't go back to the woods to make our fire or even get a lighter to smoke our cigarettes. We went back to Billy's and sat in the front yard. His parents were having a party which explained the fridge of beer, so we didn't go in, which was fine with me. A crowd was the last thing I needed, especially one of adults.

We didn't say much the rest of the night and I only really remember pulling out clumps of grass from his lawn which he got yelled at for the next day and Billy kept looking up into the sky, into the stars, but I never asked him what was up there. He probably wouldn't have known.

'Who was it?'

'Milly's crazy friend. The pretty one.'

'No shit.'

'Yeah.'

'What did she look like?'

Billy gave me a hard look.

'Her face, I mean, when she covered your mouth. She say anything?'

He waited a second and sighed, not a sigh of relief or exasperation, but of an existential crises that only the stars could answer. 'No, she looked past me like I wasn't there.'

'What did she look like?'

'Like she wanted the sun to stop.'

It certainly came as quite a shock, first that she was dead, second that it was of tuberculosis, and third that she was already buried, casketless beneath a giant tree. This is not a normal letter to receive.

My sister disappeared about a decade before that, pretty much straight away after high school. I think everyone has that travel bug when they're eighteen. You've been so long in the same place that you're ready to see anywhere so long as it isn't here. A chance to escape a lot of things, including your mom and dad, but, most importantly, your past. She didn't have a hard life and her past was pretty ordinary as far as I could tell. She was five years younger than me so I knew her but only in the way that every older brother knows his little sister. You meet some of her friends, maybe a boyfriend, you smile, nod, and you go back to college. That was her high school life for me and, I mean, those are the definitive years, so if you miss that you kind of missed a lot. Five years is a long time when you're young, in college,

in high school. Even still, five years constitutes more than an eighth of my life. That's a long time. 12.5% of a lifetime.

I was done with college by then, kind of doing whatever, but I was back around the house and we talked about her plan after high school.

'I want to see everything,' her eyes lighting up like the world was worth seeing and that she'd see it. I asked her if she wanted to go to college but she didn't care. 'I've worked all this time so I could have money to do that, see the world, not so I could meet a bunch of strangers in a dormitory. I have my whole life to learn but only my life to travel.' She said things like that, redefined a word right after using it. Life in that sentence doesn't mean the same thing both times but it doesn't necessarily mean something different. It's like thinking about two places in time. They both exist and they're clearly not the same moment in time but it can be agreed that they both are a time and it can further be agreed that these two times are existing now in my head as memories or as facts. Both exist and both are the same unit and both are happening now despite the fact that they happened maybe hundreds of years or five minutes apart.

I knew she wanted to and knew that she kind of had to go. We all choose our lives and that's the one she chose. Mom was terrified of the prospect, her young blonde bombshell trekking out to see the world alone. In the end, that's why she left secretly, got a friend to give her a ride to the train and disappeared into that good night.

It's something that people always talk about doing but never do. I've known tons of people who planned to move abroad, save up money and travel Europe or the US, go work on an organic farm halfway round the world, only to keep doing what they did before and act as if they hadn't told you all the plan of escaping America. That desire to escape is a fundamental American young adult affectation. A country built by immigrants and because of immigrants that has this kind of love/hate relationship with itself. It's always in to be a self-loathing American, to think of how great life would be if you were in the old world. A real Hemingway kind of thing. One of the quintessential American authors who didn't even live in America when he wrote his best work. There's something about America that makes us think it's somehow fundamentally flawed and that the rest of the world has everything figured out already. I guess that's part of being an eighteen to twenty five year old. Nothing is satisfactory and the only way to fix it is to leave. We think our country's somehow more broken than the rest of the world, and maybe it is, but we're certainly not equipped to decide that when we've never even left our hometown. It's something I felt very strongly, but I just never found the time, even in college, when I had all the paperwork done to study abroad, I ended up staying where I was. I figured there was always time to see Europe. Haven't been yet, fifteen years later, but there's still time.

She did it, though. Picked up and left without a word and I watched from my window when she entered that car. No boyfriend so I knew she didn't leave to do something banal like that. Even if she did, that would be a little too Bonnie and Clyde for her. She wasn't one of those people who thought they were an artist or wanted to be an original or anything like that. A normal life is what she wanted but she wanted to have that life on her terms. A normal person in Hungary, in China, in Venezuela is what she wanted to be. Get up, go, live, and be. That's how she was: simple.

After a few days the parents freaked out and called the cops and all sorts of things. No credit card or anything like that so she was hard to track down. Turns out, she pulled all her money, closed her account, and then hit the road. Clever. That's another reason I knew she was all right even though she was most definitely lost, both in terms of location and in terms of identity. Eighteen's a wild time in life and we all make it up as we go, who we are, what we are, why we are. There are no answers but there is this gradual realization that comes after many years of practice because life's like that, practicing who we want to be in order to one day be him or her. We never get it perfect but most of us get it close enough to the way we want it.

My parents stopped searching when they got her first letter. She said that she was found, that she loved where she was, that she might be in love, that she had a job, a place

to stay, that she was doing exactly what she had always wanted to do, was becoming exactly who she wanted to be. A great feeling for me and for her. Me because I knew my baby sister was alive. Her because I remember that day when I woke up and realized who I was. It's like recognizing yourself in the mirror for the first time or being born. I imagine it only happens once to everyone, some when they're as young as twelve, others when they're as old as their deathbed. What a terrible feeling that would be, to not know who you were till you died. But maybe we all delude ourselves before then and death is the only thing that lets us really see the person we have been and the person that we are. I bet that's right. It's not about hoping that you like who you end up being but making sure that you live well because a life lived well leaves no room for regret. That's what I think.

There was no return address on the letters that came every month so she really could have been anywhere. A shock to discover now that she was only one thousand miles away when she died and that she had been there for years, for a third of her life almost. She told us about Jerry and how that wasn't his real name and the story behind it.

In her letters, the town sounded like a fairy tale. All this humanity, this love of the earth and its people and its plants and its ecosystem rushed from the page and sort of got caught in my head for days after I'd read her letters. There was a kind of mysticism there and this tranquil

beauty that made me feel like she was making it up or that she lived in a different time. People depending on one another, people being so closely tied, not only with their family, but with everyone in the community. Beautiful and almost surreal. This place with no crime and no regret, with an ageless past and a cyclical future. There were so many stories. I saved all the letters and they came regularly, about once a month, sometimes less. She was a diligent chronicler of that place and all their myths. I forget it now as it's been a long time but those are some really powerful words, their collection of stories and traditions, the firstborns and the purebreds, the Parents and the children. She really connected to that place, you could tell. I imagine it was a feeling she had her whole life and that's what really made her go. This place wasn't right for her but she didn't know why so she picked up and searched until she found what she was looking for. I bet she knew right away, all in one breath.

It wasn't all good stuff. There was some difficulty with her and her husband's position. He was one of the firstborns which made him a central figure and an important one while she was an outsider which usually takes some time for acceptance and it's real uncommon for an outsider to jump right in with the top tier of the society. And then she couldn't have kids. You could tell it broke her heart, not only because of being barren, but also because of how

it made her husband feel. Firstborns are expected to have kids and here she was sort of keeping him from it.

He never faltered, though, and I still want to thank him for that. He stayed true to her no matter what people said and he respected and loved her. There was never any indication of underhandedness or regret in her letters coming from him. He was always supportive, even when she thought she should leave to make it easier for him, but he wouldn't have it. She wrote down the conversation for me verbatim, but I forget the exact words, only the gist, which is that he loved her more than the moons and the stars, more than his ancestors or his siblings, that she was all the family he needed and wanted, and that he would love her forever, even after they both died and met again in the land of the Parents. It made me cry reading it and I'm sort of close now here thinking about it.

She was lucky to find such a man, to find such love. It's something I've never found. Love. Love is hard and it's not enough that you're perfect for each other because that can only ever be the first step. Even perfect love doesn't last and sometimes there's no reason for why that is. Even if there was a reason, it usually doesn't matter. What matters is the love and what kills is the devastation that follows. Love can kill you, love can make you kill, but love can save, and it can make a thousand tragedies for a lifetime be worth it, even if it's only a single moment of true and perfect love.

All things must end. Even love.

The last letter sent came from her husband. She hadn't sent for a few months and he explained why. It took him thirty pages, front and back, but he told us everything. I wept through the whole thing, such was the way he loved my sister. If there was ever a saint that I have known, it would be that man. There aren't enough words in any spoken language that can show my gratitude towards him and the way he made my sister feel love. It's why I didn't mind not being allowed to see her body, but if he had given an address I would've been there the next day.

I have it now and mom wants to see the place and person her daughter fell in love with before she dies, so I'm going to take her soon, but dad's sick and not long for the world, so we'll wait. There's always time to travel.

I dream about her every night.

She's walking away from me down a long hallway that's all shadows and very gothic. Steeple peaked with a red carpet, candlelit, gargoyles, the whole thing. She wears a dress but not the kind she really wears. It's long, flowing, white, almost translucent but not like that. It's not sexual, no nudity, there is only her walking, or, I mean, floating.

She's an angel is the thing. I think she is is what I mean. Long burgundy hair that falls in curls and pale skin almost like the dress and the skin are the same, the boundaries between mist and rain kind of thing. Everything's softlit and kind of blurry like the camera lens is fogged up or maybe wet like every thing is underwater but she's dry and the candles still flicker. Shadows come from everywhere, from no sense at all, and the gargoyles have faces of malice that cackle and snap their sharktoothed jaws but never at her. But there is no me in the dream. It's disembodied and the dream is not about me. No agency or action, a slow pan down a hallway that sometimes lasts for centuries and oth-

er times barely long enough for a flame to flicker to dance a shadow. What I mean is that the dream has nothing to do with me except that it is my dream. I think. That gets into a whole other realm of thought once you take that route. I think about it sometimes, the fact that the dream may not be mine but hers. That it is about her even though I'm the one dreaming. I mean, if it wasn't my dream, I wouldn't be the one having it, yeah? Dreams weren't like this before, though. I can't really say what my dreams used to be like or if I even did dream but I know, I mean really know for a fact, that they were not like this. I did things, was in them. Sometimes I could even see myself. I wasn't always me, mind, but who I was was always me.

But, yeah, she's kind of walkfloating down the hallway. The faces calm and look tranquil even. Sometimes the shot pans over to them at close up but once she passes they come alive. Angry and vicious. The lights, too, they kind of bend towards her like the tide and she is the moon.

It's so real that when I wake up I'm lost. I can't smell or taste or feel in the dream, not the way you taste smell and feel in real life. I don't exist in the dream, yeah? So when I wake up I forget who and why and where I am. It's a minute, maybe not even, just a flash, a millisecond, but you understand a lot in that moment that barely lasts. Kind of puts things in perspective. To not exist. To disappear. Slowly, your body comes back to you or it comes back in a gasp that brings you out of bed and into the real

world where she's a face that you see on the subway, only someone you'll end up in the same park as or in the same restaurant.

That's the thing, the real thing about it. She doesn't exist. Not in the proper sense. Not in the way that friends or family or coworkers exist. No background, no memories shared, no words between us, not even the sound of her voice. Only little things. But I never thought I'd be that guy, this guy. Not that I'm a stalker or weird like that but I can't stop thinking about her and I can't stop dreaming about her and I go to work so I can maybe cross her path and catch her scent. I don't know how to explain it, the way she smells. Like she's on fire with expensive soil or something. Not like flowers either but like an open field at dusk, something abstract, beyond words, but instantly recognizable. Twilight, yeah.

I imagine her skin is warm. Warmer than anyone else's. Warm like the sinking sun. Like red skies and high grass fields full of fireflies.

I'm not weird, I mean, but it's weird with her is the thing. This isn't normal, I know and agree. But you can't help yourself and I bet this is what addicts say. Worse things to be addicted to, yeah? Maybe not.

I was on the subway back home to work. Normal stuff. People crammed in and waiting for their stop. It's a weird thing, subways, or, not subways, but the way people react to subways. no one speaks and everyone tries to not look at

one another. There's something about looking right into the eyes of a stranger or being caught by a stranger that you're staring at. Something embarrassing about looking at someone when they don't know, like you're stealing something private that's not meant for anyone, not even really for close friends or family. It's intimate, yeah? The way you act when you're alone even if you're alone in a crowd. It's the aloneness that gets it, I guess. You know people are around but you also know that no one should be looking at you because being alone is a personal matter and not for the eyes of strangers. So, yeah, it's embarrassing when you get caught catching glimpses of people's faces, their legs, their ass, their chest. Your eyes do this by themselves, willfully will-less, they wander and then in the blink of an eye the stranger feels your gaze crawling over them so they look up and you're caught and there's nothing to do but look away so you do. I don't get it, really. Why it's so private or why seeing something private is so embarrassing for the onlooker. When it happens to you, when you catch a stranger looking at you, you don't get embarrassed. Maybe girls do. Not embarrassed, maybe, but creeped out. Everyone's a pervert. Maybe.

But, yeah, it was a normal ride home which meant it was the usual awkwardness of being so close to strangers, having your body accidentally jostled or bumped or rubbed by faceless hands and elbows and feet. I don't even know when she got on and maybe she was on before me but the

car kind of cleared a bit and in my eyes wandering gaze I saw this chin, this perfect chin like a porcelain doll. Not too pointy and not too rounded. Soft and pale with a full lower lip, the kind of lip that can make you want to kiss. That was it, just the chin visible. I knew I couldn't be seen so I watched it. Watched it mumble or sing or something. Maybe she was on the phone or talking to someone on the train. Hard to say when all you have is the chin and lower lip. After a while, after a few turns and a few bodies in motion, there she was. In full. Big eyes, almost cartoonish, really, but not in a bad way. It was the way that makes you want to cross the bar and buy her a drink, the way where you can't look away. Blue. That's mostly what I remember about that first sighting. Everything was blue. Her bag was blue, her dress was this tight blue thing with ruffles or whatever you call them at the breasts and hips--made it seem more modest because it really clung to her--and her eyes were so blue. Kind of a pale blue like when the sky clears after a storm. That kind of blue. Pale and saturated.

She looked sad or bored, like she was waiting for something to end.

That's the one thing I always think about when I see her, that she's waiting. Can't really explain that, not even what I mean by it, but you get the impression that once whatever it is ends she'll be different and she'll look not like she's waiting but like she's ready. Opulent. Herself kind of bursting through rather than on hold somewhere deep

in the blue of her eyes. It's like that, her eyes, like you're looking deep into the past, an ocean of memories.

Real skinny, too. It gave her that hourglass look but only just because her hips were sharper than they were round and her neck barely existed. Arms and legs like pencils, but the shape isn't unappealing. There's a curve there and she's so light she can walk on water. Maybe. She didn't catch me looking for a while and I watched as long as I could. Or, I mean, it wasn't a conscious effort. Not like I thought to myself, I better keep staring at this lady. But I couldn't look away is the thing. Movement and I looked away and she was walking right at me. Jesus, my heart was beating too loud and I almost yelled something to her. No idea why but in the moment I felt I had to let something out so I probably looked insane when she walked by me.

And this is the important part because I think without it she would have only been that beautiful woman I saw one day on the subway rather than this dreamt up ingenue. She looked at me when she passed. Eye to eye. Not embarrassed, not ashamed. She looked me in the eyes and I almost said, I love you. I don't know what to say about it, really, but I felt like she knew me or, in that moment, that seemingly insignificant instant, that second where she was midstep and turned to meet my gaze when she crossed in front of me, she understood everything about who I was, all thirty six years I've walked the earth, all the disappointments, all the ecstasies. Everything. And she smiled.

Sometimes I think it's because she smiled. Like we shared a secret, maybe.

Ever since then, she's been here with me. I don't see her every day, sometimes not even as often as once every third month but I make sure to always ride the same lines because I don't want to miss her. Every time I see her, it's a new dress. All colors, any color, sometimes vibrant, sometimes more earthy and grey. Lately, the pattern's been getting chaotic and I think that she's making them out of her old dresses because I remember bits of patterns that don't match but that I've seen before. A circle becoming a square, the head of a dragon with a body of stars, colors that don't go together and lines that don't make sense. It's like walking art, always shifting, always experimenting.

But in my dream she's always the same. Floating, ephemeral, a goddess. When she reaches the end of the hallway, which doesn't happen every night, but when we get there, she turns and looks at me and smiles.

Definitely a weird place. My brother Carol's the one who told me about it.

'Where were you all that time?' I said to him.

'Oh, Rich, the prettiest little town I've ever seen. It's off in the middle of nowhere, didn't even see it till I was walking through it. It was like walking into a dream world or one of those historical places where people pretend it's the 1700s except people are normal, but they live real old fashioned like.'

'Where's this place?'

'Brother, I couldn't even tell you if I tried. Been trying to get back there since I left.'

'Why'd you leave?'

'Man, it was kind of on accident. Ended much as it began, you know. I was just walking through the woods near town and I never found my way back.'

'And now you're back in civilization.'

'And now I'm back in civilization,' he sighed heavy there so as to punctuate the sentiment.

It struck me as strange, not being able to get to a place you wanted to go. I've been all over. People act like it's hard but it's not. All you have to do is to want it and you can have it. I've been to five continents, lived in three of them for four years a piece. I know first hand that a person can go anywhere they want. The problem is that people only like the idea of going. Really, they never want things to change and are afraid of change. What you realize when you start to change settings isn't that everything is different, but how similar everything is. People are people no matter if they're from Ukraine, Vietnam, or Bolivia. Places, sure, those are different but only in the way they look and the way they feel. At heart, anywhere can be your home if you open yourself to it. And home is what matters.

I've made a life of not being in the same place, of seeing as many places as I've had the opportunity. I jump at any chance to go anywhere, especially if I've heard good things or interesting things.

After talking with Carol, my radar was buzzing. Piqued.

I didn't realize what kind of place this was. Carol was right, it's like a dream and that's what made it so difficult to find. Didn't make sense to me when he said he didn't know where it was or how to get back there. Thought he was being lazy. But, shit, place barely exists. Might not even, when it comes down to things.

It took me months to understand that I couldn't look at a map and figure it out, couldn't just drive or fly there.

'It's not on the road. It's nowhere.' Carol laughed at me when I was trying to pinpoint where it probably was based on what he told me. 'If it were that simple, I'd be there.'

'It has to be somewhere.'

'It is, but it's probably not always in the same place.'

'You're an idiot.'

'Keep looking for it and you'll never find it. I think that's part of it, too. Why I can't get back.'

I leaned back and pushed the computer closed. 'Tap my heels three times and wish I'm there.'

He looked up from his coffee like revelation, 'Shit, maybe.'

All good ideas sound like bad ones when you start out, kind of like how all bad ideas sound like good ones first time round. We had a plan now, or the absence of a plan. We meant to get lost. For Carol, that's easy. He's spent a lifetime being lost. Me, though. I've never been lost, not ever. It almost made me sick to not know where I was but I trusted Carol. We left early one morning in his car and just drove. He blindfolded me or made me go to sleep anytime I was up and we were on the road, knew I'd figure out our placement with a handful of signs. A few days later we were somewhere that I'd never been. City, state, not sure. Only knew it was still America because of the English, but I guess it could've been Canada. A lot of forgettable time passed and I was starting to get pretty pissed at Carol for doing this to me.

It made sense to me then that this was an elaborate trick. Fucking with his little brother was something Carol always enjoyed, but only because I hated it so much. There's no pleasure quite like making a sibling miserable and few did it so well as Carol. Never mean, but some real motherfuckery.

About when I could take no more Carol told me to shut up, not like a command, but like, I think we're close so let me concentrate.

'Close your eyes.'

'Are you shitting me?'

'Do it.' His voice was a hiss. He meant it.

I closed my eyes and kept them closed while he led me around the woods. Felt like circles and probably was knowing Carol but when I opened them I was staring at the biggest damn tree I had ever seen in my entire life.

'We're here!' Carol started jumping around and hollering.

I was too amazed to do any of that and too confused. I wanted to ask a million questions but instead I walked to the tree and put my hand against it. It was warm. The feeling that there was a fire on the otherside of the bark filled me up but before I could inspect the question there were a bunch of people talking to Carol. Old friends, I guess.

'The hell happened to you?'

'Got lost again and ended up back in the outside.'

Lots of Haha-ing followed that one.

'Glad to have you back. Who's your friend?'

'This is my brother, Rich. Rich, this is Mo, Anderson, and Hunter.'

We all shook hands and greeted. Real friendly guys.

We went drinking and I met many more of my brother's friends. A lot of fun and interesting people. We stayed in Carol's old house for the whole time I was there, all three months.

I knew there was something to it to make my brother love it so and I discovered it. Not women or anything like what I expected. He meant what he said about the lifestyle. It was beautiful and ancient. Everybody gets up early and does the chores of the town. People help everyone. If you're a carpenter and someone's door is broken, you go help them out. No money passes hands and no promises to exchange the favor, only a polite thank you that you know they mean. They don't have to exchange favors explicitly because it's what the town lives on. Farmers don't raise food to sell, they raise it to share, and when they need some additional help, people volunteer. If a house needs building, a whole crew of guys starts helping. That's how Carol's home got built. Everyone kind pitched in and went for it. No one had a reason not to which is as good a reason as any.

Even the children were shared. Everyone recognized the actual birth parents and kept track but really the kids be-

longed to everyone. No families were better or worse off than others because everyone had a place. If you didn't want to help the community, then you didn't receive the benefits of the community. Or that's how I imagined it would happen. Apparently they had never had trouble in that way.

They didn't even have policemen or judges. People said there had never been a crime of any importance there. Sure, sometimes a younger fellow would steal something, but it always got returned. And, besides, everyone owned everything kind of as much as everyone else, so stealing was essentially borrowing without asking. Whatever it was would make the rounds again. The only thing that were typically fixed in this all for one, one for all place were homes and spouses. Infidelity happened, sure, not while I was there, or at least not that I knew of, but it certainly happened, but people worked it out. Everyone respected one another and cared for each other. The whole town is your family and no one tries to fuck over their family members. Not in any real kind of way.

It was easy to see why Carol loved it so much, but it still struck me all as weird. And there were people who were less friendly. The purebreds. A bunch of old women who tended the garden and stayed on one side of town. People had a lot of respect for them and what they said mattered. There wasn't a government or judges, but the purebreds

were close. Bob too. He was a nice guy, though. Very welcoming and inviting, though he evangelized a whole lot.

I never bought into the stories but I could see that Carol was taken with them. He's always been a dreamer and all this talk of dreams made a whole lot of sense to him. The parents and the tree, I mean, it all made sense the way that most of those creation stories make sense, but I never got very interested in it beyond that. You could tell that those stories were fundamental to the way of life there. It struck me as dangerous, or potentially so. The older generations were forcing ideas upon the young and not allowing them to have a real education outside. That's not to say they were dumb or ignorant either. Pretty clever folk in general, even had their own little branch of creative literature, but it seemed contrived, the lifestyle.

'They're brainwashing the kids, Carol.'

'Why? Why is teaching them this more harmful than teaching them what we learned in school?'

'Because it's not real. They're just stories.'

'What does that even mean, Rich? Why aren't they real? And does it matter?'

'Yes.'

'No, no, it doesn't. That's what you don't get. Not every aspect of life needs an answer.'

'It may not need an answer that we can understand or perceive, but it does need one.'

'They have answers. Answers that make sense to me more than the ones we were brainwashed into believing in.'

'It's not a question of belief!'

'Isn't it?'

'There are fundamentally true things out there that we know.'

'They know them here, too. They believe in science and use it to their advantage.'

'That's not the point.'

'Sure it is. What is your problem with the people here?'

'I don't like how they teach their kids.'

'They teach respect, humility, and compassion. Assholes.'

'That's not fair.'

'Richard, you know what your problem is?'

'What?'

'That.'

'What?'

And Carol walked out of the house with a slam to the door. I knew he loved it there but something about it didn't sit well with me. I've been a lot of places, so I don't think it was a cultural thing, but something else. There was something about the way these people lived that was wrong.

I mean, any place that seemingly perfect has to be evil, right? Everyone knows that. There's no such thing as a perfect life or a truly harmonious existence. I'm all for

everyone to get along and the progression that we go through as a civilization to begin to see the other as another version of us and us as another version of the other, but it doesn't make sense, the way they kind of act like we're all together without any challenges. The challenge of civilization is getting along, but they seem to have that figured out. No strife. But no strife means no progress so they kind of stay the same forever.

It seems backwards.

In any case, I left and didn't look back. As far as I know, Carol's still there. I wish him the best and all that but I wanted him to come with me.

It was like the Garden of Eden, right? Except the snakes were offering Eden, not taking it away.

'I'm leaving.'

'You don't have to.'

'I do.'

'If you just let go of yourself, it'll be easier.'

That scared me, that kind of idea coming from the brother who used to beat me up just because. 'Bye, Care.'

He shrugged and hugged me. 'Take care, Rich. Tell mom and dad I'm okay. Tell them I'm not lost anymore.' He pushed me back at arms length, holding my shoulders. 'It took me my whole life, but being lost is what saved me, what got me found.'

I don't think you can consider yourself found in a lost city.

She came into my office all done up with heels and says,
'I'm perfect for this.'

I says, 'What is this?'

'I make clothes.'

'How old are you?'

She says, 'Twenty,' and she looked it but I bet someone
in the office later that she was sixteen.

'You make that?'

She's wearing this dress and it's wild. The hem and stitching are all perfect, but that's not what matters. The lines. They didn't make sense, don't make sense, but they work. She works outside of parallels and perpendiculars, outside of angles and curves, like she grabs another plane, a new dimension and bends it into this one. It was a high collared sleeved red dress that clung to her like a kimono but it was softer and more mobile. Solid, red from the hem at the knee to neck, hand to hand, but there were these lines that raced over the fabric, or raced under it, lines like ravines that dashed this way and that, like railway over a

continent, and it was a mess, chaotic, but subtle and somehow beautiful. There was a system to it, I think. I never understood, even after four years, but your eyes don't lie. First look, you're intrigued, second look, you don't like it but you also can't turn away, until you realize, not only does it kind of look all right, but that you love it and want to wear it, want everyone you've ever met to wear it. It was so simple but so complicated. It was some red, too. She wouldn't tell me where she got her colors from and I'm pretty sure she made them herself with special and secret dyes, something Indian probably, because she'd show up on days with this fabric that she never ordered. At least she never ordered it from here nor was it ever delivered here.

'This?' she says pointing at her concave stomach, like it's not obvious.

'Yeah, yeah,' I says, 'did you make that?'

Well, of course she says Yes because anyone could tell by my expression that I was lost in it and didn't understand.

'I don't get it. I like it but I don't get it. Why do I want this?'

And she looks at me with her head cocked to the side, eyebrows arched, and a coy little smile up the left side of her face. 'Because you're afraid someone else will have it.'

Shit, I laughed and slammed my hand down on the table. She was good, real good. I tells her that she's right but she's gotta prove she made it. She clasps her hands and tells me she'll make me a dress today. I laughed again

but she wasn't smiling. She looked insulted. Who was I to insinuate that she was a liar? Hot shit, this girl, but that's what she's like. When she says something she means it and don't try and pretend or even act like she's not good for it. Never says much with her mouth, but those eyes and the way she carries herself speak volumes. If a picture's worth a thousand, a twitch of her eyebrow or a flick of her hand or a turn of her head is worth ten pictures.

Leaving the office, I didn't think much about that meeting till this girl gets up from the curb in this green dress with electric blue trim. Of course it's the same girl. I didn't know what to do or say so I says nothing and just laugh and extended my hand. Her face, though, she looked like she could spit, like she wanted to spit at me, so I bottled up.

'Listen, never mind me. What I mean is that you're hired.'

She crossed her arms and shifted from left to right, hip popping way out, revealing that the fabric, when seen under new light or new angle blued. 'Why did you laugh?'

'Ah, sorry there. Never thought you'd be back today is the real thing. Forgot you had even come till you stood up just now. Surprised.'

She sighed and extended her hand which I shook and she says, 'There is nothing funny about what I do.'

I apologized and told her to come by tomorrow and we'd sort her position out. In the car on the ride home I realized there was blood on my palm.

See, thing is, before her, we never did anything like this and we don't do it without her either. Only she can make the dresses she makes so we can't do assembly line. That's all we do. We make high-end clothes for affordable price but she made us into a one woman fashion studio. Real top of the line and she got commissions for all the big people in the city and in Hollywood and abroad. It wasn't enough for her for you to have money. Real particular about her dresses. If she didn't like you, no dress. If you were too fat, no dress. Too short, no dress. Too tall, no dress. About as selective as I've ever heard but it never caused a sour note.

You'd have to see it to believe it but she has this way of talking and this way of moving. Like her dresses, there's a magnetism, some semblance of magic, and everything comes out perfect and how she means. When she says, You're too fat, she doesn't mean it as an insult, but as a fact. She wasted no words either. She said that, simply, You're too fat, and the thing is is that people would apologize to her. They actually apologized like they always knew this judgment was coming and that they'd disappoint her. I even heard it, I'm sorry they says. I near enough died laughing. No one got upset or felt insulted or tried to fight her on it to make the dress. If you didn't fit the build, if you couldn't carry yourself with class, she wouldn't make

the dress, and people understood. Never seen anything like that.

It's her eyes. People wither before her in a way. I don't get it myself. Those Nordic eyes, icy like a wolf. Unique in their own way but I always saw her as a girl pretending to be an adult, which is what she was. Fifteen when she walked through my door. Hot shit. None of us knew then how young she was but it came out when she turned eighteen that she was eighteen and not twenty three. Everyone told me so, about her eyes, the way they broke down before her like her judgment meant more than the Almighty. That girl could've been a tyrant had she been in the wrong century. Her disappointment really got to people and it got to the point where she barely even had to say a word to anyone. Simply a look decided everything, a closing of the eyes, a parting of the lips. Things like that told you if you were getting your dress.

Worked here for four years on her own time and in her own way. Like I says, she brought her own fabric and did her own dresses. Never let anyone watch. Private business. I couldn't get over it the first time she told me to get out because she had to sew. I laughed like I always do when I think someone's joking with me, but she gave me that look again, like a rattlesnake, like a wolf on the hunt, and I apologized and shut the door behind me.

Kind of spooks me to look back on it but those were great days here.

Word is that she became involved with some man from somewhere. No one knew exactly where he came from. Least no one here, but she never socialized much with the company. Kept her own life. She came with a bunch of secrets and left with at least as many if not more. Not many people like that. Oh, I'm sure she had friends, but that's the way of employees. If boss goes fishing for personal information, it's best to pretend ignorance.

This guy came around once or twice. I saw him. Ordinary looking guy, average in build and face. The kind of face you can meet a hundred times and never remember, real All-American type. Chameleon. Maybe that was her attraction because it didn't make sense to me. A girl that looks like that should be on the catwalk, not sewing and dating nobodies. She started coming less frequently after he showed up. This was about three and a half years in, so she must've been eighteen or nineteen by then. Come once or twice a week, sometimes less. Boy, she danced those days, even here where everything was mystery. That's how I knew she was sick with it, sick with love.

Feverish the ways she'd work after that. Sure, never showed up, but I figured out she was keeping her own appointments. Had cut me out of the loop, not on purpose, I don't think, but because it was easier and made more sense to her. Never did care about regulation or even money. I'd get an invoice that said what she did and how long it took but there'd be no price, only a circle and a question

mark. I paid her well, real well. Well enough that she never needed to work again after she quit, assuming she wasn't dumb with money. Too smart to be a spendthrift I always thought. The dresses she made then were really something else. Less chaotic, more classical but still with her magic woven in. She experimented wildly with fabric at this time but kept the stitching and the lines more sensible. Every dress, in reality, was becoming more and more a wedding dress and I knew she was making them for herself, so sick in love was she, though I guarantee she didn't even know she was doing it, promising herself forever already. The colors, too, were more vibrant than before, saturated and sunny. Brilliantly Bold is what the fashionistas called it. We ran a lot of magazine covers in the four years she was around, but none so entrancing as those. Before it was enigmatic and only for the chicest of chic, for the highest echelon of the industry, which blew the industry up from the inside, this big department type store creating revolutionary pieces.

Then, one day, she never came back. Didn't realize till about two months later, of course, because such was her infrequency by then and such was the freedom I gave her. I knew she was still working because you know one of her dresses when you see it and they'd show up at certain award shows and ceremonies. Never came back and I think she left town or dropped her phone service because it was disconnected. I figure she's off with that Joe Nobody breeding angels.

Yes, Jerry and Tom are my nephews. Good boys, real good boys. In their meadow days, Tom was always getting picked on and Jerry would defend him even though he was younger and smaller. Jerry has a lot of passion and a lot of heart, always has.

It's preposterous that MotherTree is only two hundred years old because I'm nearly as old and I don't remember a sapling back when I was born. No, MotherTree hasn't been that age since before time was reckoned. That boy, Stanislaw, has a real hatred for the ancients. His family is relatively young, going back only three hundred years, but, to his credit, his forefather was the first european to stay here. They were always an insolent family and never married in with the firstborns. It is why he is a liar and so bitter. Blonde hair is a sign of deceit and so are his shade of blue eyes. However, the pale blue is a natural and eternal color, they say. Certain breeds of wolves are said to be touched by the Siblings and that is what gives them their ephemeral eyes of blue that haunt mankind and hunt on

the weak. Lady Wolf across the street is one with those eyes and the Wolf line has preserved the Dream of the Siblings forever.

We purebreds all know the stories and we share them with everyone. My cousin Bob is the keeper of the tales as they belong to his family line. The singleborn firstborns. It is a great honor and credit to his ancestors and we have the utmost confidence that he will produce a child to succeed him. Many more leaf falls ahead of him and plenty of time to find a suitable woman. If only there were some purebreds left to take his child and restore our place in the culture. Old women near the edge of the village clinging to the Dream, they overlook us often and some of the young ones do not understand who we are or why we are. It is sad. Very sad. Some of the young ones even call the Siblings angels.

The stranger, I did not meet, but I heard he was at the party. Tsk, tsk, letting outsiders so near MotherTree without explaining to him Her sacred origins. It is shameful even to think about. My my my, the children have lost their heads.

But what fun they have!

Mr Gomez certainly does spoil the town with his flamboyant indulgences but it is no trouble. The town can use such excitement now and again. Most days are left to tending the garden, so it was quite pleasant to watch all the little brothers and sisters singing and dancing. Moth-

erTree looked beautiful, too. For being a young family, Mr Gomez certainly understands our town and our way of life. Adding a bit of zest here and there was exactly what we needed that summer. Right on the solstice, the anniversary of the Parents departure and the planting of MotherTree. One of the brothers from the west end of town proposed to the Gomez girl and she accepted! Oh, what a time was had and I could barely believe how the wine was going. Even some of my sisters drank and danced with the children. A very long time since something like that has happened here. A very long time indeed. Caribou and Cat taught the children one of the ancient song and dance routines, one of the circle ones with loads of clapping and hooting. Poor Owl would have loved to see the traditions of her kin still beating life into our community.

Owl was a purebred but she passed to the cycle and met the Parents many solstices ago. In fact, I believe she died beneath MotherTree exactly 13 years before that night. She was a dreamer and her death brought the return of the seventh sons and daughters. Dreams are an act of creation as we well know, and she always told me her dream was one of a seventh son of a seventh son marrying the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. Not quite a purebred, but nearly as good. When a dream dies, it becomes reality, and so we now have the possibility of the dream.

Oh, yes, poor Bob. Not a shaman, no, but more of a scribe and chronicler. Yes, it is true, though, that every

other generation of singleborns have an ability but those are only known by the singleborn and the purebreds. Information can be shared and it distorts the memory of the line, of the culture. In this manner, information can distort the memories which can lead to cataclysmic consequences.

Be careful of your memories for they are all we have.

The stranger was said to be very foreign looking, very american, with one of those faces carved from granite, big cornered chin and deep eyes with the illusion of kindness. Kind eyes can lead people astray. It is a trick as old as wolves for no creature has such magnetic spiritual eyes, but, if you come close to a wolf, you may be dead before you realize.

Jerry and Tom saw the man but really only Tom as Jerry was allegedly far past sobriety. Tom may be slow but he never lies. He does not know how to and he could not even if he was forced.

Outsiders bring violence and madness. One must only remember the way that women who bewitched Jerry died, coughing up her very soul into her hand. The Parents rejected her and so she died. Poor Jerry. In his madness and grief he gave her body to Mother Tree.

We could not have that foul stranger passing her disease to Mother Tree so we found a solution.

The stranger brought his own solution with him but he was clever enough to infiltrate and spread his gospel of hate and violence. Who could even imagine such an act? These

outsiders are worse than beasts. Ugly, foul, rotten beasts. Not even suitable for planting in the earth, so they must be burnt as offering and thrown into the garden.

We are the guardians of the bridge and we will not allow the enemy to breach our gates.

I was drunk and Lou was high and drunk and we were doing the weekend crawl, slurring around the city till we passed out or got beat up or sobered up. Those were our days back then, Normal college kind of life. A reputation kind of followed us around: drunks, vagrants, artists. That was the scene then, every neobohemian kid in the country came out here to try their hand at Kerouac or Burroughs or, if they were an asshole, Ginsberg, and Bukowski if they were still in high school. Lot of Bukowskis back then, but there always are, people thinking homeless is artistry, not realizing that Bukowski didn't really choose that life so much as it chose him and that he was one of the lucky ones. A dirty old con artist who scammed young people into believing shitty poetry was better than good poetry. That was life then and it's not much different now. Sometimes you'll get a real one that comes through.

Lou was a real one and he's mostly where the reputation came from, him being the perfect l'enfant terrible, not because he tried to be, but because he had to be in the

same way that Rimbaud has to be the archetype. The life isn't always chosen. Sometimes it's given, the way life gave Rimbaud eternity by taking everything but his words and his myth. Lou already had a myth grown over him by the time I started college because he was a local and didn't bother with going to university, instead bummed around, brawling, bawling, and creating things that were never forgotten once you saw them. Painting, graffiti, poetry, songs, even a novel or three, I forget. It didn't matter if it was good yet because it was there and he was bigger than what he did. Lou was bursting through the buildings, his name recognized for miles, and the college kids started dressing like him, trying to be him if they were English or art or music majors. Me, I grew up with Lou, and he pretended or allowed me to pretend like we were both the leaders, that I was a creator like him, a Dreamer. I wasn't, no, but, because of Lou, I had a name and a face, too. Everywhere he was, I was, and vice versa.

It was good, though, Lou's work. It's hard to classify because he strove for impermanence. That's where the graffiti came in though it wasn't really graffiti, not in the sense one usually thinks of graffiti. Not about form or visuals but about clarity. He tagged poems on walls and the trick wasn't simply to get it anywhere, but to get it in the hardest place to clean up but the easiest place to see. It started on billboards, something simple, like,

Drink in the Sky

Watch it All Die

Nothing showy or even too clever at first, little rhymes or rhythms that people would remember, that would sow a seed in people's head, and I remember the first time we heard someone say one of Lou's lines without prompting and out of context, in natural speech. He was tying the city together a clause at a time and he knew how to do it, to make something short and perfect.

When you see something new, it changes the way you think. When enough people see the same new thing, it can change the way a city thinks, and so on until you're global. That was the idea. Not the original idea, but the rationalization that came later because one never knows what one is doing until one has already begun.

They were popping up everywhere and people were taking notice. We were sixteen then, but already we were changing people's minds, changing people's hearts. Part of the nihilism of teenagedom is that we didn't care that Lou's poems only lasted at longest a week, sometimes as short as a handful of hours.

*i sing to her a songbut it's always wrongwe're out of tune-
and she's gone too soon*

That was my favorite and it's the one that really made him. Someone even made it into a song, this long ambient work with nothing but a single violin, a sparse piano, erratic whispered drums, with mechanized vocals over it. The band, Headless Mouth, were big at the time and toured

around the country, even playing the song at South by Southwest. It didn't have a name or a set structure till the festival when they played a fifteen minute version and announced it as A Ballad for Brother Lou. Instantly we were famous. Lou was famous, but we shared.

By the time I started college his reputation had reached the other coast and he was getting commissions for installations and the like. I helped by holding a camera here or kicking a piano there, throwing paint at a fifteen by fifteen plexiglass window. He was chaotic and peerless in terms of energy. Never afraid to voice his opinion either, he earned his name by being a louse. Drunk and disorderly, throwing fits at poetry readings, breaking windows, even lighting some poor kid on fire after the guy read some real Beat bullshit.

'It's not the fifties for fuck's sake,' Lou screamed when the bouncers were pulling him out and he was kicking his legs wildly knocking over tables and busting open some teen goth's lip. Insufferable, but legendary.

Lou was giving a reading one night and he stops mid-poem and screams, 'Where are you fucking going?' to this girl, sixteen or twenty, hard to tell, dressed like a geisha or something accidentally oriental. It was a kimono, blue, tight, and with some silver pattern on the back that, swear to god, crawled off the fabric later that night. She didn't turn or slow down, but walked right out and Lou chased after her.

Lou called her My Sweet but I know he didn't know her name because no one did because she only spoke to Lou as far as I can tell and I don't think she even said much to him. Lou told me she was the greatest poet in the world after knowing her for a week. She didn't seem to care. They became inseparable which meant that Lou disappeared from the scene for weeks at a time because she didn't like it. Everyone became a peasant or a philistine or a cretin to Lou around that time. Her influence. After two weeks, Lou told me he was going to marry her and showed me the tattoo she gave him on his wrist, one half on the left and the other on the right.

Take away the sun
Leave me the stars

She had similar ones on her wrist in the same pretty lettering. Impressive considering the method: calligraphy pen and heat. Though she never spoke, Lou told us all about her ideas, about what art really meant, and how it was all aesthetics, which is about as opposite his previous ideology as possible, not that he had a succinct ideology, but he had never made something visually beautiful. Striking, maybe, but never gorgeous. It wasn't what he was about and it wasn't what he was good at, but she, and you could tell by looking, was all vision. There was something very animal in her, like she was a caged beast, a wolf, but also this angelic kind of tropical bird.

'The personification of bliss,' is what Lou called her.

I always thought she looked like she was about to cry. Kind of bored and glassy eyed. Lou never paid much attention to other people though, and it probably suited him that she rarely spoke, because he didn't really care about her in any real way. Not out of an emotional connection, but out of her purity, her singularity of vision and grace and beauty. Even though she never talked, we always knew what she was saying, even when Lou mistranslated, which he did often.

He loved her more than any other girl in his own way, in the selfish way that most geniuses love other people. I didn't blame him for that and you could tell she didn't either. He fawned over all her new dresses, over the way she'd change her hair, which she did ever so slightly, but it always attacked the senses and announced itself. She'd pin back her bangs and it was a statement, let down her hair and it was a song, form it up on her head extravagantly and it was a declaration of war on the male sex. Her body was really an image and Lou described it graphically, intensely, millimeter by millimeter, so taken was he. She was his dream, his muse, his reason, his everything.

Oddly, he didn't actually create much in the half year she was around, but he talked a lot about new ideas and new ways of doing things. It was an exciting time because he was on a steady incline for the top and now this new sense of experimentation had entered him. Her doing.

He told me about this thing she'd do after sex. She'd place her hands over his ears and lay him down facing him, eye to eye, mouth to mouth, sex to sex. Breathing the life of her dreams into him, she whispered images and sensations while he closed his eyes. Like a dream, he was transported to another place, a place of her creation, all carried on her words, on the sighing of her breath. He told me that she'd make him come like that, without touching him, just by imagining for him. Eventually he preferred it to penetrative sex, he said, and couldn't sleep without it. No more dreams, though. That was the price of the Morpheus touch. My name for it. I could tell when they had done it because the hair around his ears would be red and sticky, coagulated.

we never fit rightlike a circle in a square
i was never here
a kiss with open eyes
only the ghost of her
past your silent
cries

That's how she ended it. In a manner that she knew he'd understand: poetry. One single piece of paper in that ancient script of hers. Lou was devastated and he went crazy. Legitimately. Wildly productive, though, and her influence was everywhere in his work. Most notable, though, was his return to the beginning.

*i wanted to see
if fire could burn me
i gave my heart
you took all three*

and so much more of me

His return to form and you could see her influence in the lettering. Chaotic perfection is the first thing I thought when I saw it. And everyone saw it. Two stories. That's how much room the poem took. It had the feeling of madness that I was seeing in Lou. The scribbling of a giant is what the paper called it. Lou was heading towards something and it was big and it was all because of her. The placement was no accident either. I'd later discover it was right across from her window.

He became wilder but reclusive, emerging from his hole of a room to tell me, 'It's finished.'

'What?'

'New novel. It's called The Sky's gone Dim, the Moon's gone Black.'

'How long is it?'

He thrust out a stack of papers, maybe four hundred, handwritten, indecipherable. 'Find a publisher.' And he slammed the door again.

That happened three times that month, him emerging only to hand me another heap of papers that were mostly suicide notes, ravings, craven love, and accusations against gods and devils. Mostly, they were all about a man in a big city like this one searching for an angel with a capital A.

I started to look for her to find out what happened, why she left Lou, and if I could do anything to fix it, if he could. No one knew anything about her, though, not even where

she lived or what her name was. A needle in a haystack's easy compared to a person in a city. She had a reputation, but not like Lou or even I had. Hers was one of mystery, of otherworlds, of dreams.

Weeks went by and I gave up, but didn't forget because of the tomes Lou would hand me and the occasional giant tag that would appear around the city proclaiming desperation and hopeless love.

Take away your love

Leave me the scars

That was my favorite one, even though it was the most obvious.

She appeared finally. Not in a happy way, not for Lou anyway. Walking down 6th, I happened to look into this nice restaurant, candelight, decor, classical music, a maître d', all that, and I see her with some guy, real plain business class type. Strong chin, thick hair, nice suit, the antithesis of Lou. That didn't surprise me and it made everything fall into sense. She wanted to be a normal girl or whatever. Lots of people get burned out or down by the scene. What surprised me was that she was smiling and laughing.

Yeah, doesn't seem like much, but I knew her for six months, or spent six months in her company, and she never smiled. Not once. I never heard her laugh either.

I don't know how much time went by, but it must've been a while because people inside were watching me stare. Probably thought I was homeless because I certainly

looked the part, but I didn't even realize time was passing. I was lost.

I think that's when I fell in love with her.

I couldn't sleep for days. Spent all night staring at the ceiling and seeing her smile, imagining her laughter bubble up through her skinny neck. I already knew every inch of her skin from Lou's description so fantasies were easy and I'd come alone in my room with nothing but the thought of her eyes.

I wish it stopped there but things never end. You can wait for your whole life to end only to watch it continue past you. That's how I felt for months, like my life was happening without me.

I followed her. Often. Bought a suit because her haunts required one. She was always with him. By then I was calling her Morpheus and so I called him Orpheus because he had to be doomed. That's the type of girl that sinks thousands of ships and drinks a million suicides. Dangerous. Eternal. I was there when they ate dinner, when they got drinks at the lounge, when they hailed a taxi. Some nights, regrettably, I was outside her apartment imagining her touch until sunrise and I'd amble on home or walk around the parks and the city until they were back out again.

There was only her smile. Nothing else mattered. As long as I could see it, I didn't need to eat or sleep or fuck or speak.

I avoided Lou but was aware of his growth over the city. His book got published, not sure which one, but it was due out the following year. It broke him out of his hole and he was ready to live again. He proclaimed it as loud as he knew how.

*Turn from tar to wine
this dying blood of mine
phoenix*

His statement of rebirth given in bold tones. He was looking for me, but I was never anywhere, except where the promise of her led me.

She was my drink, my food, my blood, my Dream. The Dream. I became a ghost that haunted her love. It was obvious from the first moment that she loved him and she is impossible not to love.

At night, I tried to imagine the Morpheus Touch, her magic that cast a person into her dreams. Even the thought gave me an erection, the thought of her mind penetrating me.

'Where've you been, boy-o?' Lou shaking me out of sleep. 'They said I'd find you here, but I never believed. Who'd have thought you'd turn Bukowski on me?'

I was asleep on a bench in the park, bundled like the skids. Lou was different, vibrant in color and wildeyed again. He looked like a phoenix, a plume of blond rising out of his head in all directions and a thick red scarf around his neck. Peacoats and scarves and boots and pants that

fit his form, the new Lou was upon me and somehow I had missed the signs in the streets, the packs of teens in black coats, tight pants, and scarves. It made me nauseous to think about, that I had lost track of Lou. That I had lost track of myself, actually. It was the first time since Lou remade the scene that I wasn't a top tier member.

He cleaned me up and bought me the right clothes. Fed me and I slept for the first time in weeks without her smile keeping me awake. Instead it caused me to weep and I knew something was different.

Lou found out. I think I told him. I can't remember. I don't remember much about those days, but, apparently, Lou was different. No longer throwing tantrums or ridiculing, falling drunk into sewers and waking up in his own vomit and piss on busy streets. Even the paper ran a headline: Local Artist Rises like a Phoenix from Trash to Class. Not a very clever headline, but it's a paper. Maybe it was a magazine. Same thing. But Lou found out and no one could stop him.

He walked into the restaurant like a suicide bomber, strapped with nothing but his own death. He pushed past the staff and kicked their table.

Pointing at her new beau, 'Who the fuck is this?'

Her eyes burned him alive and he screamed, slamming his head on the table. A waiter or three tried to restrain him and he grabbed a champagne bottle, wielding it like a sword. 'Who the fuck is that!?' He clubbed a waiter and

dove at him. Lou missed with the bottle and they were on the ground rolling, punching each other and Lou was tearing at his hair, trying to gouge his eyes, fighting like a caged animal, screaming devilishly. Lou took three to the face, spat blood, got an arm free, and brought down the bottle like a hatchet over and over.

Blood was dripping to the ground from her hands, rolling right down her fingers in big crimson drops to stain fat blots on the carpet. In two steps she was holding Lou off of him by the neck, and the blood stained palms to Lou's skin for a week. She didn't say anything, but her eyes, Lou said, tore him in half. He slumped out of there without another word. Her man didn't get up and an ambulance was called. Turns out Lou got him with the bottle, one clean one right at the end. For all his ferocity and effort, he really only hit the guy twice, once in the lip with his forehead when he dived at him and once with the bottle. Any fighter will tell you that it only takes one.

It wasn't too serious. Nothing broken or anything, but knocked him out. Lou fared worse, actually. His left eye was closed for as long as the bloodstains lasted and his lip was busted open.

No one pressed charges and it ended like that.

Fill me with smoke and firemaking a pyre on which to choke all these words I once wrote

It appeared a month later. No one heard anything of Lou for a while. He had shut himself up in his hole after

the incident, but I saw him two weeks before it happened. In good spirits, he told me not to worry about him, that he wouldn't self-destruct or need to phoenix out like last time.

I stopped following *The Dream*, my Morpheus, too. Managed to clear her from my head, but I still saw her occasionally. She didn't see me, or refused to acknowledge me. That's the kind of person she always was, but she was still with that guy, the all american Orpheus.

'I've figured it out. Finally. Come by in a month and I'll have my next novel finished. It's a love story. A proper one, without all the lunacy. It might even be a comedy if you believe it.'

I did.

Her expression was still happy and the reappearance of Lou clearly didn't bother her. I wondered how that conversation went, the explanation of the famous ex-lover who beat him with a bottle till he went unconscious, what the paramedics said when they found her hands bleeding. In a lot of ways, she became a background, sort of another thing that happened in my life that I might talk about in embarrassment when it got brought up. Yeah, that's right, I turned stalker for my best friend's old girlfriend until he beat up her new boyfriend and locked himself in his room. Somewhere along that road, I got cured of my peculiar bout with mania.

The new poem appeared and I went to see him, but thought he wasn't home when no one answered, and didn't think much of it. When I figured he was done with his novel, I came by, but no one answered again. Typical of Lou, time meant nothing to him and he was okay with disappearing. Added to his mystique, and being a genius doesn't make you immune to the artistic ploys of the scene, where one does anything to gather more attention.

I was the first to find out because I'm always the first person Lou shares anything with. Unfortunately, his new act wasn't the surprise I was looking for. When he said a novel, I thought he meant paper. When he said a comedy, I thought he meant I'd laugh.

I didn't laugh then.

The last time I went to his apartment, I got the landlady to let me in. She knew me or at least saw me with him enough over the years that she wasn't suspicious, so she gave me a key instead of walking up the twelve flights to his room. He thought of a lot of things, even how to manage the smell. Hundreds of air fresheners, candles, and anything that would smell not of rot were placed around his room. The rank air struck me and I nearly fell over coughing. Covering my mouth, I flicked on the light, and there he swung from the ceiling, a Glasgow smile and his naked body covered in tattoos. A post-it note on his chest read:

TO DIE, TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM: A
COMEDY

I didn't laugh, but I managed to vomit and cry and scream and the neighbors came and found me holding his feet, the skin of which was falling off in my hands.

The coroner said he had been dead a few days. The estimated time of death was a month to the day from when he told me to come by to pick up his new novel. I asked him what the tattoos read and he said he didn't know, so I asked if I could copy them down, and he said absolutely not, that a dead body is not a play thing.

He took it with him. It was fitting.

I imagine it was pretty funny.

I didn't laugh at his funeral or at his year commemoration, but I can smile now thinking about it, thinking about how a Dream killed the greatest living Dreamer.

The party was fantastic. We never had anything like that before. Even a wedding announcement. I tell you, that was one night that won't soon be forgotten around here. The tents were big enough that the whole town could fit underneath one if they wanted to and we had three of them. One for eating, one for dancing, and one just for the hell of it. Mr Gomez really made something special that night and it's pretty hard to believe it wasn't for his daughter's engagement. He certainly knew that was coming. The look on her face was to die for. I bet her cheeks were sore the next day from smiling so hard. Every time I saw her, smile as big as the sun. It was a big day for Mr Gomez too because now he had married into the firstborns. He's a social climber, real status oriented, and, if you want to get ahead, you got to get a firstborn.

It's harder than you'd think, but they're real wealthy and resourceful. Somehow they moved in and up faster than most, maybe anyone. Doesn't hurt that his daughter's so pretty. It's not the case with most of us locals. We're

adorable when we're young, tan, skinny, and dark, but we age into plump, wide hipped, hags. Just look at the purebreds. Never have I seen uglier women. Firstborn men usually look fine, like Bob. He's gained some weight over the years, but he's got a strong featured face and thick hair. At my age, things like that matter a lot. He's so funny and kind, too. And smart, knows everything about everything. Rare for a fellow like him to be single so late in life, especially because he's a firstborn and he's the only singleborn around. Usually that's a bad sign, means your parents might have been cursed, the mother at least. But he comes from a long and ancient line of singleborns. They're kind of the unofficial leaders.

He danced with me most the night and he has some moves. Always harumping about how he doesn't dance and that he's no good. Hot damn, I've never seen a man move the way he does, doesn't matter what age. Men are like that. Pretending to not know how to dance or saying they don't like it. Well, just watch one of them get a few drinks in him with the right music. He'll dance and dance and you can't stop him and the way they move is just something else. It's because they never try to learn any real dances, so their movements are real primal. It's beautiful to me. We all learn the ancient dances here and the ancient songs but a lot of people forget them or just never pay attention. But the ones who care really care. Lots of drumming and lots of harmonizing are what characterize the old

songs. They learn this thing with their throat, real low and sonorous, kind of like the rumbling of earth, like standing in a deep cave without light. That's what it sounds like, the belly of a mountain. It's passed on straight from the Parents they say.

His breath was on my neck and I was all his eyes could see. It was the most fun I'd had in years. Bob's a real man and he knows how to make a girl feel special but he's shy, deep down. He doesn't seem like it because he's such an outspoken and central figure around town, but he's shy about the things that matter. Sex and affection. He's gentle and nervous like it's always his first time. Few men love like that.

I remember the stranger but not very well. I saw him and I knew he was there but he was kind of background for me, blurred in with everyone else. Hard to care about a stranger when everyone in town is feeling so good, when everyone is so together and connected. A feeling of hugeness, like my body was only a small bit of this whole being. I had never felt so like myself, so whole. Bob made sure I felt pretty in his own secret way. I'm not a firstborn but we've been here for a long long time, way before the europeans and americans, so there's no trouble with that. But Bob's Bob and he'll settle when he's ready. For now, it's enough for me. I'm getting on in years, so he better hurry. He didn't spend the whole night with me, I don't mean to mislead.

He spent a lot of time with the stranger with Tom and Jerry, sitting off in some corner for too long laughing and drinking. Not that I minded or cared, but I could've used Bob that night. Instead he had that stranger clung on to him. Fair boy with a brick for a face. Forgettable.

The flowers were strewn about magnificently and all the way to the very tip top of the tents and you should've seen the way the place glowed. It was a moony night and the sun was out till almost ten so the party had that nice twilight glow. They say that's the light of the Siblings.

No one really knows much about the Siblings. They're kind of that part of our history that's a little too mystical for me. A lot of kind of metaphysical juggling. It makes more sense when you start thinking of them as angels.

Put a real damper on the whole weekend finding that body from the tree, bluefaced and swinging.

Bob'll come around. Just got to be patient.

I t's funny, you know, we were cousins and pretty close in age but I never met her till after college. I remember the funeral the way I remember everything before I was ten, in polaroid flashes, an image here, a still there, sometimes I can line up enough to get a moving frame. Mother was afraid of her, that much was obvious, but I didn't know why then. Time goes by and your parents become clear, sort of the opposite of glass. They start as puzzles and end as a picture in a frame on a wedding day. Life's simple like that, when you can compartmentalize it, you know?

I remember her chopped to shit hair and I remember that mother was proud of me for not complaining about my black dress and uncomfortable shoes because she was horrified at her blue one. Back then, I thought we were better than them, better than my aunt and my cousin and my uncle who mother always referred to as That Man. I don't remember his name, no. Derrick or David, something with two syllables, two claps. That was the first time

I saw her, though, and it wouldn't be for almost twenty years that I would see her again.

Grandpa James finally died. I never really knew him either. Mother wasn't close with her parents, but she made sure that we went because 'He was a good man and he gave everything to me when I was growing up.'

I don't really understand that part of family, the feeling of obligation. Me and Tim didn't even know our only cousin on my mother's side, and I don't really remember Gran. Tim does, but he remembers everything, and he was older when she died. There's some kind of biological imperative that makes us care about those who share our blood, to need them, to need them to be safe. It's one of those things that goes deep to the crocodile brain, something illogical, a divine connection is what my mother would say. She blames everything on god. You know, those are the two big ones: family and god. People blame those for everything but they also need those for everything. I mean, all I ever had was mother and Tim. Grandpa sent cards is all. Family doesn't make sense in a place like that, where there is no family. It should mean more than biological ties, something more than evolutionary urges. A family should last beyond space and time, past race, past bloodlines, past death. I don't need to share your blood to be your sister and you don't need to come from my womb to be my child.

Life's not like that, though, easy. Life's about twists and turns and inconvenient speedbumps. Everybody's lost on their own drunken boat because god never wrote any maps or bothered to even put out some road signs, and that's why we blame god, because god doesn't help anybody or anything.

Grandpa's funeral was nice and I got to look at him, old and stale and filled with embalming. When I die, I thought, just throw me in the river, let me wash out to sea. I'd like that.

Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème De la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent, Dévorant les azurs verts ; où, flot-taison blême Et ravie, un noyé pensif parfois descend ; Où, teignant tout à coup les bleuités, délires Et rythmes lents sous les rutillements du jour, Plus fortes que l'alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres, Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour !

She came in and I knew her right away, though I can't say why because it wasn't logical or rational, it just was. Only she could look like that, only she could walk like that, only she could wear that, and only she could have those eyes.

I remembered those eyes from the pictures my mother used to cry over. Her sister, my aunt, had the same ones. Blue, even in black and white I knew they were blue, the way they radiated and shined through the colorless image. These were those same eyes reborn in a new body, a lost dream come home.

My mother had an instant reaction, too. Crying and hiding her face, hiding herself from her. Mother never got over the fear that gripped her, the ghost of her sister, and the suicide, because suicides never end, I think. That person goes on dying every day of your life. That's what it felt like when I saw her, my cousin, because her face was made of glass teetering on a precipice, a windblow from shattering to pieces and leaving nothing but unsunned sand.

Her hair was black and done up high, almost wickedly so. It was a shock, but not in a disgusting or indecent way. Beautiful, like a nebula. That's what she was like, a nebula. Glittering blackness. Her dress was tarblack with lace sleeves and a lace collar. I'd come to find she loved sleeves and collars. It was simple, you know, simple for her. None of that crazy vibrancy or ludicrous patterns and stitching. I didn't realize till later, but there was a man with her, the kind of man you don't remember. A face forgotten when you close your eyes, impermanent. It made sense, you know, someone unforgettable falling for someone who you could never remember. Together they built a normal soul, a single dream. And she smiled when he was near, the only times she ever smiled unless she was telling you about him, which was rare. That wasn't her way, to tell, to share. A hoarder, you know, that's the way she was. She had great heels on, obsidian, and I could see myself in them.

It's not fair, in a way, how she's like a rail and I'm like a boat. Tall and slender versus short and stocky. She inherited mother's side, me, my chubby dad's. Tim's like that, too: ugly. You wonder how she came out of the same gene pool as us, in a sense.

At the reception, mother disappeared, went home early in case she stayed. She did.

'Do you remember me?'

Her eyes didn't wander over me, but stared right into my retinas, into her own image stuck there. 'We've never met.'

'I'm your cousin Victoria.'

'I know.' Her lips pulled back on the left side of her face ever so slightly, a failed smile. 'I remember you.'

I wanted to hug her but wasn't sure what to do so I laughed and stuck out my hand. She took it and we were finally united. It didn't really last long in the terms of a lifetime, but it was about as much as I could ask for, to have something like a sister, finally.

We got drunk at the funeral reception but I don't think she did much talking. Instead her man did. He'd say things like, 'She's wanted to meet you for a long time,' or, 'We just got in this morning from Niagara.' I talked a lot. I mean a lot a lot, you know, like, couldn't keep my mouth shut. Must've told them everything about me, all twenty five years, all the heartaches, because a fat girl has many, and all the disappointments, because a fat girl has more. But we had fun and mostly I remember laughing. She's funny

when she wants to be, but, you know, thinking about it, even when she's funny, she's not talking. She'll point with her eyebrows, mock with her hips, laugh with her nose, kind of curling it up to show she's in on the joke and the mark's not.

We became kind of close, but usually she was with her man and they would get up and go for months at a time without a word. They'd send me postcards from Paris or Milan or Cannes or Tokyo. She was a designer, you know, so people were always paying for her to go everywhere. I don't know if she spoke any other languages because, you know, she really barely spoke English. Her language was one of movement and spirit, not of vocalization. He'd tell me about the trips and she'd tell her jokes the way she told them, which was hilarious, all eyebrows and nose, like something Chaplin would do. Yeah, you know, that was her comedy, silence. It was great and had me laughing to tears.

The last time she went for one of those trips, though, is the last time I saw him. When she got back, she wouldn't speak. Not even her version of speak. Like a statue, that's the kind of silence she had. No movement, no sound, but everything was in her eyes. I don't know what happened because when she doesn't want to tell, it never comes out, but it must've been awful. I never trusted him, you know, but she loved him so much, it broke my heart even to think

of what that asshole did to her in Munich. Probably ran off with a model. Figures.

She wouldn't eat anymore and I got worried, real worried. I asked mother but she didn't know what to do, kept saying that it's her father's madness in her or that her mother's suicide is haunting her. I don't know.

After a few weeks in bed in my spare room, she disappeared in the morning. This is weeks since she had spoken and there was no sign of where she could've gone. I called the police but someone needs to be missing for two days before they count as missing which is nonsense. Two days for a kidnapper to get away, you know? I spent the morning eating and smoking and drinking coffee, you know, because I was terrified and my hands were tied when all of a sudden she comes in with a grocery bag and she's dressed in the most insane dress I've ever seen. Part plaid, part striped, part dizzying silvery lines, and there was blue and black and green and purple and beige and mercury colliding all over it. It was the mad scientist of dresses like Frankenstein's creature. Her hair was cut short, above her ears, and dyed silver making her look like a fairy of death. It scared me more than her missing, you know?

Never said a word about him, either, and I never saw her smile again. It didn't come natural to her is the thing. Every day her dresses got wilder and more esoteric and mutilated. They weren't ugly but they weren't beautiful but they had

that quality that everything she wore had: you can't look away.

It made sense in the end, what happened, you know, because only she could go like that. Had to go like that.

She burned alive outside my window. What was I to do? Just a girl then and it was so absurd I could barely even believe it. Still don't, not really. It happened crazy fast and ended even faster. A blink. That's how it seemed then, but it's not how I remember it.

Humans aren't meant to burn and if you see someone try you know why. At the time, it was like an explosion of flames, rockets firing into the night, but when I actually think about what happened, it was slow and quiet and somehow peaceful. Crazy, but peaceful.

It's because she never shouted out. I'm positive she smiled, even. It's like those Tibetan monks that burned themselves up all those decades ago. No one knows why they did it, but it happened.

It was really late and we were staying there on vacation. My parents were in the next bed over and I couldn't sleep because my mom snores like crazy loud. Dad got used to it somehow, but sometimes even at home I can hear her through the wall and I want to go wake her up and tell

her to quit snoring because it's freaking me out and I have school tomorrow for God's sake. I'd never do that, though, even say God's sake in front of her. She's real religious and might thinking I'm blaspheming or whatever.

God's why I was up, actually. Well, God and my mom's crazy snoring. I was having one of those nights that I used to have where I would try to make sense of everything I knew and the same problem kept coming up because it always comes up. God doesn't make sense. I mean, He's everything, all goodness and love and everything else. But, like, if God is everything and I am a thing, aren't I God? And if I'm God how can I ever commit a sin? But even if you go and say that God isn't everything, but everything is because of God and made by Him the same kind of problem comes up. How does God who is perfect make people that are so imperfect? Original Sin makes sense, but even Adam and Eve weren't perfect or they wouldn't have disobeyed God. We blame the Devil for that, but the Devil was made by God too, so how come God didn't make Satan perfect? I didn't and still don't get it and it was crazy confusing back then. It's still confusing but I don't care that much about it anymore. I go to church but I don't think God lives there. I don't believe anyone would want to live there. It's always too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer and it smells weird. Whoever decided that spirits and souls like the smell of incense and candles

was an idiot. Imagine smelling that forever and not killing yourself.

Like I was saying, I was up and couldn't sleep but the moon wasn't out which sucks because it means there's nothing to look at and I couldn't see any stars because it was kind of a big city and we were downtown, I think. That's what's crazy too, it happened right in the middle of the city. There were still people out. I remember. I bet they were mostly drunk so they didn't even notice her. I did. Right away.

She had wavy burgundy hair down to her chin and she was wearing a big blue overcoat and high heels. Not lost or confused or drunk like everyone else, but purposeful, on a mission. That's what mom used to say when she saw people walking like that, that they were on a mission. I don't know, it was funny. I couldn't hear anything that happened outside because it was a nice hotel we were at and people need to sleep even in cities like that. Probably some special kind of glass or something. I bet no one even looked at her because people with purpose disappear in crowds easier. People who kind of wander around or who are crazy lost stick out right away. It's obvious.

All of a sudden she stopped in the middle of the street like a hundred feet from where my bed was. We were on the second floor, probably. At least that's how it looks when I think about it. Sometimes it's zoomed in and I see things that I know I couldn't see. She stopped though and

looked up but there was no moon. I thought that's what she looked for and part of me still thinks that's why she did it. Like maybe she would've gone home and slept it off had the moon been out. Looking up, she brought her hands above her head, reaching up for something. Then she lowered her hands and pulled out a matchbook.

One match, lit, held until it burned out. Second match, same thing. Studying the flames, staring at them, really concentrating. It was weird. Third match, lit, held for a while, the flame getting smaller, and then she put it in her mouth. I think she swallowed it.

It was the weirdest thing I've ever seen and she kept standing there. She took out one last match and put the matchbook back in the coatpocket. With the last match, she held it in front of her face, then opened her mouth, and she started on fire.

Just like that. Not from anywhere either, but all up in flames in an instant. People started screaming, all the people, but they didn't rush over to help her or even come any closer. It was crazy, kind of like she had this forcefield around her for thirty feet and no one could come near. She undid the buttons on the coat and it dropped behind her and she was bare ass naked--that's what my dad says about it. The weirdest thing, though, and there are only weird things, is that when the coat hit the ground, it wasn't on fire. Of all the craziness that happened, that's gotta be the craziest.

She didn't move from her spot the whole time. Only stood there and burned alive for the whole world to see. I only believe it now because I know it happened. Miracles happen if you believe in them but I don't really think this was a miracle because miracles are supposed to be good things.

Like I said, I couldn't move or even make a sound. I sat in bed and watched and it lasted not even a second, but it lasted so long, sometimes I think it's still lasting. Probably like ten minutes. Ten minutes of real craziness. Like, I can't even explain what I was thinking at the time or even how I feel about it now. It was too much and part of me wishes I never saw it but I'm glad I did in a way.

All the way to ash. That's how long she burned and how fully she burned. The freakiest thing was that I swear to God she saw me. There was a smile on her face the whole time and she kind of looked up a little bit right at me through the window. A face engulfed in flames is a crazy thing but her eyes were at least as crazy. She lit up the street, literally, orange, yellow, and red, but her eyes were blue. Not that they were blue eyes but they were on fire blue. Like, I could see that her eyes were separate flames from the one burning her up and those little flames were blue and they were watching me. I wanted to cry and I thought I was going to pee. It felt so weird. Kind of like that feeling when you're asleep and you feel someone watching you and then

you wake up and someone is watching you. It was like that but I wasn't sleeping.

I told my parents the next morning and they told me that I had a bad dream. Maybe I did. It wasn't in the papers or the news or anything. It was like the whole world thought it was dreaming when it happened and then it woke up and remembered the whole thing. I never forgot it, not for a second.

Trauma is a powerful thing and can be a powerful act of creation. My sisters Lady Wolf and Lady Elk do not agree with me on this. They do not see the purpose of sacrifice and how it may cause change. They think that change must be progression, that it must be out of the past, and so they avoid it. But we are losing the young people. They no longer care as much for the old ways. The outside has cracked our armor after millions of centuries and we are under attack.

Jerry understands that and he only understands it because of the sacrifice he paid. To watch a loved one die is the greatest of sufferings and there is no image more powerful than burying her. Jerry did both. He watched her die and then was forced to bury her with his own hands, with the hands that loved her and knew every bit of her flesh. Jerry went through a great ordeal and he emerged stronger and more resolute. Yes, he was seduced by the outside, by a pretty stranger with european looks and an american body, but he has returned to his place as a firstborn.

Bob and I, the rest of the sisters, too, warned him about consorting with them, but he didn't listen. He believed the lies of that immigrant, Stanislaw. Stanislaw's family have always been unwelcome outsiders who live here. They were the first infiltrators and if we had known then what that seed would reap, we would have cast out his ancestors before they had time to sow. Even his name, Stanislaw, is an affront to our community. Like his parents, he never tried to fit with his brothers and sisters, always had to be separate, different, was not satisfied to play his role amongst us.

People are not alone and they are not singular. We are all connected. We are not all islands, but are more grains of sand in the desert. No two are the same but no two are different in any significant way, and we only exist as a whole. Who we are is what we are. You do not call a desert billions and billions of grains of sand. You call it a desert. Just as you refer to a person by their culture because the culture defines a man or woman more than a name or a face. I can meet a person one thousand times but they may look different or go by a new name. What is constant, however, is who they are. People are not meant to change just as a real culture lasts forever.

We do not die because there is no change. Death is the acceptance of impermanence. Yes, not a one of us is immortal or will last forever, but we, as a whole, are eternal. This place, MotherTree, the Parents, the Siblings, even us, the children, are infinite. That is important to realize.

This is the last haven of the spirit world amongst the living. It is a beacon, a tower, a lighthouse for souls, and we must protect it. Because the Parents planted MotherTree here, we are born to guard Her. There is no purpose but this. This is our role in the Dream and there is nothing but the Dream.

People all over the world are lost and do not know how to be found. They do not understand the nature of reality because they do not believe and they raped the other MotherTrees at the corners of the earth so now there is only our Mother left. If only they had to suffer they might come to understand the Dream, the nature of the real and how ephemeral it truly is. There is a legend that the Siblings take pity on those who suffer more than they can handle. The Siblings reach back from the far reaches of the universe and touch their eyes giving them the vision of the Dream. Children cannot understand the Dream just as the Siblings cannot understand It. It is a legend, the Siblings touching children, but I have never known it.

I believe though.

Mr Gomez did throw a wonderful party. I even got up and danced with the brothers and sisters, taught them Lady Owl's song and dance. Oh, that really was something beautiful. I could feel the connection then, the connection I have forgotten that exists here, the most important connection that we have: the bond of community. I could feel everyone's heartbeat, hear everyone's voice, see

with everyone's eyes: we were one, all of us, together with Mother Tree. It was the closest I have been to the Parents in my whole life, all these many leaf falls, and it is the first time in decades that I have felt that power of oneness, or collective existence. Our ancestors all lived in that way many centuries ago, before america became america and had a dream that tries to choke ours out as if we were a flame and they were a snuffer. We will not diminish or disintegrate or fall apart. That party, the Anniversary, reminded me of the true life of the purebreds and firstborns. Oneness.

We can get there but something needs to change. A powerful action must occur, a great act of sacrifice.

It may be the death of the purebreds.

I shudder to think it but we are all old. We are old and we are out on the edge of the town just as the Siblings are out at the edge of the universe. The Siblings disappeared, so the Parents created the children. When the purebreds disappear, the firstborns will take charge and restoration will occur. The hands are already in place and the beginning steps have been taken. Lady Owl died and Bob discovered his ability and now we have seventh sons and seventh daughters once more. There may never be another purebred after us but the purebred values will last forever if these sevenths can be reached, can be touched.

I believe in the future as I believe in our past.

Yes, I saw the stranger in purebred territory. I do not know why he was here nor do I care. All that matters is that

he is gone. A horrible way to go but only members of our community know the only good way to go. MotherTree and connection bring pure deaths that take us to the cycle and reunite us with the Parents so we can meet the Siblings and be there at the return of the Sibling's Dream.

Such a sacrifice, to die hanging from MotherTree, it would be fitting for a purebred or a firstborn and it is the kind of sacrifice that may be called for.

How he got up there is a mystery, however. I do not know anyone who can climb MotherTree except for brother Mo and only because he was forced to take the stranger down.

No, Mo is not a murderer. No one here is capable of murder. Even the most violent and volatile are incapable of such an act against humanity. It is unthinkable to even suggest or think that one of us could do such a thing.

The first crime committed here will not be murder. Absurd.

Even the animals do not kill in the shade or view of MotherTree. It would be too repugnant and awful.

This place is sacred. It is timeless.

Purebreds do not consort with strangers. I did not speak with the stranger but I did see him at the party.

He is of the cursed kind. Blond hair and blue eyes of the european, not of the world. You cannot trust people with such features. They are the ones who poisoned the rest of the Natives across this continent. It is all they know, sub-

jugation and coercion. That is why outsiders expect that we too are like that because they cannot imagine what it is to even think of a person who is not a vicious bloodlusting animal. They are despicable. Truly. It is why they die so young and live so greedy. They are fill with insatiable desire and all they desire is everything.

The ones who make it here are lost in the world outside because they know somewhere inside that the world beyond here is a nightmare. If the universe is the Dream, then america is the part that is the nightmare. Butchers, thieves, and rapists of land, people, and thought.

Everything good can be perverted by them and everything they touch will stink of a festering ideology, putrid and revolting, feeding on hate and despair.

We exist to preserve at all costs the memory of the Parents and the Dream of the Siblings for there is nothing else.

I started working here in high school. Never thought much of it and never thought I'd still be here in the career path. Something that I'd probably do over if I could, go back in time and change my mind. Hindsight being perfect or whatever. My boss told me that if I stayed on full time, I would be assistant manager, which sounded great at the time. I was going to college, but only kind of, and only because I had nothing better to do. Looking for an excuse, though, I thought I had one. I kept going to school for a while but forty hours of work with twenty hours of class became too much and I stuck it out here. I know, right. Would've, could've, should've, but didn't and that's what counts at the end of the day. It's not the things you wanted to do or the things you planned on doing: it's what you did do. I stayed.

Regret, meh, not my thing. Everyone has a reason to regret any number of things big and small and in between. I regret not sticking through with college but I also regret breaking up with my girlfriend and not going to my dad's

funeral, but the rest of it is fine with me. It's important not to have big regrets but regular size regrets are all right because they don't make you lose sleep. It teaches you things about yourself and about people. Sometimes you get drunk and you hook up with an ugly girl. Regret. You won't do it again. Sometimes you get drunk and start a fight. Regret. You make sure it was the last time. Sometimes you get drunk and miss work. Regret. You keep the drinking outside of the store.

College wasn't right for me, not that it was so perfect here, but at least it was stable. I need that kind of thing, something to lean on because my balance is no good. I have a good thing here. Benefits, low responsibility, money saved, learning the business, good core of friends, stability. We have a new girl, too, and she's real pretty. Dark eyes, dark hair, short, real short, which is how I prefer them. She's Asian, Tsukiko. What a name. Tsukiko. I could say it all day. Her English isn't so good yet but she plans on being here for a while, maybe emigrating. I think she's older than me but it's impossible to tell. All Asians look like they're twenty to me until they turn fifty. Fifteen to forty-nine might as well all be the same age for them. She's from Japan or Korea or China, one of the big ones, not Thailand or Vietnam. Real small nose and breasts, but more curves than you usually see on an Asian. I think about fucking her a lot when she works, hearing her call out in whatever language she speaks. She has this tattoo that goes up her

back and just peaks out of her collar on her neck. No idea what it is or how big it is but it looks badass from what I can see. Makes me want to fuck her more. That's what back tattoos are for. Plus, I think I'm tired of American girls. They all come in here all the time, order their coffee, treat us like shit because we wear a nametag, and then leave. I know if they saw me in a bar they'd treat me different, like a real man. Here, though, behind the counter with this stupid green polo, black apron, and black baseball hat I'm less than nobody, less than a dream you can't remember.

Sometimes I wonder what happens to those dreams, the lost ones. They must go somewhere. Maybe your brain has a storage facility for them. Because you forgot doesn't mean it didn't happen. Anyone who's been drunk knows that lesson and has learned it a thousand times before they remember that blacking out sucks. When I was younger I called it time traveling because I thought being drunk all the time was endearing or cool. Turns out it's not. Most girls don't dig the drunkest guy at the party. They might take a picture with your passed out remains, but you're not going to wake up with your dick in her mouth. Life's not that easy. I don't think Asians like to drink. I think I read that somewhere.

I've been here a long time--now it's my store, moved up to manager--and served a lot of women and fags coffee. I don't drink it myself, but I've made it a living. Ten years here and I know a gay just from the way he orders. The

first sign is that he's here instead of making his coffee at home like a normal guy. Tea means he's a twink for sure and so does anything with ice or ice cream. You meet a lot of people and see a lot of strange things. Queers and college kids that'll grow up to be fags bring their laptops or their notebook and pretend they're writing a book. Probably about suicide or lost lovers. Nine out of ten are about that. Depressing. It's why people don't read anymore. Couldn't even name the last book I read or how long ago it was. Some people hang around to read their book, showing everyone how smart they are with their big thick paperback in one hand and their latte in the other. Moms are the best because they're in and out, always know what they want, and usually get the same thing at the same time everyday. Same with the business guys who come in on their phone-headset-thing. They don't even have time to stop talking, to stop doing business, and they usually drink normal coffee, maybe with cream. That's how you know they're straight. Straight guys like sugar, sure, but they don't get caramel chocolate fat free chai lattes. We get artists in too. That guy who did all the building poems used to come around here every once and a while. He paid in nickels and dimes that you could tell he found outside. This was before he made it, but he was kind of like that even when people like me recognized him and I don't know shit about art. I always thought he was queer and that's probably why he hanged himself. They say he

mutilated himself before doing it, which is faggy, too. Only a guy who hates his body would allow himself to be fucked in the ass.

The one I remember best was this tall thin girl. I saw her first when I just started. She seemed older than me, even looked older than me, which is how I knew she was in high school still and probably a year or three younger than me. That's how girls are: impossible to trust. I don't remember much about that first time except that I was real nervous and sweating a lot. It happened real fast. Flop, drenched, hands shaking, fucked. It wasn't so much that she was hot, but that she was beautiful. I wasn't filled with lust, that would come later, but that I was blown away. Long legs, full lips, piercing wild eyes, like one of those dogs that's like a wolf, and she had the strangest get-up on that I'd ever seen. I don't remember much about it, but I think it was blue. Yeah, a lot of blues of every shade back in the beginning, every day, if I remember right. Real quiet, almost always a whisper, her voice has this kind of musical nature to it. When she talked it was like the world had the volume too loud and she didn't care, like that kind of music that was big a long time ago where all the songs kind of sounded the same and the instruments really fought with each other for space and there would be words that were sung but you had to strain to even catch what it could possibly have been. I kind of dug that. That's how her voice was. Soft and melodic but she looked bored back

then. Maybe sad. Bored is more right, I think, like it had been raining for days and she was staring out the window waiting for it to stop.

For about a year she was like a clock. Every day she'd come in at four and order a small coffee without cream or sugar. Standing by the door, she sipped it and watched the sky or the street or the faces that walked by. That's how she was, always by herself, and always waiting for something that she couldn't yet see. Unless she could see it and was waiting for it or him to turn and see her. Both seem right to me.

For a while she ran around with that Lou guy, the artist. She always paid which seemed rude of him. Another sign of homosexuality. The dresses changed around this time. They still had this kind of craziness to them that made them hard to look at but also impossible to look away from, but she wasn't always in blue. Lots of reds and greens and yellows and all sorts of patterns that just confused the shit out of me. Sometimes I barely knew what I was looking at, but it was sexier. Her hair grew out and it had this real kind of shine to it and a bounce like those hair models. Man, I wanted to fuck her then in her tight dresses that showed all that leg. Sometimes I'd go home and think about her while I whacked off. I didn't even get her naked in my fantasies. Instead, hiked up her skirt, ripped off her panties, if she was wearing any, and fucked. Her visits were much more infrequent in those days. Every other week or

so. Fucking that fag got her to kick the habit. Probably needed it.

She disappeared for a long time and when she reappeared there was a new beau. Normal working kind of guy. Straight this time at least, didn't even drink coffee but he'd go in with her and wait for her order like a real man. She stepped back in those days. The dresses flowed more and the focus was on color instead of pattern and design. Every time you saw her you'd swear it was a summer afternoon or an autumn dusk because she looked like that every day, even in the snow and the rain.

I don't know how she did it but she was always a different person in looks. The girl you saw on Monday wasn't the girl you saw on Sunday and she wouldn't be the one you would see on Thursday. Not only the clothes, but the hair and expression. She was lit up like a Christmas tree, just glowing from ear to ear. I still wanted to fuck her but that's not the kind of thing that crossed my mind. Sounds gay but I wanted her to be like that forever: happy. You could tell especially if you had been watching her as long as I had. There was some real pain in there for a while, the deep kind that doesn't wash away or fade like a normal scar. There was something way down inside her like a heartattack, a secret that would hold the answer to her life and the truth about her death.

This guy was nothing special to look at or to be around. He didn't have an aura the way she did but no one really

does. An aura like hers fills stadiums. A normal aura like mine and his barely fills up the body we have. Not ugly, but not memorable. He had brown hair with green eyes or something like that. Don't remember but he wore a lot of suits. Nice suits.

Like clockwork once more but not all the time. Sometimes she'd be gone for days or even months but when she came back it was always the same time and the same order.

About that time is when I finally became manager. My boss went corporate and I got to take over the store. It was a big deal for me and I had to start going through training and learning how to interview, hire, and fire people. It was all right but I still hate having to tell people they're fired. Let's just say that a lot more girls started working with me, not because I'm a creep, but because I need that. Girls are beautiful creatures and they make the world turn, surely. The right girl can make you do almost anything, even the things you thought you'd never do. Love's like that and there's no love like the love of a good woman. I've been with the crazies and the evil kind. They're fun and exciting and have their own kind of devilish energy to them that makes fucking unforgettable, but it's not the same as the girls who make you want to change your life and become a better person. If fucking a crazy girl is unforgettable, fucking one of these girls is like a religious experience. Being around girls just makes me happy even when I'm not banging one. They have this energy, this magnetism, that

makes you forget about all those regrets you might have or all the ways whatshername fucked you over. I love them. Each and every one.

She returned eventually after a long way away. She returned but only in body. The light was gone from her. That look was back, that look where she walked deep inside your soul if she wanted to and raped your mind. I knew she knew what I had thought about her but I didn't care about that. It mattered because she was beaten down. This time she wasn't waiting for the storm to pass but was waiting for the storm itself. Not the storm of life but the storm of judgment.

I don't even know how to explain what she wore then. I guess they were technically dresses but there was a real kind of demonic design, not for humans. Looking at it made me feel nauseous because it didn't seem to make sense how this line connected to that line or how lace and corduroy could possibly be put right next to one another like that with plaid flannel kind of over it. Monstrosities of fashion like she had given up on any kind of normality. She still got her coffee because no matter what happens to someone they still want their coffee. It makes me feel good to be needed like that, to know that what I do is important. Not in the big picture, but in almost every single person's little picture. I think that makes me a real cornerstone to the big picture because of that. Coffee makes the world go round. It's like the painting's frame.

She was back to every day then. Even after all those years of serving her coffee and all the times I saw her, we still never exchanged more than a handful of words. I think that's why I knew her so well. Probably better than anyone else when it comes down to it. She was the type to keep secret and not say much. That was obvious. But there were other things that you get, real answers, that you'll never get by talking. People's body's don't lie, but their mouths do. She hated the color blue for example. I don't know why she did but it was obvious from the way she reacted to things that were blue, including her own reflection. That's why she wore blue, so that the blue outside of her would be dimmer and the blue inside her would glow but never bright enough to be visible to her. She hated mirrors, too, and they're the reason she stopped wearing blue. A rare skin disease on her hands. I don't know much about medicine or whatever but I knew her palms weren't normal. All red like that and sometimes she'd leave streaks on the wall or handle of the door. They bled without her noticing and I know because I handled her money and watched her hands drip onto the linoleum. There are two real important things that I learned from watching her: 1-she loved that man and they were together for three or five years, 2-there was something inside her that couldn't be forgotten or left behind and it made her live under the constant threat of death.

I knew right away that he was gone and I wanted to say something to her but didn't. I regret that. I didn't have to but I could have. Even though we never spoke, she was my friend. In a true sense because she shared most of her life story with me, from abandoning her father to trying to change the world. She'd still be trying, but, you know.

The guy, her beau, never showed up again as far as I can tell. Maybe if he had things could've been different. I'd like to know what happened, if only for the peace of mind. Hell of a thing that happened and the curious like me always want to know. I've a feeling that he died and that's how it ended because they were the real deal. I know. I see a lot of couples, gay and straight, and you can tell how it'll work almost right away.

Near the end, the dresses she wore were truly a sight. Almost terrifying. The last one I remember had all these patterns that didn't line up or mean anything but they moved like snakes across her body, across the tight hug of that body length dress, and I swear to you on my own life that one of those patterns crawled right up off her and into the coffee that she drank. It was fucked.

One day she never came back and when I heard I felt like shit for days wishing there was something I could do to change it all. Then I hired Tsukiko. It was like a present for good behavior or desert after hearing the worst news available, after losing a dear friend.

I thought about renaming something after her but realized I didn't know her name or even where she was from or what she did. I knew everything but the details. I'll never forget the way she moved, though. It was like a dance at all times, like one of those lavalamps. Always in this fluid motion. I got the feeling that she felt trapped by something and I'm hoping she found escape somehow. You never know what waits for us after the end. Maybe we just dream forever or maybe all the lost dreams finally come to us and we live out eternity in all those dreams we stored away.

Tsukiko works today and I may ask her out because it's important to step in before the competitors. If you wait too long, especially when you look like me, you may never get to fuck her. And it's important to be clear from the start.

I wonder if she dreams of me. Not like the dream is about me, but in the sense that I appear in the dream. I must've invaded her subconscious to some degree after all this time. Obviously she doesn't dream of me the way I do of her but I'm in there somewhere. I have to be because she's still up here like an angel without a voice and without wings.

I wonder what she's dreaming now.

Bob's queer and has been for all his life. He's the only man in town pushing fifty who's never been married or even really had a proper girlfriend. It's easiest to tell when the boys become young men, late teens and early twenties. Bob fauns over them and tries to make up all sorts of reasons as to why they need to spend time with him. He'll bless them, tell them more of our illustrious history, talk to them about their place on the communal tree, explain the cycle in all its metaphysical detail. With the kids he's the same as everyone else. They're his children and he looks after and guides them. We all do that. Being queer doesn't mean he's a pedophile.

Poor Roma doesn't realize it and she thinks that their innocent kisses and twice a year fucking is a sign that he's gonna marry her and have some kids. Poor Roma, never been married either and she's getting to the age where it's dangerous to even try. She doesn't even see the way he hangs around the laborers and brings them drinks and listens to their banal conversation. To her, he's like a god,

someone too special to be anything but perfect, touched by the Parents. Lots of firstborns have that attitude, that they're better than the rest of us, that we owe them something, maybe everything. The purebreds are the worst. Awful old bitches that have been old since the next oldest of us was born. Lady Owl was the last one to die and I was still in the meadows then, hiking up my skirt and trying to keep up with the boys. I was fast and the adults called me Jumper because I was always jumping up to something or down from something, being chased by the boys.

I don't mind saying, but I was pretty and had a real nice figure, even for a girl in this town. The natives stay skinny till they become fat, and they have beautiful full curves till they change to lumps, and then their faces slacken and fill up with fat. Time, it's unkind to women, especially women here. That's partly why there aren't any purebreds left. The outsiders came in looking all novel and staying all pretty until they were ready to die. Us locals start out different but all end up the same worn out, dried up old hag.

Oh, that stranger was murdered, no doubt about it, and I know it was Jerry. Those purebreds have a real stranglehold on Jerry's mind ever since his wife died. He doesn't know they moved her body. I bet he'd think differently about them if he did, but I don't have the heart to tell him something like that. The trick, those purebreds distort the memories of this town and its people. Even our history's

all mangled and if you think about it there's no sense to it. The purebreds have forged their own imagined history onto us and I don't know what their power is, but influence is certainly one of them. That's how they did it with that stranger. Bob was taken out of the equation, Tom and Jerry only passed him in the street, then he was dead. Thing is, Bob was following that young man all night, wouldn't let him alone. Got him drunker and drunker and always by his side.

It's not okay to be gay around here, especially for a man of position like Bob, so he only fucks outsiders. He has a bit of the purebreds in him, that ability to change memory and the truth into whatever suits best. I know that's what he was doing to that outsider, the stranger, trying to convince him to have a go, wink wink, nudge nudge. I don't think it worked.

The truth is that those four were together all night and all morning and then there's a blank spot on the records and the man's hung some hours later.

I think Jerry has it in him, but he needed to be drunk, real drunk, and he needed the push of the purebreds. Lady Elk or Wolf is behind this and they used Jerry. Tom'll do anything to help Jerry and he's big and strong. Doesn't hurt that he's a moron.

No idea how they got him up in the tree without being noticed. Bob probably knows. He's clever, but Tom probably did it. He's the only one in town big enough

and strong enough to carry a grown man up there. Mo could've done it, physically, but not mentally. He's not a psychopath. Not to say that Jerry is, but Jerry's got a loose temper and a hot rage, especially when he's had as much wine as he had that night. Really, it's a mystery how he got up there, but, as far as I can tell, there's no mystery when it comes to why that man died.

Laughing, singing, drinking all night, then blowing in the wind like a damned leaf by the following afternoon. Doesn't add up.

It was hushed up quick, too. The whole town knew about it at the same moment, but the stories were all different until Bob and the purebreds got to it. The edges got rounded off and facts got misplaced or distorted. Walking around town the next morning with a noose around his neck? They don't even give us any credit, assume we're all as dumb as Tom. Makes me sick.

They used it to bring about an anti-outsider stance that picked up with the young ones. It's maddening the way those in charge will lie to those who don't understand. It's a systematic kind of mind control and it's so that the purebreds keep their power. The last couple generations have been less pious than the previous ones and because of the gradual devolution of belief they created a tragedy and tied it to the scapegoat.

There are only lies when it comes to those people but I stay because this is my home. It's irresponsible to leave

because you disagree with something. When I see evil, I try to correct it. My family's pretty old, but we're not firstborn so what I say matters much less to everyone than the purebreds or firstborns, but it still matters and I'll keep speaking until I'm heard.

Victoria made the first move as she tends to do. By this time, they were all friends more or less. A reuniting of long lost and separated cousins.

'Tim,' she said to me, 'it's so nice to finally meet you.' Surprised the hell out of me so I kind of got quiet and smiled. She was pretty in a surprising way. It wasn't that she was truly a gorgeous woman, but that she acted as if her beauty had almost nothing to do with her. Mostly, she was quiet, seldom spoke, but communicated to us, mostly to him, in gestures and looks and smiles and all sorts of ways that I always missed. Apparently she was quite funny but I never caught on. Victoria and him would erupt with laughter and she'd have a coy, guilty expression on her face, but I always missed the humor, even when I was staring right at her.

He was a good guy. One of those Hollywood square chins from the fifties and real thick blondish hair. Always laughing, always smiling, but somehow mysterious. No matter how many times you met him, his face never really

registered right, like it was the first time you were seeing him. It's not that you didn't recognize him but that you didn't remember what he looked like till he was right there in front of you.

Now that I think about it, we never knew much about them, me and Victoria. We knew their names and the kind of places they liked to go to, their favorite drinks, where they lived, but we didn't know them as people. They were just a list of places and superficial likes. Never really got any answers about him in terms of anything and she was hopeless for answer owing to her silence. I didn't even know where he was from or where they met or how old he was. Was. It's a real shame what happened to those two. Kind of like that Shakespeare thing or something.

They were so happy and so clearly in love. Her hand always in his, their bodies always touching, as if distance hurt like amputation. I never saw one without the other and they almost needed one another to exist. If you cornered one of them in conversation too long from the other, the one you were talking to would get distracted and anxious and would make damn near about any excuse to get back to the other half. You'd swear they were really one person and not two, such was the way they fit together. It was seamless, perfect. She was everything he was not and he was all her missing parts, and they both had a lot of missing, I think. People don't behave like them without a few oddities that run miles deep. Canyons of peculiarity.

I really liked him and her, though. It felt good to be near them, made you feel loved, the way it gushed from them like a fount. The room changed when they entered, brightened. When they left, all excitement and intrigue went with them.

And the way they were always heading all over the world, it was like they were spies or something. So many secrets, so good at getting you to talk for hours without them having to even offer a single question and they never answered a question, but it never seemed deceitful or crooked. A pretty disarming effect those two had when they wanted to.

Victoria really looked up to her, too. It was obvious. She was everything Victoria had ever dreamt of being.

I don't even know what he did for a living. Christ.

Like I said though, he was a good guy with real kind eyes. Very unremarkable and ordinary, but so completely himself and so completely different than anyone I had ever met. Those two are walking contradictions. They're your best friends but you don't even know their names. That's the kind of people they were. No information given out, but everything was taken in.

No idea why they split up or even how it happened but I never actually saw either of them again after that. Didn't even know they had split till Victoria told me and I don't think she ever said anything to Victoria about it.

I don't think it was his fault the way my sister does. Those two were meant for one another and why they split is their own business. I think it says something, though, the way it all ended for both of them. Six months apart, too. Him way off in the middle of nowhere strung up from a tree and her lost to the demons that followed her from the beginning, from her mother. No matter how much time passes you don't lose that pain.

I think it was love that did it ultimately. When I think about those two, I think about that scene that's missing from the reel. The one that explains why they separated and why they died.

'I can't live without your love.'

'Our love will kill us.'

'Then let us die.'

I imagine they were in each other's arms off an ocean or two away watching the sunlight slowly filter into the room while tropical birds sang to them.

'I can't lose you.'

'You won't. I belong to you.'

'Please, stay.'

'Even after death, I'll remember you.'

'Live.'

'I love you.'

And the scene fades. The next day upon waking, she's gone.

A part of me knows it was her because it had to be her. He needed her and she needed him, but she was the one who was afraid. She knew that staying together would be the end of them both, but it was the end of him that she couldn't take. It's why she left first. Both times. And it's why he was forced to follow. They would die together or they would die apart.

But, I mean, when it comes down to it, I never even knew them. In a way, they were never even here. It was just a dream that someone told me about that I forgot.

It was their dream and it was none of my business.

I was drunk and he was new. I walked up to him to see what he would do.

'Hi.'

He turned his head, looked me right in the eyes, 'Hey, what's your name?'

'Cecile. A pleasure.'

'I hope so.' He took my hand and led me to the dance-floor. Garlands hung from corner to corner, from steeple to star, and we danced. His breath was sour from too much wine and his feet were loose from it, but he had a quiet grace and composure. Never looking down at his feet or down at my breasts, he held me by the hips, low, with fingertips touching my ass, and we moved with the music, his eyes always on mine. Bright blue, blond stubble, he came from a painting of vikings. He smelled like nothing I'd experienced, like a memory of the world beyond here, an artifact from the real world. He stepped from one realm to the next but never lost his footing. His hands were

soft but persuasive, guiding me across the floor, telling me more than an hour of conversation.

He knew women. Not in the way that he had been with a lot of women or that he was manipulative, but that he understood us. It means he was in love.

Everyone talks about how he was so happy and how weird it was he killed himself.

I didn't think he was happy. He didn't seem happy. Laughing, singing, and dancing, obvious signs of glee, but those were for us, not for him. It came from outside of him, not from inside. His heart beat in all the wrong directions for the kind of mad bliss us locals had that night.

We danced for what seemed a long time, but was maybe only an hour. No words passed between us then, but I felt that I knew him and I understood right away that he knew me, could see me, was watching my eyes, not in the way nervous guys do because they're afraid we'll catch them looking down our dress, rather he did it because he knew where I was, where my heart was.

He was laughing and drinking with my daddy and his brother and Bob earlier and later and that's what everyone remembers, that he had such a good time with some real firstborns, which is rare for a stranger. It's not what I remember. I remember his pale skin and how soft his face was even with the stubble. I remember that otherworldly smell that I sometimes dream about now. I remember that

the time I spent with him was gone too fast and that my body could barely be contained by his hands.

I wanted him, but he didn't even notice, and it made me want him more.

He was in love. Not with me and not with this place.

They say that people only get here by being lost and that's what he seemed. Somehow, he let his love get away. His heart was broken over it. I could hear it, the way his blood pumped like tears flowed, inconsistent and wavering.

He came here or ended up here because he couldn't forget. I don't think he wanted to. For him there was no escape from the past, only the inevitability of it. The pain was deep in him, like he was cleaved in two.

Lady Wolf says that the Siblings do not exist as ones but as halves. Or They did before. Two must come together in order for Them to be whole. She said that's why a man and woman love and come together. We are two halves of the whole. The Parents are whole but They made the children not in Their likeness, but in the likeness of the Siblings who They missed. It's even in the stories, but only covertly. The Parents are never referred to as mothers or father, only as Parents, while the Siblings are sometimes called Brothers and Sisters. It's the same reason why all the children are shared by the adults. There are not mothers and fathers, but there are parents. And then the kids are often referred

to as the brothers and sisters until they become adults. It's why the stories are so important.

It was clear that he had lost his other half and that he could barely breathe without her. It's times like that that I wish I was a purebred instead of only a firstborn. Purebreds can know what's in a person's heart, not in the empathetic or compassionate way that anyone can understand another person, but they can see people's memories.

In a way, it felt like he was doing that to me, like he was knowing me without speaking because he could see everything, even the things I wanted to hide. It made me embarrassed, but I wanted him so bad that I would have given him everything. He was perfect in a way. Not particularly handsome, very foreign, which some girls really dig, but he became so pure and timeless in the time that we spent dancing.

I wish I could remember what he looked like instead of only the shades of him. Blond, blue, pale, there's nothing more to him but a list of adjectives, but there was so much more and I longed to know. I think I was wet from the heat of his hands on me, the force of his touch, the way he spoke right to my very body and soul. It drove me crazy, but it broke my heart, too. To see this stranger, so lost, forlorn, and devastated, forced to watch an entire community have one of the most memorable nights of its history. He was too kind to be sad.

It was the kind of thing that made a girl fall in love.

Bob stole him away from me and kept us separate the rest of the night by constantly being around. He was probably afraid that I was going to fuck him. He knew I wanted to. Everyone knew, probably, except for my daddy and uncle. They wouldn't notice me fucking unless they were in the room, such is their belief in my purity.

I didn't go see the body when I heard the next day. I almost ran straight there with everyone, but the thought disgusted me. Not so much that he was dead, but the fact that he had become spectacle, that he was made display for all the town. It wasn't right. None of them cared either, and then they all started saying that stuff about him, how evil outsiders are and the abomination of the act, that he was absurd, killing himself when he was so happy. None of them understood because none of them wanted to understand. Everyone became real closed off to strangers for a long time. People around here are still pretty wary of them.

I still make the effort, though, to welcome outsiders because they give me a chance to see the dream outside of this one, to see the reality of the vision, to see the dreams inside the Dream. America's not a nightmare, but a place unburdened by the past. A place where the future is born and the present shines, not because of an abstract promise of connectivity, but because each person has a dream and through their history they have been able to connect these dreams together to make a dream that encompasses everyone and everything.

This town is a mausoleum for memories and a burial ground for dreams.

There is only the Dream here and it leaves no room for others.

It starts to feel like fate and you almost want to believe but the preordained is a lie. There are worse things than lies. Sometimes the truth is the worst thing a guy can hear and he'll spend, say, five years trying to forget it. Besides, the truth of something doesn't matter nearly as much as the belief in something. Belief matters more than all else. It's like that poet said, If one believes, miracles occur. Miracles can come from lies often as easily as from truths. It's like god. No one knows if god exists or not, but, if you believe in god, you'll choose a certain kind of life just as if you don't believe you'll live a different kind of life. It doesn't matter if they're both lies, and they probably are, what matters is the lie you believe in. I choose to believe in the lies that I told myself about her even though I know better.

It seems significant, meeting the same person for the first time on three different occasions. What I mean is that she was never the same person, even in looks. Time does that, though, changes people, changes everything. We only

count years to show how different we've become from who we used to be. We, I, whatever. It's why we do that, too, talk in the plural when we're really talking about ourselves or we'll say You when we mean I. It's a lie to separate me from the truth about me that I'm going to tell to you. Linguistic acrobatics. Language was made so that we could lie to one another, and what greater invention could there be? If people told the truth, nothing would ever get done. There'd be no capitalism, there'd be no America, there'd be no EU, there'd be no Cultural Revolution, or Holocaust, or physics, or Climate Change or politics, or civilization and there might not have even been any war. What that means is that history wouldn't have happened. We would still be small collectivist cultures, real insular, and we would exist now as we did for thousands of years. Humans, through all the centuries of meddling, have never really improved life, they've only made it different. Life now is no better than it was when Rome ruled the world, but we have computers and cars and we can create enough light to blot out the stars. Everything is different because time changes all things. Even god.

I knew her first when we were prememory. Our lives then were nothing but emotions, memoryless and languageless, but we could propel ourselves around. I don't remember learning how to walk or crawl or even speak, but we did all these things together. I've seen the pictures, which is why I can remember at all, and I've heard

the stories endlessly. Mum's kind of boring but she finds amusement in everything so the exact same story told the exact same way doesn't get old for her to tell or to listen to. She's easy going that way. It's nice.

The pictures, stuttering steps and smiles, big toothless ones, little curls of black wisping off her head, blue eyes that took up her whole face next to my black tufts that sprouted asymmetrically on my head. That was our first date, playdate. There are some more pictures from those memoryless times, costumes, fingerfood, bibs, bottles, sippy cups, shared toys, all that. Then the act happened, the act that couldn't be taken back, the act that set her whole life in motion, in that topsy turvy cycle that brought her from an angelic little girl in the midwest to an angel of death traversing timezones like she feasted on them.

After the funeral, she and her dad disappeared from our life. I didn't even remember her, but I had the vaguest of sensations like I used to have a person beside me at all times, kind of like the sensation of a forgotten dream. I knew I had a dream and knew it existed upon waking, but, two minutes later, there's nothing but the fogged afterglow of images and emotions and sensations. I didn't even know I had the dream until much much later.

We moved and I began junior high as a new guy. It was easier that way because everyone was a new guy or girl. People had the elementary and middle school friends still, but there were at least one hundred new faces to every

person. It's easy to blend in and fit in when everyone's searching for someone that they can't recognize because they haven't met yet.

I met Milly the first week of class because she was pretty. Even back then, I always sat next to the first pretty girl I saw. Milly. Long black hair and shallow black eyes that showed me myself whenever I looked at her. Clothes of radical and conflicting nature draped from her skinny frame and it appeared as if someone had thrown three people's closets at her, such disarray and confusion of symbols. It worked, made her stand out, not that she needed it, but her behavior and her style went together, a sort of erratic brilliance that tiptoed on the precipice of absurd and frightening. We took to one another right away and then I met her through Milly and all three of us became musketeers. The first time I met her, though, I became uncomfortable the way she looked at me, right in the eyes and not speaking, like she was peeling back my skin and investigating every molecule inside me. She had that effect on people, those eyes.

Milly acted like the leader but it was clear who made the decisions and defined who we were. She only wore dresses, even then, of violence and boldness, colorful, aggressive, and swarming with design, and her hair was constantly changing, sometimes black, sometimes grey, sometimes white, sometimes mohawked, sometimes half shaved, sometimes whole shaved. Unlike Milly, her radical

appearance was at complete odds with her external behavior. Quiet and subdued and astonishingly smart, never shy or humble or nervous: it made her easy to hate but impossible to ignore. She already had a reputation throughout the school, even at the high school. She drew and her drawings won competitions. Real ones, but they didn't hold any interest for her. For her, the drawings were like fingernail clippings. No one cherishes the parts of their nails they cut off and no one saves them and no one really gives them any thought at all because it's just something that people do one step above involuntary action. That's what her drawings were to her, things that she did, without thinking, without caring. More than that, though, she was known for the tragedies and the suicides.

'Did she really cut herself up that young?'

Milly sighed in that way that says I don't want to talk about it, 'Yeah, in first grade. They were safety scissors so no one thought you could do that, but no one had ever tried before, probably. I was there when it happened.'

'What happened?'

Another sigh and she looked back and forth, up and down the hallway. 'Well, everyone was supposed to be cutting out these shapes for Mother's Day. Hearts and stars and things that made us think of our moms, cakes and dresses and flowers and whatever. Our class was kind of big so no one noticed for a while because she never made a sound. Imagine that, she didn't make a sound, right? I

asked her about it one time but she just kind of did that thing with her eyebrows that gave me every reason I needed but that I never remember. Does she do that to you?'

'I guess.'

'It's like, she motions all this stuff and I understand completely what she's telling me or what she means, but when I try to remember later I can't, even though I know it mattered. That's like how she told me why she did it. But she pulled her skirt up high and kind of started slashing at her thighs and then chopped at her wrists and then dug that dull blade into her leg until it opened up and she tried to cut a heart out of her own skin. There was literally blood all over her but she wasn't crying and didn't even look like she cared.'

'Why did she do it?'

Milly shrugged, 'The same reason she always does it.'

'I thought those were lies.'

'Depends. They're all lies but they're mostly true. First grade, third grade, fifth grade. Every odd year, so maybe again this year.' Milly smiled and winked, pushed me a little and coughed.

'Why does she do it?'

'Ever noticed her palms?'

'What?'

'Her palms. They're red. Like blood.'

'What?'

'That's why.'

'Why are her palms red?'

'Yeah. Why?'

'What?'

'Why everything.'

She didn't try to kill herself that year, but she did the next and the one after that. I forget which, but one year she dove out of a tree headfirst into about a four feet of water. Everyone heard about that because of Billy and Anthony and how Billy saved her life.

Milly said that no one could save her life.

'So she's doomed?'

Milly scowled at me and rolled her eyes and made a noise with her throat that meant Fuck off. 'She's perfect.'

She and Milly had a thing they would do that they let me see that first year I knew them. Milly closed her eyes and she put her palms to Milly's ears. Usually they'd be lying down or Milly would find a way to suspend herself above the ground. Then, she whispered to Milly, whispered images and scenes and even sang or hummed lightly. The first time I saw it, Milly was suspended, her feet on the bed, her upper back on the arm of a chair and she was wearing this yellow sundress that looked like someone had attacked it with a paint brush and she bent over her so that they were face to face with Milly's head suspended in air. I didn't get it and it weirded me out. I couldn't hear what she said to Milly but I saw her lips moving is how I knew. Milly started quivering all over after a few minutes, then biting her lip,

and then it was over and Milly was breathing really heavy and went to the bathroom. Her ears were red like fresh blood. I didn't know it then, but Milly had an orgasm.

'It's the greatest feeling in the world and I come every time.'

'Can I try?'

Milly made a face that said Fuck off. 'It's up to her.'

'Can't you do it?'

She laughed. 'Only she can do it.'

'Why?'

'I know. She's perfect.'

Later, they let me hold Milly's shoulders while they did it and I finally was able to hear what she said. I closed my eyes when Milly did and listened as best I could. I went away, but not far. I was still aware of the room and the girls, but I could see what she wanted me to see. I just couldn't feel it. And that's the crux of the matter. Sensation. I had the sights and sounds but not the feeling. For me, it was like watching a movie, a beautiful esoteric film, but for Milly, it was another life. Milly called it dreaming and I guess that's what it is. She gives you a dream, makes you live in it so fully that you experience everything, not as images and sounds and textures, but as if it's truly happening to you. Milly said it was worse if she was high or tripping and she said that tripping sucked compared to dreaming.

I didn't get it then.

Back then, for me, it brought the places to me, the way films work. Sights and sounds, which are quite powerful and they did move me, but I was getting only the edge of the true experience. If the dream that she creates for Milly was the universe, then I was a quasar. A part of the universe, but only just. And it was a universe if Milly was to be believed.

'She doesn't dream.'

'When she sleeps?'

'Yeah. Not once.'

'Everyone dreams.'

'Not her. Not ever. And it's not like she dreams but can't remember. She just doesn't.'

'How do you know?'

'She told me.'

'And you believe that?'

A fixed gaze, 'More than anything.'

'What about when you guys dream together?'

'That's not how it works. She doesn't dream. She puts the dream inside me. She creates it. Out of nothing, she creates the universe.'

Milly and her did more than dream together. They never told me but I knew. She loved Milly and Milly adored her. At the end of the night, they always sent me home, but she always slept at Milly's because she didn't want to go home to her dad and because she couldn't sleep without Milly. She gave Milly a million dreams and an

infinite amount of orgasms, both in and out of dreams. They got a reputation for that but I don't think anyone ever actually saw them together. She never really liked to be kissed anyway.

We kind of ended up dating in a way. Milly was jealous but not really. They could speak to each other in ways I didn't understand and it was obvious that she didn't care that much about me, at least not nearly the way she cared for and loved Milly. For one thing, she never gave me a dream. No matter how many times I asked or begged, and asking and begging usually made her mad so I quit.

It started as an act of seduction.

'Marty?' She breathed into my ear when we were holding one another, drunk out in the woods by the train track. It was our usual hangout place because Milly lived nearby and the woods were deep and big enough to get lost in and not get caught by adults.

'Yeah?'

'Do you love me?' Her hair and dress were pure white as if made for a wedding but the dress was short and cut low though she was mostly ribs with tiny mounds for breasts.

My heart skipped beats and I was so nervous I started to shake all over and my face was hot. I couldn't answer so I looked past her.

'Don't you?' She pulled back and put a finger to my chin, softly. I could just make out her face, eyebrows turned up, a sorrowful look, and the irises of her eyes were somehow

bright under the moonlight. Those wolf eyes and that wolfmoon, pale and icy, like fever dreams.

'Yeah.' I meant it but it made me sad to say and I was still shaking and by then I was sweating.

She put her palms to my cheeks and kissed me.

I wanted to die, I was so shocked, and I thought I was passing out, but she pulled me back through the blackness, out of the abyss and said, Wanna fuck me on the train track? but not with her voice or even her mouth, I just somehow knew it from the flash of her eyes, the turn of her chin, and the scrunch of her nose.

We did and it was the closest I had been at the time to one of her dreams. She controlled my every movement, from my tongue to my dick, I was the marionette and she was the puppeteer. It lasted one minute or it lasted an hour but it was black when we started and it was black after we were done, but, in between, there was a supernova and everything was white and blank and I honestly wish I remembered it because it was my first time and, in a sense, my only time, because there has never been a time like that since. It was perfect. She is perfect. I saw angels singing and the world being brought into creation and the Tree of Life, but mostly I saw her irises, those rings of blue like a winter's sky and the smell of sweat and a summer dusk.

'Took long enough,' Milly fell over when we returned. 'I've been drinking by myself this whole time and you guys just fuck on the tracks like hobos.'

She smiled at Milly and kissed her and they kissed and kissed and I watched and I never really knew what was happening when I was with them. Even still, to remember, to think about it all makes it make less sense. Milly started to moan and I knew they weren't kissing and I just watched until Milly smiled at me and said, Don't be gay, so I lost myself in both of them, not knowing whose tongue belonged to who, not knowing who I touched and who touched me, losing grip of which skin was mine and which was not, who I was and who I was not, if I was watching or if I was fucking, and there was this brilliant light and this shimmering blackness but always this purging pale fire that surrounded our existence and when it was over I was in my bed and the sun was coming up and I had never been so thirsty in my life.

The next day, we visited her in the hospital because she stabbed herself and would've died if her dad hadn't come home. That was how life was with her around. One day is the greatest of your life, and the next is the scariest, every day following the broken logic of a dream.

Despite the suicides, it was the most amazing I had ever felt in my life, every day with them. Life was a constant adventure with Milly at the helm but she was the ship, the sea, the sky, and everything else. She was our angel, guiding us through life, through the life she created for us, the identities she gave us, and then the dream ended only four years after it began.

Funny how those trains were so important to that place. She loved them. Milly told me about how the first time she gave her a dream was on those tracks. The first time she had sex with a boy was on those tracks. The first time she escaped her past was on those tracks, too.

Before she left, I asked her if she remembered me.

'I never forgot you.'

'You remember all that? Learning to walk and talk and the town we used to live in?'

'No.'

I wasn't there when she got on the train and I didn't even know she was going to leave. Milly was there, though. Milly was always there, even when we had sex. Except for the first time, it was always all three, and mostly just them. I think she only tolerated me because Milly liked me so much. She never cared if I was around or what I had to say or even what I was doing. I was allowed to stick around by her and she was amused by me, I think. Nothing could've been more perfect for me. I loved every moment with her and I loved her. Truly.

Milly told me that she had never looked more beautiful than the moment they kissed goodbye. Her hair was black and cut up unevenly, long on one side and in the front but the bangs pulled back on her head, her dress was the same blue as her eyes, and she smiled.

Me and Milly stayed together for the rest of high school, but we only had sex a few times. Milly was lost without

her, crumbling apart, really. Once so vibrant and alive, she became gloomy and retreated into herself often.

I never thought about Milly in that way and she never loved me the way she loved her. Our hearts both belonged to her, but Milly and her were really bound together, and it ruined poor Milly.

Milly died a few months back, right around the time this all started. My mom told me because she read it in the paper. An accident, drowning in a river. Milly never seemed sad, but I thought she probably killed herself. That's not how the story read, emphasizing the accident, but she was out there by herself in the middle of the night half an hour from campus. I don't think she died out of sadness and I don't think that's why people kill themselves to be honest. Depression is rarely a good reason to do anything and it's certainly no reason to die and it usually keeps you from doing anything. People suicide, not out of sadness, but out of frustration or out of memory or for a dream. Usually that dream is love. But, in Milly's case, I think it was more than just love. I think it was the dream, the dreams that she gave to her, the lives that were caught inside of her, the universe of the dream. Milly couldn't handle life without her, though she persisted for a long time. I think it's when she finally heard the news that she was dead that the dream ended. Not just the dreams that were given to her, but her own dream, the dream that was before her and the dream that lasted as long as she lived. I didn't know her

anymore and I felt terrible hearing it. I think I'm only still alive because I never really understood.

In a different time, in a different place, as a different person, she came back into my life. A decade after she left without saying a word on a train through time, she came like a cold breeze and heavy drops of rain.

'I remember you,' whispered to me and I looked up from my book to a woman with barely blonde hair trimmed above her ears and close to her head with bangs that fell like leaves into her eyes that have cool flames of blue circling the pupil.

'Is it really you?'

She nodded her head and I jumped up and hugged her for way too long but it had been ten years, almost half our lifetime.

'I can't believe you're here. What are you doing here? Do you live nearby? I live over on 10th.' I couldn't stop talking and she stood there looking me right in the eyes and I could tell that she already knew everything that had happened to me. Her dress was absurd to be honest. I couldn't make sense of what I was looking at. A Rorschach rorschached into itself over and over again over the blue fabric. It was like staring into a mirror that was reflecting a mirror that reflected another mirror that reflected yet another mirror and so on forever. It made me dizzy and my legs were weak from being so close to her and she could tell right away that I still loved her, I know she could, the way my heart beat

too loud and the way my body turned to gelatine and the way my eyes glassed over. I was already lost and it had only been minutes since she had reappeared.

'Sorry, I can't stop talking.'

'Oh,' soft and sweet yet sonorous, her voice was the same, like a bell dipped in honey. Her eyebrows danced and her lips tightened and I still understood her language, what she was saying to me, the perfect way she communicated every thought without having to say a word.

We walked around the city that she knew as if she built it. She was a designer and world famous and she was surprised I didn't know, but understood that fashion and art were never my thing.

She was the same person and the same body, but the sadness had begun to take over. For all of the wondrous times we had in junior high and high school, she had been miserable and constantly balancing on a razor's edge, trying to die as often as possible, but it was different now. Her life was a glass cart on a hill, plunging down towards a brick wall that would shatter it to pieces.

She was in love and he was gone. That's all I know, all I ever knew about it.

We spent the night together, but we didn't have sex. Lying beside me, she was incredibly cold, not like the dazzling star I remembered.

'Do you remember me?'

She looked at me, I remember you.

'Remember how me and you and Milly used to be?'

Yes. I remember everything.

'This is the first time we've been like this, without Milly.'

I miss her.

'I missed you.'

You love me.

I pulled her tighter to me and she rested her arm on my stomach and her head on my chest. I'm fatter now, and I was embarrassed by it, because I used to be thin, like a swimmer, though I was never really handsome. College and the sedentary life of an office salesman got to me. Hell, even my hair was kind of thin by then. If she minded, she didn't let me know.

'I don't think I ever stopped loving you.'

I know. I can feel it.

'What has your life been all these years?'

Many things. Many different things. Many beautiful. Many horrible.

She smelled like the train tracks, like the sun coming up. I ran my hand through her hair, 'You seem sad.'

Yeah.

'What happened?'

She sat up, 'Do you want me to give what I never would?'

My mouth went dry and I had no words.

She turned her head to me, 'You always wanted me to give you a dream, but I've only one dream left. Do you want it?'

I nodded.

She stood on the bed with me in between her feet, then sat on my chest. So light, so thin, her bones were like those of a bird, weightless on my chest, her bony ass against me. Her hands covered my ears and they felt moist, then she looked into my eyes, her face inches from mine, and told me to close my eyes. I did.

No words. It was different from before. There were no words between us. Instead, she sang a song without lyrics, just the melody. Soft, a lullaby, but complicated, as if she were singing from a choir, and it was desperate, sorrowful, raging but tranquil. It was otherworldly and vast, but not expansive, rather it was vast in emptiness. There was an endless space and she sang endlessly but there was nothing inside. There was no color. There was no light. There wasn't even blackness. It was as if the sun had gone dim and the moon had turned black. The universe, but the universe before there was anything, before there was a sun or a moon or a sky or an earth or people. It was the universe before god. I did not exist in it, but I could feel it, the hollowness, the coldness, and there could be nothing more and nothing existed nor had anything ever existed nor would anything ever exist, and then there was a spark that expanded and blazed across the entire space, filling every last inch of it with something that did not exist and could not have even been imagined before it occurred. Lifetimes shot through me and I was lost in eternity, faces and places,

angels sang and devils screamed. At the center of it was a ring like the rings that circle planets but it was blue, almost colorless, but vaguely blue, and at the center of the ring was a face, a man's face, blond hair and bright blue eyes with a jaw chiseled out of a mountain and he could have been everyone or no one, such was the anonymity of his features, but he stared at me and I could feel him knowing me and I was afraid, my very cells being pulled apart and I retreated out of the circle and the world caught fire and it was burning alive but I was damp from the rain that fell until the earth fissured and swallowed entire countries while the rain changed from water to fire and the holocaust continued and ripped across every continent and an angel appeared with the eyes of a wolf and silhouette figure that was just distinguishable from the blackness of space but incredibly vivid from the juxtaposition of the inferno and the utter impenetrability of its blackness, but I knew the angel, knew her from before there was such a term as existence, before light or dark, before anything but the absence of everything, and she saw me and she spoke to me and my heart stopped, and I was crying in bed and she let go of my ears and whispered to me, cooed to me, It's okay, it's okay, the dream's over, and I opened my eyes and I was there with her, the real her, and I hugged her and my pillow was wet with blood and tears.

It took me about half an hour to come back to reality and to calm down, but I managed.

'What was all that?'

Her head was on my chest again, but she was facing me, her chin on the back of her hand, and she said without words, The end.

'Whose blood is this?'

Not mine.

'But your palms.'

Believe me.

'But there's a beginning. It was beautiful.'

If not for that, there would be no end.

'I could feel everything, every emotion or sensation that existed. I spoke with stars and skies, tasted moonlight and bathed in silence. I don't understand it.'

Me neither.

'But you made it.'

No.

'Then where did it come from?'

It didn't come from anywhere.

'I don't get it.'

Then no one ever will.

'Hm?'

Yeah.

I touched her face with the back of my fingers. 'It's him, isn't it?'

A tear rolled down her cheek.

'What happened?'

thing could not exist before hers. It was like her dream was falling out of her one drop at a time and she couldn't keep it contained, couldn't hold it back, and no longer cared.

She said nothing until I heard her say, just barely audible, I remember you, and I love you.

I don't remember falling asleep, but in the morning she was gone and there was no trace of her except the blood on my pillow.

I knew she wasn't talking to me just like she wasn't crying with me. She was in her own plane and I was in mine and they only met at the very boundary. It's why I never mattered to her and why she never gave me her dreams before then, because she didn't care, because I didn't exist as anything more than a shadow. Even when it was the three of us, it was really just them and I was their ghost. It's why she showed me that dream, because I didn't know her and I didn't exist. To her, it was just whispering into a dark room, but, for me, it was everything, and it was the only moment that I knew her, that I felt connected to her, even though she was a dimension away.

Whoever he was, she loved him, she remembered him, she needed him.

I believe in her and I love her, but I will never understand or be a part of her.

She is an angel and this world was not hers just like I am a man and this world was the one that was meant for me, not the world of dreams and memories.