

Looking for Our Bones

I have been friends with Iris Petermeyer for more than twenty years, and if I occasionally hold her in contempt, it is the gentlest sort of contempt. We met as undergraduates at Vassar and have been forcing ourselves to smile at each other over coffee ever since. Even when our disciplines diverged, and she jetted off to observe bonobos in Zaire while I exhumed corpses from the muck of Denmark, we kept in touch and read each other's drafts. Now we both have our own editors and contribute thoughtful quotes for the back of each other's book jackets.

She is a reed-thin woman, with prematurely gray hair that hangs freely down her back, and she is always announced before she appears by the clattering of the stones and trinkets strung about her neck. Her personal philosophy is relentlessly positive and she has a canny eye for monetizing it. She has sold more books than I ever will, is currently embroiled in negotiations over a movie, and I will always wonder how many of *my* books were sold only through her enthusiastic endorsement.

Iris's area of expertise is sex, strictly in the academic sense. She has applied her knowledge of social hierarchy and interaction among apes in order to speculate about prehistoric relations between man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, and many other fresh and exciting configurations. She knew how to create a pleasant little scandal, a storm in a coffee cup, without alienating her reader or bringing about any uncomfortable self-examination. According to her, our hunting and gathering ancestors were likely peaceful. Men and women enjoyed equal status within the loose familial bands. Interpersonal conflicts were resolved through liberal application of casual sex. Iris always ends her books with a collection of tips on how to bring a little bit of the harmonious past back to your marriage or relationship. This may be part of why her books sell so much better than mine do; I neglect to include advice on how to commit murder.

You've almost certainly read one of her books, but perhaps you've also heard of my latest work, the one that continues to flit on and off the bottom of the NYT Bestseller list: *Bloodshed in the Age of Flint and Fire*. Iris lets her positive energy flow through her body and onto the page, reassuring her faithful readers that the urge to fuck is a happy and fruitful one, programmed into their DNA. I, on the other hand, harness my morbid streak and write about crimes that occurred when the concept of crime was still young and fresh. I started writing for the popular audience in my late thirties, newly let go, hoping to collect modest royalties for a book or two until I could find a new position at a university. What I discovered was that the more morbid and dramatic I became, and the more details I twisted to paint our ancestors over with gore, the greater my audience grew. We human beings see the envy of Cain in every shattered cranium, and we wouldn't have it any other way. Iris and I only give the world what it wants. What does it matter to me if the two of us are called frauds and panderers by critics who would never enjoy one tenth of our success?

The greatest irony is that, according to the data collected by our publishers, the same demographic buys both of our books. The debate over whether humans are essentially lovers or brutes has continued for centuries without resolution. America's 25-55 year-olds with bachelor degrees have reached a surprising consensus. We are whatever is championed in the book we are holding at this very moment. We switch out our hearts and minds like we switch out cassette tapes.

This isn't to say that I hate my own work. I keep my books lined up on a high shelf in my study and sometimes pull one down for the evening, after I've had a glass of wine or two. The texture of the pages is pleasant, as is the sight of the stark black ink on the creamy paper. I become absorbed in my own narratives of wide-hipped, broken-toothed young woman laid to

rest in the swamps, smiling at my own dramatic turns of phrase with pleased embarrassment. Even I am not immune to my own spell, and while I read I sometimes become quite convinced that I have hit upon the truth: humans are hateful and vicious creatures, always ready with a club or a knife, either held in front or concealed behind our back. I had my own school years as evidence of that.

It was only a few nights ago that I took down *Bloodshed in the Age of Flint and Fire* for the first time since its publication, and it fell open onto the dedication page. *To my mother* it read, first and foremost, and with her death as recent as it is, I became seized with sentiment. My mother was truly exceptional, a woman who loved me fiercely, without reservation, in a way that no one else had entirely anticipated. She bought me a BB gun for my sixth birthday, edited the first drafts of my books with a far harsher pen than Iris's, and never thought of me as a mistake, even if she refused to tell me the story of my father, or even give me an outline I could fill in with prurient details. *Thank you to Drs. Burnham and Lyle, for the kindness and the firmness of your guidance in my formative years...Special thanks to Dr. Yuslaf for both access to her private collection and many hours of wonderful conversation...In memoriam of my dear friend Dr. Kishimoto...And of course, love and good wishes to my oldest and dearest friend, and the far greater wordsmith, Iris.* As I continued to read, I imagined the names as a column of shining faces, radiating an air of approval. Of course, I was thanked in similar terms in their books, though I rarely merited the place of honor on Iris's acknowledgments page. Praise is no less a currency than a bit of shell or a dollar bill, and we traded with it freely.

Yet when I read the words *oldest and dearest friend*, it was not Iris's beaming, bespectacled, rather matronly face that I pictured, but entirely different features upon an entirely different face. This one was youthful, narrow, and intent. I knew it at once. It was the face of a

girl named Helen Moore, who I'd shared books with and shot at cans with for the span of about a year, and who could truly be called my oldest friend. Before her, I'd never wanted or needed a friend. After her...I don't think that I was particularly changed. My nature has been much the same since birth, and the only thing that has differed over the years is how much I choose to acknowledge it.

Officially, even thirty years later, Helen is still considered missing. However, I know that she is dead. I could even provide you with a general location. How exactly she died is beyond my knowledge, but I have a well-developed imagination, and can conjure up more details. I'd like to believe that it was a death by water, and that part of her is still resting at the bottom of the Cape Fear River to this day. I can imagine her sturdy forty centimeter femur, encased by chance within the layers of silt instead of being swept out into the great Atlantic, but without the bone itself to brandish like a club, my claims lack even the rigor to be published in one of my books. I would have put together an expedition, trawl the bottom of the river with nets and pull her up. Even then, the book would not fly off the shelves. She was an immature female, approximately thirteen years old at the time of death. The skull and ribs would be intact, with no indicators of traumatic breakage or ritual deformation. She was never pregnant. No bronze adornments found near the body. There would be no indication that a crime took place, and a corpse without a crime is unremarkable.

To speak of Helen's death I must delve even deeper into the muck of my past, and no one has time in their day for that. My readers have no interest in my Wilmington girlhood, in the humiliations I endured, in the mason jars of dead wasps I collected as a girl and rediscovered as I cleaned out my dead mother's attic. I look back for my own sake alone.

The only way to entangle it all is to start the story at the beginning. I was eleven when I first became aware of Helen's existence. I remember our first meeting quite well, because of the impression that she left on me. I was holed up the library of the school I attended through elementary and high school: St. Mary's Immaculate Heart, where I received an excellent education in science, literature, Latin, and pack dynamics. Although I hate to shatter anyone's fantasies, it was not a harmonious environment in which interpersonal conflicts were resolved with liberal application of casual sex. The only label more damaging than that of 'slut' was that of 'lesbian,' and I was stuck with the latter, though I doubt any of them truly believed it. It was only a cudgel.

I spent most of my free time in the library because the librarian, Sister Sophie, had a particularly watchful eye. My tastes ran towards books with large and sturdy covers that I could stand upright on top of a table and use to hide my face. The sisters often praised me for my love of reading, since there was little to praise about my manners or my Latin, unaware that books were only my shield, and that I was happiest spending a Saturday afternoon taking pot shots at blue jays.

I even recall the book I was reading when Helen confronted me. It was a book about the exploration of India. A certain line had me puzzled: *The tiger that has lost its fear of men and dogs becomes a menace*. I had a deep admiration for predators then, and was capable of multiplying the corded muscles and the cold eyes of a house cat by fifty, so I didn't understand why a tiger would have any fear of men or dogs in the first place. I was startled out of these thoughts when the table shook, and there was a great slamming sound, loud enough to rattle my teeth in my skull. When I peered around the edge of my book, a pale, pinch-faced girl was peering back at me. The source of the noise was her book, an even heavier one than mine. I knew

the girl was at least a year above me, since she had on a frilled cardigan over her school uniform, which was a privilege permitted only after graduation from elementary. I also knew that since there had been no reprimand for her gross mistreatment of a book, the librarian had been called away from her post.

The older girls rarely bothered the younger ones; it was a bit beneath their dignity. I still waited in silence for it to begin, assuming that this one was willing to make an exception.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked. I had never heard anything like it. She spoke in a Southern drawl, but a British crispness crept in at the end. Since I didn’t know at the time that she’d spent her summer vacation in London, I wasn’t sure quite how to parse it.

“Eva Fisher?” I said it as if it were a question, which was my habit back then. If I’d been told that my name was not, in fact, Eva, I would have been in full agreement.

“That doesn’t sound Greek,” the girl said, dropping into a chair just as abruptly as she’d dropped her book.

“Why would it?” I asked.

“I thought you might be Greek. I guess I was wrong.”

I was certain she was mocking me, and my face burned. Still, her behavior was strange. Most barbs about my father’s heritage, about my skin that was just a shade or so more olive than was strictly proper, were whispered in a crowded hall, or scrawled hastily on a note that I would find slipped in my locker or my backpack or my shoe. This, alone, was too taboo to discuss openly. So now I waited for her to flee and leave me to stew in the insult. If she lingered, someone might make the mistake of thinking that she was actually associating with me.

The girl, however, remained at her seat, staring down at her book with a furrowed brow. I was able to study her safely. She was very skinny, her form a straight line both in back and in

front. Her hair was long and dark, drawn back into two tight braids. Although she was very still, she gave off an impression of overwhelming energy, like a cat pooling all its strength in its haunches just before it springs. Although she wasn't particularly beautiful or particularly ugly, I couldn't stop myself from staring, because of that.

"If you want to look at my book, you can," she said, without looking up. "It's a compilation of mythology. I've been reading it all week. That's why I thought you might be Greek." The book wasn't the subject of my interest, but since she'd invited me, I stood to look over her shoulder. There was an illustration: a pearly white swan and a dark-skinned woman, entangled with each other. I grew just a bit flustered, and glanced over my shoulder, double-checking that there was no one behind us. This book hadn't come from the school library, I guessed, and I was right. Her father had an extensive private collection of illustrated books (most not quite so risqué), and though Helen wasn't actually permitted to take them out of their home, he was rarely present to enforce his rules.

"My father told me that the myth of Leda and the swan is probably based in truth. Swans aren't so innocent. They're vicious, territorial birds. In their mating season, they're uncontrollable." Another fact about Helen that I would soon discover: she liked to educate. My baffled look was irresistible to her. I think she primed me well to get along with all sorts of academics.

"You don't know the myth of Leda and the swan?" she asked. "The god Zeus took the form of a swan to seduce a mortal woman. Then she gave birth to Helen of Troy. Which is my name, by the way." That was our introduction. I spent the rest of my free period reading over her shoulder. She showed no discomfort around me, and I was intrigued by that. At the time, I thought I was an outcast because of something intrinsically ugly inside me, seeping out through

the pores in my skin, immediately perceptible like a smell or an aura. If she couldn't pick up on it, perhaps there was something wrong with her, as well. When Sister Sophie returned to her post, she could hardly contain her delight at seeing me sitting together with another girl by choice. Seeing that, I decided Helen wasn't so bad.

The next day, Helen came to me in the library again, with a new book this time. This bizarre girl sought out my company, rather than merely tolerating me for an hour or two, and I wasn't about to object. While I was reticent, she shared freely every detail of her life. Her father, who she referred to often as an authority on absolutely everything, was a British ornithologist of some renown, who'd been drawn to Wilmington to study the feeding and mating behaviors of pelicans. Her mother was a native to the Carolina coast who he'd met and settled down with, though he still spent much of his time away, either back in England, or in a tiny shack amidst the rocks, where he could observe his subjects without distraction.

At the time, Helen's background baffled me. Books were my escape, a strictly practical tool, but she had nothing in particular that she needed to hide from: her parents were together and well-to-do, and she had no particular black marks on her reputation. No matter what they thought of her eccentric nature, she got along with the girls in her class, although she had no particular close friends to object to her clinging to me like a barnacle. What then, was the reason for the depths of her solitude and her obsession? Although I considered myself to be quite worldly at the time, I can thank my mother for the fact that I remained innocent about all the other ways a person can be ruined.

I'm in no position to make accusations. A year was too little time, and I never knew her father beyond what she told me of him. Perhaps her precociousness was what drove others away, and then demanded an outlet; a common enough pattern. At any rate, her knowledge of classical

cultures was encyclopedic, and I became a pupil for her one-sided lectures on the pagan religion of the Greeks.

“They really believed all of this, Eva,” she would say, while we sprawled upon the grass. We often exchanged the library for a balmy courtyard, once spring came. Helen needed the sun. “They really believed in gods and goddesses and creatures. What a time it would have been to live in! Giants and nymphs were as good as real.” She was not a terribly good Christian, she confessed to me. Of course she believed in God, but he had no sense of presence for her. She’d never seen a vision of him, or felt his touch, and just as I was just slightly deficient in her eyes for being something other than Greek, God was also lacking in dramatic, mythical flare. I had never been one to believe in God in the first place, so I was of little help in a crisis.

It was through confessions like these that Helen convinced me that she was my friend. You didn’t discuss faith and cosmology with a mere acquaintance, after all, unless you are someone like Iris, and Helen was nothing like Iris. Over the long summer, our friendship truly blossomed. She knew better than to show me to my mother, but my rural home was a paradise for the two of us; all she had to do was give the name of another girl to her mother and escape to my spacious backyard, where we would shoot cans off of stumps together in my backyard until our arms were sore, trading the gun back and forth. The woods and the marsh were our playground, and it was there that I had something to teach her. Although Helen knew a lot about birds, she’d never actually been outside for long, and she wasn’t very strong.

I decided to show her my attic bedroom, before the summer was out.

Perhaps her many confessions built up a sense of obligation in me. Actually, I think I was hoping that if I imitated her, and showed her certain intimate things, I would be able to adore her in the same way that she did me. You see, while I was fond of Helen, and enjoyed her company,

in the same way that I enjoyed watching a dog or a praying mantis go about its day, even a blunt and somewhat oblivious child like myself was able to realize that we were not equals. She chased after me, but I never pursued her. Over that summer, she would often wrap her arms around my shoulders, or plant a flower behind my ear, or tug at my wrist to show me a malformed rock that she thought looked just like a woman's face. I never touched her.

Showing her my room did not bring about the change that I'd hoped for, but I was still pleased to find that she didn't cringe away from my collections of specimens, or shake her head and cluck her tongue like her mother did. I must clarify that I wasn't a sadistic child. I always shot wide of the blue jays, and everything in my collection was dead when I found it. The insects I scraped off of windowsills and wet sidewalks. The bones were mostly from roadkill, skinned and stripped of flesh using methods I'd learned from a book, this one from the public library and not the school one. I remember Helen gazing for a very long time at the bones of a dead cat, which I'd tied together and mounted with wire so that it stood upright. It had been a highly educational process.

"I think it's beautiful," she told me. "As beautiful as any picture in a book."

"Really? I think it's actually pretty awful." Although I was glad that she was pleased with it, I'd never constructed the wretched thing to be beautiful. It had all been a whim, something to do with my hands during long hours of solitude, a commemoration to curiosity sated. I'd never made it for other people to see.

"Oh, it's awful, too," Helen had said. "The poor thing. That's why it's so beautiful."

Did she think that I was awful, too, for creating such a thing? Was that the reason she had been drawn to me to begin with? There is no way of knowing that.

Helen had two older sisters: one of them was boarding in England, while the other was freshly returned. This sister, a worldly young woman who resembled Helen in nothing but looks, had her own car and would let us ride in it with her once the weather grew colder and the woods lost some of its appeal. It gave us a certain sense of freedom and maturity to be able to ride about.

“I’m glad that Helen is getting along with somebody,” the sister told me once, while Helen was in the toilet. She seemed to share the same view with Helen, that I was someone to be confided in. “We always thought she was hopeless.” It was through the sister that I learned some of the things that Helen would not confess. She almost never talked about her mother, but the sister implied that the woman’s rule over the household was anxious and unsteady, and she was prone to sudden bouts of tyranny to make up for it. Adding to the chaos, their father was finishing up his study of seabirds for good, and considering moving the entire family back to England. I got the impression that the family was not consulted.

“Helen doesn’t get along all that well with Dad,” I remember the sister saying, wincing in sympathy. “Well, he’s hard for all of us to handle, but having him around all the time...it’s no wonder she lost her head.” This was news to me. From what I had heard, Helen worshipped her father; I had assumed she would be overjoyed for him to return to the family, even if the potential move to England was troubling news for both of us. The sister was confused by my confusion. After Helen had been told, she’d gone on hunger strike for three days straight, as if that would do any good. I hadn’t known? Weren’t the two of us friends?

Five months is not such a long time to know someone, even if it feels like a small eternity to a child. It is certainly not enough time to become well-acquainted with someone’s family. In fact, Helen did not talk about her father as a person. He was only a fountain of knowledge and authority about such things as the seduction of mortal women and the mating behaviors of swans.

As a person, he was a blank space. Because I thought of my own father was the same way, it never occurred to me to question this. And I never questioned Helen while she was alive, respecting her secrets, assuming that there would be time, there would always be time. Now, of course, I have my questions and my doubts. At any rate, it was not long after this talk with the sister that matters came to a head.

It was very nearly winter when Helen brought me a book of maps and a ridiculous idea: we were going to go camping, before it became too cold for two soft little girls like us to even consider it. We would spend the night beneath the stars. I was not fooled. She was not nearly as still as she usually was, when she asked me, although she pretended nonchalance. Her hands and her lips betrayed a twitch, a tiny portion of her manic energy overflowing out of her tiny frame. She was desperate, and I was curious; I did not draw the connection between the rumors of the move and her newest idea. My mother wouldn't have approved, but she was working that Saturday, and if I returned in time, she'd never know the difference.

Helen planned out the bus route with great care, and purchased tickets for the both of us. We were headed inland, to where certain there still swamps and forests left mostly untouched. While we sat, packed close together on the jostling seat, she showed me the contents of her pack: the maps, of course, and an atlas, a compass, her father's prized binoculars, a few camping guidebooks, and a package of sandwiches in brown paper, prepared by her mother for her and the girl with a different name. I was somewhat impressed. At the time that I'd met her, I doubted she would have thought to prepare so well for a wilderness excursion, but she had remembered food and the necessity of navigation. I had taught her well.

"It won't be that much of a walk," she said. "There's this particular spot on Eagle Island that's supposed to have an absolutely astonishing view. We can watch the ships to pass some

time.” She’d never, as far as I knew, lied to me before; that was probably the source of the twitch, which continued unabated for the entire ride. I half-expected the bus driver to stop us, to ask us where we were going and where our mothers were, but he let us off at stop alongside a deserted road. Most likely, he never really noticed us to begin with. If he had, Helen might have come to quite a different end, or at the very least her body might have been discovered. There would be no need for me to tell the story, then. However, the driver either did not notice or did not care what we did.

. Once the bus was rumbling off in the distance and my options for escape were limited, Helen admitted her ruse immediately.

“I’m sorry, Eva,” she told me, straight-backed and assured, still trembling. “I thought that I might stay away for longer than a day. Drastic measures are called for.” This impulsiveness was not unusual for her. It was the very same impulsiveness that had led her to approach me to begin with. I was no longer impressed by her foresight, and I let out a long and rusty sigh. The air was humid, sweltering, and a few curious mosquitoes were already starting to buzz around my ankles. This was marshlands. It was no place to spend even one night.

“What, are you trying to get back at your mother for something?”

“It’s not about getting back at her. I want her to listen to me. That’s all.”

“Running away isn’t going to do much good.”

“Maybe not,” she agreed, and there was silence between us.

“How long until the bus comes back?” I asked her, but instead of replying, Helen turned her back on me, stepping deliberately out onto the grass from the pavement, moving in a perfectly straight line. She was the very image of a tiny, unarmed centurion.

“I still have to do something. My father is moving us all to England,” she said. “We’ll never see each other ever again. I’ll have to go to some English school, where I won’t have any friends. And...” She paused here, probably on the cusp of some revelation, but finished with only, “I just won’t be able to stand it.” I went after her, of course, even when we entered the trees, the dimness and the heat of the marsh growing overbearing. Helen had grown stronger over the year that I’d known her, but she was no adventurer yet. She hadn’t even been taught to swim.

“Helen,” I told her. “If that’s what they’ve decided, there’s nothing you can do about it.” I’d been taught, after all, from an early age, by the jeers of the other girls, by the look on my mother’s face when a smeared but still-legible note turned in the wash. You couldn’t change the world through force of will. If the adults decreed that she was going to England, to England she would go.

“I do so understand,” said Helen, perfectly calm. “You’re right. Running away isn’t going to work.”

“Then where are you going?”

“I’m not sure yet. You need to go back, Eva. But don’t you dare tell anyone where I went.” She still didn’t turn, and she certainly didn’t hesitate. If she had stopped, and turned, and I had met her eyes, would I have understood then? Would I have tried to stop her? Would I have flung myself at her, brought us both kicking and biting and scratching to the ground of the marsh? I was shorter than her, but stronger. I don’t doubt that I could have dragged her back by force.

“I’m going to make something beautiful out of myself,” she declared, and I scoffed at her back.

“No one will care,” I said.

She slipped into the tress. I stood and waited there at the bus stop. She would come creeping back any second, I thought. She adored me, after all, and I doubted she would have the courage to last long in the unfamiliar woods without me to support her. Even if sheer stubbornness led her to stay the night, she would still be back eventually, chagrined, her pale skin dotted and swollen with insect bites, her neat leather shoes broken apart with water. That was what I thought at the time, but I think that even then, I knew it was a lie. I'd said my farewells when she disappeared into the forest, and I chose not to pursue.

When the bus returned, I boarded it, flashing my round trip ticket. I made it back before my mother did, and escaped a spanking. When my mother got the call from St. Mary's Immaculate Heart the next day, a call that went around to all of the parents, she called me in, sat me down, and asked me if I knew a place Helen might go if she were upset. I said I didn't know. Helen had asked me not to tell, after all. She had asked me to keep this secret for her. I still believed that she would be back, at that point, and even as the days passed I did not tell. I had a very strong feeling that I would spoil something if I did, that our friendship would be at an end. What were friends except for the keepers of secrets? You revealed things to them because you knew that they would be safe. A true friend didn't spread rumors.

Helen's face was printed in the newspaper, even more pale in black and white. Flyers were posted all over town. The school arranged for a prayer session; I knelt on the hard floor of our little gymnasium, the pressure of our monotonous voices bearing down on me, holding what I knew inside of me. The first few days were something of a struggle. Perhaps she was still alive somewhere, trapped within a pit, legs broken from an unfortunate fall. I recalled what she had said, though. The utter certainty in her posture. She had accepted that I was right, and the world was not going to change itself for her. What other options were left? She was just a young girl,

but a young girl can know more than one thinks, especially one raised on stories of tyrants and star-crossed lovers.

Several weeks passed, and it was not so much of a struggle any more. It even became a sort of pleasure. It was a story only for me, a special secret. Most people assumed that she had been kidnapped by a pervert, but I knew that she had left of her own will, and I had an image of her to keep, striding away from me, utterly unafraid.

I like to imagine what Iris would think, if I told her this story. I think she would make the same face that she might make if I took one of my old jars of wasps to a coffee house meeting. She might try to tell me that Helen had loved me, and looked at me with accusation, trying to piece together what sort of diseased mind would do such a thing. She would think that I bore Helen some resentment, and that was why I allowed her to die, and then left her body untouched for all of these years.

It isn't like that. All I wanted was to have something beautiful and awful that is only for me, a bloodless story without any bones.

Even a sell-out like me deserves that much.

Two Thin Files

“Ma’am, we’d like you to go over the events of last night one more time. Afterwards, you’ll be free to go.”

“Go where?”

“You may not feel like it at the moment, but it’s for the best if you get some sleep.”

“Don’t you tell me what’s for the best. How can I so much as shut my eyes when my baby boy’s not where he belongs?”

“I understand your feelings, ma’am. My heart goes out to you. No one is trying to dictate what you may or may not do, and I believe you’ve been told that there are counsellors available. Should you need to speak to someone.”

“Save it. Why do you need me to start all over, anyway? Aren’t you recording this?”

“Yes ma’am. But we’ve found it’s often helpful to place events along a single timeline—the very process of putting your thoughts in order may cause you to recall something of potential significance.”

“There’s no significance. There’s nothing to put in order. It was just a single moment. Like a stone plunking into a pond. He was there, clasping my hand, and then he was gone.”

“You’re saying that you heard a plunking sound, ma’am? Something falling into the water, perhaps. That’s a contradiction in your previous testimony.”

“What I said was that it was *like* a stone plunking into a pond. It was a metaphor.”

“So you heard nothing. There was no wind, no cars passing by, nothing rustling in the grass...no noise from your boy, none at all?”

“It’s quiet along the river, especially at night. That’s why I like to walk there. There’re no roads nearby. Don’t you know that?”

“I’m not familiar with the area, ma’am. You aren’t hard of hearing?”

“Not in the slightest. How old do I look to you?”

“Ma’am, you’re absolutely certain that you heard nothing. Absolutely certain that there was nothing for you to hear? What about his shoes? Wouldn’t his shoes make a sound on the grass?”

“He wasn’t wearing shoes.”

“And yet he walked away.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“If he’d fallen into the river, it would have made a sound. Young boys, boys of age ten and under, do not slip noiselessly into the water. They are not streamlined for the purpose of diving like submarines or ducks. They have not given up on life. There would be cries, splashing, a great struggle, if he had fallen into the river. Even if he had been pushed.”

“I don’t know about all of that.”

“We will dredge the river tomorrow with sieves and nets. If he can be found, we will find him. There’s no such thing as a child that vanishes without a trace.”

“I don’t know that, and neither do you.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, it’s not that I don’t believe you, I just want to make sure I’m getting my facts straight here—the woman who vanished was a stranger. You don’t recall meeting her, or even seeing her face for a moment, before the 16th of June.”

“She was a complete stranger.”

“What was the nature of your interaction?”

“Well, it was around one, and I was on my lunch break, taking a walk around the block. It was right along Piedmont Avenue—downtown Atlanta. I guess you don’t know where I’m talking about.”

“I’m not familiar with the area, Miss, but please continue.”

“I noticed this lady hobbling along the sidewalk, looking like she was about to keel over at any moment. She was so tiny, and she didn’t even have a cane or anything like that, and there were so many people acting like she was just some *thing* getting in their way. This one guy rubbed up against her shoulder and nearly knocked her down, but didn’t even glance back to see if she was okay. I felt really, really sorry for her. She sort of reminded me of my granny.”

“How exactly did she resemble your grandmother?”

“She didn’t, actually. Not a bit. Maybe it was more that I wouldn’t want people to treat my granny like that, so I felt like I had to stop and help her. I wanted to make sure she got across the street okay, at least.”

“You offered her your assistance, and she accepted.”

“Yeah. She didn’t say anything, just grabbed hold of my hand and held on tight. Her nails were really long and sharp, kind of like talons, and I was pretty grossed out.”

“There was an unusual occurrence.”

“We were right in the middle of the crosswalk. She was moving so slow that people from both directions were moving around us, sort of flowing around us, if you get what I mean? It was a really weird feeling.”

“But that wasn’t what was unusual.”

“No. I remember hustling her along, wanting to get her across before the light changed. But when we finally made it to the other side, just in the nick of time, she was gone.”

“You didn’t even notice when she let go of your hand?”

“My hand was still hurting even once she was gone. I don’t know when exactly she disappeared. That lady left *gouges* with those talons. She couldn’t have been my imagination. The pain was real. And if she was really so frail, she couldn’t have scurried off all that fast.”

“So where did she go?”

“You’re asking me? I told you, she just vanished. Shook me up for the rest of the day.”

“Yet you didn’t feel the need to report the incident to anyone. You mentioned it to your mother in passing and then you forgot about it.”

“What else was there to say about it? Crazy shit happens, and it’s not like this is the craziest shit that’s ever happened to me. Maybe she was a witch. She sure looked the part.”

“You can’t write off the possibility that she was nothing but a hallucination. The brain is an amazingly adaptable organ. Hallucinations that react dynamically to the world are not unheard of. Phantom pain and injury by proxy are also not unheard of.”

“Hey, I’m not crazy. I know what happened.”

“An old woman disappearing in broad daylight, right in the middle of a crowded crosswalk...that’s simply impossible.”

“What do you know about what’s impossible or not?”

“It’s my job to catalogue the inexplicable. I know a great deal about it, and I’m telling you that old woman never existed in the first place.”

“Hey, what magazine do you work for, again? You’re starting to creep me out.”

Princess Power

It was a balmy Saturday morning in the very beginning of June when Michael Wood gathered his family in the breakfast nook to make an announcement he hoped would be well-received. His timing could have been better. Jillian, his wife, was peeping at her cellphone under the table. And the girls seemed restless, more so than they usually were. Michael was so rarely the center of attention that he regretted not waiting until dinner, during which there was a strict and impartial ban on all electronic devices, but it was too late now.

Michael's seven year old daughter, Amber kicked her bare feet outward in an anxious rhyme. Her mother had forced her to abandon her Frozen DVD before it was entirely over. Frozen was not her favorite movie of all time, but it held a steady spot within the upper rankings. The T.V. was still on, and she could hear the music that played over the credits. The movie wasn't over until the end credits were over, but she was the only one who saw it that way. Amber often felt as if she were the only one in the world to truly understand anything.

Amber's fourteen year old sister, Hannah, could also hear the music, and it made her want to gouge out her own eardrums just to end the pain. She compromised by slipping in her earbuds while she pretended to adjust her glasses; her thick black hoody made the maneuver easy to conceal. Hannah despised Disney and everything that it represented. Princess dresses and sing-a-longs and glittery stickers and fairy wands were nothing but a crinkly candy wrapper concealing the stale and soiled gumdrop of greed. Her little sister's receptive young mind was at this very moment being primed to accept the will of her corporate masters. Not that Hannah cared. She had better things to worry about, like the diet she'd been researching lately. Apparently, if you only ate every other day, it would fire up your metabolism and melt away the fat. Hannah was skeptical, but she'd give anything the two week test.

Jillian, who knew better but couldn't resist, was texting Ruth. The vacation was already old news to her. Michael had been harping about it for weeks. He could be awfully fucking obnoxious when he thought he had a good idea. But she should have known what she was getting into when she married a man who worked in I.T.

"Girls, I have exciting news," said Michael. "My time off work was approved. That means that this year, we're finally going to get to go on vacation. And guess what our first stop is going to be?" No one posed a guess, so he stumbled onwards. "It's Disneyland! We're going to Disneyland!"

"Isn't that great?" Jillian looked up with a tight smile.

"Huh?" Amber's mouth formed a small O of incomprehension. The credits had just ended. The music from the DVD menu was playing in a loop.

Hannah bobbed her head, a coincidence that made it seem like she'd been paying attention. Bob Dylan's *Forever Young* had come up on shuffle. Her friends said her phone was full of the gayest shit in the universe, but her friends were philistines, and she was secretly somewhat proud that she listened to the same music as her father.

"Disney...Land," said Michael, enunciating carefully. Although he felt that condescending to children was wrong, sometimes the situation called for it.

"The park where Mickey and Minnie Mouse live," Jillian supplied. "You've seen it on T.V., sweetie."

"We're going there?" asked Amber. She thought she was following along now, but it was always best to make sure. That was one of the coping strategies her behavioral therapist, Miss Evans, had taught her. Amber adored Miss Evans and always sought to please her with good

progress reports from her teachers, but now that school was out, she wouldn't get to see her for a long time.

"We leave a week from today," said Michael. "Disneyland is only the very beginning, of course. I have two whole weeks all planned out. Exciting, isn't it?"

"I guess so," said Amber. Although she had seen the advertisements, her brain was not nearly as malleable as Hannah believed it to be. Amber's frame of reference was limited to her familiar living room, the sterile halls of her elementary school, and her therapist's softly lit and comforting office. She didn't want to visit Disneyland, any more than she wanted to visit a Spanish castle or the Amazonian jungle or Cancun.

Michael sighed. He was just glad he hadn't gone with his initial idea, which involved a blindfold, tickets mounted on cardboard, and Jillian's shaky camerawork. A reaction video with a cute little girl could net you hundreds of thousands of hits on YouTube, and he believed that Amber was exceptionally precious. All the women in the family tended towards plumpness, to put it in the nicest way possible, but Amber was at the age where that still worked in her favor. But for all her cuteness, she was far too level-headed. He wasn't sure if he believed the ADD diagnosis. Doctors these days were all paid off by the drug companies.

"Wait, what? Where are we going?" asked Hannah.

The firm scored a big client on Friday. Jillian texted Ruth. Going to be busy for a while. Might not be as much time to talk.

Hang in there baby : (Ruth replied. Ruth, a fifty year old virgin from Boston, did not so much as suspect that Jillian was a housewife with two children. She believed Jillian's lie that she was a ruthless, up-and-coming corporate lawyer who worried that an open relationship with another woman would jeopardize her job. Ruth lived more than 2,000 miles away, and neither of

them had any intention of ever meeting IRL (in real life), so Jillian considered the web of fantasy she'd been spinning for the past three years to be an innocent and victimless deception.

“Young lady, I’ve already said at least three times. We are going to Disneyland,” said Michael.

“You’re fucking kidding,” said Hannah, whose phone privileges were then revoked for the rest of the day.

Hannah’s father was not, in fact, fucking kidding, and a week later, they touched down in John Wayne Airport, right according to schedule. The name of the airport became a topic of conversation. Michael didn’t agree with John Wayne’s politics but admitted that he felt a bit of respect for the man, who came from a different era after all, and since he was dead there was no point in getting hung up over something like conservative political views or advocating white supremacy, so his feelings were mixed. Hannah liked John Wayne’s movies, or at least the two she’d watched, but hadn’t known he was dead and racist and found that a little depressing. Jillian could not possibly have been more indifferent to John Wayne and had nothing to add. Amber didn’t know who John Wayne was, and assumed that he was a famous pilot.

Disneyland was not all that it was cracked up to be.

Hannah was the one to ruin things, a scant hour after they passed through the gates in the park proper, although to be fair, that was after an hour of circling the parking lot and waiting in line and listening to her father talk about how Disneyland had been one of the better experiences of his childhood. This was not a lie. Michael had enjoyed an exceptionally idyllic childhood sometimes wondered if he was trying to recapture some of the straightforward happiness he had enjoyed then now that he was an independent adult. His father had spent a lot of time at work,

but he had specifically taken time off to accompany Michael and his mother at Disneyland. He associated the positive memories of a rare moment with his father with the park itself, which was extremely loud and extremely crowded, much more so than he remembered.

The problem was the Hannah was going to be sick. This was not hyperbole. Well, she was also sick in the sense that she was fed up. She was sick of her father telling her to keep up a positive attitude, and sick of squealing brats, and sick of high pitched, droning music, and sick of watching fat lards shoveling hot dogs down their gullets, and sick of Mickey's grinning mug, and sick of capitalist oppression, and also sick in the head, or at least that was what Jacob had said to her when he broke up with her, and he'd said it in such a nice way, too, with genuine concern. Jacob was a nice boy who hadn't wanted to hurt her and only called her a crazy fatass when he was alone with his friends. However, she was not kneeling on sticky pink and yellow checkered tile, staring into one of the Happiest Toilets on Earth because of squealing brats, capitalism, or Jacob. She thought it was probably the killer combination of the heat and the smell.

Although it was over 90 degrees in the park that morning, a heavy heat unstirred by the slightest breeze. Hannah still refused to remove her sweat-soaked hoody, despite her mother's advice. She didn't care if she died and had to be lowered into her coffin wearing it; she actually rather liked that image, and dwelled on it through her next of dry spasms. Without it, she felt naked, and did her mom really expect her to wade through the crowd of literally thousands naked? Hannah wasn't delusional or anything like that. The hoody didn't hide the fact that she was fat. Still, it could conceal the individual rolls and bulges, pressing it all together so that her torso was a sort of squishy ball shape, and that was better than nothing.

She'd been wearing the hoody for two years now, and was used to being hot. That alone wouldn't have been nearly enough to do her in. It was the smell, really, the thick and almost

tangible fumes of used frying oil, artificial butter, scented sunscreen, and human sweat. The stench had gathered in her nose and mouth, settled deep into her lungs. Did sugar have a smell? Hannah thought that she could smell the sugar, too, but maybe that was just her imagination. Hannah wasn't delusional or anything, but she couldn't shake this feeling that she was breathing in calories, or maybe absorbing all the fat and sugar floating through the air through her skin, just like a frog letting in oxygen through its porous membrane.

The bathroom stall was cool and dim. It smelled strongly of piss and faintly of baby powder. Hannah wished she could stay there for the rest of the three days, but knew she would have to come out eventually. Despite it all, she didn't actually want to single-handedly ruin her family's vacation.

Hannah's family stood outside the restroom, below a sign with a pink polka-dot bow on it. A constant stream of women and girls passed by them, the swinging doors slamming opened and closed, but none of them were Hannah.

"Maybe you should check on her," said Michael to Jillian, but Jillian shook her head.

"Let's give her another fifteen minutes." It wasn't that Jillian didn't care about Hannah. She loved her daughter, and actually preferred Hannah over Amber. Jillian suspected that her daughter might have inherited her lesbian tendencies, and attributed her sullenness, isolation, and general misanthropy to sexual confusion. Jillian hoped that if given adequate support her daughter would turn out better than she had, and would not end up marrying a slim and nonthreatening I.T. professional. To that aim she had made it quite clear to Hannah that she would accept her daughter no matter how she chose to live her life, but had learned over the course of many awkward late-night conversations over tea that Hannah usually preferred to be

left alone. There was nothing to do but wait. She wished she hadn't given into Michael's whining and left her phone at the hotel. Maybe she could tell Ruth about the trip, after all...she'd invented a brother for when she wanted to complain about Michael, and a trip to Disneyland with her two nieces might not be that much of a stretch. But she wondered if Disneyland and a ruthless, up-and-coming corporate lawyer would ever really go together, except as client and consul.

Michael, on the other hand, was doing his best to manage his anger. They'd arrived at the park an hour and a half ago. He'd gone on two rides with Amber, two goes on the same whirling teacups because the line was just a little bit shorter for those, and he'd bought her a strawberry ice cream cone; Hannah refused the rides and refused the ice cream. But Michael's repeated mantras about the importance of open-mindedness and a positive attitude meant nothing if he could not apply them to himself. Hannah was not intentionally ruining their long-awaited family vacation. Her face had been so pale it was nearly blue when she ran into the restroom; she wasn't faking sick. Although she was not faking sick this time, Hannah was adept at it. After Jacob broke up with her, she took a whole week off from school before Jillian caught her sticking her fingers down her own throat to induce vomiting.

Michael took repeated, deep breaths, holding each one for three seconds at a time. This was the coping method his company-supplied therapist, Vanessa, had taught him. Michael adored Vanessa, platonically, and always sought to please her by managing his anger in constructive ways instead of damaging company property or personal relationships. He did not throw things in anger anymore, and that had been a singular incident, besides.

Eventually, Hannah did emerge from the bathroom. Her colorless face and her dyed black hair were sopping wet where she had dunked them in the sink.

“Sweetie, if you need to go back to the hotel and lie down, I’ll take you right now,” said Jillian, sensing an opportunity and ready to take it. Michael frowned at her, but they had kept a strict accord never to contradict each other in front of the children ever since Hannah was five, and he wouldn’t break that accord lightly.

“I’m okay,” mumbled Hannah. “Hey, where’s the squirt?” ‘The squirt’ was Hannah’s charmingly old-fashioned nickname for her little sister, and although it was meant affectionately, it had unpleasant associations for Jillian. This was because Amber had been the direct result of a broken condom, though of course neither of the girls had ever been told this irrelevant fact. Amber was well-loved, even if she had jettisoned Jillian’s plan to return to school, finish her certification as a paralegal, gain financial independence, and divorce Michael.

The squirt had slipped out of her father’s limp hand about two minutes after her sister had run into the bathroom. Amber was enjoying Disneyland far more than she’d expected. Her parents and sister were tense, snapping back and forth at each other like crackling wires, but this was not unusual and Amber found it easy to ignore. Still, she much preferred wandering on her own to being tugged along by her father, who liked to point and talk and turn her head where he thought she ought to be looking.

“Look at the teacups, look at them spin, aren’t they pretty?” Michael had said, when she’d been looking at a young boy who had just wiped his chocolate smeared face on the edge of his mother’s pale green skirt. She’d obediently glanced at the giant teacups, which were not nearly as impressive as her father made them out to be, and then she’d lost the boy and his mother in the crowd. Had his mother noticed the stain already? Would she be angry or would she laugh? Amber would never know. She’d been made to ride upon the teacups instead of seeking answers. Her parents were always taking away questions before they were fully answered. She

was sick of being shuffled from place to place, and better off on her own, letting her feet follow wherever her gaze led her. Even though she'd been told not to wander off, Amber doubted that anyone would actually notice, as long as she returned eventually. She was unobtrusive. The last three times they'd played hide and seek, her mother had forgotten to look for her.

Amber's gaze happened to lead her to a tightly packed gathering comprised mostly of parents and girls. Many of the girls waited in trembling anticipation, hoisted up on their fathers' shoulders; it turned out that there was a use for fathers, after all. Alone, Amber wasn't tall enough to see past the sea of backs and shoulders and hats. Still, she didn't much mind. There was plenty for her to look at in the crowd, like the girl about her own age, dressed in translucent and flossy blue, who rocked back and forth on her heels with tears and snot trailing down her face. She was crying because she was happy, which was something that Amber had never seen before. Amber was not particularly happy at that moment. If asked by an adult, she probably would have said she was happy, because she was not sad or worried or in pain, but she was mostly just contented and curious. Still, as she looked at the girl, she started to rock back and forth herself, imitating the motion. It felt nice, and was something to do.

There was a great intake of breath from the girls all around her.

"They're coming out," an adult muttered.

"About damn time," said another. The rocking girl was lifted up into the air by her father's arms. Amber opened her mouth, sucking in as much air as she could, until her chest and stomach grew so large that they started to hurt. Then came the release. The girls, all of the girls, at least a hundred of them, started to scream. Amber, who had been a perfect infant and a docile toddler and rarely saw any reason to cry, began to scream as well. She didn't know what the girls saw, and didn't particularly care, but she still screamed, with all the power that her disused vocal

cords could muster. As her voice joined the rest, a feeling utterly unfamiliar to her, a religious ecstasy, crashed down upon her like a wave. She closed her moistening eyes and continued to scream, even when the other girls' voices died down, and a park employee called for quiet and the formation of an orderly line for photo opportunities with the princesses.

Michael would have been satisfied to see Amber like this. All he had wanted, really, was to make his younger daughter happy, having already given up Hannah and his wife as lost causes. However, Michael was still standing beneath the restroom sign. Jillian was crying into his shoulder, the way she hadn't cried since the pregnancy test came up positive. She was already wracked with guilt over her failure as a mother. Ruth would not be able to understand. Losing a niece was not even in the same ballpark as losing a daughter. Michael was slightly slower on the uptake, and could only wonder with swallowed irritation how this was going to affect the day's itinerary. Hannah was giving a physical description to an understanding employee, who had his pager out already. She was both worried for her sister and glad that while the family vacation was well on its way to being ruined, this development was only tangentially her fault.

Amber continued to scream. It felt good, and there was no one there who would tell her to stop.

The Evolutionary Ladder

The outside of the Pacific Marine Aquarium did not inspire great confidence in anyone. It was a concrete shell, dappled with greenish stains, and queuing visitors had little to distract themselves with aside from a peeling mural of smiling cartoon crabs, which were suspiciously similar to a certain character from *SpongeBob Squarepants*. Hannah, who was inclined to find fault with anything that failed to properly engage with cold scientific fact, pointed out to her father that crabs didn't even have teeth, so it was kind of a sick joke to paint them grinning like that. Shouldn't an aquarium know better? Didn't the people who worked there have college degrees?

"Hannah, please. We haven't even gotten through the door," said Michael. His intent was to nip her negativity in the bud, but his sharp tone only caused it to take deeper root. He had his own doubts, but he had gotten an excellent deal for four tickets on Groupon that included a 10% discount on selected gift shop items.

"It is pretty cheesy, though," said Jillian, silencing her husband. She had formed an unspoken survival pact with Hannah after Disneyland. No matter how much the two of them fought amongst each other, they would present a united front against Michael's tyranny. Jillian was partially motivated by sympathy, but Hannah had already caught her mother in flagrant violation of Michael's ban on recreational cell phone use three times, and silence had its price. Jillian lived for stolen moments with her phone in the hotel bathrooms. She hadn't even known they were taking a trip to the aquarium until minutes before the Rentacar pulled into the parking lot. She didn't doubt that Michael had told her about it at some point, but he talked so fucking much about so many irrelevant things; how was she supposed to know the difference between when he was telling her something important and when he was just moving air?

Michael didn't think his warning was out of line, but he would swallow his retorts in the name of maintaining peace. He hadn't been able to imagine a trip to the aquarium causing the slightest controversy, and yet here they were, sniping at each other already. An ancient story came to his mind: Eris, the goddess of jealousy and discord, tossing her enchanted golden apple into a crowd of upstanding young Grecians and watching them tear each other apart, simply for the joy of causing conflict. Michael hadn't entirely thought his comparison through, but mythologizing it helped him believe that he was above it all: the throngs of slack-jawed tourists, his ungrateful wife and daughter, and a universe that laughed in the face of his sincerity. After his first semester of college, he'd switched from Classics to Computer Science, but the allure had never entirely worn off.

Amber, sensing the tension, grew restless, but there was no escape for her here. The incident at Disneyworld would not be repeated. Her father kept his hand clamped firmly around her wrist. As a stop-gap measure, she now wore a rubber bracelet with her father's cell phone number written on it.

Just like her mother, Amber was also unaware that she'd been taken to an aquarium until the very last moment, when she read the bronze letters above her head and put AQUA and QUARIUM together. They were ushered through the wide glass doors by ticket-takers with forced smiles. That was one of the constants of their trip, young men and women who accepted little scraps of colorful paper as barter for entrance to their domain; in this case, an eye-searing turquoise lobby. One thing that all four of them could appreciate was the shelter from the broiling sun, the other constant of their trip. Amber and Michael had become brown and freckly, while Jillian and Hannah burned, a quirk of biology that emphasized the separation in the family

that had either been gradually forming for years unnoticed, or had been there all along, depending on who you asked.

“Now Hannah, it’s only going to get more crowded,” said Michael, as he surveyed the bustling lobby. He was somewhat intimidated by the larger packs, the tour groups and the extended families. “Please, please, please help me keep an eye on your sister, would you? We don’t want her to get snapped up by a shark, do we?” The sad attempt at a joke fooled no one. Hannah grunted in acknowledgment, but she could sense the blame in her father’s words. Blaming her for Amber’s disappearance when she’d been holed up in the bathroom was the height of injustice. She wasn’t her sister’s keeper.

“Do they have sharks here?” Jillian asked, her interest just slightly piqued.

“Of course they do,” said Michael, who hadn’t actually checked. They did. There was, in fact, an entire shark tunnel, advertised in the pamphlet he’d been handed in exchange for his ticket, promising thrills and chills with each bucket of chum.

“Do you really think that Amber’s up for that?” he asked his wife in a low voice. She raised an eyebrow.

“There are people here with their babies.”

“Still. Don’t you think it would be best to leave the shark tunnel for the very end?”

“Whatever you say.”

“There’ll be a feeding in an hour. If we work our way through the rest of the building, we’ll can go back just in time.” Amber was not consulted at any point in this discussion, and didn’t offer her own take; she was used to be discussed over her head. Michael was not concerned so much for her as he was for shaping the entire narrative of the trip. His wife’s unexpected expression of interest had scared him. He’d been worried that she would wrest

control and lead the way to the shark tunnel, effectively placing the climax at the beginning of the entire aquarium journey and leaving the rest a meandering and exhausting disappointment.

Michael had been preparing for this. He had his digital camera primed and ready, though it was for the most part useless in the glassy landscape of an aquarium, and all the pictures would end up as little more than bursts of reflected white light. He also had a plan of action, and would accept no interference.

They would start their journey at the very beginning of the evolutionary ladder, or at least where Michael envisioned the evolutionary ladder beginning: in the sediments of the ocean floor. This was another of his myths, one that Michael had created himself, with some help from half-remembered biology classes. He didn't believe in God, but he believed in his own myth, with the same blind fervor that he believed his family vacation was still salvageable. Life had shaped itself out of the dark primordial ooze, sprouting eyes and malformed, lopsided fins. Some of these strange creatures had been content to live and die in the murky darkness, sucking up nutrients from the sediment. Others, feeling unfulfilled and dissatisfied with their lot, had strained upwards towards the faint light of the sun. The further upwards they travelled, the more defined they became. They acquired spines, musculature, and brilliant, glistening hides. They made something of themselves, and it was from this ancient species of go-getters that humanity originated.

Michael was justifiably afraid to tell his family about his ideals. He knew that Jillian and Hannah would jeer at him, and though Amber might listen, she could just as easily be distracted at some crucial moment. So he had to illustrate it through the use of example. A glance at the map told him that the aquarium was structured along the same lines as his mythology. The bottom-dwellers were located on the bottom floor, and as you ascended the central spiral

staircase, you would encounter steadily more advanced organisms. The sea lions were housed on the roof, sleek, bright, playful, and mammalian: a perfect piece of punctuation, to be followed with the savagery of the shark tank before they left.

The first stop was a broad, clamorous room off to the side of the lobby, which smelled faintly of algae and strongly of hand sanitizer. This was the home of the touch tank, a sopping nest of pathogens surrounded by squealing children. Rays ghosted by on the bottom of the tank, clouding the water as they passed, but even when Michael found a space to plant Amber on the steps surrounding the tank, they remained just out of her reach. She let her hands drift in the water, aimlessly, until it fell upon the surface of a rock. The coat of greenish slime fascinated her almost as much as it disgusted her mother and father.

Hannah had no intention of sticking her hands into the water, and no one expected it of her. The strong smell of the place was something that would typically make her ill, but she found that she was starting to like it. There was something frank about the inside of the aquarium, past the crude murals and away from the brilliance of the sun. You couldn't dress up a fish as anything but what it was: an alien creature with lidless eyes, flitting about in its tank without any cognizance of the gaping faces peering at it. What was it like, Hannah wondered, to live in an entirely different medium?

While Amber stared at a middle-aged man who'd plunged his own broad and weathered hand into the water amid all the smaller ones, Michael read off of the plaques about the physiology and habits of bottom-feeding rays. Although the barb of the classic stingray was a formidable weapon for self-defense, these rays had been humanely de-barbed.

"So you see," Michael said as they shoved their way out. "All sorts of decaying matter falls down to the bottom of the ocean, and someone has to clean it up. The bottom-dwellers are

something like garbage men for the more highly evolved animals. It's a nasty job, but someone has to do it."

Next, they viewed jellyfish in a blacklit room, delicate and billowing, trailing their tendrils like worn-out handkerchiefs. They twitched occasionally, as if they were uncomfortable being watched.

"They're completely see-through," Michael informed them. "No organs, no brain, no nothing. Just blobs of...well, jelly. Can you really say that they're alive?"

"Of course they're alive," said Hannah.

"They're pretty," said Amber.

"I just think it's important to ask this sort of question," said Michael. "Without a brain, how can they feel? And if they can't feel, can you really say that they're alive?"

"Don't get philosophical on us, Mike," said Jillian.

"How do they eat?" asked Amber, and Michael couldn't find the answer on any of the informative plaques, so he said,

"They don't really need to. They're a very simple form of life."

"Dad, what do you think the tentacles are for?" Hannah asked.

"Self-defense," said Michael.

"They use them to paralyze their prey," Hannah said. "So they can draw it up into themselves, and then slowly digest it."

"God," said Jillian.

"You do know a lot about these things, honey," said Michael, and he forced himself to smile. Hannah did not smile back at him.

They took the spiral staircase upwards, step by step, stopping to stare into every tank along the way. The moray eel gaped with menace. The parrotfish dribbled powder from its beak, as stupid as a grazing cow. Their schedule was a strict one, if they were going to see the entire aquarium in time to finish with the shark feeding. Michael's determination and Amber's youth gave them energy, but Jillian was lagging, and Hannah's chest burned with exertion. Both of them would have been more than willing to complain about almost anything else, but Hannah in particular dreaded the significant look that her father would give her, the twitch of his mouth as he stifled what he was going to say. It was her weight that dragged her down, layers of body fat crushing her lungs when she tried to gasp for air. However, Michael did not even consider that Hannah might be having difficulty. He decided that she was being slow on purpose, in a conspiracy with her mother, solely in order to irritate and undermine him.

Resentment bubbled within both of them, and came to a head in front of the scowling, fanged barracudas. The missile-shaped fish roved about their bare tank, searching for anything that glistened.

"Those aren't sharks," said Amber with interest.

"That's right," said Michael. "But they're very, very close. Apex predators. Very dangerous."

"They're nowhere close," snorted Hannah. "Sharks are cartilaginous."

"Does it really matter?" Michael snapped.

"You're the one who likes to pretend he's an expert."

"I'm just trying to explain things in a way your sister can understand."

"Bullshit. You're just full of it." Hannah had gone a step too far. Her father was at a loss for words, perhaps for the first time in his life. It wasn't the word so much as the certainty behind

it. Hannah was a troubled girl and prone to cynicism, but Michael had always believed that she held some level of respect for him as her father. For her part, though Hannah had never consciously held her father in contempt until this particular moment in time. She had never noticed it before, but he was a nothing but a posturer. It had never occurred to him before, but he might be nothing but a posturer.

Jillian, Amber, and a few fellow aquarium patrons with keen ears all waited for Michael's judgment to descend. He was held in paralysis for far too long. While he stood there, Hannah fled, blindly shoving aside anyone who got in her way. She found the spiral staircase and she descended, following an instinct to hide in the darkest, dankest cranny that she could find. It wasn't that she was afraid; she just didn't want to have to look at anyone anymore. On the bottom floor of the aquarium, she stumbled on a tiny chamber that her father had overlooked, nearly pitch-black inside. This wasn't a room that held anyone's interest for long, it seemed, because the kids came and went by the second. It would be a decent hiding place, if anyone was searching for her, which she doubted.

Only one of the tanks inside was lit. Hannah peered inside, over a gaggle of small heads, wondering if there was even anything alive in it. There were tangles of seaweed, a few bleached pieces of coral...and a tiny glass bottle, only a little bigger than the 3 oz. of vodka her ex Jacob had ripped off from his dad and slipped into her purse during class, just because that made him feel like some kind of badass.

What an idiot Jacob had been. She wished she could just be glad he'd dumped her. Instead, she still found herself thinking of him, even at times like this. Her dad would have called him a bottom-feeder, if he'd even known they were dating. He was formless, ambition-less, and none too pretty, but he'd been the only one who would take her. His greatest desire had been for

political persecution, so he wore his hammer and sickle T-shirt at least once a month, thrusting out his skinny chest like an athlete showing off his pecs. He'd been desperate for a teacher to call him aside, question his loyalty, and tell him to change into something more patriotic, but they were all disgustingly tolerant. Eventually, he'd resorted to baiting her to feed his ego.

Now that Hannah thought about it, on a cloudy day, the window-lined school cafeteria resembled a poorly-cleaned fish tank. The student body, slumped low in their seats, were indistinguishable from invertebrates. On the day that Jacob broke up with her, she'd gotten an especially large scoop of goopy mashed potatoes on her cafeteria tray.

"Fuck, Hannah," Jacob had laughed when she fell into the seat next to his. "Give me some of those potatoes. If you don't, you're going to put on even more lard."

It hadn't been an unusual comment for him. He prided himself on his sharp, no-holds-barred sense of humor. She could have fired back with "shut up, shrimp dick," and that would have been the end of it. She could have shoved as much starch in her mouth as it could hold and chewed it right in front of him. Instead, she'd asked him,

"Do you only date me to make yourself feel like less of a worthless asshole?"

She'd said some other things, too. She'd said them very loudly. A school administrator led her by the hand to the isolation room before she was done with all of them. But she hadn't necessarily wanted to break up with him over mashed potatoes.

Hannah didn't want to think about Jacob anymore. There was something in the tank, after all. Folded up inside the bottle was a tiny octopus. Hannah could make out the suggestion of arms, and a single glaring eye, but most striking of all were the neon blue rings that covered its body. The octopus had folded itself up so tightly that it must be shaped exactly like the bottle itself. Did it think that it was safe in there? Did it think that prying eyes couldn't see through the

glass of the tank and the glass of the bottle alike? Unlike the unblinking fish, or the unconcerned rays that glided onwards beneath tiny grasping hands, Hannah felt a powerful self-consciousness emanating from this creature. It knew that it was being watched, and it hated it. It probably hated her, too.

Octopuses were actually extremely intelligent, she recalled from some nature show, or maybe from Bio class, or maybe even from Tara, the only girl in her grade even weirder than her, who seemed to think spouting off animal facts would make her more likeable. It had been Tara who told her that sharks were cartilaginous fish. Octopuses, on the other hand were about as smart as a dog or a cat...maybe smarter. You couldn't give an octopus an IQ test, after all; their psychologies were fundamentally different from a human being's, and if you expected them to conform to human standards, the joke was on you. They were capable of learning tricks, and of unscrewing jars, and of sneaking out of their tanks at night to raid their neighbors for food. Apparently, no matter how alien their psychologies might be, voracious, unreasonable greed was a universal trait.

It was starting to feel almost rude for Hannah to stare back at the octopus, knowing what she did. Even if she got the sense that it was miserable, she was really just compounding the misery by looming over it. She still couldn't tear herself away. She'd just about given up on finding another living thing that understood her existential angst, and the more she stared, the more similarities between them came to mind. The octopus had stuffed itself into a clear glass bottle because there was nowhere else for it to hide, just like she stuffed herself in her favorite black hoody. It didn't do anything to fend off anyone's judgmental gaze, but it was all they had.

When Hannah read off the glow-in-the-dark plaque that the normally docile blue-ringed octopus's bite was venomous enough to kill a human, she felt even more liked she'd happened

upon a kindred spirit. Hannah knew she came off as a bit cynical, but she was really a docile bottom-dweller at heart. She wanted to be left alone, but when she was fucked with, she lashed out with prejudice. So she was an octopus in her former life. If she'd had her phone on her, she would have announced it to everyone she knew, and waited for whoever was bored enough to text her to demand an explanation. But she wouldn't explain. Just like an octopus, she didn't answer to anyone's whims.

One of the kids, a fat-cheeked, snot-nosed little brat if she'd ever seen one, decided he was going to produce his own entertainment. He tapped on the glass octopus's tank, rapid-fire, like his finger was a chisel or something.

"Hey, quit that," Hannah protested, defensive on the octopus's behalf. The kid stared up at her, slack-jawed, then turned back to the glass and continued to tap. Where the hell were his parents, anyway?

"You're going to stress her out," Hannah said, as if reason and basic human compassion had the faintest possibility of finding anchor in a hyperactive six year old boy's brain. If there was one thing Hannah was grateful to Amber for, it was being born a girl.

Before she could warn the kid again, there was an explosion of motion directly beneath his finger, and he was finally deterred. The octopus had jetted out from its bottle, and spread its tentacles out like a halo around its bulbous head. The rings flashed and glittered like sparks, and the eyes stared out at nothing in particular, empty.

If there hadn't been a pane of glass in the way, that boy would have been dead before he was ever old enough to learn what "venomous" meant.

Instead, he grinned. This was the spawn of a generation of instant entitlement, Hannah thought. Press a button or pull a lever, and get a reward. Harass an innocent animal, prod and poke and torment until it gives you exactly what you were looking for: a reaction.

Bored now, the boy wandered off. The octopus drifted for a moment, then, in a split second motion, folded itself back up into its bottle, just as it had been.

Hannah wondered how it felt. Was it rage or reflex that had propelled it out of its refuge? Could an octopus feel embarrassment? If it could blink, maybe it would have blinked out a message for her, in Morse code: I'm sorry you had to see that. I overreacted. I gave him exactly what he was looking for. What a joke I am. I belong in this bottle, and I'm never coming out again.

Maybe Hannah didn't want to be an octopus, after all. It was tough, seeing a role model fall from its pedestal, but apparently octopuses weren't nearly as smart as the nature show, or her Bio teacher, or Tara had claimed. They got emotional and made mistakes. That hit a little too close to home.

Hannah decided that she needed to find her family sooner rather than later. She struggled back up the steps, all the way to the sea lion pool on the aquarium room. Her family was right up against the glass barrier, watching two sea lions snapping at each other's throats in what was looking less and less like play. Michael and Jillian avoided her eyes. They had decided amongst themselves that the incident was best ignored. Amber was entranced by the battle, and visibly disappointed when two aquarium employees appeared and hooked the sea lions with catch poles, dragging them apart while they let out strained yaps.

Michael was beginning to rethink his theory of evolution. Was there no animal on earth immune to the lure of petty conflict?

Jillian was counting down the hours until the trip was officially over.

Amber thought she was watching some sort of show. She'd assumed that Hannah was in the bathroom.

"Crazy animals. Reminds me of the school cafeteria," Hannah said, but none of them were listening.

Deathwish

The plastic jug bounced against Michael's thigh with each step, the soft and flimsy impacts calling him back to Earth before he could float up into the empty Mojave night. His flashlight illuminated a disc of dark red earth, but the moon was only a sliver, and elsewhere was a murky dimness, in which hills and rocks and stumpy Joshua trees that loomed pitched black as he drew near.

It was quiet. There were his footfalls, the rustling of his clothing, and occasional faint noises from outside the flashlight's beam: dust settling, pebbles scattering, something slithering low, a faint and mournful bark from far off. The desert had a voice, but it was not a human voice, and for the first time in many years, Michael didn't have to listen to anyone else. He'd forgotten what it was like to be alone with his own thoughts, and forgotten that he'd forgotten (could he trace it back to his honeymoon?), until he'd ended up believing that it was normal for his head to be a shrieking, clamoring courtroom of contradicting arguments. There was a persuasive whisper in his ear, there to let him know that he was a failure as a father, a man, and a right-thinking human being, but it was not the desert whispering to him, or his wife, or the distant apparition of his own father. That was *his* voice, alone.

Being alone was refreshing, but it did nothing to soothe his parched throat. Michael had been walking now for an hour, maybe longer. The shadow of the stalled Rentacar where his wife and daughters were sheltering themselves, which he'd been using the gauge distance for the first leg of his journey, had long since vanished into less than a pinprick on the horizon. He let the jug dangle carelessly from his limp hands, but no water spotted the earth. It was dry. His daughters had drained most of it between the two of them while Michael only watched, licking his cracked lips. Hannah had gulped until she was red-faced and gasping. Amber had taken smaller, more

hesitant sips, struggling sometimes to hold the heavy jug at the proper angle. Neither of them had glanced at Michael, or seemed to realize that he, too, felt thirst.

And isn't that what parenthood is all about, he'd thought, as he watched them guzzling away, and then he was ashamed of himself. He'd been the one to land them in this situation (though Jillian could have objected and didn't). It was like one of those hypotheticals that he'd only ever fretted over in the comfort of his living room. *You are stranded in the desert with your family. There are not enough resources for everyone. Would you sacrifice your own life so that your family could survive?* When it was only a hypothetical, when he was well-watered and had a full stomach, it hardly seemed like a dilemma. Thirst was something easy to underestimate.

Michael was the sort of person who, in the comfort of his living room, refused to accept such contrived conditions. Instead of making pointless sacrifices, he would drink just enough water to keep his body going, and strike off to get help; he would take what he needed not out of selfish greed but because he was the strongest, the fittest, the most likely to succeed at saving them all. In actuality, though they did take it for granted that he would be the one to walk away, he'd been too afraid to say anything when Jillian retrieved the emergency water supply from the trunk and told the girls to have as much as they wanted. Once Hannah had finally surrendered it, and Jillian had drunk her share, Michael had been left with only a single swallow. He'd been paralyzed by what they might think of him, and failed to take what he deserved. After all, he was their ignorant father, who had followed the cool and authoritative directions of the GPS along increasingly narrow and winding roads for more than two hours, assuming that they would surely arrive somewhere that was worth going to, because all roads lead somewhere. Their hapless father, who'd never so much as changed a flat tire, and could do nothing about the sputtering engine in the Hyundai, other than tell Jillian that it must be a problem with the battery. He was

their pathetic tyrant of a father, who could now add endangering their very lives to his lengthy list of sins. What would his girls think of a father like that if he tried to demand a drink?

So Michael had restrained himself. He'd accepted the jug, with its single splash of water, barely enough to wet the tongue, and he'd set out on his trek. He estimated that the lonely little gas station they'd passed on their way into the valley was at least fifteen miles away, and probably more. Michael could only pray that there would be someone there, or at least working telephone line. When morning came his family would be baked alive inside that shitheap of a car.

So was a thank you far too much to ask for? What bothered him most, Michael decided, was that they did not even hate him for what he had done. Jillian had examined the engine beside him without any words of recrimination. When he told her there was nothing he could do to fix this, she had shrugged her shoulders, as if to say she expected as much. He had expected Hannah to launch into another outburst when they broke the news to her. A girl her age, fragile, always close to the edge—she should have sobbed, railed at both of them, collapsed into a stunned heap. Instead, she had ducked her head, muttered “okay,” when he told her that she had to pretend that nothing was wrong. For Amber's sake.

Perhaps the reality of the situation had not fully struck them. They were in denial. Death was not real to them. But they gave off an impression that stranding them in the Mojave was hardly the worst thing Michael had ever done to them.

There was still a very long way to go. How well Michael conserved his energy would mean the difference between life and death. Still, self-directed fury tightened his belly, and he squeezed at the handle of the worthless jug until it cut into his cracked palm. Then he flung it from him. It was swallowed up by darkness, denying him the satisfaction of watching the ending of its arc, and Michael instantly regretted it.

He shifted the beam of his flashlight off the road, scanning for a glimpse of unnatural transparent plastic nestled among red rocks or nestled in the tangle of a brambly bush? He needed to retrieve the jug. This was a beautiful place, a treasure of the Americas. Littering was wrong, and a felony beside, on protected land like this. In the dry and sterile environment of the desert, that jug might lie there for decades, gathering scant dew in the mornings, scorpions and snakes coiling up within its milky confines. Already, his flashlight kept reflecting off of what he took at first to be mineral deposits, but soon realized were half-buried beer cans. He could not find the jug, and had to continue onward, chalking up yet another failure. Even though he had never thought of himself as the kind of person who despoiled the environment, here he was.

The idea of the jug as an eternal eyesore was especially troublesome to Michael because of something he'd read. He'd thought it was funny, funny in a sad, heart-wrenching sort of way, and it stuck with him because he was a romantic at heart, the sort of person who cared deeply about the preservation of the natural world for tomorrow's children and also about aesthetics. An idealist, he was an idealist.

According to the article he'd read, Mt. Everest was in trouble. It was no longer pristine; far from it. The snow was littered with discarded wrappers and oxygen tanks, left behind by the churning tourism industry. Climbing parties of wealthy thrill-seekers went up and down, shepherded and sometimes outright carried by Sherpa guides who were only trying to make a living. Instead of planting a flag, they left their garbage and occasionally their corpses. Climbing Everest was supposed to be a transcendental experience, but what sort of revelations could be reached among piles of human detritus?

It was an attempt to escape the goddamn tourism industry that had led him into the Mojave. The prepackaged tours had all ended in failure, their house further and further divided

against it. Amber had abandoned him at Disneyland; Hannah had been staring at him with smoldering resentment ever since her explosion at the aquarium. Shock therapy, in the form of California's startling natural vistas, had been his last and only chance. Yet that, too, had ended in failure, and he had just polluted the valley for any future comers. Of course, if he didn't fetch help in time, the pollution wouldn't be limited to an empty jug.

Michael's fantasies spiraled further outward. His legs were still serviceable, but say they started to weaken. Say his ankle got twisted up in a rabbit hole. Say he collapsed here, driven to his knees by sheer thirst and exhaustion. He would be dead. There would be no other cars, no chance rescuers sent by God; not at this time of night. Maybe not for days, weeks, months. How long would it take the four of them to decay? The scavengers would make relatively short work of Michael, the coyotes he imagined stalking just outside the range of the flashlight's beam. The others, though, with the car as their coffin, would linger for a long while.

There was a hard limit to Michael's morbidity. Death by heat and dehydration was neither quick nor present, and if he had spent any time lingering on Amber's suffering, he would have abandoned such terrible thoughts in disgust and terror. However, Michael instead called up an image of his family exactly as he had left them. He'd shined his flashlight through the back window of the car, where Amber and Hannah were joined by Jillian in the cramped back seat, beneath an old picnic blanket they had found in the glove compartment. Only Amber was asleep; the other two dozed with open eyes, with no way of telling exactly what they were thinking. That was how Michael imagined them in death. He should have taken a photograph before he left.

How long would it be before they were discovered? Days, or even weeks. This was clearly a rarely travelled road. The longer it took, the more of a sensation it would become. Michael had no doubt that all the blame would fall on him. The headlines would not be able to

contain their derision. *Idiot Strands Family in the Desert, Leaves 4 Dead, Including Self*. Michael would become a posthumous scapegoat, and there might even be speculations about murder-suicide, about what drove him to this point. Yet the other three would become martyrs. To outside eyes, there would be no question of family togetherness: they had let him drag them to this place, after all.

No one would care how much Michael had spent on aquarium T-shirts that none of them wanted. No one would care that the crayons he'd procured to keep Amber entertained had melted into an ugly brown morass in their box, bringing her to tears for the first time on this nightmarish trip. Both children would remain beings of infinite potential, lives tragically cut short before they could reach fruition—or not. There would only be three victims beneath a picnic blanket.

It was so simple to arrive at what he wanted, in the quiet, but he could see the impossibility of it, too. It would not be nearly as neat as he was imagining. Hannah would feel smothered beneath the blanket, and strike out on her own. Jillian would be found with her dead cellphone clutched close to her chest. Amber would be alone.

Even a tragic, untimely end would not be enough to save his family. Still, the fantasy of it was enough to quench Michael's thirst.

Was this a deathwish? Did anyone enter the valleys of the Mojave without one? Weren't they a place you went to be reborn? Where dreams were painted all across the landscape and the heat gave rise to strange visions?

Michael's legs were still strong. He knew they would not fail him. He would bring help thundering down the road by sun-up. After a short recovery from this embarrassment of a vacation, he would return to his cubicle, the girls to their school desks, Jillian to a life lived in front of a glowing screen. The revelation he had come to in the desert would be drowned out by

other voices and their ceaseless demands, until he could no longer recognize what he was, until he forgot who he had been. Then, Michael knew, he would immerse himself once again in his efforts to grasp what was out of his reach, and wonder in full earnestness what he was doing wrong and why no one was ever happy with him.

He wished this road would go on forever.