

BOOK OF FAVES

Various Authors

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THE BLIGHT

by Emma Cline

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And here was a town house, five stories high. The car idled in front. David looked out the window of the back seat, up at the stone façade. There was a guard, installed on the front steps, and a rash of flags mounted over the door, as if it were an embassy. The façade was lighted from below by the exterior lights that specified the building, separated it from the other night buildings.

It was the flags that threw him, there over the big door. Scrambled his thinking.

Then David had a flash of understanding. They were already in Zurich: this was an official building, the appointed time upon him at last.

There was a hitch in his breath. Too soon, wasn't it? He wasn't ready!

His eyes caught his assistant's with visible alarm.

Instantly, the boy's hand was on David's arm. Cody calmly took out the itinerary, read it aloud: Rebecca. Dinner. London.

This was the club. Seven *p.m.* reservation, under Larkin. Restaurant upstairs, check-in downstairs.

I'm coming in with you, the boy said.

Squeeze, squeeze, went the boy's hand, signalling that everything was correct.

Cody would wait in the car during dinner, but the handoff was important, these interstitials, and Cody would be here when it was time for pickup. Time to ferry him to the hotel.

I'll be waiting, Cody said soothingly.

•

An entryway, a stone floor. Polished to lawsuit-slickness. The walls were seamless sheets of wood that wavered in candlelight. David hung back, letting Cody be the one to approach the woman sitting at the front desk, crowded out by a floral arrangement. So big, the arrangement. Were those actual tree branches?

She was a ghoul, this woman, with her many requirements. She needed to see identification. Needed the full names of both parties. The boy supplied the correct answers, had any number of important David documents on his person, ready for the woman's perusal.

She wrote something on her paper and checked a tablet. Ms. Larkin is in the restaurant, she told David, Cody apparently already dismissed. Fourth floor.

Just the named guest, she said, when Cody took his arm.

I'm his assistant, Cody said. It's medical. For medical reasons. I'll be down as soon as he's with his daughter.

Only the named guest, the woman said.

I'll get lost, David said. He smiled. I really will.

You can see, Cody told the woman, on your little video screen. I'll take him up and come right back down.

All right, the woman said finally.

And you can send him after me, Cody said, nodding at the security guard, if I'm not right back down.

The woman frowned. The guard didn't react.

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Cody stayed at David's side, his arm through David's, helping him navigate the elevator, the hallways hung with heavy velvet curtains. The carpeting was so thick that it seemed to eat up their footsteps.

The people they encountered seemed like children, dressed up in party wear, traipsing around the rooms of this doll house. Their faces were done up and their hair shone.

Good for you, David thought, as a woman pushed past in a short dress and high heels.

Now that he did not want to expend any effort, he saw nothing but effort all around him.

Too many levels—Cody steadied him through each transition, a turn down a hallway and then three shallow steps. A dip and another set of steps.

They passed through a dim bar area, wall lights dialled to a golden glow. Then they arrived at another bar, the correct bar.

A lull.

Cody pointed out the woman who had taken up an uncomfortable perch on a barstool.

There we are, Cody supplied helpfully. Rebecca.

David nodded. Of course.

I'll check in with her later, Cody said. But Rebecca knows to text whenever you're ready. I'll just be around the corner.

•

David started toward his daughter. Dressed in the prim British style, or so he decided, without any real knowledge of what that might be—a narrow skirt, tall boots whose tops were hidden by the skirt, a Peter Pan blouse. Gold jewelry that flashed its minor dazzle, its subtle good taste.

She appeared to have finished most of the glass of white wine on the bar in front of her. She said something to the bartender, but the bartender glanced in David's direction, which made her turn, too.

Rebecca stood up nervously, her eyes taking him in with diagnostic intensity. What was she noticing, or trying to notice? She closed the distance between them, put an arm through his, and led him back to her barstool.

Dad, she said, and at least that was familiar, not some British affectation.

Something something about the place. She was chattering a bit.

When it's sunny out, there's a nice roof terrace, she said. They open it up—it's nice. Not now, of course.

Yeah.

It's a bit frustrating, she said, looking around. Table's not ready. It's not even so busy. They're good about that stuff, she said, usually.

Right.

She squinted at him. Dad, she said, you've got— She tapped her cheek.

He stared at her dumbly.

Here, she said, and reached out. He felt a tiny tug of his skin, and then she held up a scrap of toilet paper, browned with blood. He tried not to look confused. She rolled the paper into a little ball that she rested on her cocktail napkin. He touched his face and checked his finger—no blood.

A mystery.

Your table is ready, the waiter said, and Rebecca drained her glass and stood.

Shall we?

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What did she know? Only that David had decided to slow down a bit, as of late. Step back from work.

Retirement, or some euphemistic version of retirement. That information alone had been enough to send her into a spiral. If she had known that there was actually something wrong, that a genuine diagnosis existed and David was keeping it from her—hard to imagine the fallout.

She had e-mailed Cody a string of articles to print and pass along to David. Retirement often marked a bad turn was the general gist; it was when people started their slow decline. That had to be actively avoided. When you retired, you actually had to work overtime in order to keep the brain and body stimulated. It was a job in itself, really!

Creatine research, peptides, the correct sauna temperature to best replicate the resilience of some Norwegians in

a clinical study. These congenial, sweaty Norwegians scolded him—why had he not developed a lifelong habit of weekly saunas with a group of close-knit friends? That seemed to protect against any misfortune.

What was the correct sauna temperature? He didn't know, because the article had reported the temperature in Celsius and, according to his mental calculations, it came out to three hundred and ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit, which he knew was . . . probably . . . not correct.

A kitchen drawer had been taken over by bottles of vitamins, tipped on their side, labels up, and there had been a stretch of weeks in which he had bothered to force them down.

do not age, one supplement brand was called.

donut age, his eyes saw.

Was it truly possible for salvation to be purchased on Amazon.com or wherever Rebecca went to find these dim and stinky gelcaps? Was the brain just waiting for unregulated supplements to slough off the plaque before it would emerge, spanky and pink?

Her protocol had intersected somewhat with his own desperate push. His brief sobriety. The red-light hat on the skull, another line clipped up the nose: a laser pointer, really, shoved up a nostril. So how could it hurt, throwing her regimen into the mix? It was all folk medicine. Offerings. The capsules tanged on his tongue as he washed them down: the green-tea-extract pill, the fat amino-acid vitamin that nudged its awkward way down the throat.

This is the body of Christ, amen—David back in grade school, Friday-morning Mass. He opened his mouth for the bland Communion host. The wafer dissolved almost instantly; his tongue roved around, trying to coax the soggy body of Christ from his molars. Even so, he'd made a real effort to summon some solemn holy feeling, as he did when he took these pills, a gesture for the far-off daughter. The lost years, the brief birthday calls, dates for visits discussed but flights never booked—swallow, swallow, do this in memory of me.

Similarly disappointing, similarly unmiraculous.

Unmiraculous—like it had been to swallow the body of Christ. More like gumming the wet sock of Christ.

Do this in memory of me, ding-a-ling-a-ling.

This was the way of things, this desperate religious surge, Mecca in a gelcap. Maybe it would all work. Maybe it would!

For David, it had probably been a month, all told—that this surge of hope had lasted. Maybe he was a special case.

Why should I hire you, his first boss had asked, and David said, I graduated with honors—

So you think you're special? Mark said. His tone wasn't unkind. A special guy?

David sensed that the right answer was the one he had given.

Not at all, David said. But I work hard. I'm a hard worker.

Why me/why not me? That was how some people dealt with bad news. Accepting that they weren't special, after all.

Rebecca hadn't learned yet. He sort of had.

The blight had come for him; it was too late. The vitamins stayed in the drawer. He let his brain blank out on words without trying to chase them down.

The quick brown fox, the lazy dog.

The lazy—

•

What did you call them, the little half curtains on the windows? Strung neatly along silver curtain rods. These booths with partitions that closed you off from the nearby tables. So you felt even more important.

Who did Rebecca come here with? People were members of such places so that they could take other people there. He didn't know the contours of her life well enough to imagine who those others might be. People she wanted to impress. She didn't work, hadn't worked for years—he was fairly certain of this. He had an automatic transfer set up, guilt money still on its biweekly distribution schedule.

Rebecca shook out her napkin, then checked her phone. He's really on top of things, she said, with a slight eye roll.

David waited to understand what she was talking about.

I don't like him, she said. When I call? He doesn't always tell you. I know it, too, his voice does this weird cutoff thing, and I just know he doesn't even mention it to you.

Cody—she was talking about Cody.

He's a nice. Pause. A nice boy.

I wish you would answer your phone. Or your e-mails. It's just hard, she said. Always going through him.

You can call me, David said.

He says he tells you but I know he doesn't.

You can call me anytime, David said.

Somewhere in the restaurant, a champagne cork popped.

David forced himself to return his attention to Rebecca. She was peering at him. He smiled, this strange new habit—but it worked, in its way. It seemed to calm her.

Have you talked to Mom? he said.

Her face showed her surprise.

Annabel, he corrected himself.

Yeah. She's good. I mean, seems like it.

David had stayed polite, unfailingly so, with Annabel—it had been easier when she remarried and gave up alimony. So he was no longer aware, every month, of just how polite he was being. A doctor, the new husband—wasn't he? David had been relieved. Hadn't she ended up ahead? Wouldn't her anger finally lose its urgency, every conversation no longer a fresh report from the scene of her woundedness? Time for the farewell tour, Annabel, darling.

Though he couldn't remember when they had last talked. Where was she, in this world? Panic, a quick hit of it—surely he should know.

He hurried past this blank spot.

We came here on our honeymoon, David said. Did you know that?

Yeah, she said. I guess I did.

She paused, like he might offer some amusing story from the past, polished for her enjoyment, but he didn't.

The past, where he lived now. Rebecca was obviously, insistently, a citizen of this planet. With its clubs. With their many levels. The ego churn in the room was almost a visible thing. What's next, what's next, what's next—that was the hungry hum under everything.

The waiter's interruption was helpful.

David took a slice of the dark bread, spread it with a thick layer of butter.

She made an apologetic face at the waiter. For what, he didn't catch, but he assumed it had to do with him, some lag or error. He showed his teeth in a half smile, half grimace.

It's been cold here, she said, but it'll be much worse in Zurich. You know Geoff wanted us to go to Switzerland for Rainer's break. He's big into that, skiing, real treks, the *National Geographic* excursions. I wouldn't go now, she said. Not in the dead of winter. So gloomy. What's the project?

She waited for him to respond.

He waited, too, for another nudge in the right direction. Switzerland? she added.

Oh, you know.

She studied him. She took another drink.

Lag time, enough for a creep of unease. Fill the silence, David.

It's for Stearns, he said. I do little things, here and there. The invocation of Stearns was calming, he could tell. A familiar signpost from a familiar life. And that was enough—didn't we just want the people we knew to stay in their familiar realms? Knock around inside the boundaries of their familiar selves, hit their familiar marks? Remain pretty much approximate.

When they'd set up this visit, he had made mention to Rebecca of a business thing, the outlines of some consulting project that awaited him in Zurich. Had Cody smoothed over any jarring gaps? Probably. Hopefully.

The prospect of actual business now seemed to brighten her tone.

It's wonderful to get back into things, she said in a high, unnatural voice. One less thing for her to worry about, if David kept himself busy.

Busy-ness, which used to be his life. A busy-ness man.

David had worked so frantically. Needless, his frantic work. And yet—they were all like him. Stearns and the others. Why did any of them fill their lives in this way? He had not needed to work as much as he had, not nearly as much, and not with a feeling of such terror.

He took a drink of his wine. His eyes fluttered a bit. The start of a histamine itch. But what could he be allergic to? He blinked rapidly.

So much frantic work. But they had all seemed forlorn in times of leisure. Vacation sent him into strange moods: he was unkind to his family, he drank more. A dissatisfaction, like a sickness. How everything seemed unfortunate,

meagre. This was his portion? This was his slice of happiness? His family stared balefully at him, waiting for some alchemy to be performed by his hand, like those trips when he was somehow expected to navigate them through an unknown city.

It's probably time for lunch, his wife would say, as if he weren't hungry, too, as if he had failed to notice that they were all sweating and sunburned and lost, the unhappy little unit of his family there on the foreign sidewalk? If I see a place I'll stop, he said curtly, and returned to the thankless task of leading them along the strange streets, every restaurant shuttered, every passerby seeming to sneer at David.

We'll just head back to the main road, he said. I'm sure something is open.

They looked at him, his wife and child, as if they'd found him on the bottom of their shoe.

It had always been a relief to return to work. Back to the universe that required his wholesale belief and, in turn, gave him the assurance that he, too, was real, that his life was something to believe in.

Rebecca did not know how things had ended with the board, only that they had. She knew none of the unpleasantness.

He welcomed his own forgetting on that subject.

Just really great to hear, Rebecca said. That you're back at it.

It's pretty straightforward, he said. The project.

Had he done his particular monologue already? No way to know.

For Stearns, he added.

He was saying Stearns's name too often, he gathered.

I do little things here and there, he said.

She gave him a look. But didn't ask any follow-up questions.

•

They were served slivers of pale fish in sauce, barely-there disks of orange citrus that dotted the flesh.

This is to share, she said.

The waiter had said that when he put the plate down: This is to share.

A slackness between them. A smile, again, his big smile.

You can eat those, she said, when he started to pick off the citrus rounds. The skin, she said, is quite thin.

He chewed them obediently. You could eat them, yes. This seemed—chew, chew—technically true.

Oh, Dad. She looked sad.

He was silent. The pork chop came with an unfamiliar vegetable, shreds of a green stalk. He shifted the mass to the side with his knife. He scraped the plate audibly. Kept at it until the shreds were all in a knife-neatened square, cordoned off from the cutlet.

Aren't you hungry?

She reached across the table to take possession of his silverware. She used his knife and fork to cut up little pieces of the pork chop. It looks good, she said.

Don't do that. Perhaps he grabbed the knife and fork back with too much force.

She raised her hands, glanced around at no one. Well, I'm sorry, she said, her face red. She finished her glass.

He took up a piece of the cut meat with his fingers and put it in his mouth. Pork was very sweet. He forgot this every time until he was eating it again. Strangely sweet. He swallowed.

If Rebecca knew what was planned in Zurich, she'd stop him.

She'd figure out the legal avenue. Go straight for the cutoff switch.

What was the formal term—mentally unfit? Incompetent?

She'd make it official. Punitive in her way, Rebecca. She didn't seem to believe that anyone should escape their allotted pain in this lifetime. Stations of the Cross, Marylebone edition. Would she wear a hair shirt, if it were on offer in a nice navy?

As a girl, she would sometimes cry when David smoked cigarettes. Big, fakey tears that gusted in and out of genuine distress. It wasn't even so bad, then, smoking, but she was ahead of her time. Had a suspicious nose for her parents' pleasure, identified it as a destabilizing force. The time she'd refused to acknowledge Annabel when she'd cut her hair in the short style. Perhaps the girl had been right. It was a threat, wasn't it? Other people's desires, a mother taken by a new vision of herself. A father's insistence on the private pleasure of a cigarette.

Well, honey, this is like one big cigarette that Dad is going to smoke. A really big one.

The people in Switzerland had strongly suggested that he inform his loved ones about his plans. If you “sneak away into the beyond”—their words—you could hurt their feelings and make them angry.

Sneak away into the beyond—maybe this was a clumsy translation. Shouldn’t their terminology be more medical than that? Sneaking away into the beyond—like how you might describe a teen-ager dropping acid in the back yard. Groovy and loose.

And, anyway, hurt feelings, anger—that was exactly what would not matter to him, there in the groovy beyond. You made calculations, you weighed the future anger of others against the present trouble, and then you pretty much said, O.K. Kick the can down the road.

What would the alternative be, if Rebecca had her way?

A forced march through the brutal next decade. Whatever gruesome care scenario awaited him. His brain would short out completely, oh, sometime in the next year or so. He’d perhaps have the occasional flare of lucidity, though whatever scraps of reality he’d manage would be pierced with terror.

There would be the dutiful once-a-year visit from Rebecca and the child. Neither of them would want to be there. Wind would blow the trees against the windows and the humidifier would puff and David would deteriorate in his little slice of existence, running out the clock there on the very edge of other people’s real lives.

It was not—David picked at a shred of citrus peel caught between his teeth—a pleasant thought. Not pleasant at all.

So he was doing the right thing. His calculations were correct. Leave at five minutes to midnight.

It was a great party—thanks a ton!

He smiled at Rebecca.

Rainer is looking forward to seeing you, she said.

David kept smiling.

Rainer, in his notebook, age nine. Rainer, age nine.

He's nine, David said. An inane offering.

Almost ten. He's got loads of friends—he's really doing so well. We're so pleased.

That's good.

It was a little, you know, touch and go, right after last year, but the new school has been just so professional. Really a total shift—it's like night and day. He's thriving.

Wonderful, he said.

New school, O.K., some incident, but he had lost the context, so he just kept the child's name in his brain. Rainer, a solid name. Rainer, who was thriving, and he chewed dutifully on the chop, and, in this way, the dinner passed.

•

Many opportunities to extend the meal. Coffee? Dessert?

To not choose these offered extensions seemed sad, an acknowledgment that the night had been only O.K., that no spark of familial magic had overcome them. And they

were as they had always been, stiff with each other, missing the mark.

Like those holiday outings, post-divorce, with itineraries planned out by Annabel. Even at the peak of her anger, she'd remained the wholly capable stage director of everyone's emotions. Take the girl here, look at these lights, these window displays, there's a holiday village in the children's department, get an early dinner reservation at the restaurant on the highest floor—she'll like the glass elevator.

He'd been grateful. Enormously so.

Shirley Temple for madam, David had said. Rebecca's legs in their white tights swung from the restaurant chair.

Extra cherries? His voice had a festive strain.

Oh, no, the serious girl said. Thank you.

She opened her presents without fuss. Thank you, she said, in a neutral tone. She was often thanking him back then, but it seemed to mean something else, her affect oddly listless.

The time he called to let them know that she had left the new little coat behind, the wooden chess set.

We'll get them next visit, Annabel said.

Had they? Had Rebecca ever brought the chess set home? Quite expensive, he remembered. The chess set. A smooth wooden box with a felt-lined drawer where the pieces were kept.

Quite expensive.

No dessert—was Rebecca sure?

I'm really O.K., Rebecca said, but David waved a hand. We need something sweet. You love sweets. He studied the dessert menu. It seemed bizarrely coded. So many of the words were capitalized, confusingly, and he scanned gamely for a bit, then put it down.

You choose, he said.

One yuzu cheesecake, two forks.

You, zoo. You, zoo.

They took polite bites, Rebecca needlessly covering her mouth as she chewed.

He tried to think, I love you, to see what it scraped up in him. He tried to gather himself to match the seriousness of the occasion—the last time he would be alone with his only child.

His child. All the illnesses and treachery—hadn't she survived? His child, who had once vomited silently in the bathtub, then gone on playing happily with her bath toys. Who had once walked with mummy stiffness down the night hallway, her poxed limbs pink with dried calamine lotion. Who had broken a wrist on the back-yard flagstones, drooled cherry medicine down her sleeping face on the car ride back from the hospital.

The reel was playing too quickly; it was difficult to hold on to.

I'll have to show you the plaster, she chattered. It's an interesting technique. They basically picked up the entire kitchen and moved it to the sunroom. Where it used to be. A bigger footprint, though. It'll be totally different than when you saw it last—when was that?

He pretended to try to recall. Pinball eyes, looking up, looking down.

Gosh. I mean, maybe we hadn't even moved in. She smiled. Well. I guess it's been a long time.

Too long, he said. He surprised himself.

She kept smiling, surprised, too. Even this minor display of sentiment made them both awkward.

It was a crumb, compared to what he was supposed to say. He was supposed to invoke something, speak to the strangeness of passing from one world to another. Burnish this evening with dramatic color, emotions vivified like in those old hand-painted photographs.

Maybe he had prepared some sentiments in his notebook? Some . . . remarks?

He wasn't that person, and neither was Rebecca. This universe was bounded, meagre—they had only their usual roles, their approximate dialogue.

No more tears.

Mmm, Rebecca said aloud, to indicate that she liked the dessert.

•

There was an e-mail that Cody would send out, after it was over, composed, mostly, by David. Certain additions had been made by Cody, reasonable enough, meant to forestall any liabilities. David understood the need to pay this kind of attention, and he was grateful.

A few different versions, for the different audiences. But hers had taken the most effort to compose.

(Was the last name really necessary?)

Not ideal. To ambush her with an e-mail. But it seemed the only real way to handle it.

The slice of You Zoo steadily disappeared from the plate. The two of them alternated with their forks until there was nothing left.

He wiped half-heartedly at his mouth and thought, Rebecca is full grown, she is a full-grown woman. Her constellation of self, her preferences and complexes and aversions, her taste for sweetness—he would only ever know a fraction of Rebecca. A shadow moving in another room, spied through a keyhole. A girl who had once loved a ratty doll, a doll now lost to the black mouth of the indifferent universe. This nervous woman with her nervous clothes and how her tone went up an octave as she spoke to the waiter—she was of his flesh but not of his flesh.

This was a promising line of thought, and emotion stirred in his chest. My child.

Like little Rebecca with her fake/real tears—the sentiment was real, this love for her, and swelled through him convincingly, totally, but he couldn't hold on to it.

The feeling receded. He tried to get it back, but the music was too loud, there was a distracting after-dinner surge for the bar.

This whole place, how odd, the look of a real restaurant, filled with people, but still it seemed so airless. It was sealed off in some essential way, and, no matter how much they dedicated themselves to appearing otherwise, they were false, actual life kept at too much of a remove.

Still, he raised the cup of espresso to his lips and it tasted real, like the real thing, and wasn't it pleasant enough? This real cup of espresso, the daughter who had his DNA twisting through her, and what would it even look like to break it all open, his life, break himself open, like a Christmas cracker: here was his birthday lunch, David a little boy, an hour that passed in near-silence, *Don't you speak to your father that way*; here were the years at school; here was Annabel on their wedding night, trying to hold in a fart unsuccessfully and bursting into sobs when she couldn't.

A being entrusted to his care—that was how he'd felt about Annabel, and then about Rebecca. The baby with wrinkled hands that flickered and twitched around her face, her eyes black before they were blue. She grumbled in her sleep, with each breath, a wheezy ancient in the house.

Annabel's bones had shifted during pregnancy, her pelvis spread outward. Another time when the animal was ascendant. There was one person, then there were two. The sudden creature in the hospital room. Then the second labor: the placenta, marbled with fat blue veins. No one had prepared him. It had seemed horrifyingly solid, as if they might be expected to take it home. Another mouth to feed.

Annabel had to sit on a little inflatable pillow for a month. She retreated to an animal privacy, bent over her child. Whatever she and David had had between them was revealed as flimsy. It didn't matter so much for Annabel—

she had found herself in a new country, with its absorbing new customs. But David was forlorn, redundant. The man in the suit who lumbered around in the background of their lives. Coming in and out of focus like a clumsy stage-hand.

His doing, certainly. Still.

They'd divorced when Rebecca was ten.

•

David tried to get the check—awkward, the fumble to accept the little leather folder, David peering at the receipt. He groped for a pen but it was all swimmy. Impossible. He handed the whole mess to Rebecca.

My eyes, he said vaguely.

She took over with her usual briskness. They just charge me directly, she said.

Take my card, at least.

They just need a signature, Dad—it's all on file here, she said. My account.

Tot up all the money he had spent on her—hundreds of thousands, private school and college and one year of business school, the help with the house purchase—and this evening would be a drop. But it was good, to nourish one's offspring.

The daughter looked at him with concern. Yes? he said.

Ready? she said.

He blinked.

To go?

The table in front of him was empty, wiped clean, even the candle blown out. When had that happened?

They took the bill?

Dad?

Ready, he said, his hands braced on the cleared surface,
for support. Up we go. ♦

This is drawn from "Switzy."

MUTTER

by Esther Yi

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I'm waiting for my mother at the airport, holding a strip of cardboard above my head that says "*mutter*." An older German lady emerges from the sliding doors and wanders up to me with a dazed look, relieved that she can finally drop her bags to the floor. But I tell her she is not my mother—never was and never will be. I add that I don't love my mother just because she's my mother, though being my mother certainly helps, since it means she's always been around, and so I got to know her, and it was only then that I came to love her.

With a sigh, the German lady picks up her bags and waddles away. At that moment, my mother comes marching out of the doors. In lieu of a greeting, she informs me that she doesn't have any checked luggage and impatiently waves us away from the airport, from all of this. She's carrying only a tote bag, but it's so heavy—taut and bulging, like there could be a bowling ball inside—that it's making half her body sag.

"I've seen that word before," she says, pointing at my sign.

"You've probably seen it in English. But I mean it in the German way."

I pronounce it slowly in German. My mother imitates me, then converts the word into a pair of Korean syllables that sound most like the German. She tells me that this Korean verb refers to when a splotch of something sticks onto something else, and it shouldn't have. The offending splotch is frequently moist, leading to the possibility of a stain, but the Korean "mutter" could also turn out to be a surface-level affair.

My mother, who probably would've become an eccentric schoolteacher had she never left Korea for America, asks me to imagine a shooting spree at a shopping mall: "Let's say the gunman plugs you squarely in the chest and blood drenches your shirt—that's not 'mutter.' Now, imagine you're sitting in the food court, close to the main action. It wouldn't be 'mutter' if a drop of a stranger's blood flew over into your cup of soda, but it would be 'mutter' if that droplet landed on your shirt. Understand?"

"I think so," I say. "When something 'mutters,' there's a chance it won't penetrate deeply enough to leave a stain. Such a 'muttering' thing shows up where it shouldn't, but it's pretty easy to get rid of."

As we take the bus into the city, I try to think of a word in English that describes the entire concept in reverse, that is, when something shows up where it should and is impossible to get rid of. Interestingly, there are nouns for this something (soul, God, etc.), but there seem to be no verbs capturing what this something does ("to soul," "to god"?). Meanwhile, I can think of far too many nouns for something that shows up where it should but is pretty easy to

get rid of, and they all have verbs. That would make sense, because, if something can disappear, then it'll need a verb to call itself back into existence. By contrast, something like the soul, God, etc., in being impossible to get rid of, knows no such shift. It can't be made to happen, since it's always already there. What's more, if the soul, God, etc., can't be made to happen, then it never has happened, actually, which makes me wonder—does it happen by *not* happening? Might it happen by *not* showing up where it should? In that case, perhaps everything I hold dear—e.g., my mother, her voice, both rattled by this bus—can be understood as being in an unrelenting state of abandonment by the soul, God, etc. Beauty, then, arises from the pain and struggle of experiencing oneself as a site of divine truancy, and ugly is that which pretends to be directly equivalent to the soul, God, etc. Might this be why I find cockroaches endearing, while kindly know-it-alls make my skin crawl?

The next day, I bring my mother to work with me. When I first started working at the zoo, its inhabitants were organized by taxonomy (birds here, wildcats there). Not long afterward, the animals were organized by continental regions (African birds here, Asian birds there), reflecting the popular celebration of cultural differences, particularly in the anodyne areas of fashion and food, which made animals—plumaged, etc., frequently eaten, etc.—ideal subjects. Now the park's animals are organized by their degree of endangerment. The idea among management is something like “save the best for last”: instead

of viewing the precarity of a species as an allusion to what's not there, why not treat it as a substantial trait that imbues an animal with pathos, even a soulful intelligence?

I encourage my mother to walk the zoo's entire course, from the species that exist in plenitude to the species that are so much on their own that even if their calls were to be broadcast around the world, not one living creature would know how to respond. I work as a security guard in the latter section. When my mother finally reaches my station, she joins a group of schoolchildren and their teacher standing before the metal enclosure in which the crown jewel of our park lives: Zelzah, the only California condor left in the world.

A trainer is inside the cage feeding Zelzah. Meanwhile, my job is to stand guard on the other side of the footpath. Unlike the trainer, who holds Zelzah on his arm and does all sorts of things with her so that she becomes stronger, faster, and smarter, I'm on the lookout for anything that could weaken, decelerate, or retard her. I'd like to be up close and personal with Zelzah, too. But I'd never make it long as a trainer, because I'd have no desire to acquaint myself with her "machinery" so as to coördinate aerial or biological feats out of her. I'd be too busy staring at Zelzah and growing increasingly troubled. I'd let her stay on my arm for as long as she liked, even if that meant sleeping standing up inside her cage. All I want, really, is to fall within her line of sight for long enough that a little pile of information about me forms in her brain. It can be a messy pile, unsorted, just sitting there like dirty laundry.

As the trainer explains the complex evolutionary history of Zelzah's species, she looks around with unspent savagery. She wants to do something, anything, but she doesn't know what there is to do. She doesn't even know how to want to leave her cage. If only I could move all my feelings into her! She'd know how to draw my contradictory human impulses into a single irrevocable act, and this despairing but living instant would be magically commensurate with the rambling span of our conjoined life.

"Zel—zah," I pronounce slowly. "Last not just once, but twice."

The trainer informs the schoolchildren that Zelzah was born in the zoo but that her "real home" is a stretch of shrubland north of Los Angeles. She's "supposed" to have been born there, he says. I don't understand this matter of supposedness. It seems to me that Zelzah isn't supposed to be anywhere or anything. The trainer thinks he's confronting a painful idea, namely that there exists a home Zelzah can't return to, when he's actually distracting himself with a painful idea that's false in order to avoid the more painful idea that's true. Still, I can sympathize with the desire for a firm peg or two on which to drape the amorphous fabric of one's existence so that it can approximate a picture with meaning. As much as I can't stand to be told who I'm supposed to be or what I'm supposed to want, I secretly need some guidance at all times. It's even better when there's brute force involved, because then I do everything in my power to break free, a task sufficiently preoccupying that I don't have to decide what I actually

want to be free for. I want freedom but not too much of it. For example, while I have no wish to belong to any particular place or group of people, I wish to belong to myself. So I, too, believe in supposedness: I think I'm supposed to be myself. This may be even more mistaken than thinking I'm supposed to be someone else.

The trainer holds out a piece of raw chicken, the sun striking it as though it were the moisturized pink cheek of an obviously beautiful woman. Zelzah snaps it up. Stuffed with chicken from the top, she has no choice but to eject a violent rash of feces from below. In symbolic timing, I'm selected at that moment for a visit by a trainer at the elephant pond who's infamous for his uncontrolled extroversion. The prevailing interpretation among my co-workers is that he's arrogant and thinks himself unduly interesting, but my feeling is more that he's so burdened by his own banality—his “cross to bear”—that he has to cast off bits of it everywhere, like rotten apples out of a sack.

“Mary was such a good girl today,” he announces. The elephant must've been asked to endure something. “Ah,” he goes on, catching sight of my mother, “ha ha, it's your mother,” and then, preëemptively, “hey, take it easy, I'm just poking fun at people who would say such a thing.” I wait for him to finish talking to himself. Then I confirm that the woman is my mother. But he only laughs some more, mirthlessly. “You can always tell there's something broken about the older folks who come alone. Oh it's just so sad. You'll find them talking to the animals, saying things like ‘You wouldn't fit in my oven.’ It's obvious they haven't

had any real human contact in a while. That woman's husband is probably dead, and I bet her children don't call her."

From my position on the other side of the footpath, I try to see my mother as he sees her. She's shaking her head in awe at Zelzah. The children, meanwhile, are turning around to stare at her, having gathered that she isn't a mother to any of them and that this makes her solitude weird.

"She looks fine to me," I say uneasily.

After the demonstration, the children move on, but my mother remains standing before the cage. As I cross the footpath in her direction, I feel like we really could be strangers, and, in that suspension of our lifelong history, she strikes me for the first time as lost and confused. Zelzah spreads her wings wide. My mother anxiously turns her head left and right, scanning the wingspan as if a message awaits her there, but the bird, with an air of displeasure, promptly folds her wings back up, and what I used to see as a posture of relaxation now strikes me as the tense withholding of a secret. When I lay a hand on my mother's shoulder, she looks up at me in alarm, eyes void of recognition—but then they soften, become mild and indifferent. Flooded with relief, more because I want to be than because I am, I hug her.

"I'm so tired," she says. "I hate your time zone."

I take her home as soon as I can. After I finish showering, we sit on the floor in the middle of my apartment so that we can have dinner while she combs my hair. I'm sur-

prised she doesn't ask if I'll ever come back home, or make her usual solicitous observations about my apartment's chairless austerity. Now she sits cross-legged behind me on the parquet beside our dinner of discounted baked cheese and seems perfectly resigned to the way I live.

"You used to have so much more hair," she observes from behind. "Now when I gather your hair into my hand, it has the dimensions of a chewed-up plastic straw."

"Whenever you get older, I get older, too."

I tell her it's never made any sense to me that more and more hair falls out with age. Shouldn't my hair, dead as its cells are, actually multiply over time, while the juicy living parts of my body fall out, with my death being the exact moment when nothing that's alive about me is left? Rolling around inside my coffin would be a gigantic ball of hair trussed by a Möbius strip of fingernail.

"The older I get, the more I love you," I say. "Does that mean my love is more dead than alive?"

I tell my mother that sometimes it feels like an emergency: she must know that no one else can ever be what she is for me. I don't care who other people are and what they think they can do for me, I wouldn't care even if my mother were dead—in fact, they better leave my sight so that I can focus on the gaping hole she's left behind.

My mother says nothing and keeps the comb trundling across my scalp.

"Hello?" I say. "Are you there?"

She stops combing. I turn around to look at her.

“I came here to tell you something,” she says. “I’m starting to forget things, and it’ll only get worse. Thankfully, at a certain point I won’t know it’s happening. As a matter of fact, I’ll probably be the happiest and freest I’ve ever been. But you won’t be happy and free. My greatest fear is that I’ll do something in my brand-new life as an idiot that’ll make you laugh and cry at the same time. I don’t want to confuse you like that; I don’t want to make your joy and sadness hard to tell apart. I know this wicked mixture is the truth, but still, I don’t want it for you. So treat me as if I were no different from that impressive bird you watch over at work. I know it’ll be hard to see me as an animal. I was your human mother for so long, after all. But understand that I’ve transformed. Understand that your human mother has gone away. Don’t try to find her in what I become. Only then is there a chance you might love me still. You might even be tempted to cuddle me, post pictures of me, spend hundreds of dollars to buy me so that you can keep me at home and play with me.”

I touch my hair. It’s silky until I reach the ends, which are so viciously knotted that I’ll have to cut them off with scissors later.

“But who will take care of you?” I whine. “Live with me. Stay with me.”

“I would never do that to you. Things would get so bad that you’d be relieved when I die. No, it’s healthier to catapult you into grief.”

I weep as she resumes combing my hair. Ignoring my breakdown, she tells me a story I’ve already heard before,

about how, when she was a girl, she had thick beautiful hair all the way down to her butt and wore it in a flamboyant braid as long and heavy as a rope. She lost her balance whenever it swung, and, in that sense, it functioned nothing like an animal's tail. But her mother, who found it unseemly for a little girl to be swinging such a thing about, chopped it off one night while my mother was asleep. The next day, what made my mother even sadder than the braid's disappearance was how amazingly light she felt as she walked down the street, like she might float right up into the sky. ♦

This is drawn from "To God."

TESTING

by Min Jin Lee

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Even as an infant, Helen and John Koh's firstborn had a calm temperament and an accommodating disposition, as if he appreciated what it meant to be a jangnam, with the attendant privileges and responsibilities of primogeniture. Bo never seemed to let the burdens of being the eldest child overwhelm him. He exerted himself in the classroom and on the sports field; he got along well with his peers. A nice-looking and thoughtful young man, Bo was a blessing and a relief to his busy parents.

All three children had been born in Paramus, New Jersey, while John was working for a Japanese trading company in New York City. The Koh family had lived in New Jersey for six years, Seoul for four, then Sydney for almost six, prior to their return to Seoul. In the U.S., Australia, and South Korea, Helen's friends had constantly asked her how she was bringing up her eldest son. Was there a method to rearing such a fine student and good boy? Helen, however, insisted that the credit belonged neither to her nor to John. "Bo came that way," she would say.

Bo's mother could admit this truth not because she was modest but, rather, because the experience of having more than one child in the same household amply demonstrated to any self-aware parent that each child was entirely

unique. Eventually, all small humans—even when they were flesh of one's flesh, which should have provided some illusion of predictability—asserted their individuality, no matter how much a parent tried to control, shape, or design them.

As educated and earnest middle-class parents, Helen and John had provided more than the basics, and certainly more than they themselves, both the children of poor parents, had been given. Parenting was a haphazard experiment for even the best intentioned, and Helen and John observed their offspring, Bo, DH, and Mido, with profound fascination, as only parents can. Each child was immutably distinct from the others.

When Helen read a sad story in the news about a child who had gone astray, she very rarely assigned blame to the parents. Life had taught her that the debate between nature and nurture was almost moot: Excellent parents sometimes had badly behaved children, and careless parents could have progeny who performed admirably. The bond between a mother and her child was binding, yet it had to be loosened. A mother had to love, and a child had to grow up. The results were often out of one's hands.

In America, Bo was eighteen years old, but his Korean age was nineteen, as the time in the mother's womb was counted. Girls admired his glossy chestnut hair, olive complexion, and large brown eyes. He spoke English like a native, which had made him an exotic curiosity at a public high school in Gangnam, and he studied from morning into the night, barely sleeping. In the evenings, his sister,

Mido, studied as well, but she could never stay awake as long as he could. Helen did her best to stay up with Bo, but even she had to turn in eventually, because she had her job the next day and had to prepare breakfast for the family.

Most remarkably, Bo had maintained an impressive grade-point average, in the second stanine nationally, and he was now allowed to apply to Yonsei University. His school did not think he should test for Seoul National, his father's alma mater, which was reserved for the very top students, but his rank was high enough that his advisers thought Yonsei might be possible, especially if he applied for sociology, which was a subject he wanted to study. This was fine by Bo. He preferred Yonsei's old-fashioned campus and admired the university's alumni.

In Bo's homeroom class, there was a precocious beauty named Ara Yang, whom he liked, and who adored him. After school, Bo usually went to his cram school, and, once, she showed up at the hagwon and invited him to her house to study, and, right there in her bedroom, she proposed sex. Stunned, grateful, and naturally tempted, Bo made a deal with her: after they were accepted into college, they would make love. Whenever he masturbated after that, he fantasized about the twin possibilities of attending the college of his dreams and having sex with Ara.

Bo took the Suneung in November of 1994. In addition to that dreaded national college exam, in his year he also

had to take the bongosa, a specific exam for Yonsei. He believed that the tests went well enough.

As soon as Bo and his classmates finished the bongosa, they rushed back to their hagwon. Their tutors had been more or less flying blind, because there were almost no prior tests from which to teach. Each student, fresh from having taken the exam, was asked to recall the test questions, and three tutors recorded the questions and typed out their speculated answers. The bongosa question Bo would never forget was “Describe the difference between digital and analog.” For his answer, he had written that a digital clock stated a moment in time, whereas an analog clock revealed the process of time. Bo’s tutor said that this answer was terrific. Not that it mattered.

Bo’s Suneung score was what kept him out. A perfect score was 200. He received 153, a strong showing but not invulnerable, and, predictably, given his focus on studying for the college exams, his high-school G.P.A. had fallen to the lower end of the second stanine, so he was no longer in the top four per cent nationally.

Ara had been accepted to Sungkyunkwan University, but she told him she’d be happy to wait for him as he prepared to take the Yonsei exam again. Almost everyone took these exams more than once, especially for schools as hard to get into as Yonsei, she said, trying her best to encourage him. Bo, guilt-ridden at the heavy expense of his failure, told her firmly that he would not hold her back. To make the situation clearer, he told her that they should not even be friends.

Bo wanted to take the exams again. Helen did not know what to do. The Suneung was offered only once a year, in November. And John, after falling out with his boss and not finding anything good in Seoul, had just been rehired at his old office in Sydney, albeit with a demotion and a lower salary. He and Mido were now staying with Helen's brother, Kenny, who worked for Qantas, and his wife, Lily. Thankfully, DH was still doing fine at Andover. Helen had to consider the cost of maintaining housing in Seoul and Sydney, Bo's hagwon fees for another year, and the family's stretched expenses.

Helen's sister, Sonya, lived in an apartment complex made up of many separate towers in Apgujeong. In the elevator in Sonya's building, Helen finger-combed her hair, tucking the loose wisps behind her ears. That morning, she'd noticed new gray hairs sprouting from her side part. No doubt her sister would comment on this. Each week that Helen held off on getting her cut-and-color, she could put aside more for the children's school and hagwon fees.

When the elevator opened on Sonya's floor, a uniformed maid stood waiting at the apartment's front door. Sonya's home, which was owned by her husband's uncle, Chairman Mun, was larger than most houses in Seoul—a full floor, two apartments combined. Three generations lived in the two units, separated by a small hallway. Sonya spent her days taking care of the household—her husband, Yonggil, their two sons, and the Chairman. She managed a sizable staff, with a formidable housekeeper, two maids, a cook, and a driver.

The maid guided Helen to Sonya's home office, which was the size of Helen's living room. A large square of southern light flooded the elegant space. Behind the modern oak desk was a green mohair-wool sofa where Sonya read in the evenings. Stacks of art books covered a low hand-carved Korean-pine table. Tall branches of persimmons filled an enormous cobalt-blue fishbowl on a rosewood pedestal.

The maid remained at the door while Helen took a seat on the sofa, and Sonya frowned.

"I can't believe you're going to leave. Again. You've barely been here," Sonya said, too exasperated to bother with pleasantries. She asked the maid for tea, and the young woman bowed before closing the door.

"Is she new?" Helen pointed toward the door.

"Just the niece of the cook," Sonya said, then regretted sounding so dismissive. "She is part time. I don't really need her, but the cook asked me. She's recently divorced. There are two little kids."

Helen understood. Everyone asked her older sister for help, and Sonya had a hard time saying no.

"Did John find a house in Sydney?"

"They're still at Kenny's."

"Still?" Sonya raised an eyebrow.

"Well, Kenny and Lily said it's fine, and Mido is helping with the kids."

"Are you O.K. with money?" Sonya asked bluntly.

"It's tough," Helen admitted. She drew a breath. "Bo didn't get in."

“Oh, no!” Sonya exclaimed. “Was he close? I bet he was close. Bo is very smart. The hardest-working boy. I shouldn’t have favorites, but he is the best. Nicer than my sons,” Sonya said, then smiled. “Then, are you going to stay another year so—”

“I can’t stay. The apartment lease is ending, and we need that deposit back so we can get a place in Sydney. We can’t keep relying on Kenny and Lily. Bo missed the test by just a few points, and the counsellors said that this year’s Suneung was a nightmare.”

Helen folded her arms and closed her eyes, unable to forget what her son had said after the test results came out: “Umma, I want to take it again. I failed you and Appa. I’m sorry.”

She’d told him that he hadn’t done anything wrong. He had never failed them, but Bo could not be consoled. Her oldest child did not cry or waste more words. He was certain that, if he had studied harder, he would have passed. Acceptance was within his grasp. Three points, maybe four? He did not want all this expense and time to be squandered. How could she say no to a child who wanted to study harder? Helen could not. For her son, passing that test would be his redemption.

The boy’s apology continued to press down on his mother’s brain like a tiny ball of tungsten, a deceptively heavy metal she had once held in her palm in a chemistry class.

“It doesn’t make sense for me to stay here and lease a smaller place,” Helen said.

Sonya shook her head. She understood. Helen's growing expenses were unsustainable, and how would she ever save for the children's weddings and her own retirement?

"Sister, I was wondering, I know the Chairman wouldn't like it, but do you think Bo could stay here to take the test again? He'd be at the hagwon most of the time and wouldn't be underfoot. I know it's a big—"

Sonya had been afraid of this. She felt unable to refuse her little sister but unable to say yes either, because this was not her house. With her head bowed down, Sonya sat, not saying a word.

"Never mind," Helen said. She understood. Her sister couldn't ask the Chairman. He felt strongly about not allowing anyone outside Yong-gil's immediate family to stay overnight. He had never liked Sonya's relatives. For her sake, he tolerated them. "I was thinking of renting a room for Bo. I can't decide if he should stay at a boarding house or a gosiwon."

"I've heard that boarding houses can be terrible about meals," Sonya said, wanting to be helpful. "The newer gosiwon can be nicer," she said. "They're more like motels now than dorms. The rooms are small, but some of them are better run. I can help you with that. I am sorry about this. You know that if the Chairman and my husband weren't so against—"

"We'll be fine," Helen said, feeling foolish.

"I can help you with the cost," Sonya assured her. "Find the best gosiwon for him, right next to the hagwon. The boarding houses are often far away, and you don't want

him to waste time commuting. Just pick the best one, and I'll take care of it. I'll check in on him often. I promise."

Sonya paused. "You look tired," she said. "The sweater is pretty, but the lilac color highlights the gray in your hair. You look older than me! Get an appointment and get your roots done. I'm a mean older sister, aren't I? But who else is going to tell you to take care of your looks?"

Helen touched her head. Her sister was picking on her because she felt bad. Sonya had married a man from a wealthy family but had quickly learned that none of the family money was hers. The Chairman controlled every decision and expense, and Sonya did everything she could to please him. She nagged or teased only two people in the world—Kenny and Helen. With everyone else, she was detached, her behavior unimpeachable. To everyone else, she appeared flawless.

Sonya crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. "Why is Bo doing this? It makes no sense. He should be studying in America."

"He likes being here. He feels closer to the people. He was even thinking of trying to get into military service," Helen said, mystified.

"Has my favorite nephew lost his mind? My sons would be overjoyed if they didn't have to go through this. It's crazy enough that Bo wants to take the test again and live in Korea. Do not allow him to give up his American citizenship to do service. I will not allow that," Sonya said sternly.

Helen nodded.

Sonya glanced at the clock. “Listen, let’s have something to eat now. The Chairman will be back soon.”

Bo failed on his second try. An impossible philosophy passage and a confounding geometry proof. A few points shy.

On November 13, 1996, he took the Suneung for the third time.

The day before, after his last hagwon class had ended, he’d got on a mostly empty subway car heading to the Yonsei campus and sat in a seat near the back. Cold, he tried to warm himself by tucking his blue woollen scarf into his faded black parka.

“If you want to be a Yonsei student, you have to behave like one,” Kim Teacher, his hagwon instructor, had told him. “Go to the cafés where Yonsei students have their snacks, read the books they read, and inhabit the peace of mind of being an admitted student. Visualize. Draw the picture in your mind.”

A Suneung wizard who got one of the top scores in the country for his year, Kim Teacher charged an extraordinary tutoring fee, which Bo’s aunt Sonya paid. As a bachelor, not yet forty years old, Kim Teacher earned more than several lawyers and judges combined and already owned two commercial buildings in Hongdae. It was rumored that he didn’t have to work for money anymore; he just enjoyed teaching. His specialty was retakers, the ones who had not passed on their first or second tries. Kim Teacher was convinced that Bo would pass this time. His practice scores

were in the safety zone, so he focussed on building Bo's mental game.

At a corner table, by the window of a popular two-story café near Sinchon station that was frequented by students, Bo picked up a discarded copy of a Yonsei literary magazine and read it while drinking his tea. All around him, young men and women huddled together, warming their cold hands on hot coffee cups. Attractive girls in bold patterned sweaters and jeans discussed politics in hushed tones, ignoring the boys sniffing around them.

Bo tried to imagine himself as one of the young men writing in their notebooks or reading. A female student with short, permed hair resembled Isul, his friend at the gosiwon who was studying for the civil-service exam. The woman was reading "The Stranger" in French. Bo hadn't had time to read fiction since the summers during high school, when he used to read classic European and American novels in English.

He'd always imagined himself living and working in Korea, but he also wanted to be the kind of Korean who knew more about the world—through books, film, and history.

In less than twenty-four hours, he would take the Suneung again, and, for the past three years, he had done little but sleep, eat, and study for this exam. He had failed the Suneung in his last year of high school, and then again after graduation, and he hoped that tomorrow's Suneung would be his last. He felt good about the test this year and ready to put it behind him.

Earlier that morning, after class ended, Kim Teacher had asked him to stay behind for a moment. Bo stood awkwardly while the teacher remained seated, his long brown face tilted in deep thought. The teacher was unusually tall, with broad shoulders and a square jaw. Even when he smiled, he looked more like a former professional athlete than a once stellar student from a strawberry farm in Gos-eong.

"You will do very well," Kim Teacher pronounced. He handed Bo a paper box filled with the customary taffy. "Make the score stick! This is the best yeot in Seoul. Not everyone can get this."

Bo smiled his thanks.

"One more thing," Kim Teacher said, digging into his vest pocket to pull out a five-hundred-won coin. "Take this with you tomorrow. It's a good-luck charm from your old teacher. When you get nervous, just touch it. Remember, you're not alone. Think of the millions and millions of students who have taken difficult exams before you. Now you're part of this group of strugglers. It is good to be examined. A young person should learn and be tested so that he can retain knowledge."

Surprised, Bo stared at the coin in his palm. He wouldn't have pegged his teacher as superstitious.

"My hagwon teacher gave me a coin when I took my test. I passed and got into S.N.U. for the hardest course. A farm boy got a top score!" he said, laughing. "So here I am, training you to take an exam, giving you a coin, and wishing you luck."

Bo bowed and thanked him.

“How are you feeling?” The instructor prided himself on checking in with his students. He felt that his personal approach was the reason that his students got their best scores and shook off their past failures.

Bo grinned, staring at the pale-blue walls of the large classroom.

“I’m well, Teacher. I believe I’ve prepared as much as I could.”

“You will have fine luck, too. You deserve it.”

“I guess I haven’t had much luck before.”

“Sometimes it isn’t just preparation. It’s timing, circumstances, and personality. You have good habits, and you did the work, Bo. You’re a good person. Go easy on yourself. Make sure you go to sleep early tonight. Tell yourself that the exam is just another practice test. You’ll be fine.”

At the café, several tables had cleared out, and Bo was alone in his corner. He put down the literary magazine for the next person who might want something to read. When he went to the cashier to pay the bill, he could feel the worn edge of the five-hundred-won coin in his coat pocket. He took the train home and stopped at the grocery store near the gosiwon to pick up supplies for dinner.

Sonya had selected the best gosiwon near Bo’s hagwon, and it rarely had a vacancy, because it was so well maintained. But it was still a pay-by-the-week lodging, filled with transient students, day workers, and ghostly figures who came and went, and, of course, it was nothing like

home. The kitchen for the residents was a modestly sized rectangular room. There were three rice cookers and three electric kettles on a long white counter by a deep sink and a dish rack. Residents were required to wash their own dishes.

Bo found Isul at the communal table, her eyes closed, with her head propped up on a civil-service study guide. An aluminum ramyeon pot with rounded handles simmered on the stove. Isul wore her usual indoor clothes—black sweatpants, gray sweatshirt, white ankle socks with black-and-white plastic slippers. She was bone thin and tiny, and although she was four years Bo's senior, she looked like a primary-school girl wearing her older brother's clothes. Severely nearsighted, Isul wore eyeglasses with thick plastic lenses, which obscured her lovely, small eyes.

Bo had met Isul in the communal kitchen on his first day at the gosiwon. Within a week, she'd made a point of sitting him down to tell him that he was nothing like the other residents.

"You're not a loser like most of us. You'll have a bright future. Keep studying."

She had already graduated from Pusan National with good marks, but she hadn't been able to get any office jobs. Dejected at the thought of continuing to apply for white-collar positions, she had taken a break for a few months to work as a bartender at a restaurant owned by her aunt, who had borrowed money so that Isul could study in Seoul for the civil-service exam. Isul had failed

twice already. On her first try, she'd made it to the interview stage but had caught a severe cold and lost her voice on the day of the interview.

Isul's windowless room was one of the smallest in the gosiwon, and she had to share a bathroom on the women's floor. She teased Bo for being a rich kid, because he had his own bathroom and a transom window that opened, allowing him to get fresh air from the lobby windows. Isul and Bo had made a deal that whoever passed on the third try would buy the other a beef barbecue dinner.

Every day, they ate at least one meal together in the third-floor kitchen, where they could have as much rice, kimchi, and ramyeon as they wanted, all supplied by the gosiwon. With the allowance that his parents sent, Bo bought eggs, sausages, tofu, and tins of jjajang tuna, and he shared his groceries with her, though she ate so little that her intake was hardly noticeable. Whenever her aunt sent her fish or banchan from home, she shared it with him. She called him her little brother.

The ramyeon in the pot burbled over, and Bo hurried to the stove to turn off the gas.

"Sister! It's done, right?"

Isul didn't open her eyes, and he nudged her shoulder gently, feeling the sharp edge of her shoulder blade beneath the thick sweatshirt.

He saw that she was sleeping soundly and had forgotten to take off her eyeglasses. As he removed them from her small face with both hands, Isul still didn't wake up.

Big Uncle, a middle-aged security guard at a downtown bank, peeked into the kitchen. A longtime resident and a kind of mayor of the gosiwon, he favored Isul and Bo. Six years ago, after his elderly father died, Big Uncle had moved into one of the back rooms with a bathroom and never saw the point of finding a bigger place of his own. He preferred the bustle of the gosiwon to the idea of living alone and took great care to remember the birthdays of both residents and staff. On a birthday, he'd buy a red-bean bun from his favorite bakery and leave it in the kitchen with the person's name and a smiley face in a heart drawn neatly on the paper bag.

"Our little Isul looks tired," Big Uncle said. "Maybe we can get Manager Hwang to open her room, so she can sleep properly. Her neck is going to hurt if she sleeps that way," he said, clucking his tongue. "Manager Hwang is at the store now. He'll be back in half an hour or so."

"Sister, Sister!" Bo jostled Isul's shoulder but got no response. He spotted the familiar green lanyard with her room key in her sweatpants pocket. He turned to Big Uncle. "Maybe we can take her ourselves. She must weigh forty kilos, if that."

Big Uncle bent over her chair and scooped up the young woman in his arms like an infant.

"She weighs less than a small sack of rice," he said with concern.

They both checked that she was breathing.

Taking her key, Bo walked ahead of him to open Isul's door. Having never seen the inside of her room before, he

was startled by how small it was, less than half the size of his.

She had almost no possessions. The white walls were bare and the sheet-of-paper-size patch of floor immaculate. On the clothing rack hung a navy winter coat, a black interview suit, one white dress shirt, and a Burberry scarf that Isul's aunt had sent last Christmas. Every centimetre of her desk was covered with heavy piles of test guides and notebooks. Her bed was made and covered with a thick red-and-green checkered blanket. On the pillow was an open box of cold medicine from the corner drugstore. Six of the capsules had been removed from the tabbed aluminum sheet.

At the hospital, the doctor pumped Isul's stomach and gave her fluids. She would be fine, the nurse told them. Big Uncle had to meet someone and asked Bo to stay with her until her aunt could come from Busan. When Isul woke, a few hours later, Bo was struggling to stay awake in a chair next to her bed. Isul looked startled.

"Bo, what am I doing here?"

"You troublemaker," he said, relieved that she was back to normal.

"Where are my glasses?"

Bo picked them up from the bedside table and handed them to her.

"Did you take all six pills?"

"What pills?"

"The cold medicine."

“I don’t think so. I took two at first. They didn’t work, so I took some more.”

“You dummy,” he said. “You need to take a child’s dosage, and you probably didn’t eat. I can’t believe you have a college education and still don’t understand basic science.” He looked at her sternly but started to laugh.

“Watch it. I’m still your elder,” she said, smiling weakly.

“How do you feel?”

“I have a cold. And my throat hurts.”

“They pumped your stomach. They thought you tried to —”

Isul raised her hand briefly from the bed as if to stop him from speaking, then let it drop. “Bo, I’m so tired. Let me sleep. I just want to stop feeling so tired and sick. I keep getting these colds, and it makes it hard to study. My poor aunt. She wants me to work in an office. I’d better get well soon.”

Bo watched her fall asleep. When her aunt finally arrived, he left Isul a note, promising to return the next day.

It was four in the morning when Bo returned to his room, and he closed his eyes for a couple of hours, washed, and remembered to pack what he needed for the test, including his exam ticket, identification, a packet of tissues, and the hard candies he liked. He tossed the box of taffy into his backpack.

As soon as the proctor allowed them to open the exam booklet, Bo plowed through the questions. After the first section, there was a short break, and that was when he began to feel dizzy, the exhaustion hitting him all at once.

He had taken his seat at 8:10 *A.M.*, and the exam would end at 5:20 *P.M.* There would be another short break and an hour for lunch, and it was during the breaks that he felt most nauseated.

His head was heavy and hot. When he reached the literature section, he couldn't puzzle out the meaning of the questions. He stared at the reading passages, trying to make sense of the sentences. The short questions were more confusing than the longer ones. He reached into his trouser pocket and fumbled with the five-hundred-won coin. The indecipherable words began to swim in his mind.

What had made him think that he could go to Yonsei at all? He was born in New Jersey, and grew up there and in Sydney, before moving to Seoul, and he was sitting in a room filled with students who had been living, breathing, and eating in anticipation of this exam since they were in primary school. This year, the bongosa exam had been eliminated, so the Suneung was everything. Bo opened his eyes as wide as he could, doing his best to wake himself from his stupor. His mind didn't go blank; rather, all the what-ifs multiplied like exponents, crowding his thoughts and rendering him unable to envision anything else.

The proctor told the students to stop, and Bo handed in his exam papers.

At the train station, a beggar was sleeping soundly on a bench. Easily over eighty, the man had a deeply furrowed brow, but the lower half of his face was oddly cherubic—jowls plump and a small pink mouth, almost smiling. By

his left hand, there was a polished brass bowl and a laminated sign: “Blind from birth and abandoned by my mother. I ask for mercy. I wish you good fortune.”

Bo placed the coin in the man’s bowl.

Kim Teacher paged him twice but Bo did not call him back.

The results came out right before Christmas. Alone, Bo read his scores on the slip of paper and sat down on the bed in his rented room. That year, the number of possible points had changed from two hundred to four hundred, and the newspapers reported that this test had slaughtered hordes of top students. The highest scorer hit 373. Bo had not cleared 300. He felt as if he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t know how long he sat in his room, but eventually he walked out of the gosiwon and applied for a job at the nicer of two convenience stores, a block away.

Working full time as a cashier and stocking shelves, Bo felt productive. The store manager, a thirty-two-year-old man from Daejeon, admired Bo, who was punctual, responsible, and honest. When other employees came late or didn’t show up, he picked up extra hours. One evening, the manager mentioned in passing that he had graduated from a college that no one in Seoul recognized and hadn’t been able to get office work no matter how hard he’d tried. He didn’t see the point of the years and years of hagwon payments and countless job applications, all to end up at this convenience store, but the degree, matted and custom-framed, had made his late parents proud. The manager’s cheerful wife, who was a head taller than he was,

also worked at the store. They did not plan on having children.

Bo's parents offered him a ticket to Sydney, but he asked for time to consider his options. Moreover, he asked them not to send any money until he knew what he was doing. With his own earnings, he was able to keep living at the gosiwon. At the end of the workday, a store employee could purchase discounted meals, and often the manager and his wife saved him the best of the expired goods, which were still perfectly fine to eat.

Between Bo's mother and father, it was Helen who took the news harder. She had trouble sleeping and couldn't focus at work. Even as Helen completed everything she had to do—her job, family-meal preparation, housecleaning—her mind dwelled on her disappointed son in Korea. It was difficult to imagine her brightest child selling cigarettes and beer and sweeping the sidewalk. Hearing that the manager and his wife were being kind to him gave her little comfort.

If Helen hadn't been worried about losing her job, at a department store in Sydney, she would have flown back to Seoul to get him. Her husband asked her to be patient.

"Bo will figure it out," John said.

Helen called Sonya anyway.

When Sonya met Bo at a tonkatsu restaurant, she wore a simple camel-colored dress and wasn't carrying one of her expensive handbags. Bo arrived on time and took a seat across from her. He looked remorseful, as if he deserved to be reprimanded.

"I ordered your favorite set and a cola with ice," Sonya said, smiling.

"Thank you, Aunt."

Her nephew had just turned twenty-two, but to her he was still a boy. He was the size of a man, but she could see only his familiar baby face behind his glasses.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you. The tutor you found me was very good. It isn't his fault."

"What are you talking about? I think you're amazing, Bo. I imagine this feels awful right now, but this could be providence," she said. "I believe this needed to happen. Your aunt is over fifty years old, and this is what I've learned. Sometimes the things you wanted most and didn't get are terrible things you've been delivered from."

Bo looked up, his mouth open a little.

"It's still upsetting. I understand." She paused, sensing that he might resist her next proposal.

"I talked to an admissions counsellor about you, and she said that you should go to America."

Bo's expression darkened. "Aunt, I can't give up. I should take it again. I already spent three years on this, and my scores were really high in my practice exams. I don't even have to learn that much more for the next Suneung. I just have to wait another year."

"The admissions counsellor had an idea, and I think it can also help your parents."

The server placed the tonkatsu sets on the table and left them. They bowed their heads and prayed silently, then she gestured for him to eat.

“Nephew, this admissions counsellor is famous. She is the best in Seoul, and she has a plan, which apparently she’s used many times with her students who can get visas. You move to California and go to a community college for two years. After you establish residency, then the cost will be almost nothing. You can pay for it by doing part-time jobs if you like working so much. If you do well, and I know you will, you can transfer to a Cal State school, or one of the University of California schools, or any four-year school. You could transfer to an Ivy if you wanted to. The rich schools give financial aid. Bo, you can start again. I know you will flourish. It’s not your fault that—”

She stopped herself. The boy was obviously upset, but trying not to show it.

Bo felt worse. She was clearly assuming that he couldn’t pass, yet he could not defend himself, because the evidence against him was irrefutable. He had failed. Three times. None of the context mattered, only the results. He chewed the fried pork but tasted nothing.

“Aunt, I can pass. I know this has been a terrible burden, so I thought I’d save the money from this job and try to do it alone—”

“Bo. Listen to me. I know you can pass, too—but what for? Is it worth it? Do you really want to live here, or did you just want to know that you could get into Yonsei University? If you really wanted to live here, you could have chosen an easier school to get into, isn’t that right? This system of testing just to weed children out is unfair and

unpredictable, and I don't know why you should bear it any longer."

Bo said nothing. He had believed in his plan, and in a few sharp, well-reasoned words his aunt had pierced his logic and his purpose.

"How would I get there?"

"Uncle Kenny will get you a ticket to Sydney, and then, after you see your parents, you can go to Los Angeles." Sonya held her breath.

"I guess no one thinks I can get into Yonsei."

"You're wrong," she said, unwilling to indulge his self-pity. "I get that you feel embarrassed. You want proof that you can get in. That's normal."

Bo put down his fork and knife and wiped his mouth with the paper napkin.

"I know you can get admitted. There were some tough breaks, and I'm positive that if you keep taking it, you will pass. But, if you go to California and study there, you won't be vulnerable to all these exam and admissions changes. You won't keep delaying your life year after year to prove you can do something that everyone already knows you can do. None of this is your fault. Life is terribly unfair but we have to—"

Seeing his disheartened expression, Sonya took another breath, not wanting to say any more. Then she continued.

"I spoke to Kim Teacher. You're the best retaker student he's ever had. All of us believe in you, Bo. We don't believe in this exam."

He stared at his barely touched plate.

“We don’t believe in the Korean education system. Do you understand?”

“I don’t blame Korea,” he said.

“Eat your food,” she said as kindly as she could.

After he finished, he told her that he’d think about it.

Two days later, he ran into Isul in the kitchen. She was drinking her first coffee of the morning and looked chipper.

“Thank you for the toast bread and strawberry jam.”

Isul was referring to the day-old baked goods and expired jams he’d brought back the night before. The gosiwon residents were delighted to supplement their rations with Bo’s regular food bonuses. No one paid any attention to the expiration dates. More than one of them had joked, “If only the store could give us expired soju.” She slid her plate of toast toward him.

Bo nodded thanks but didn’t say anything. He poured boiling water over the powdered coffee in the bottom of his mug.

“My parents want me to go to America.”

“Go,” Isul said. “I’m glad somebody is making sense. Yah—you better go. I’ll kill you if you don’t go.” She raised her fist, grinning.

On seeing his expression, she put her fist down.

“You don’t want to go? Why?”

“You, too?” He shook his head. “I want to take it again.”

“Forget Yonsei. You can pass next time. I’m positive. I would bet my eye-surgery savings on that. And when you

pass, so what? Have you seen how hard it is to get a good job here? You don't have any connections, right? Does your rich aunt know any conglomerates that are hiring?"

"I spent three years," he whispered.

"Big deal. Go. Listen to your parents. I wish I had smart parents." Isul smiled to soften the blow of her words. "You speak English perfectly, you have U.S. citizenship, and you're a genius. Forget this hell. If I had your choices, I would've been gone a long time ago. You foreign-born Koreans are all messed up. You think you have to prove something. Prove you're Korean. C'mon. There's no test for that. There are Koreans who are born here who hate being Korean. Hey, maybe that's what it means to be Korean!" She laughed, then grew serious. "Do you need money for the ticket? I don't have much, but I would give my little brother some of my eye-surgery money." Isul still felt terrible that he had not slept the night before his Suneung on account of her.

"My uncle works at Qantas. He can get cheap tickets."

"Wow. If you weren't such a nice little brother, I would not like you. You have it made. What are you upset about?"

"I failed the Suneung three times. I'm twenty-two years old." It occurred to him that in the U.S. he would be twenty-one, and it sounded much younger, though he was still the same person.

"So damn what? I failed my exam twice. By the time I get a job, if I get a job, I will be an old lady with thicker glasses. But you know what? Your gosiwon sister will pass

this son-of-a-bitch civil-service job test, ace the interview, and I'm going to get my nearsightedness corrected. I'm not so bad-looking, and I'm going to have some fun. I'll have tall, good-looking boyfriends who like short women, and, one day, I'm going to buy my aunt a little building back home. It's not expensive like Seoul." She put her hands on her hips, her bent arms as thin as twigs. "This is my plan. I believe it is a good plan. Every day, I work to make my plan into reality."

"You will definitely pass. I'm positive you will," Bo said.

"Go. You go to America. That's a better plan. But, first, you have to get to work." Isul gestured to the kitchen wall clock, then picked up her toast and jam.

Bo laughed.

"I'd better go."

Isul winked, and, when Bo left the kitchen, she imagined the big gosiwon without him, which was depressing. She made herself another coffee and opened her study guide. ♦

This is drawn from "American Hagwon."

THE PROMISE

by Rachel Yoder

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From the kitchen table, it was all sunlight and haze. Through the sliding glass door, the morning mist burned off the green waves of corn. A low red veal barn, far beyond, marked the place where the land rose up, then turned to trees. The girl named Birdie diligently spooned raisin bran into her mouth, cold milk dribbling down her chin, and, against her will, thought of her visit to the veal barn the day before, the tug of the calf's tongue on the mauve nipple of the bottle, the white formula sloshing inside.

After breakfast, she had a stomach ache and sat by the living-room window, watching cars pass at irregular intervals, listening for the growl of motors as they approached, roared, faded away. She went to the cupboard next to the brick fireplace and tapped each wrinkled storybook spine. She rubbed the beige carpet threads with her fingers as she looked at the pictures of a bird, a dog, a loud machine. *Are you my mother?* the story kept asking.

The day before, she had fed a calf with her much older cousin, Angie, a beautiful girl who smiled when she said sad things and was engaged to be married when the leaves turned red. That was how she'd put it to Birdie, as she showed her how to hold the bottle against the calf's tugs. Angie lived on the family farm, just down the hill from

their aunts' and grandmother's place, where Birdie was staying. The veal barn had a smell Birdie had never smelled anywhere else—antiseptic, then sweet like a flower and rotten like manure. It reminded her of being in a clean hospital where everyone was dying or already dead, though she'd never been in such a place.

Birdie had found the calves darling, so darling her chest hurt. She liked to rub the rough swirls of hair between their eyes. They tried to lick her wrist when she did this. Their noses and the inside of their ears and their long tongue muscles were delightfully pink, the color of a crayon. Each baby wore a collar with a chain and had a messy bed of straw. Once Birdie and her cousin were back outside, the air hung green and full. She had to walk all the way around the cornfield and along Market Avenue, up the hill, to get back to her aunts' place. She would have preferred to go home to her mother and father, but they weren't there.

At the fireplace's dark mouth sat a small black iron, heavy as a bowling ball, impossibly heavy. She touched the chain-metal curtain gathered at the fireplace's edges, and her fingers came away soot black. She rubbed them on her skirt, ruining its pretty. She picked up an empty ostrich egg, put one eye to the small hole on one end, then quickly set the shell back down, repulsed.

After the living room, Birdie wandered to the dining room, where she was cast into an underwater light, the sun sifting through the plants arranged by the long window. A white lace cloth covered the dining table, and a stiff

piece of plastic covered the lace. She climbed onto a chair and reached for the bowl at the center of the table. She took the cluster of purple grapes from it, touched each sticky plastic fruit, then took the too yellow banana in her hands and bit it gently, enough to leave a few small marks. She knocked it lightly against the table to hear the hollow inside.

In the kitchen, her aunt Rebecca kneaded dough on the floured counter. Birdie sat at the little table by the sliding glass door and watched her work the dough forward and back, her shirtsleeves rolled above her elbows, an apron covering her denim skirt. Rebecca wore her simple week-day covering over her hair, which had been pulled back in a ponytail, then braided and pinned up on the back of her head. On Sundays, she wore the lacy covering the girl preferred but put her hair in a simple bun, because that was more godly. Rebecca asked a question in Pennsylvania Dutch, then laughed and tried again: “Birdie, do you want some bread?” Well, of course she wanted some bread. Her aunt gave her a warm piece with margarine melting at the center. “For goodness’ sake, Birdie, wash your hands. And it’s better not to mess with the fireplace.” Rebecca unfolded a little metal stool for her and placed it in front of the kitchen sink.

As Birdie ate her bread at the table, she watched her grandmother carry a blue bucket from the shed to the garden, where she and Birdie’s other aunt, Miriam, worked in worshipful ways, bowing down to weed in their flapping skirts. Miriam wore a navy-blue task jacket to ward off the

loose chill of the morning. Grandma's white cardigan bloomed like a daisy against the green. Birdie tried to understand her grandma's beige shoes, stiff with a thick sole. Her grandmother left them on a little rug outside the door when she came in from her work. Birdie was still sitting at the table, with just a few crumbs on her plate. The sun was high in the sky now, and, despite Miriam's smile as she slid the glass door open, the girl's chest was full of crying. Her parents had gone to Indiana to visit old friends, other Mennonites they'd volunteered with in Africa. Her older brother and sister were staying with classmates, but she was still so small. It had been easier to leave her with her aunts and grandma at the house on Market Avenue than to take her on the long drive. Tomorrow, a Tuesday, was the first day of second grade.

The kitchen smelled of coffee and yeast. Grandma sat opposite the girl, with her back to the sliding glass door. She smiled and brushed Birdie's hand with her fingertips as the aunts talked and laughed. Grandma spoke—something the girl couldn't understand. The phone on the wall rang, and Rebecca snatched the receiver, then pulled the curly cord down the steps to the basement and shut the door. A battery-powered radio on the counter played tinny gospel songs. The girl grew heavy, heavier. Her head tipped toward the table. Her lips turned. Then Rebecca was there, with bits of tissue stuck up her nose. Birdie laughed but didn't feel happy. The day went on and on. Before long, a little carved cuckoo emerged from the open door of its house on the wall and sang five times.

In the hallway off the kitchen, Miriam pulled a box of games from a high closet shelf. Birdie sat on the cool linoleum, half in the closet and half in the hall. Red, red, blue, yellow, green. Red, red, blue, yellow, blue. A buzzer bleated. She played again. The women's talk in the kitchen rose and fell like a song. A purple melancholy settled into the shadows on the hallway floor. The backs of her legs stuck to the linoleum, and, when she pulled away, her skin sliced with pain. Before long, the night would be there.

After dinner, Rebecca split open a melon from the garden. She scooped the furry seeds from inside the orange flesh. The chunks of fruit were warm and sweet, like cough syrup. The girl sucked on the fruit, and, when she finally bit down, juice leaked onto her chin. She wiped it with her hands, and then her fingers stuck together. When she pulled her fingers apart, she saw dirt gathered in the hollows between them.

While the girl had a bath, Miriam readied for bed. At the bathroom mirror, she pulled three teeth attached to glinting metal parts from her mouth and scrubbed them with her toothbrush. She turned to the girl.

"Well, what do you think?" she said, smiling a little. Her front teeth were gone. She covered her mouth with one hand, now laughing from the horror of it. She placed one of her partials in the girl's soft, small palm. "Careful with it, little bird," she said. The girl touched the yellowed thing attached to wires. It was a part of Miriam that was already dead. Birdie placed the tooth on the edge of the

tub and moved white bubbles around in the water, then pushed her face into the bubbles and further down.

Before Birdie went upstairs to bed, she stood in the doorway of her grandmother's small bedroom. Her grandmother sat on the single bed as Rebecca undid the back of her dress.

"Come see the scar where they cut her breast away," Rebecca said. The girl shrank. "There's nothing to be scared of," Rebecca insisted, tugging at her mother's dress. Birdie shook her head.

"Don't make her if she doesn't want to," Grandma said quietly. Rebecca's hands stilled, and the girl stared at her grandmother, wide-eyed. Her long white hair, normally collected in a bun, trailed down past her shoulders in smooth, pale waves. It was the most beautiful thing the girl had ever seen.

It was another era, or even the end of it. Birdie didn't want to get older. She liked being small, except when she was scared. She stayed in Miriam's bedroom because this was the aunt she belonged to. Before, when her father was small, he had belonged to Miriam, too. There were a dozen kids altogether, and Miriam was the third-oldest girl. The eldest girl, Ruth, had raised the middles. The second-oldest girl, Rebecca, did the cooking. And Miriam raised the little ones, Birdie's father included. This had happened in the farmhouse down the hill, where Angie now lived, along with Uncle Abe and Aunt Martha and a trio of her brothers. Angie's bedroom was where Birdie's dad had slept as a boy, and, whenever Birdie went in it, she felt a

white spirit pass through her. In which room had her uncle June died when he was seventeen, a brain bleed after he'd collided with someone in the outfield during a baseball game? In what room had her grandfather seen the angel warning him of June's death? She never asked. Her father called Miriam a princess, but Birdie knew she was more than that: a queen. There was nothing better than Miriam, except Birdie's own mother.

Miriam watched soap operas on the little black-and-white television on her hope chest, even though they were forbidden by the girl's parents at home. Birdie puzzled over the woman on the little screen shouting "I hate you!" at a man, and then embracing him, kissing him desperately.

"Well, little bird, there's love and there's hate, and you think they're opposites, but they're almost exactly the same thing," Miriam explained. Even though the girl was only eight, she could understand.

Miriam had pictures on her mirror, one of a man whom Birdie had met a few times, a Hungarian named Zoltan, who had a nice accent and a kind face. He always wore a dark suit.

"He wanted to marry me," Miriam smiled. "He brought me a very nice set of knives."

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh, it wasn't right. And I suppose I wanted to do what I wanted to do." She paused, then blurted, "He was shorter than I was!"

"Why does that matter?"

Miriam hesitated, the question twisting her mouth and eyes. She looked at Birdie, then laughed.

“Maybe I’m petty,” she said. “Plus, I already had a set of good knives.”

Miriam was forty, or maybe fifty-five. Birdie wasn’t sure. She was older than Birdie’s father, at least. She worked at the meat locker, where Birdie’s father had once taken her. Miriam had given her a heavy coat and wrenched open the silver door. Inside, bloody pieces of animals hung in the cold. A single bulb illuminated the room, and Birdie wanted to leave as soon as she was inside. She could smell the blood. She watched her white breath blossom and fade in front of her face, while Miriam walked among the bodies, touching each one to make it sway as she explained the cuts.

In bed, Birdie wore a floral nightgown that wrapped her in heat. Her new backpack and folded first-day clothes sat on Miriam’s upholstered reading chair. She had wanted to wear a smooth white button-down with her little skirt, but, when she’d tried it on, Rebecca had said it made her look like a boy. She was ashamed for having liked it. Instead, they picked a nice blouse with an itchy lace collar she despised.

Tucked under the quilt, Birdie watched Miriam as she searched her head with her fingers in front of the mirror, pulling pins from her dark hair one by one.

“Would you like to hear a story?” Miriam wondered. “I have a good one from my friend Susie Coblentz.” It was something that had happened to Susie’s friend, she said.

Across from the bed, the ceiling sloped precipitously, with a dormer cut into it. On either side of the window, a small door opened to a space just the right size for a little girl, where her aunt stored wrapping paper and yard-sale finds. Miriam didn't like for Birdie to play in there, but it was the only place the girl wanted to play. It seemed like a punishment not to let her shut herself in with a flashlight when it was just the right size for her make-believe. At night, though, the doors took on a tinge of terror. They were also the right size for dwarves and goblins, sundry other monsters. You couldn't be certain, in the night, what sort of world they might open onto, were you to turn the knob. People shouldn't have small doors in their houses, Birdie thought. It wasn't right.

"So, the friend of my friend Susie," Miriam continued. This woman was lying in her bed one night when she heard a tap-tap-tapping coming from the living room. She got up to see what was making it, and there, at a little desk her husband used for his bookkeeping, sat the Devil, working away on a typewriter.

Birdie, paralyzed beneath the hot sheets, imagined the living room below them with a little wooden desk and an old-fashioned black typewriter on it. An oil lamp, like the one that Rebecca kept in her room as decoration, illuminated the Devil, who wore dark slacks and a dark vest, an impeccable white shirt. A golden chain glinted against the vest, disappearing into his pocket. His skin was browned and his neck and chin wispy with hair. He wore round, gold-rimmed spectacles. His nose and mouth protruded

wolfishly. A cigarette smoldered in the ashtray near his hand.

“Well, of course Susie’s friend was absolutely petrified, but soon enough she found her voice,” Miriam said. The story went that Susie’s friend asked, “What are you doing here?” And the Devil replied, in a strange accent she couldn’t place, “I’m here to write your life story.” Smoke wafted from his ears! The woman couldn’t breathe. It was as if she were suffocating, just being near him. “I’m here to write your life story,” the Devil repeated. “Whatever way you’d like it. Just tell me: Do you accept my offer? If you do, I’ll make it so.” He waited with his long, sharp fingernails poised above the keys. “I suppose you want my soul in return,” the woman said. “Of course,” the Devil said, smiling.

His handsome grin bewitched her, and she imagined all the ways her life might go. Maybe she could be a famous jazz singer. Perhaps she could travel around the world on an ocean liner. Or what about living in New York City and running a soup-and-bread restaurant visited by people from all over?

Birdie felt the woman’s dreams swell in her own chest. She herself wanted to be an astronaut, or a ballerina. She wanted to live in a city and visit the art museum every day. She wanted to order takeout Chinese food in white cardboard boxes, even though she’d never had Chinese food. Her mother said she was worldly, and her father said she could not, under any circumstances, be an astronaut. Also, they would not drive her across town for something like

ballet lessons, but still all she could think about was a pink tutu. Her parents weren't quite sure where she had come from, they'd say, chuckling, but Birdie didn't understand why what she wanted was funny.

"The woman thought long and hard, longer than a good Christian woman should," Miriam said. "And in the end she said, 'I don't. No, I don't accept your offer. No, I don't want you to write anything. I want my soul to go to the Lord. I love my good, simple life as a mother and wife, with my family, and nothing could ever replace that.' As you might imagine, the Devil was furious. He slammed his fists onto the keys and let out a horrible screech. He moaned and grunted as she walked back to her room, got into bed, and easily fell into a restful sleep."

Even though the story was over, the Devil of Birdie's imagination had moved upstairs and was now conducting his business just across the hall, in Rebecca's bedroom. He was in there still, sitting at his desk, as Rebecca slept, in the light of the oil lamp. Birdie feared she would hear the clicking of the keys if she listened hard enough.

Miriam snapped on the bedside lamp and touched the girl on the shoulder.

"Did that frighten you?" she asked with concern. Birdie nodded, though the answer was more complicated than a simple yes. Miriam's face fell. "I should have thought it through more. I'm sorry." Miriam pulled one tooth, then another from her mouth, and clinked them into a porcelain dish on her nightstand.

Miriam rubbed some pink lotion on the girl's little hands and arms, to make her feel better. Then the girl watched her aunt read, willing her eyes to stay open as long as she could manage. The glinting metal of the Devil's watch chain flashed in her mind, his hair and his teeth. She thought of a long, jagged scar cut across her grandmother's chest.

"Why can't the woman have the life she wants," Birdie asked, "without the help of the Devil?"

Miriam paused her reading and stared into a dark corner of the room. Birdie had been tired, nearly asleep, but her aunt's silence kept her awake. She waited, but her aunt said nothing.

Birdie rolled over to stick her feet out from beneath the quilt. Three long shelves of books covered the wall next to the girl's side of the bed. She ran her eyes over each spine, sounding out the words to keep herself awake. She stopped at a book with the word *ROOTS* on its thick spine. What could it be about? She closed her eyes and imagined roots tunnelling into the soil, anchoring the house to the top of the hill as if it were itself a living thing, then all the plants in the garden and fields, all the distant trees, attaching the landscape above to the earth below. White roots cracking through her grandmother's strange shoes and burrowing down into the dark, soft soil, and then Rebecca's taproot breaking through the kitchen floor, travelling across the expanse of the cool basement, plunging into the concrete floor, and below, below. She imagined Miriam planted outside in the garden with the zucchinis

and eggplants, strong like a tree. She thought of the roots that kept a person in one place, a place where people looked like they were related and smelled the way her parents smelled. Where they brought in wooden baskets of gnarled tomatoes and laughed about the humidity, instead of complaining, and pruned the rosebushes so that they bloomed exuberantly. Where people were happy, and happy, and happy. But, in her imagination, Birdie herself didn't grow roots. She grew wings and flew above them all. And it was as she flew that, against her will, she fell asleep.

In the years to come, Birdie asked her mother and father, her brother and sister, even some cousins, whether Miriam had ever told them the story about the Devil and the typewriter, if it was the sort of story that was passed around, part of the culture, so to speak, or a Mennonite version of an urban myth, but she never found anyone else who had heard it or could help her remember precisely how it went. It obsessed her because the story seemed like some sort of prophecy, or key.

Birdie woke before dawn. Pain throbbed deep in her head. Sweat dampened her nightgown. She moaned, and Miriam woke, touching the girl's face.

"You're aflame," she murmured. The girl couldn't hear out of one ear. Miriam rose and returned with a cold washcloth, which she placed on Birdie's forehead. The girl closed her eyes, and, when she opened them again, the room flared white with day. Miriam put warm oil in her deaf ear. She brought Birdie a tall glass of water with ice.

The little girl cried because she was missing the first day of school and was worried, worried about what her mother would think, worried that she had done something wrong by getting sick, that she should have behaved better and not been interested in the Devil, that she was now being punished, and rightly so.

“Poor thing is delirious,” Rebecca said, bent over the bed and holding the girl’s hot hand. Birdie cried and slept and cried, then woke to an oily splotch on the pillowcase. She took off her nightgown and slept in just her underwear.

Later, much later, as she thought back to the story about the Devil, it seemed as if the story itself had been the earliest symptom of her fever. She incorporated the story into her sickness, into her absence from school on the first day of second grade, her parents in a faraway state. She had not merely been scared of the Devil. She had wanted to sit on his lap and kiss his hairy cheek. She had wanted to clickety-clack on his black keys. For this, she had been struck with fever, made deaf in one ear—a warning. Her fever dreams were of floating untethered in an infinite black space, of being trapped in a blinding spotlight on an empty stage, not knowing how or where to move.

In what felt like the late afternoon, Birdie rose and stuck her head out the bedroom door, listened to be sure her aunts weren’t nearby, then opened one of the small doors beneath the slanted ceiling, and went inside where it was cool. Just inside the door, Miriam kept a flashlight. Its

ray illuminated a case of wrapping-paper rolls, a wooden stool, a broken box full of old picture frames. Behind the wrapping paper, under a piece of gauzy fabric with frayed edges—she was sure that was where the Devil’s black typewriter would be. It was as real to her as her own heart. She pulled away the piece of cloth to reveal a wooden knife block, black handles neatly tucked into every slot. She touched the biggest hilt just to be sure it was real. Her fever glowed orange all around her, outlining her hand. She slid the big knife from the block and held it in front of her face, tilted the blade back and forth. She saw a man in a black suit. He spoke lovingly, with a strange accent, to Miriam, before lowering himself to one knee and handing her six knives plunged into a wooden cube. Birdie blinked slowly to clear her eyes, then carefully pressed the cold metal of the knife against her cheek.

Crouched in the darkness like that, the knife a comfort, quite suddenly—or maybe after a long, long while—she was the goblin beyond the little door whom she had once feared. She made raspy little grunts and snorts and flicked her tongue against her lips. She rubbed her palms back and forth against her scalp until her hair was in knots, then dragged her nails down her cheeks. She picked her nose and wiped it into the carpet, then peed through her underpants, the urine flaming hot as it ran down her thighs and splattered on her feet.

She emerged from the little door into moonlight. How could that be, she wondered. Out the dormer window, the garden overflowed its small plot, an unfettered grot-

esquerie of florid kales and chards, the tomato plants baroque with late-summer wandering, tendrils crawling up and out of their cages, the squash plants making beds with their elaborate arms. Lie down in that garden and it will take you over, the little girl thought. It will wrap you up and you'll never leave. As she tilted it back and forth, the knife blade flashed blue, then white.

The story Miriam would tell the girl's parents upon their return was that she had found the girl standing in the dark hallway late at night, underwear sopping, a length of gauzy fabric draped over her head. They would all laugh, Birdie included. What Miriam would not tell Birdie's parents was that, when she found her, Birdie held in her hand a butcher knife. This was when Birdie learned from her aunt that sometimes lying was a necessary sin, though she wasn't certain this was the lesson her aunt had meant to teach.

In the hallway that night, Miriam had moved close to touch Birdie's flushed cheek, damp and hot with the sickness. She pulled the veil from Birdie's head. The girl's eyes were black, pinpricked with silver light.

"Little bird," she murmured. "You've given me a fright. Come, let's clean you up. What are you doing out here? And with that knife, no less."

On her own June wedding day, decades later—the ceremony under a young maple tree, the reception in a red barn, hot as a fever—Birdie would remember what she had said that night. She would remember how she said to her aunt in the hallway, "I am the bride," as she held out the

knife, “and this is my promise.” A man slips a golden ring on her finger. The cornfield rises up around them like a fortifying wall, a defense protecting what from what? She remembered for all those years the promise she made with the knife in her hand, and then, after she said *I do*, she forgot. ♦