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A FAST-MOVING STORM

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A FAST-MOVING STORM

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
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By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

A FAST-MOVING STORM

This collection of linked short stories follows a young woman who takes on a job as a property manager in Lexington, Kentucky after the death of her parents. These stories explore a cast of characters she encounters as well as her struggle to adjust to her new life.

KEYWORDS: Kentucky; Literature; Fiction; Working Class

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May 2, 2017
Date

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THE HOUSE ON NORTH UPPER

The house was so quiet. Jayne sat at the kitchen table. Since selling the livestock, she didn't quite know what to do with her mornings. She had fed and watered her father's chickens and the couple of cows he kept every morning for years. Doing so no longer felt as odd as ceasing to brush her teeth every day.

Then came a knock on the front door. What else had been left unsettled? A white-haired man in blue mechanic's overalls stood on the porch. Jayne didn't know him. She figured her parents owed him money.

"You Delores's girl?" he asked through the screen when she opened the door.

She nodded.

"You don't know me, but me and your mama grew up together. I'm Henry Cowan."

Jayne recognized the name. "I remember her talking about you," she said, joining him on the porch.

He smiled, then shifted his weight around and looked away. "I'm real sorry about what happened," he said. "It's a real shame."

Jayne lowered her head and nodded. "Thank you."

Over the past few months, the grief over her parents' deaths had lessened somewhat. Jayne was mostly just numb from the loss and felt a general confusion most days.

He sighed. "I should've got in touch before she died. We never got to catch up after I moved back." He put his hands in his pockets and watched his feet as he spoke. "Thought I had more time, though."

“Me too,” Jayne said. “It was a real shock.” The line was one she’d repeated several times since the accident.

Henry pulled his mouth into a tight frown. “I wanted you to know that I thought a lot of your mama,” he said. It was obvious he was not one for confessions of feeling. “I got to thinkin’ about how, with both your folks gone, you ain’t got nobody else and if there was anything I could do for Delores now, it would be helping you. So, I want to do that for her. I think she’d rest easy knowin’ somebody was looking in on you.”

“That’s kind of you, but I don’t need anything,” Jayne said.

“Maybe not right now, but you will. News travels fast around here, you know.” He raised his bushy white eyebrows and gave her a pressing look. “You ain’t gonna be able to keep up the payment on this place. Anybody with sense can see that.”

Shame flared through her chest and her cheeks flushed. Jayne looked down again, then nodded. “I hate to lose it, but I ain’t got no choice.”

“Yeah. Well, we might be able to do something about that. I got a place in Lexington that’s empty and I’d like to get somebody in it before winter. It ain’t nothin’ fancy, but it’d be a roof over your head.”

“No,” Jayne shook her head. “I’ll figure something out.” She and her family weren’t the type to take handouts.

“Come on, now,” he said. “There ain’t nothing left here.” He scoffed. “What are you, nineteen? You got your whole life ahead of you and there ain’t no sense in wasting it wallowin’ around a place like this. You got a damn better shot of making something up there.”

Jayne inhaled and looked out over Henry's shoulder at the hillside that faced her parents' land. "In Lexington?" She felt a whooshing in her ears as she tried to make sense of this stranger and his offer.

"Yes, Lexington," he said, his voice rising as if he were losing his patience with a child. "I got several rental houses up there. I'll let you live in that one and won't charge you a dime if you'll look after the rest of them for me; collect rent, clean 'em up when people move out, stuff like that."

Jayne folded her arms and bit her lip. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know anything about that kind of thing."

"There ain't nothing to it," he said. "I'll show you everything you need to know. I'll even give you a little grocery money for your trouble."

Here Jayne was confounded by the shock of this original offer doubled by the suggestion of money.

"Look," he said, staring her square in the face. "Let me do this for your mama."

She took a deep breath through her nose and held his gaze. A lifetime of unknowns existed behind his eyes, and she wasn't sure where her mother fit in, but she knew she couldn't turn down the chance to do something for her.

Then, as if it were all settled, he said, "What choice do you got?"

At that, Jayne felt like crying, but there was no use in it. The bank was coming for her parents' home whether she made a fuss or not. There was only the question of when.

"I'll take you up there tomorrow," he said. "Show you around." He gave her a pat on the arm like she was a boy; like it was time to get excited for a ballgame.

She looked at the creases in his face, ones that wouldn't have been there when her mother knew him, and nodded once. "All right."

*

The house on North Upper didn't look like much. It had probably been nice when it was built, which was over a century ago, but when Jayne moved in it seemed a strange place for a girl her age to live. Because she needed help paying the utilities, Jayne talked her friend Chloe into moving up to Lexington with her. They weren't so much friends as acquaintances, having grown up in a town where everybody went to the one high school in the county. Jayne figured Chloe felt sorry for her on account of her parents but also saw it as an opportunity to get out of the holler.

Chloe moved in the last of her things on a sunny Saturday morning. She stood on the porch as her father shut the back of his SUV. Chloe's mother hugged her and said, "We're proud of you, honey, for being out on your own." Her father wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed before saying, "Love you."

"Love you too," Chloe said to them both.

Her mother looked over at Jayne, who hung back by the front door, then said, "Sorry again, hon, about your folks." She hesitated a moment, then hugged her. Jayne tensed.

They drove away with a few short beeps of the horn, their hands waving goodbye out each window of the car.

When their car was out of sight, Chloe turned and raised her arms over her head as if in victory, then clapped and said, "Let's get to it."

Jayne smiled and turned to go inside.

"I'm gonna finish unpacking, and then we'll get into something, okay?"

“Okay,” Jayne said.

Chloe went into her room, which was in the front of the house, facing the street, and Jayne sat down at the small desk in the hall opposite Chloe’s door. She opened the accordion-style folder Henry had given her the day before. After driving her around to each of his properties, he had suggested she look over the paperwork for each one. She read the street names on each tab of the folder and tried to place them with the image of the house she’d seen the day before. She pulled out leases and tried to memorize tenants’ names. The agreements seemed almost as if they were written in another language with words like “lessor,” “heretofore,” and “indemnify” throughout. Jayne inhaled. This work was like nothing she had ever done before, and Lexington seemed far away from the home she’d left in eastern Kentucky. She felt a little shaky. Though it was summer, the house was cool. Jayne tried to focus harder. Things would be finalized soon with her parents’ farm and she would have nowhere else to go. She had to make this work.

Jayne didn’t look up when Chloe walked up and placed a hand on her shoulder. She walked past while Jayne’s back was still to her, but Jayne could tell she walked into the kitchen. She finished putting the papers away and followed, assuming Chloe wanted her to join her for lunch or something. When Jayne walked into the eat-in kitchen, it was empty. She glanced into the adjoining bathroom. Empty. She retraced her steps, back to the desk, and went down the hall. Chloe was in her room, earbuds in her ears, hanging clothes in the closet as she pulled them from bags piled on her bed.

“Hey,” she said, pulling the wire from one ear when she noticed Jayne at the door.

“Were you just in the kitchen?” she asked.

“No. I’ve been in here the whole time.”

“You didn’t just walk by, put your hand on my shoulder and walk into the kitchen?”

“Nope.”

Jayne stood for a moment, not afraid, but confused. “I could have sworn someone just walked through the house.”

Chloe paused, hanger in hand, eyes a little wide. “That’s weird.”

Jayne looked at the front door, which was locked, and laughed uneasily. “I guess I’m losing it.”

Chloe cocked her head to one side, sympathy on her face.

*

The first time a tenant moved out, Henry came to town show Jayne a few things. She followed him to a house that sat in the rounded part of a dead-end court where all the houses looked the same, except the vinyl siding on each one was a different shade of off-white. It was a newer neighborhood than the one Henry had moved Jayne into, and it was cleaner, the yards more well-kept and bordered by long driveways.

“Always try to get ‘em rented back out quick,” Henry said as they walked up to the porch. “The longer they sit here empty the more money I lose.”

Jayne swallowed. The pressure made her feel like she was being squeezed. Henry unlocked the door.

The living room was small, with windows facing the street to let in plenty of light. Tiny nail holes pocked the walls. The carpet hadn’t been vacuumed. Henry walked through to the kitchen and looked around, then came back into the living room before Jayne could follow. He went down the hallway and glanced into each bedroom, then opened the door to the bathroom. “Not too bad,” he said, walking back toward the front door. “This shouldn’t

take long at all.” He motioned for Jayne to follow and went back out to the driveway. From the bed of the truck he pulled out a mop bucket with trash bags, Windex, and paper towels in it and handed it to her. In the cab, he rummaged around and found a black marker. “What’s your number?” he asked and pulled a For-Rent sign from the truck bed. He wrote her number at the bottom and put the sign in the yard. “You can get this cleaned up and ready today, can’t you?” he said, getting back into his truck. “When people call tell ‘em it’s six hundred a month, and they gotta pay their own utilities. We don’t take no section eight. Deposit’s half the rent, so it’s nine hundred to move in.”

“Nine hundred. Okay.” Jayne stammered. It was a staggeringly large number to her. She looked back at the house. “So what all do I gotta do in there?”

Henry sighed and got back out of the truck. They walked back inside, Jayne carrying the bucket. He went in the kitchen and pointed. “Clean off the stove, wipe everything down.” He opened the fridge. “Clean this out.” He shut the door and walked back through the house. “Bag up all this shit and throw it away,” he said, gesturing to clothing and belongings piled in the bedroom floors. A futon with a broken frame was in the last bedroom.

Jayne looked in each doorway as he breezed by them and was surprised by how much stuff had been left behind, but before she could say anything, he pushed open the bathroom door and said, “And clean up in here. That’s it. Nothing to it.” She looked at the shower, which looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a year. Black mildew grew in the corners where the tub met the tile on the walls. It was starting to grow on the grout between tiles, too.

Henry headed back to the kitchen. In the laundry room, a broom and mop had been left behind. “Here ya go,” he said leaning the handles against the kitchen wall by the back door. “You got a vacuum you can bring over, don’t you?”

Jayne hurried along behind him. “Yeah. I got one,” she said.

“All right,” he said. “Just get her cleaned up.”

“What about painting?”

“Nah, it ain’t too bad. Maybe next time.” He walked back to the front door, then turned. “Don’t forget to lock up when you’re done,” he said. “And when you come show it to people, don’t forget to turn off the lights when you leave. Save on the electric bill.” Then he was gone.

Jayne stood in the empty living room and listened to the sound of Henry’s Dodge as the engine turned over and the muffler grumbled down the street, growing quieter and quieter until she couldn’t hear it at all. She looked around the room, not knowing where to start.

*

It was late before Jayne got back home. She walked past Chloe’s closed door and headed straight to her own room. She fell across the mattress and laid there a moment, gathering the energy to change her clothes. She followed the lines in the ceiling with her eyes, tracing the web of cracks from the light fixture in the center of the room out toward each wall. She turned her head to the side and sighed at the sight of her hamper full of dirty laundry. She sat up and slid her mother’s suitcase toward her. She’d used it to pack her clothes when she moved out of her parents’ house and hadn’t yet unpacked them all. The sound of the suitcase sliding across the hardwood reminded her of when she and her parents had first moved into the farmhouse. She was sixteen. It was a celebratory time for the three of them and a real point of pride for her father. Owning his own land had been his triumph considering he’d spent part of his youth sleeping in junkyards and barns, then later in the

back of an Oldsmobile. Although she knew those details and knew he'd been a runaway, Jayne never learned what her father had been running from. Now it was too late to find out.

That first night at the farm, the cicadas and frogs had cried so loud Jayne couldn't sleep. She laid in the dark a long while before she pulled the screen out of the window and closed it. After a little while the room grew too hot. At the breakfast table the next morning, Jayne told her parents about the rough night. Her father pushed away from the table so hard he overturned his chair. "You women ain't *never* satisfied," he yelled, as he stomped out the front door past the unpacked boxes stacked in the living room. Jayne's mother gave her a severe look, then turned her back before Jayne could say anything.

The memory still hurt, Jayne was surprised to find, sitting in her bedroom in Lexington all those years later.

*

In bed, in the dark, in the quiet space right before sleep, Jayne heard something scraping across the floor of the attic above her head. It sounded just like her mother's suitcase sliding over the hardwood. When she opened her eyes the sound stopped. Her body was so heavy with sleepiness she decided she must have dreamt the sound after having heard it earlier. The rhythm of her breath remained slow and steady, ready to ease back into sleep. Her eyes closed, and then, louder, she heard it again. She was sure she wasn't dreaming. She was sure that over her bed something scraped across the ceiling from one wall all the way to the other. *What the fuck?* She lay in the darkness watching the ceiling, but the room grew quiet again. Surely Chloe wasn't in the attic in the middle of the night. Goosebumps pricked up along her arms. She sat up, listening, but couldn't hear anything. She laid back down and closed her eyes. As soon as she did, it felt like someone was in the room with her, standing

over her, looking at her face. She clenched her eyes shut hard, and that's when she noticed voices in the next room. Maybe Chloe was up and watching TV or something. She forced herself to open her eyes and prove that no one was standing over her. The room was empty. She listened for the TV but heard nothing. She let out a whine, but felt like crying full blown tears out of frustration and exhaustion.

*

When Jayne asked Chloe about it the next morning, Chloe just shook her head. "Wasn't me. I went to bed around ten." "You didn't get up at all?" "Nope." "And you didn't leave the TV on or anything?" Jayne asked, knowing she would have noticed it when she got home if Chloe had done so.

Chloe shook her head again. "I have noticed some weird vibes here, though," she said.

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. This place just has an odd feel to it." She pursed her lips, thoughtful. "But maybe it's just the house settling or something and freaking me out. I'm not used to being alone so much."

"Yeah, me neither," Jayne said, and felt a wave of sadness rise inside her. "I'm gonna ask Henry about the attic. Maybe a cat got in up there or something."

*

"Ain't much of an attic to speak of," Henry said. "And I don't know how anything would get in. The only entrance is inside the house."

At this Jayne felt a chill. As she held the phone to her ear waiting for him to say more, she paced through the house, the wood floors creaking under her feet. When she stepped through the doorway from the living room to the kitchen all the lights in the house went out. She stopped. "I think we just tripped a breaker," she said.

"That house is on a fuse box," Henry said.

The refrigerator was no longer running. The house was eerily silent. "The lights just went out," Jayne said. Trees and neighboring houses shaded the windows, so the rooms were unnaturally dark in daytime without the lights on.

"I was coming up there today anyway. I'll come take a look."

*

Henry peered into the space in the wall where the fuse box was tucked behind a door. He shined a flashlight into the hole and reached a hand in. Jayne leaned around the corner watching his face in profile, his thinning white hair, the working of his jaw. He pulled out a fuse the size of a quarter and shined the flashlight into it. "Yep." He screwed a new one into the box and the lights flashed back on. The refrigerator hummed like an engine starting. The two of them looked up at the lights, Jayne in relief, and Henry in satisfaction. He moved to shut the door to the fuse box, then said, "Huh."

"What?" Jayne said.

"It ain't grounded."

"What?" she said again.

"The house ain't grounded." He pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and made a few adjustments, then put the cover back on the box and walked past. Jayne followed him outside where he checked to see that a copper wire running from inside the house was

clamped onto a rod buried in the ground. “This looks all right,” he said. “It just came loose in the box. It’s grounded now.” He put his hands in the pockets of his blue overalls. “You been having a funny feelin’ at all?” he asked.

Jayne just looked at him.

“When it’s not grounded, electric’s just in the air kinda.”

“Huh,” Jayne said, and bit her lip.

*

After they’d been in Lexington a couple months, Chloe met a guy and started staying at his place a lot. Jayne’s nights were long when Chloe was gone. The girls used to spend their evenings together watching movies into the night, occasionally drinking a few hard ciders if Chloe could find someone to buy alcohol for them. Mostly Chloe did the talking, and Jayne listened wide-eyed, taking in tales of bonfires, cruising, and the kinds of experiences that were so different than the ones from her sheltered life they may as well have been from another world. By fall, Chloe had enrolled in college, and when the last of the leaves had turned, she moved out. Jayne had seen it coming in the way Chloe had talked about her new boyfriend and her new classes, but she was unprepared nonetheless. When Chloe turned over her key, she was filled with such enthusiasm that Jayne couldn’t be upset. She couldn’t blame her for moving on from the house on North Upper to a newer apartment with someone she loved to come home to and a future to look forward to. But for Jayne, the house on North Upper was where everything stopped. She couldn’t foresee anything beyond it.

Chloe’s rent had covered the utilities. Without her, Jayne didn’t know how to come up with the money. She didn’t know anyone else in Lexington. She didn’t know where to

look for a job that would still leave time for the work she had to do for Henry. Back home she'd stocked shelves at the IGA in the morning before school. In high school, her father had told her she needed to be working, and she earned enough to buy an old car from a mechanic he knew. The big grocery stores in Lexington intimidated her, though. They were teeming with people no matter what time of day or night it was. The one closest to her house was open twenty-four hours.

The first night alone, knowing Chloe wouldn't be coming back, Jayne laid awake. She ground her teeth, she realized, after her jaw grew sore. Her whole body was tense. She had twenty-eight dollars in her bank account. The electric bill was ten dollars more than that, and due in two weeks. She felt like someone set adrift in the dark. She had no idea what to do or which direction to head. Her frustration settled on her parents and how they could have left things like this. What had they been thinking? Who has a child at forty but makes no plans, leaves no will, and no guidance whatsoever for after they're gone?

Wind pushed against the outside of the house and wood siding let out a strained sigh. Jayne was used to all the sounds the old house made, but she still paused when she heard them. She thought about the house back home and wondered if anyone lived in it now. Even if she had been able to keep it, how would she have lived in it with them gone? In a way, she hoped it had been torn down. She threw the blankets off and pushed them to the foot of the bed. It was a cool night, but it felt like heat was trapped under her skin. She rolled over and punched her pillows harder than she needed to try to make them more comfortable. The lost, floating feeling reminded her of the day of her high school graduation. She had come home with the diploma—neither of her parents had one—and shown it to them. Her father had looked at it and nodded, and her mother had smiled and cooked her favorite dinner—

meatloaf—then nobody ever mentioned it again. That night she thought about what came next, but only that night, because her parents quickly filled her days with tasks that had grown hard for them in their age. Hauling garbage to town, keeping enough firewood split and stacked to make it through the winter, breaking ice across the top of the cows' water trough, bush hogging the grass and brush by the road, and keeping the cows in hay left her no time to imagine anything else for herself. Yet no matter how much she did, her father would be anxious and press with urgency how much still needed to be done. If Jayne tried to sleep in or pushed back in any way he'd bellow at her that she didn't give a damn about the farm or her mother. At first she'd been shocked by his anger, then she grew angry herself, but drew it in and said nothing for her mother's sake. Whenever her father screamed, her mother would cry, and Jayne wanted to spare her that if she could.

And now here I am, she thought. She did everything he said and wound up with nothing. It occurred to her that it made sense that something in her father's brain killed him. The doctor said it was an aneurism. Now, in hindsight, Jayne wondered how long it had been swelling and pushing against other parts of his brain, causing who knows what kinds of reactions. And it made sense that when it burst and struck him down, he took Jayne's mother with him. She hung on his every word and followed him like a shadow.

Jayne didn't usually picture the accident. She wouldn't let herself imagine the aneurism going off inside her father's head like fireworks exploding, causing him to run the truck off the road into a guard rail, both her parents' bodies mangling themselves around the metal of the truck's cab as broken glass showered down around them. Jayne couldn't be angry when she thought about their lives ending in that moment; everything they had ever done, done, and everything they ever were, over and done.

Her eyes rested on the glow from the fluorescent light left on over the sink. Through her open bedroom door, it softly lit the linoleum floor in the kitchen. Her breath slowed to a steady rhythm and sleep was near. Then smoke filled her nose as if someone were smoking a pipe in bed with her. Her eyes even felt warm from it. She sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. There was nothing in the room, so she got up to look around. She walked through the house, flipping on lights and sniffing the air. Nothing.

Water dripped in the bathroom sink. She turned the knob on the faucet until it squeaked and the water stopped. She walked back through the house toward the front door, sniffing. Still nothing. She looked out the front windows. No one was outside. A street lamp shone down on the empty street. She stood still, her bare feet on the cool hardwood and listened. Nothing.

Finally, she decided to back to bed. She left the living room light on wondering if she was crazy, if there might be something swelling in her brain, too making her imagine things and just waiting to burst. In her room the smell had completely evaporated. Maybe she had fallen asleep without realizing it and it was all a dream. She had smelled tobacco though, she knew it. Fully awake now, she couldn't help but think about money again.

When she laid back down she remembered a scene from a movie she and Chloe watched one night that ended with a bunch of men in suits shooting each other. At the beginning of the movie, one of the men said that waitressing was the number one job a woman could get and earn a living. The thought felt like someone had handed her a gift. If she could get a waitressing job, she'd be working in the evening, leaving her days open to take care of Henry's properties, and maybe she could bring home some money soon. The

thought of talking to customers all night long made her anxious, but she decided she would just have to push herself through it. She didn't know what other choice she had.

*

The next day, she walked to a restaurant a few streets over from her house. The sign said they served "Southern comfort food," but it looked fancy to her. There were cloth napkins, a full bar, and votive candles on the tables. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, so it wasn't busy. A bell on the door jingled when she walked in. As a hostess walked up, Jayne took a deep breath and made herself smile. "Hi," the girl said, "One?"

"Oh. No, I saw y'all were hiring and was hoping to talk to a manager," Jayne said.

"Sure." She showed Jayne to a table in a back corner. Jayne sat down and smoothed her button-down shirt. She patted her hair, but that just created static. She couldn't do anything with her tight curls. Her hair always felt like a big, round motorcycle helmet around her head. After sitting alone for a minute or two, her breath grew shallow. The seat of the chair pressed into her thighs. Her heart beat in her chest like it was trying to force its way out. Then the manager appeared. He strode over and pulled out the chair across from Jayne. He was tall, and through his thin white shirt she could see that his chest and shoulders were thick and hard. His smell was distracting and suddenly Jayne wondered, when was the last time she'd been this close to a man? She forgot to make herself smile. He held out his hand and she took it.

"Toby Stuart," he said. "But everybody calls me Stu."

"Jayne Parker," she said, still holding his hand over the table. Then she let it slip away.

"So you're looking for work," he said.

“Yes,” she said, and remembered to smile.

“What kind of experience do you have?”

Jayne was caught off guard. “Well, I’m working right now,” she said. “I just need something part time.”

“Okay,” he said. “What’s your availability?”

“Evenings,” she said, “every day.”

“Easy enough,” he said, and smiled. There were little lines at the corner of his eyes.

“We usually get students with class schedules to work around.”

“Oh.”

“When can you start?”

“Right away,” she said. “Today if you want.”

He laughed. “Okay, did you say you have restaurant experience?”

“Um, no. I’m not from around here.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” he said, “with that accent.” He smiled again.

“Oh,” she said again.

“That’s all right,” he said. “I think it’s cute.”

Jayne blushed. “I just need some extra money and I figured waitressing is the best job for someone like me.” She made herself smile again.

She saw Stu look at her teeth, so she closed her lips to hide them. His eyes traveled over her and he said, “No, I don’t think the front is the right place for you.”

Her shoulders drooped.

“Can you cook?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, nodding. “Real good.”

“Speak any Spanish?”

She shook her head.

“That’s all right,” he said.

“We start cooks at minimum wage,” he said and stood up. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

*

Before the first hard freeze, some of Henry’s tenants moved out of a three-bedroom house down the street from Jayne owing rent. There was so much stuff left behind that Jayne thought they might come back, but Henry said that kind of thing happened all the time.

“You’d be surprised what all people leave,” he said. “Especially if rent’s due and they ain’t got the money.” On her second trip to the house, she noticed a little gray pup on a chain in the backyard. It was raining out, and it was huddled against the back of the house shivering. She felt sorry for it since it had been outside without food and water for at least a night and a day, so she brought it home and fed it with the intention of giving it away after that. When she mentioned it to Henry, he suggested she keep it, “Bein’ a girl livin’ alone and all.” She doubted he’d be much of a guard dog, but her papaw had had a gray cattle dog with black spots like the pup’s, and he’d been loyal. Having him around reminded her of home. She named him Pepper and let him sleep in her bed. Being alone all day, she got in the habit of talking to him and taking him with her for company when she worked on Henry’s houses. He’d look at her with his big brown eyes as if he understood every word she said. Coming home from working at the restaurant one night she filled his water bowl and said, “Mama would’ve liked you,” and a tear hit the floor where she bent down before she even realized she was crying.

Pepper made the old house feel warmer, less stale. He bounded down the hall playing with socks, slid across the floors, and left paw prints on the back door. He acted like he belonged with Jayne, like he'd just been waiting for her to bring him home. Sometimes she hugged him and cried until they both fell asleep.

*

Chloe came to visit one night with her boyfriend. She brought a six-pack and they all had a couple of beers. Jayne told her about getting the job down the street and learning how to use a deep fryer but didn't know what else to say. Chloe adored Pepper and played with him the whole time. The boyfriend, Will, seemed bored, but nice enough. They didn't stay long, and Chloe left promising to keep in better touch.

That night, in bed and still slightly buzzed, Jayne remembered Chloe's parents hugging her the day she moved in. She couldn't think of a time her own parents ever acted that way. Pepper lay on his side with his legs sprawled. Jayne's hand rested on his side as it rose and fell. Her grandparents had been the same way—short on affection and long on discipline. Children could be a burden, she realized, though that was the first time she'd thought of herself as such. As she thought about the way the adults in her life had acted toward her, her gaze fell on the open closet door. Darkness hugged the walls around it, and inside, the darkness made the closet look like a deep hole. The house was so quiet and still that the only sound was the dog's breath. On the other side of the closet, in the bathroom, the toilet flushed. Jayne jumped. Pepper shot up in bed, ears perked toward the sound.

So I'm not crazy, Jayne thought.

She and Pepper stared at the dark wall, holding their breath listening to the water run through the pipe until it filled the toilet tank and shut off, leaving a ringing silence. It felt like

the skin on Jayne's scalp was crawling. Pepper huffed through his nose and stared at the wall. Eventually he laid his head on his paws. Jayne wondered what her parents would do if they were here. She could imagine her father saying, "Aw bullshit," drawing out the *bull* to make her feel like she was being ridiculous, afraid of the sounds of an old house. Her mother would tell her to pray about it, but Jayne didn't have any use for a god who'd take her parents away and leave her in this place.

Eventually Jayne fell asleep, but was awakened in the middle of the night by headlights coming in the bedroom window. It was so dark in the room, and the lights so bright that it hurt her eyes, blinding her momentarily. The window faced the brick wall of the neighbor's house. There was no way a car could be coming toward it, yet it was, and the headlights pummeled down until they were about to crash through the window, into the house, into her room, into the bed. Jayne thrashed away from the lights so hard that she woke herself and the dog. She gasped for air for a few moments as her eyes adjusted to the room. She lay looking at the ceiling, taking deep breaths, hot tears falling down her face and running into her ears.

*

At work that night Jayne kept thinking about all the odd things that had happened since she moved to the house on North Upper. She remembered cheesy shows she'd watched as a kid where actors re-enacted the stories of people's haunted houses. She didn't want to believe her house was haunted. She didn't even know if she believed ghosts were real, but then again, she had been starting to wonder if she knew anything for sure. Slicing vegetables, she was so tired she accidentally cut herself and got blood all over the counter. Stu was perturbed at first but when he saw how upset she was, how she stumbled over herself

apologizing, he just helped wrap her finger and said, “Don’t let it happen again, okay?” She nodded and held back tears.

That night she slept hard, and the next morning she went downtown to the library to see what she could find out about the house. On the TV shows she used to watch, paranormal “experts” were interviewed, and she remembered one of them saying that spirits hung around places where something traumatic happened—places like battlefields and asylums. She didn’t think the house had been anything other than a house. There was a clear divide where the original structure had a kitchen and bathroom added to it, but she couldn’t tell anything beyond that. She searched the address in a newspaper database. It brought up a birth announcement in 1932. It was sweet to imagine a young family living there. When she searched the couple’s last name, two stories came up that had been printed a few days apart. The headline of the first result was “Mrs. Chatham dies of wounds.” A chill ran up Jayne’s arms. She read the first few lines of the second article before she had to stop.

Tries suicide

Using a pocket knife, Mrs. Chatham, a white woman, about 20 years old, cut her throat with suicidal attempt Wednesday at the Eastern Kentucky Hospital for the Insane, where she has been confined as a patient since the birth of her daughter, and is now in a critical condition, with little prospect of recovery.

Jayne felt gutted by the words as she sat in the quiet warmth of the great library’s belly. When she looked away from the screen, she wondered what she was doing to herself. There was enough sadness in her life without adding to it the suffering of strangers in 1932. She logged off the computer and went home.

As she walked up to the porch she saw a dead squirrel in the yard. Gross, she thought. She picked it up by the end of its fluffy tail and held it away from her body as she walked over to the trash can and threw it in. Inside, Pepper pranced around the back door as she washed her hands. She tried not to think about the woman who'd killed herself. It was unseasonably warm out, and Jayne walked into the backyard with Pepper. After he peed, he sniffed around the yard for a bit, then stopped. A dead possum lay just beside the fence. "What the hell?" Jayne said, and called Pepper away from the animal. She used a shovel to carry it around the side of the house to the trashcan.

Jayne couldn't make herself stop thinking about the young mother, but told herself that whatever happened to the people in this house back in the thirties wasn't connected to what was happening now. She was just still grieving. She briefly entertained the notion that it could've been her parents trying to tell her something. Something like, everything is going to be all right, or that they were proud of her, that they loved her. That's what normal parents would want their children to know from beyond the grave. But her parents weren't normal. And her father never smoked a pipe. She dropped the lid down on the trashcan.

*

On Jayne's twenty-first birthday Chloe came over with a bottle of sweet red wine. Even though she tried to convince her to go out, Jayne refused, preferring a quiet affair. She was grateful Chloe had thought of her, though, because she knew she didn't have anybody else. Her parents had made sure of that. She had stayed in that farmhouse up on the hill with them and even if she hadn't been too shy to make friends, no one from school was allowed over. She couldn't go anywhere either. Her folks didn't trust other people, or the outside world in general.

“Hey, what’s this?” Chloe said, shutting the door of the refrigerator after replacing the wine. She bent over and pulled out an old pocket knife from the space between the wall and the fridge. When she held it up Jayne felt goosebumps run all along her body. She told Chloe what she’d read at the library.

“Jesus,” Chloe said, and quickly set the knife on the counter next to the sink. “You sure you don’t want to get out of here for a little while?”

“Yeah, on second thought, that sounds good,” Jayne said.

They walked to a hole-in-the-wall bar a few blocks over. After a few drinks Jayne realized the knife probably belonged to Henry and it felt like such a stroke of genius that she had to call him to find out for sure.

“Did you lose a pocket knife?” she yelled into the phone over all the background noise of the bar.

“Hell, I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.”

“It was brown,” she said, as if that would be a good identifier for a pocket knife.

“You keep it,” he said. “A knife’s a handy thing to have.”

Jayne was extraordinarily pleased by the gesture. “Thank you,” she gushed. “On my birthday and everything.”

Henry snorted. “Happy birthday, then. Remind me, and I’ll give you fifty bucks next time I see you.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jayne said, and babbled further until Henry was ready to get off the phone.

Chloe just shook her head and smiled. She kept buying drinks, and Jayne drank so much she had a hard time walking back home. She remembered leaning on Chloe and telling

her how much it meant to her that she'd be friends with a loser like her. Chloe had said, "Oh, shut up. You're a sweetheart."

Jayne laughed so hard she cried.

*

She woke up on her couch with Pepper and vaguely remembered Chloe's boyfriend picking her up the night before. Her head hurt and her mouth was dry. She filled a glass with water and went to the bathroom. There was dirt on her pants, her right arm, and the palm of her hand. When she saw it, she remembered falling down in the front yard where, as she lay there, she came nose to nose with another dead squirrel. She downed the water and let the dog out. When he came back in, she got in the shower. She held her head down and let hot water run over the back of her neck. Steam clouded around her, but when she raised her head she felt cold. She looked over, through the clear shower curtain, to see if Pepper had pushed the door open and directly in front of her was a face with empty eye sockets. She screamed and cowered down in the tub with her hands over her head. The shower kept running and hot water poured over her back. The side of the tub was cold against her thigh. She clenched her eyes shut, but that only seared the image of the face, into her brain. She kept screaming, feeling the body standing over her, the face staring at her with no eyes. She heard Pepper's nails as he ran across the floor and nosed open the bathroom door. He rooted past the shower curtain and whined. She opened her eyes and saw his chin resting on the edge of the tub. Forcing herself to look up at the spot where she had seen someone standing, she saw there was nothing there, but still she shook and struggled to catch her breath. Pepper laid down with a thump, pushing his back against the bathtub. Jayne finished her shower watching the door. Then she put on her pajamas, Pepper following her every step, and climbed into bed.

She cried and cried until she couldn't breathe through her nose for the snot. She sat up and pulled the pillows and blankets all around her until she felt wrapped in a cocoon. When she woke up it was still daylight. She looked at the clock on her night stand. Five o'clock. She considered calling Henry to tell him about what she'd seen in the shower, but decided against it. What was he going to do? Call her crazy or tell her, 'good luck with that'? She put on some jeans and a hoodie, looked at the pocket knife on the counter when she walked out of her room, and took Pepper with her to the liquor store down the street. It had a drive-thru, but she didn't know what to tell them to give her, so she went inside and walked down the two aisles where lines of glass bottles shone under the lights. She left with a pint of Wild Turkey. Her mother used to keep a bottle in the cabinet to make bourbon balls every Christmas, and it was the only label she recognized in the whole store. She felt a little giddy when she walked out, thinking, that's it. I'm grown now. I'm not a kid anymore.

It smelled like Christmas back home when she uncapped the bottle. She pulled out one of the boxes of her mother's dishes and found a good glass. She hadn't unpacked a lot of the stuff she took from home because she couldn't bring herself to do it, and she didn't need it. Chloe had left behind plenty of dishes. Pepper watched her drink. The first one had so much Coke in it that she couldn't even taste the whiskey, but it made her warm. Warm and happy. She flipped through the channels on the TV. In the next drink, the Coke tasted flat. She sat on the couch—their old couch—on her father's side, with the glass resting on her knee. Pepper laid against her thigh. On TV was an image of a car wreck, a lawyer's name and number at the bottom of the screen. She changed the channel. Things would remind her of them for a long time, she knew. Probably for the rest of her life. Because their lives were her life. They had been three fish flopping inside the same net.

Whenever she saw those cliché, melodramatic moments on TV where a child sat on a parent's knee and the father said, "You can be anything you want," she thought of how foreign the words sounded. Nothing like that was ever said to her. Chloe was almost done with her first semester, but all Jayne had ever heard was a list of things she couldn't do, how hard everything would be outside the walls of her parents' house because they *knew*. They'd been through it already, and it had been *so* hard for them. No wonder they didn't prepare her for this. They still hadn't gotten their own lives together when they died.

The door to Chloe's old bedroom slammed.

"Goddammit!" she yelled, and flung the glass against the wall near the door. It hit where the wall met the floor, and shards of glass and bourbon and coke exploded outward.

"That's enough!"

Pepper stood up beside her on the couch, waiting, the hair on his back standing up.

The door rocked back open in what seemed like a slow, natural movement and the house felt empty again except for Jayne and the dog.

They were alone.

THOSE PEOPLE

Police cruisers were parked at an angle, nose to nose in the middle of the road, to block traffic, so Jayne had to park and get out of her car halfway down the street and jog the rest of the way to get to the house. She could see smoke rolling up from behind the house as she approached. A firetruck sat in the front yard, its windshield almost pressed against the porch. Hoses stretched along the driveway and into the backyard. The roar of water gushing from the nozzles almost drowned out the screams of the two men on stretchers being rolled into the backs of ambulances. Red lights rolled round and round, throwing color against the side of the house. Jayne caught only the briefest glimpse of the men, their faces pink and black like two crayons melted together, each with a gaping black hole of a mouth.

Now it wafted up from behind the house with no flames in sight. The firefighters continued to soak the spot where the fire was out. When she tried to move past the neighbors and onlookers gathered at the sidewalk, a firefighter with CHIEF stamped across his helmet reached out to stop her.

“I’m the property manager here,” she said.

He glanced at the crowd and then walked her to the back, her elbow in his gloved hand. Smoke rose from the ground where the small shed had stood to house a lawnmower. Only the back corner of the building remained standing—blackened two by fours held together by the charred remains of the outside wall. Some pieces of the roof lay among the blackened debris, but the majority of the wood that had made up the shed was gone. Tree limbs that hung near the spot were singed and the pressure from the fire hoses had made the yard around it like a lake of mud. The blackened floor of the shed was littered with a dozen

or so metal aerosol cans, mason jars, and the type of rectangle aluminum cans that hold paint thinner.

People in the neighboring backyard watched over the fence. The chief leaned in close to Jayne so they wouldn't hear, motioned to the house and said, "When the grandmother called it in she said a gas grill exploded." Moving only his eyes to look at the grill in the other corner of the yard, under the back deck, he whispered, "It's cold to the touch." He stared into her face waiting for her to decode what that meant, then looked to the burned debris on the floor of the shed to offer another hint. Among the metal cans were melted plastic bottles, what looked like tubing, and blister packs from some kind of pills.

"We could see where they rolled in the grass to try to put themselves out," he said. "They're likely in critical condition." His face was grave, and here he paused before saying, "It would be in your best interest to get rid of the rest of them," he said looking back at the house.

Jayne looked over. The old woman stood on the deck, the girl next to her, her mouth slightly agape, her face blank, the baby on her hip. All of them stared down at her.

*

When Jayne rented to this family—four generations under roof, counting the baby—it had been because Henry told her to. The old woman, Mary, had called him to say she wanted to move her brood back into his rental house in Scot's Town, a run-down neighborhood south of downtown. "It'll be a shithole when they move out," Henry had said, "but it's guaranteed money—government money."

Because they'd rented from Henry before Jayne started working for him, and because Mary went straight to Henry instead of through Jayne, the old woman acted like she had

something over on Jayne; like dealing with her was some kind of joke. Jayne being the same age as Mary's grandson probably didn't help either.

They met for the first time in front of the house. Someone driving by held an arm out their car window to wave at Mary as they passed. She waved back and then looked at Jayne. Her snort said she belonged here. Jayne didn't. Mary was short and round, the hole of her belly button showed through her dirty t-shirt, and she smelled wet and sour, like old motor oil. Her daughter and granddaughter waited in the car with children when she went inside to fill out the application. Mary wrote the same thing on all four pages, one for each adult—SSI in block letters—and handed them back to Jayne with a smirk. The only other time Jayne had seen those letters was on a pay stub, and it amounted to a day's wages. Mary, her daughter, son-in-law, and grown grandson all collected disability checks. When Jayne asked Henry what was wrong with the grandson, he said Mary told him the boy had ADHD and couldn't learn. "Last I checked, you ain't got to read no directions on a shovel," he had said and laughed. "But at least I'm gettin' back some of what I pay in every year."

After they moved in they wouldn't let Jayne inside when she came to collect rent. The daughter would be waiting at the sidewalk when Jayne pulled up and would hand through the driver's side window a government check signed on the back along with a stack of cash. A passel of children of varying ages with the same dusty brown hair and dirty faces would be running around the yard. Occasionally the granddaughter would be sitting on the porch with the baby on her lap, staring into space. Jayne could see from her car that her lip was misshapen like it had been sliced and then healed forked like a snake's tongue. Jayne assumed it was from being split open in a fight, and couldn't help but stare at it whenever she saw her. Driving away she always wondered what people who don't work do all day.

*

The days were still alternating between the crisp hint of a coming frost and too hot for a jacket when the shed caught fire. Jayne figured she'd have to tear down what remained and throw away all that the fire left behind. Shingles and pieces of wood were strewn all over the yard as if pieces of the shed had just fallen from the sky. Jayne called Henry to see if there was anything else she needed to do. She'd never been through anything like this, and she was still new to property management. Mary sauntered down to meet Jayne where she stood in the yard on the phone with Henry. He had scoffed at the fire chief's warning about the tenants. "Whatever they do to themselves is on them," he said. "It ain't got nothin' to do with me."

He had told her when she first started working for him that, years before, he'd owned another house on that block that had burned down and he collected the insurance money and sold the empty lot. Jayne thought maybe his indifference meant he might see losing another house in this neighborhood as a blessing.

Mary paid no mind to Jayne's being on the phone and interrupted: "Our heat ain't workin' right."

Henry heard her, and barked, "What's it doin'?" which Jayne had to relay, and then repeat Mary's response back to him.

He sighed and said he'd send somebody to look at it. He had Jayne take down a phone number for Alger, the guy who did the heat and air maintenance on all of his properties.

Mary walked away before Jayne could ask about her grandson.

Jayne met Alger at the house the following day, at seven in the morning. All but the old woman were still in bed. She sat at a cheap metal kitchen table drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Lottery scratch-offs littered the table and a TV was on in the corner, but she didn't pay attention to it and didn't speak to Alger or Jayne.

He was tall with sunken eyes and the gray circles under them made him look dark, like he stood always in a shadow, and blue veins showed through his pale skin, which seemed to be stretched tightly over the bones of his skull. Henry had warned her that he might seem a little off because he hadn't been out of prison very long, but not to worry.

Alger walked over to the thermostat and flipped a switch to turn on the fan and then turned up the heat before walking back through the house and outside. Jayne followed him around back to the entrance to the crawl space and waited while he crawled in, then knelt and pointed a flashlight at the furnace. From outside she couldn't tell if he was doing anything. She glanced at the black spot where the shed had stood. The backyard still smelled like something burning.

Alger crawled back out and told her the whole unit needed to be replaced. "There's part of a two by four stuck in it. I saw the story about the meth lab on the news. That's what did it. When that thing exploded."

Jayne's mouth was agape. "You mean part of the shed is *in* the furnace?"

"Yep." He nodded. "This thing's been here forever anyway," he said. "It's time to replace it. I've been putting new parts on it for Henry for years. It's like Frankenstein the way this thing's pieced together."

Henry had allocated a bank account for maintenance, but there wasn't nearly enough to cover something as major as a new furnace. Alger and Jayne started to walk back around front and she called Henry to give him the update.

Alger could hear Henry yelling through the phone. "*Bullshit*. And you tell him I said so."

He just opened the door to his van, got in, turned the key and drove away without a word, leaving her standing on the sidewalk. She looked back at the house. The old woman stood in the doorway scowling.

*

Mary called Jayne every day that week. When Jayne called Henry to ask him what she should do about the heat he would say, "I know, I know. She's been calling me too. We'll figure something out before long."

It was warm all week, so it seemed to Jayne that Mary was just trying to make it her job to keep them busy. She also had Jayne go over to look at a screen door, which she said wouldn't latch anymore. It turned out there wasn't a piece of the door that was salvageable. The screen was ripped nearly top to bottom, the latch was broken, and the frame itself was busted. Jayne took it off the hinges and carried it to the curb. A neighbor saw her and walked to the corner of his front yard. "One of them boys died last night," he said. "He was burnt up inside and out. Laid there all this time and then died."

"Jesus. I'm sorry to hear that," Jayne said. "Who was he?"

"One of their cousins," he said and pointed to the house.

"What about Mary's grandson?"

“They expect he’ll make it,” the old man said, “but he’ll be lookin’ at some time when he gets healed up.”

“You think so?”

“I imagine you’ll be hearing from the police before long,” he said. “Same thing happened in the valley earlier this year.” He referred to the next neighborhood over, on the other side of the bridge. He gave a little wave before turning around and going back to sitting on his porch. Jayne couldn’t help but hear her mother’s voice in her head, saying, *these people ain’t nothing but trash*. She’d thought of her mother’s words when she first met them, too, but tried not to be that way.

*

“Aw hell,” Henry said when Jayne told him what the neighbor had said about how the police might be coming soon. “I ain’t got no use for rumors.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” she asked. “You know they were doing something they shouldn’t have been in that shed. What happens if they all go to jail?”

“They won’t take ‘em all.”

“Do you think they’re all doing that stuff?”

“I told you, what they do to their selves don’t concern me.”

Jayne paused. “So you don’t care that somebody died because of a fire on your property and that your tenants are doing drugs?”

“I didn’t have nothing to do with that fire.” Henry was the type to get worked up easily. She should’ve known that would set him off. He went on, “And there ain’t nothing you can do for people like that.”

“People like what?”

“Like that whole damn bunch of ‘em!”

Jayne sighed. “Well, I was just thought I would let you know what I heard.”

“Quit worryin’ about those people and keep taking care of things the way you been doin’.”

*

There was a light frost over the weekend and Mary called again. “This baby’s gonna freeze to death,” she said. “It’s hardly warming up at all in here. We tried to turn on that old stove in the living room a few days ago and it don’t work either.”

Jayne sighed and told her she would call Alger again, see if there was something he could do until Henry decided to come off enough money to replace the unit or hire somebody else.

*

Alger said, “I told you. That thing’s old and needs to be replaced.”

“You put new parts on it before,” Jayne said, “Are you sure there’s nothing you can do temporarily? They’ve got a baby.”

“I don’t give a fuck about them or their baby.”

No one had ever spoken to her like that before and her voice cracked a bit when she said, “Fine,” and hung up.

After she’d composed herself, she called Henry to ask if he knew another repairman she could call.

“Aw, shit,” he said. “He’s just drunk. If it’s after four o’clock in the afternoon, he’s done clocked out for the day, if you know what I mean.”

“What am I supposed to do about their heat?”

“Go over and talk to him tomorrow morning,” he said, and gave her Alger’s address.

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry. He’s harmless.”

“You said he just got out of *prison*. What was that about?”

“He should’ve never done time for that. It was self-defense plain and simple.”

“What?”

“It was a bar fight that went south is all. Somebody’s mouth wrote a check their ass couldn’t cash,” he laughed.

“I don’t know,” Jayne said again. “I think I made him mad.”

“Now look, I wouldn’t put you in harm’s way. You know that. He’ll be sobered up tomorrow.”

“Why do I have to go over there? Can’t you just call him?”

“You have to learn this stuff if you’re gonna work for me. You gotta learn how to deal with people.”

Jayne bit her lip. She guessed he was right. And she didn’t know how else to get by in this town.

“He’s just trying to make a living and forgot I know better than the rest of the suckers he works for. You’re gonna go remind him for me. Tell him to scrounge up some parts and get that thing workin’ again and you’ll write him a check for two hundred dollars.”

*

When she pulled up at his house at seven the next morning, Alger’s van was still in the driveway. It was a cute little brick house with white wooden posts. She stood on the

porch for a moment before knocking. A taxidermied buzzard sat by the door, its wings fixed half-spread.

Alger's face was blank when he answered the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, and told him what Henry had said about two hundred dollars and used parts. "It's supposed to keep getting colder. They said they tried that old gas stove in the living room too, but it won't work. I don't know what else to do."

There was a flash of interest in his gray eyes. "Is that old stove on now?"

"I don't know."

"Shit," he said and frowned. The skin pulled tightly over his jaw. "How long ago did they turn it on?"

"I don't know."

"Shit," he said again.

"Did they turn it back off?"

"I don't know."

"Did they smell anything?"

"I don't know."

"Goddamn it," he said.

"What is it?"

"I worked on that stove before. We better go over there right now," he said as he shut the door in her face.

She didn't have time to say anything before the garage door rolled open and he walked out pulling a coat on over his thin frame. He didn't say anything, just got in his van. Jayne had to run to her car to get it out of his way.

*

Mary was holding the door open for him when Jayne pulled up. He carried a spray bottle, which she thought was odd. Mary saw Jayne jogging up the sidewalk and waited. “About time y’all showed up,” she said. Jayne frowned and walked past her into the house.

Alger was on his knees in the living room when they went inside. The room seemed darker than before, the beige walls a little more brown, but it wasn’t terribly cold. He crawled behind the old metal stove and craned his neck up. It sat where there was originally a fireplace and a three-inch metal pipe ran from the back of the stove up through the old chimney. Jayne had no idea what he was looking for.

“How long’s this thing been on?” he asked Mary.

“I don’t know, three or four days,” she said. “A week maybe.”

Alger moved around to the side of the stove and examined the little iron pipe that brought gas to the stove. He sprayed all the joints with the liquid in the spray bottle but nothing happened. He seemed satisfied with the result. “There’s no gas leak,” he said, crawled to the back again, and shined a flashlight up the chimney. He gave a little growl and disconnected the vent pipe at the elbow behind the stove. Then pulled a pack of matches from his pocket. He lit one and held it inside just inside the pipe that led up and out the chimney. Its flame moved a bit before he blew it out and watched the smoke.

“I’ll show you something,” he said to Jayne. “Look at this.”

Jayne went closer and watched the match. “Look at what?”

He struck another and this time pinched it out. The smoke pooled around his hand.

“See that?”

“Yeah. So?”

“If this was working the way it’s supposed to, the smoke would be drawn out.”

He got up and walked back outside. She followed but didn’t see him anywhere. There was a scratching sound overhead. Jayne stepped out into the yard and he was on the porch roof, quickly scaling the roof of the house. The sky was bright, but his dark figure stood out. He reached the chimney and shined a flashlight down it, then looked to her on the ground.

“Tell those people they need to find somewhere else to stay,” he said, as he started making his way back down. “Now.”

Inside it took a second for her eyes to adjust. The house seemed so much darker, like an old sepia photograph. The windows, even the glass on the pictures that hung on the wall were stained shades of brown. Jayne called for Mary.

She ambled out of the kitchen.

“He said you all gotta go.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. He said you gotta find somewhere else to stay.”

Her stony face puckered. Alger walked in behind Jayne and started forcing open the old windows, their frames creaking and cawing.

“There’s carbon monoxide in here,” he told her.

She grumbled and went into the bedroom. After a few minutes, her granddaughter came out wearing a hoodie and pink pajama pants, the bottoms of them dirty from being walked on. The fat baby on her hip made a low, growling noise but her face held a complete lack of emotion. She went outside and sat on the porch. In the other room Mary was on the phone saying, “We’re gonna have to stay with you.” Then, “No, he ain’t out yet. Just the four of us and the baby.”

Alger shut off the gas to the old stove in the living room.

“What’s going on?” Jayne asked him.

“Some of the brick fell in, collapsed the vent pipe. That’s why this wasn’t working,” he said pointing to the stove, “and the house has just been filling up with carbon monoxide since they left it on. It needs to air out for a couple of days.”

Jayne stood on the sidewalk and looked at the house with the doors and all the windows open thinking, now what? Is she going to have to watch the house while it sits like this?

Alger walked to his van and climbed in the back. He hopped back out with a metal cylinder in his hand. “Since I’m here, I’ll go ahead and fix that furnace,” he said.

“I thought we needed a new one?”

“The fan motor’s shot, but I got this old one. That’ll keep it going for a while.”

Henry was right, she thought. Alger didn’t give her a chance to say anything, so she followed him around back to the crawl space. “So that’s it?” she asked. “That little thing will make the heat work?”

“For now,” he said and started to climb into the dark, then looked back at her. “It’s a good thing we came though. That stove could have killed them all. No shit.”

Jayne is stunned for a moment by the gravity of his statement and by the thought: we almost let those people die.

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE

Richard isn't home when Jayne shows the apartment above his to an older lady named Regina. "Regina Jiffy," she says shaking hands with Jayne. "You know Jiffy Lube? That was my father's. The family business." Jayne's heard of the oil-changing place but thinks Regina's claim is a little odd since the name sounds like a play on words and Jiffy is a weird name, but she tells herself it's not worth pressing. She's not the confrontational type. Since Regina doesn't mention where her father is now, it almost seems like she is just trying to make her name sound important somehow.

Regina has curly hair like Jayne's, but it has turned gray, and it's shorter, so it poofs around her head, making her look kind of like a poodle. It bounces a bit as she walks through the second-floor efficiency apartment. This one's hard to rent because it has a narrow stairway that makes it impossible to get anything larger than a twin-size mattress up the stairs, and it's been empty for months, so Jayne would be happy to rent the place to somebody even if they are a bit off.

Regina walks through the kitchen nodding, her long lavender skirt swishing around her short legs. She wears a black fanny pack with lots of zippers and compartments on one hip. It's stuffed full. There are two windows in the kitchen letting sunlight in from the back and the side of the house. The biggest window is opposite the doorway. It's wider than the others in the apartment and overlooks the backyard where tenants park if they have vehicles. Richard, in the apartment below, doesn't drive. Regina walks over and looks out at the alley beyond the backyard. She unlocks the window and raises it.

“I like fresh air,” she says and smiles before walking away to look at the rest of the apartment. Jayne had left the central air on in the empty apartment because it was so stifling in the summer months that without it people would rush through when she showed the apartment to them and then never call back. Jayne looks out the open window and thinks of the electric bill.

Between the kitchen and bedroom is the bathroom where an old claw foot tub sits on a cracked tile floor. A cheap looking tube with a sprinkler end is fitted to the old faucet, but it’s really not the same as a shower. Regina leans over to look at it but doesn’t seem deterred. The house is over a hundred years old and in this bathroom, it feels like it, but some people like that sort of thing. Maybe Regina is one of those people, Jayne thinks.

The only other room in the apartment is a good size. Regina walks around it, running her hand across the mantle above an old fireplace that’s been closed off.

“These won’t raise?” she says, looking at the windows.

“No, sorry,” Jayne says. “They’re original, so the historical preservation society won’t let us change them out. The one in the kitchen was added after the house was built.” The windows in the main room have old ropes and pulleys for raising and lowering them, but they no longer work and layers and layers of paint have sealed the windows shut.

Regina frowns, then after a moment walks over to the closet door and opens it. She gives a little clap and steps inside it, even though it’s much too small to be a walk-in.

“Okay,” she says and turns, still standing in the closet. “I like it.”

“Great,” Jayne says and walks over to the mantle where she pulls an application and leases out of the file she’s carrying. She hopes this will make Regina join her there instead of standing in the too-small closet. Jayne goes over the amount for rent and the deposit.

Regina walks over and fills out the paperwork in big loopy handwriting, smiling away, then unzips one of the compartments on her fanny pack and pulls out a check folded into a small rectangle. She unfolds it and signs the back and hands it over to Jayne. It's a disability check from the government made out to Regina Glass. It covers the amount with a hundred fifty dollars left over.

"Can you give me the difference in cash?" she asks. "That's all I have to live on for the rest of the month."

"I guess so," Jayne says.

"I'll start moving in today, so you can come back by this evening," she says with a little wave of her hand. Bangles around her wrist jingle.

Jayne pauses and raises her eyebrows at Regina's presumptiveness, but then thinks, whatever. At least it's rented. "All right. I'll bring it by tonight." She twists a key off the big ring she carries and hands it to Regina, who squirrels it away in one of her fanny pack compartments. She twists off another one for the outer door. "This is to get in the main door downstairs," Jayne says. "The other one is for this door," she says pointing to the apartment door.

Regina holds it up and studies it, then puts it in its own compartment. They're walking toward the door to leave when Jayne remembers the kitchen window. She closes it and locks the door behind them. As they're walking down the stairs Jayne wonders why Regina gets disability, but decides maybe it's not that uncommon for seemingly healthy people to draw a check. Early on in this job she rented to a family where several people did the same. At the main door Jayne and Regina head separate ways; Jayne toward her car in the

back and Regina toward the front of the house. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't even turn and look back.

*

Jayne pulls into one of the backyard parking spots later that day with the cash. When she turns off the engine, the sound of crickets raises up in the space between the car and a siren blaring down the road out front. Regina and Richard are sitting in folding chairs on the little porch attached to the side of the house. Regina fans herself with an over-sized postcard advertising internet service. The main door to their apartments is open behind them and they're facing the alley behind the house. Richard had been living in the back apartment downstairs for a while, and evenings after work he liked to sit out on that little porch, drink daiquiris, and watch the alley as if it were cable television. He knew the people who lived and visited back there by sight, by which shotgun houses they went into, which cars they drove. When Jayne came by to collect rent or take care of any maintenance issues, he would tell her about who was seeing who, who had stopped coming around, or who had had a loud argument with whom. The later she got there, the more buzzed he would be, and when he was a little drunk he was more likely to talk about himself. Once he had even started crying, saying he was depressed. Jayne hadn't known what to say and figured he was just drunk and lonely.

Seeing him there with Regina, Jayne feels happy for him, because even though it had been awkward every time he had told her something personal, she liked the guy. One night he had told her about how his family disowned him. "I've got nobody," he had said, both sad and resolute at the same time. His eyes were glassy, and Jayne didn't know if he was confiding in her because he felt comfortable talking to her or if it was just the mojitos.

“Where I’m from,” he’d said, “in *my* family, you’re not allowed to be like me.” He stiffened his neck and sipped his drink. Jayne had felt sorry for him. It must be tough, she’d thought, because from a purely practical standpoint, what percentage of the population is gay? Maybe ten percent? That’d make it hard to find someone. Then she caught herself, because she knew it’s pretty hard for women too if you didn’t look a certain way. There’s a type of man that shows interest in her, and it’s the type you don’t want near you. They eye her the way a stray dog looks at a wounded animal.

When she walks up, the two seem like friends who have known each other forever and just picked up where they left off. They seem comfortable together, at ease.

“I see you’ve met your new neighbor,” Jayne says.

Richard smiles and swishes the ice cubes around in his drink. It’s purple and looks delicious given how hot it is outside. The glass is sweating.

Jayne gives Regina her money and a receipt. “Did you get all moved in?”

“Mostly,” she says.

A brown El Camino without a muffler roars down the alley and Richard leans toward Regina. “The woman he’d been seeing, in that green house,” he says pointing discreetly, “she kicked him out a week ago and now he drives through here like that a couple times a day so she can hear him.”

Regina nods with her eyes wide, taking it all in.

Jayne shakes her head. “I’m gonna get going,” she says. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

“All right. Thanks, honey,” Regina says, wagging her fingers over her drink. Richard waves too, and Jayne walks back to her car.

*

The summer months go by without incident and in late September, just after Jayne had turned on her heat for the first night, she gets a call from Regina. She's whispers, "Richard is spying on me."

"What?"

"He's been watching me, in my apartment. I could see him looking through the vent."

"What are you talking about?"

"The vent in my bedroom floor. He must be standing on a chair or something in his apartment to see through it."

Jayne's mind is racing through possibilities in which what Regina's saying could make sense. Maybe the duct came loose from the vent and she's hearing things from his apartment somehow or maybe a squirrel got in the attic again, but that doesn't quite add up to *spying*. Could he have gotten a little too drunk and said or did something that bothered her?

"You've got to do something," she whispers. She doesn't sound like she's making it up—and why would she? But why would he do anything to upset her? Every time Jayne had seen the two together they looked thick as thieves.

"Please," Regina says, "you've got to help me." The breathless way she says this pulls at Jayne as she sits alone in her house and she can't help but feel for her.

"I'll be right over," Jayne says.

*

On her hands and knees shining a flashlight into the vent, Jayne shakes her head. "Everything looks fine. It's all connected the way it's supposed to be. There's no holes in it. Come see."

Regina peers down at the vent while trying to lean away from it at the same time.

“Really,” Jayne says, “it’s okay.” She shines the light to show her every angle.

“When did you hear something?”

“I *saw* him,” she says. “I saw his beady little eyeballs in there watching me.” She holds her index fingers next to her eyes and points them straight ahead like antennas. Regina’s own eyeballs are bulging.

Jesus, Jayne’s thinking. There’s no way. The heating and air systems for the two apartments are not connected to each other. They each have their own furnace, central air unit, and thermostat. Then she has another thought: “Had you two been drinking?”

Regina shrugs like there’s no way that could have anything to do with it, and looks away. She runs her hand across the mantelpiece casually and seems less afraid. Then she jerks her hand back.

“What?” Jayne says.

“A bug,” Regina says. “That’s the second one I’ve seen.”

Jayne walks over to look, hoping it’s not roaches. With a quick scan of the mantle she doesn’t see anything.

“It probably went in that crack,” Regina says pointing at the place where the mantle meets the wall.

Weird, Jayne thinks. There’s no sign of food in the room. “Have you seen any in the kitchen?”

“No, only in here.”

Jayne figures it's not roaches. "Probably just a stink bug or something," she says. "Maybe a ladybug. They start coming in around this time of year—when it starts getting colder."

Regina doesn't seem convinced but doesn't press further. Jayne starts to head toward the door.

"Well what are you going to do about Richard bothering me?" she asks.

Jayne sighs. "I'll tell you what," she says. "I'll go talk to him and tell him to leave you alone, okay? How about that?"

She nods, seems satisfied, and it's as if she hadn't been completely distraught on the phone.

On the stairs, Jayne takes a deep breath, then walks down and knocks on the door to Richard's apartment. He opens it wearing a stained t-shirt and boxers. His sandy hair is disheveled and he hasn't shaved. His eyes are puffy and red. "Oh, hey," he says and lets her in. He flops down on his plush suede sofa and offers her a seat in one of the folding chairs he takes out to the porch after work.

"What's been going on between you and Regina?" Jayne asks carefully. "She called me."

"She's off her meds," he says, and throws up his hands like it's the last straw.

Jayne's surprised to hear she'd been on any. "What kind of meds?"

"She's schizophrenic. Didn't she tell you?"

Jayne can't help but stammer. "No," she finally says. "She never mentioned it."

“I lost my job,” he says. “I got fired. Can you believe that?” He runs his hands over his face and through his hair. He looks at the floor, his hands behind his head. “After all this time.” His sadness and disappointment—his despair—is palpable.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she says. “What are you gonna do now?”

“I have *no idea*,” he cries. Looking up, he searches her face. “I don’t have anything left.” He looks down again and wipes his eyes, but he can’t seem to stop crying.

Jayne shifts around in her seat, blows air out slowly, looks around, then gets up. “I— He stares at his hands in his lap.

“You— Jayne searches for words. She sighs. “It’s gonna be all right.”

He looks at her in a way that makes her feel like she’s laughing at a funeral. They both know rent is due in a week.

“I’m sorry,” she says again and hurries out the door.

*

That night Jayne’s phone rings and Regina’s name is on the caller ID.

“Richard’s dead.”

“What?”

“He busted in my apartment and jumped out the window,” she says. “I’m looking at him right now.” Regina speaks evenly, as if she’s relaying the weather. Jayne imagines her standing at the kitchen window looking down at Richard’s crumpled body. She hangs up and calls 911 as she heads out the door to her car.

When she turns down the alley behind the house she sees the red flashing lights of the ambulance. She parks in the neighbor’s backyard and runs up to the house. Richard is on a gurney being wheeled into the back of the ambulance. He’s groaning, so not dead, but likely

in a lot of pain. There is an orange foam support around his neck and head, and she can't see his face very well, but there's blood on his cheek and in his hair. One of his hands is raised in front of his body, trembling. His knees are drawn in toward his body like his stomach hurts. The ambulance doors shut and it pulls away, sirens blaring, before Jayne can say anything to anyone. She looks up at Regina's window and sees her leaning down looking out. Her hair is wet, hanging around her head as she looks down at Jayne.

Jayne shuts and locks the door to Richard's apartment, glancing inside as she does so, but checks the urge to look closely. She tries to respect tenants' privacy whenever she has to go into their homes. She can't help but notice an empty bottle of vodka overturned on the floor next to his sofa. At the top of the stairs, Regina's door is open. Her head pops out around the corner. "I need a plunger," she says spritely, "but I can't afford to buy one." Here she makes her voice sound pitiful, near tears.

"What?" Jayne asks, climbing the stairs. She heard her, but doesn't understand why she's talking about a plunger when her neighbor just jumped out her kitchen window.

"For the toilet," she says. "I need a plunger."

"All right," Jayne says, throwing up her hands. "I'll bring one." She squeezes her eyes shut for a moment and puts a hand to her temple. "What happened here tonight?" Jayne asks. "Did Richard say anything before he jumped?"

"Who?"

Jayne is stunned for a second. "Richard. Your neighbor. Your friend. The one who just jumped out your window."

"Oh, him," she says, nodding.

Jayne waits a beat, but Regina offers nothing more. “Well? What happened? Did he say anything?”

She shrugs. “I already told the cops everything. They left right before you got here.”

“And?”

“I was in the shower. I heard my door open, I heard somebody crying, and when I started coming out of the bathroom I heard a thud. Then I looked out the window and saw him out there on the ground.”

“Jesus,” Jayne says. She wonders what he was thinking. The old house is tall, but not nearly tall enough to kill yourself with a leap from the second-story window. She remembers how upset he’d been about losing his job, the times he’d said he was depressed, the drinking, how he’d said he had nothing left, and then she remembers he’d said Regina was not taking her medication as if it were more than he could bear.

Regina shrugs again. She’s looking at her feet, kind of swaying a bit, then stomps. “Another one!” she screams. “These bugs! This toilet! What am I going to do with this place?”

Jayne bites her lip. “I’ll go ahead and get that plunger for you,” she says. “And some bug spray.”

Instead of driving all the way back home, she stops at a dollar store down the road and gets a new plunger. It’s six dollars. Bug spray is 6.99. Jayne pays for the items with her own money and keeps the receipt.

Back at the apartment, she knocks on the door. Regina looks confused when she answers. Jayne holds up the plunger and the can of bug spray.

There's a flash of recognition in her face, and Regina says, "Oh, the toilet." She waves Jayne in the apartment. It's almost completely bare. There's no bed and hardly any furniture at all, just a card table and folding chair in front of one of the bedroom windows and a pile of blankets on the floor that she must be sleeping on.

In the bathroom Jayne sees the prescription bottles standing on the sink like little soldiers at the ready. She takes a deep breath to prepare herself to unclog someone else's toilet. Regina lifts the lid and Jayne stands ready with the plunger, but there's nothing in the bowl but water. It's not even dirty. Jayne pauses, then flushes the toilet. It works just fine. Regina gives a little clap and gushes, "Oh, thank you."

Jayne sighs, looks at Regina for a moment, then sets the plunger by the toilet. After reading the back of the spray can, she applies the bug killer to all the places in the apartment where bugs might be getting in. She's thankful to have the open window for ventilation. It's full dark outside by the time she's done and she notices bugs are smacking against the glass and flying into the apartment. Jayne squeezes the bridge of her nose. She's ready to be done with this day, this place, these tenants. "I'll get you a screen for that window," she says with a sigh. She heads for the door.

Before she leaves, she says, "Richard said you're not taking your medicine. You should probably start taking it."

Regina waves her hands and gives a little shake of her head. "Nah. I don't really need it."

Of course you don't, Jayne thinks and shuts the door.

*

The next morning Jayne convinces herself to go to the hospital to check on Richard. He has his own room. It's quiet and he lies motionless in the bed. One of his legs is in a cast, as is the opposite forearm. She imagines he reflexively used them to try to break his fall. The thought makes her wince.

He raises his eyebrows when she walks in.

"Hey," she says. "How are you?" she asks softly as she takes a seat by the bed. She feels awkward to be visiting someone in the hospital when they're not a relative, not even a friend really, but just someone she happens to know who's going through something she doesn't understand.

"Embarrassed," he says, "and sore."

Jayne cocks her head to the side and tries to look sympathetic. Although she's full of questions, she doesn't know how to ask any of them delicately. Thankfully, he seems willing to do the talking.

"They sobered me right up," he says pointing to the IV bag hanging by his bed. "I was pretty drunk, if you hadn't figured that out."

She waits for him to say more.

"I'm going to be here for another day or so," he says, "and then they're moving me to *the Ridge*. I don't know how long I'll have to stay there." His eyes well up. "They gave me some antidepressants, but I don't know how well they're working." A tear slides down his cheek.

"Well you're going through a lot right now," Jayne says, trying to be comforting, reassuring, still pressing the belief that this is temporary and everything will be okay.

He swallows. “Yeah. I told them the truth about my drinking and they say I have to get into a recovery program but I have to stay in-patient because of— he makes a falling motion with his finger. “They’ll probably want to keep me locked up in there forever.” He grimaces and looks away.

“Maybe they’ll take Regina too,” Jayne jokes, and she really means well, like wouldn’t that be nice, to have your friend in the nut house with you, but he doesn’t laugh.

*

A few days later a relative gets Richard’s things out of his apartment. She’s an aunt or something, a fat, grumpy woman who gets out of breath loading garbage bags of his stuff into a van. While they’re working to pack everything up, they can hear Regina in the apartment above them singing “Amazing Grace.” In the middle of the song her voice is near shrieking. Jayne helps the woman carry the bigger things to the curb. The couch she says she’ll be back for.

When they decide to leave for the day, Jayne says, “I’m sorry to see him go.”

The woman looks at her in a way that says, *I don’t give a shit*, then climbs in her van with a huff and drives away. Jayne thinks, I guess he had somebody after all, just not someone he really wanted.

Although she is sad to see Richard go, it does work out for Jayne that he’s leaving now, after losing his job and near the first of the month. If he hadn’t been hospitalized, she might have had to evict him when he couldn’t pay his rent, a position she always hates being forced into. When she locks the door to Richard’s apartment it sounds like Regina is running across her apartment. Jayne doesn’t know what, if anything, she can do about her. Every time she’s seen her in the days since Richard’s episode, she’s seemed more confused, and at one

point even aggressive when she lunged at Jayne and said something nonsensical. Regina's schizophrenia is Jayne's first experience with mental illness, and she has no idea how to handle it.

*

"I'll tell you a secret," Regina says when Jayne goes to collect rent. "God has been talking to me." She smiles and raises her shoulders, clapping quickly like an excited child. "And you know what? He said his favorite church is the one in the alley, so I gave them a donation."

Uh oh, Jayne thinks.

"I gave them my check this month," Regina says. She is beaming.

"All of it?" Jayne asks.

Regina nods.

"Oh, boy." Gonna need some of that Jiffy Lube money, Jayne thinks. "What are you going to live on?"

Regina gives a little wave of her hand, "There's a soup kitchen down the road where they know me. I am queen of that place when I want to be." She squares her shoulders and tosses her poofy hair.

"Are they gonna pay your rent?" Jayne asks, already knowing the answer. She feels stress setting in as she wonders, can she evict a schizophrenic person? Does Regina even understand what's happening right now?

"Don't worry," Regina says. "There's more." She leans in to whisper, "God told me the lottery numbers." She starts clapping again and laughing. "Isn't that great?"

Jayne blinks, wondering is this really happening? Is she really hearing this? Regina is nodding, and she unconsciously starts to nod along with her, “Yeah, that’s great,” she finally says. She’s trying to suppress the thought repeating in her head: *what am I gonna do?*

If she somehow comes through with the money, how can Jayne rent the apartment below her to a new tenant when Regina might see their eyeballs through the vents? No, Jayne decides. “The rent’s due today,” she says.

“The lottery drawing isn’t until later.”

Of course it’s not. Jayne takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she says, thinking that will give her time to figure out who she can call to help her get Regina out.

“Come back tonight,” she says smiling and nodding. She pats Jayne on the shoulder over and over as she walks out the door.

*

Pacing across her kitchen floor, Jayne finally decides to call the facility where Richard is being treated, then feels a twinge of guilt. Will this get her committed? Does that happen in real life? Would she be responsible for getting someone locked away? Is that’s what’s best for her anyway? Uncertain of anything, she saves the number in her phone and checks the time. The Powerball is \$200 million is tonight, and the numbers have been drawn. She heads back to Regina’s apartment not knowing what she’ll encounter this time.

“Well how did the drawing go?” Jayne asks when Regina answers the door. “Did God give you the right numbers?”

“What?” Regina asks.

“The lottery,” Jayne says, “did you win?” As soon as she says this she feels ridiculous. Maybe she’s half-crazy herself, she thinks.

“Oh,” she says. “I forgot to buy a ticket.”

Jayne rubs her hands over her face and is so frustrated and so baffled by this woman she feels both breathless and like screaming. Just then, Regina jumps.

“What is it?” Jayne asks.

“A roach—oh my god it’s *huge*—oh, they’re everywhere!” Regina is screaming, takes her shoe off and starts smacking it against the wall.

“Where? Where?” Jayne says, ready to help kill them. She scans the walls but sees nothing there. “I don’t see anything.” She realizes they’re both yelling.

Regina looks at her with wide eyes. “There,” she cries, “right there!” She’s pointing at the space all along the wall and floor. “

“There’s nothing there!” Jayne shouts. Because Regina is so panic stricken, she feels frenzied herself.

“How can you not see them? They’re all over!” Then she starts to shake like her skin’s crawling.

“They’re not,” Jayne says. “You must be imagining it.”

“No.” She shakes her head at Jayne. “They’re everywhere,” she says and scans the room. She puts her shoe back on and goes to the blankets on the floor where she sleeps. She picks them up and shakes them out. “Oh no,” she says, “They’re in my things. They’re so huge.” She looks back at Jayne. “What are you going to do?”

Jayne holds up her hands, stunned.

Then Regina smacks her own arm. She *really* sees them and she is so scared that Jayne feels afraid, too.

“I can’t live like this,” she screams. She gets the keys out of her fanny pack and throws them at Jayne, pushes her way past, and runs down the stairs.

Jayne looks at the empty room. It feels like the echo of Regina’s voice is still ringing off the walls. She hears a siren outside. It’s too loud, and she turns to see the kitchen window open. She shuts it and mutes the sound. She waits a while, even though she doesn’t think Regina will come back.

*

The next day, because she doesn’t know what else to do, and not even knowing what she’ll say, Jayne calls the numbers on Regina’s application, the past landlords and people she’d given as references and emergency contacts. All of the numbers go to weird places: a laundromat, a barber shop, a school, and no one has heard of Regina or the people she listed as belonging to the phone numbers.

Jayne feels bad about letting her leave, about her being out on the street. Then she remembers the soup kitchen Regina had mentioned. When she calls a man answers. Jayne describes Regina, says she’s off her medication, and that she’s concerned.

“Oh, yes,” the man says, “I know who you’re talking about. She’s a regular, but I haven’t seen her today.” He doesn’t sound at all worried. “She does this a couple times a year. That’s just how she is. She does real well for a while; taking her meds, keeping up with her bills, then she goes off her drugs and gets kicked out of wherever she’s staying and shows up here. After a while she’ll start taking the pills again and move on. It’s a cycle. Sounds like you got off lucky,” the man laughs.

When she hangs up the phone, Jayne feels a little better, like maybe the man’s right. Maybe it’s just a cycle she goes through and everything will be all right in the end. Besides,

there's really nothing she can do. She can't make her take her pills. And she can't reason with schizophrenia.

After she gets the few things out of the apartment and gets it ready to rent again, Jayne decides to keep Regina's number in her phone. That way she'll know it's her when she decides to call back, ready to move in again.

MAINTENANCE

The phone's ringing. Sleet ticks against the window over the bed. In the dark, Henry knows that something's wrong to warrant a call in the middle of the night. The glowing red numbers on the clock beside the bed read four a.m. His wife groans and jerks the blankets away as she turns her back to him. Henry twists away from her and picks up the phone.

"Hello?"

"This is Officer Smith with the University Police Department. Do you own the gray house on North Broadway? This number was on the For-Rent sign out front."

"Yeah, that's my house," Henry says.

"You might want to come down here. There's water running down the back of the building."

"I'll be right there," he says, and rubs a hand over his face and up over his head.

The temperature that night had plunged into the single digits. Neither apartment in the back of the house was rented. Henry knew a water line must have frozen and burst.

"Got a water leak," he says to his wife as he starts pulling on clothes. Mabel offers no answer. Henry's been doing this for ten years, and still, almost every winter something like this happens. He knows she knows it too. He knows she's about ready to move back to the hills. And he's had about enough of the city, too.

When he pulls up at the house, water is running down the back wall from a second-floor window. Unlocking the outer door, he rushes up the stairs in the dark and unlocks the

door to the apartment. He clicks on the light and sees there's two inches of water standing in the hall, and it's gushing from under the kitchen sink.

Below the shut-off valve there's a split in the pipe, so the water will have to be shut off at the main. Henry knows the water could have been running for hours already, which makes him think of the water bill. He hustles down the stairs and back to his pick-up. A police cruiser pulls up alongside his truck.

"Need some help?" the officer calls from his window.

"I'm going to shut the water off at the street," Henry says as he takes an adjustable wrench and tool from the back of the truck that looks like a long metal T.

The two men go to the front of the house and fumble around in dirt and wet leaves by the road looking for the water main. The sleet has stopped but Henry's hands are red and numb from cold and his cheeks sting in the bitter morning air. He uses the wrench to take off the cover and the officer shines his flashlight into the black maw that holds the water main. With a quick twist of the water key the red dial on the meter stops spinning.

"That should do it," the officer says and stands up.

"Appreciate you," Henry says shaking the officer's hand.

"No problem. Good luck with everything."

"Thanks," Henry says as he watches him walk back to the cruiser.

He replaces the iron cover and goes to look at the damage in the house. Inside the first-floor apartment below the one with the leak it's a little warmer without the biting wind, but he can see his breath. There's water on the floor, and in the ceiling there's a crack in the plaster where water drips down from the apartment above. It's the smallest apartment in the building, and the one Henry and his wife had lived in briefly while he remodeled the house.

Later, he spent nights there by himself, Mabel having decided she was done with all that and wanted sleep in a nice bed in a nice house in a warm bedroom with plush carpet. Henry never missed her while he worked there by himself. When he went back home she wasn't exactly happy to see him. Maybe she's been ready to go since they got to Lexington.

He checks his watch. It's 4:30 a.m. The plumbing supply store won't be open for another three hours.

Henry pulls his truck onto the road. He dreads the work that's coming, but there's no way around it. He'll need a mop and bucket to clean up all the water. That'll keep him busy for a little bit while he waits for the store to open. Should've insulated it better, he thinks. He had the chance. When he bought the place it didn't have floors in some places—it was just bare bones—naked joists and crumbling plaster walls he ripped out and replaced with drywall. But insulation is expensive and he couldn't find enough on the jobsites where he worked. He'd found a lot of scrap lumber though, and other parts he could use. He'd scavenged enough to save him some money while he pieced the place together nights after work and on weekends.

Henry decides he needs a cup of coffee before he gets to work, so he pulls in at Denny's. The smell of bacon greets him at the door and he thinks breakfast might not be such a bad idea, since he's got time. It's not even five yet. He takes a seat in a booth near the door.

"Morning," a waitress says as she approaches the table.

He orders his coffee and waits. Shania Twain's voice coming through the speakers mixes with the sound of clanging pots and sizzling sausage coming from the kitchen. He flips through the plastic-covered menu. The waitress comes back with coffee takes his order. The coffee tastes burnt, but it's hot.

Henry eats his breakfast in a nearly empty restaurant planning how to get all the repairs done. He can see the house in his mind. A part of him is in that house; in every board he placed, every tile he laid, and every nail he drove. He'd brought it a long way, and it'll be there a long time yet, even after he's gone.

A boy buses two tables in the back of the restaurant and then starts replenishing sugar packets. He runs one of those noiseless sweepers over the carpet. Henry notices he's the only one working in the restaurant. The waitress is leaning against a table, busying herself with her cell phone. The kitchen is quiet.

The boy brings a bottle of Windex and some paper towels and starts cleaning the glass doors near Henry's booth. When he's finished, he walks by Henry.

"Did you need anything else?" he asks.

"I'll take another cup of coffee."

The boy comes back with a full pot and refills Henry's mug. He sets a saucer full of cream on the table. "You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Henry says. "Long night's all."

"Me too," the boy says. "I've been here since nine."

Henry only nods in response.

The boy continues, "It's only temporary though. A few more years and I'm done with school. I'm going to be a veterinarian."

Henry looks at him, not sure what the boy want from him, then says, "Good for you."

"What do you do?" he asks looking at Henry's unshaven face and wet pant legs.

"I do a lot of things," he says. "This morning it's been rental property."

The boy looks confused.

“I work in construction,” Henry says, “And I own rental property. Had a water leak early this morning.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that,” the boy says. “I hope everything works out for you.” The boy hesitates a moment, then says, “Enjoy your coffee.” With a pat on the edge of the table he walks away.

He comes back shortly with the check. “I hope you get everything straightened out with your house,” he says. “Have a good day.”

Henry looks at the check and gets out his wallet. He glances up at the boy working alone. He pulls out a five and a one and places them on the table to cover the check. He considers tipping the boy. The only other bill in his wallet is a fifty, but he doesn’t want to sit any longer and wait for somebody to make change.

He gets up, puts his wallet back in his pocket, and pulls on his coat. He thinks, nobody ever gave me a thing, and walks out the door.

SAYING NO

Jayne's running late for a shift at the restaurant where she works part time when she gets a call about the one-bedroom apartment she has for rent.

"I'm calling for a friend," the man says. "He's eighty-three years old, and he doesn't read or write very well, so I'm going to help him with the application process if you'll be willing to rent to him."

Jayne says that's fine as she holds the phone against her ear with her shoulder and locks the deadbolt on her front door. She sets up a time for the old man to look at the apartment the following day, fishes a pen out of her purse, and writes 11:00 on her hand as she gets in her car and hangs up the phone.

*

The next morning the old man stands in one of the parking spots behind the house when she pulls up. There are four apartments in the building, but the only empty one is in the back, on the second floor. She isn't sure someone as old as he is will want to go up and down stairs.

"Ernest?" she asks when she gets out the car. It feels strange to call him by his first name, but his friend hadn't given a last name over the phone. Where she comes from people call their elders Mr. or Mrs., and although Jayne is grown, she is still young, and she is respectful.

"Yes, ma'am," he says, and shakes her hand.

He is completely bald. His wrinkled face and the loose skin sagging around his neck remind Jayne of a buzzard. She takes a few steps toward the door before the old man stops. "I

have to tell you,” he says, “I’ve been on the street. I haven’t been able to find a place to live on account of how I’ve been in trouble before.” He says this frankly, as if it were a speech he’d repeated many times, then waits a moment, presumably for Jayne to say the same thing everyone always says.

It figures, she thinks, but isn’t ready to turn him away. The only thing that matters to Henry, the owner, is the money. If the old man pays his rent, and likely he will since at his age he probably lives on social security, there wouldn’t be any reason not to rent to him. Plus, an eighty-year-old man isn’t likely to do a lot of damage to the apartment, which means less work for Jayne. “What kind of trouble?” she asks.

He stands with his hands clasped behind his back. “I did some time for rape when I was young,” he says. When she hears the word rape, she thinks back to that time in the bar, when walking down the hall to the restroom when the men’s room door opened as someone was leaving and another man inside looked over at Jayne from where he stood at the urinal. He smirked, then turned and shook his dick at her. Jayne hadn’t registered much about him aside from the fact that he was older than the other guys the bar was filled with and that he was laughing at her. She hurried past the door and into the women’s restroom. In the mirror, she saw the door open behind her and the man’s face appeared, still laughing. “What’s the matter, baby,” he slurred and grabbed her arm, twisting her around, and then grabbed her between the legs with his other hand. “Didn’t you like what you saw?”

She shrieked so loud that it seemed to jar him out of his drunkenness. He released her arm and said, “Goddamn, girl. You’d think an ugly bitch like you would be grateful for a little attention.” He waved a hand as if dismissing her and walked out. It was over, just like

that, but it left her alone, heart pounding, imagining what would have happened if he hadn't stopped.

Standing with the old man Jayne is unsettled, as the feelings of that night creep back into her consciousness. She's aware of her body in front of his, the shadow being cast by the old two-story house, and the small strip of grass under their feet. The two of them stand between the neighbor's house and the one Jayne is renting. Out front is a busy road where it's hard to hear over the sound of traffic and the occasional passing siren. Behind them is an alley lined with shotgun houses. No one knows Jayne is there with the old man. No one can see them there between the tall brick houses built more than a century ago.

"I'm on the registry," the old man says. "That's why I tell people upfront. Figure it's better to hear it from the horse's mouth."

Jayne nods, but mostly because she doesn't know what to say. She knows there is more to this story, but can't imagine exactly what. He must know that people's minds go racing when they hear that word.

"It was a long time ago," he says. "And I spent thirty-five years in the Navy after that. The judge gave me a choice: ten years in prison or six months and join the service. I was twenty at the time. I served during Korea and Vietnam." The military background makes his rigid posture make sense.

Jayne is waiting for the rest of the story, the excuse, the explanation, but he gives none. It's as if he were talking about a speeding ticket. The complete lack of emotion makes Jayne's stomach roll. She thinks of the girl who lives in the apartment in the front of the building, a college student who lives alone.

“I stayed at the Y before,” he says, “and at the homeless shelter, and down the road a piece with that fella who called you for me.” He points a shaky, boney finger toward the house. “You can talk to any of them.”

“Okay,” Jayne says. “Maybe I’ll do that.” She starts to move toward the door of the apartment.

She doubts she will speak to anyone about this man’s. She doesn’t want to deal with him. Maybe someone else will call soon and rent the place, she thinks, then if his friend calls back, she can say, “Sorry, it’s no longer available.”

“Thank you for your time,” he says with a nod and walks past her, toward the busy road, hands behind his back again, like he’s going for a stroll. As she puts the keys away, she wonders if his not even going inside the apartment signals how he thinks their meeting went.

*

Randy, the man Ernest is staying with, calls again the next day. “I just wanted to give you my personal reference,” he says. “I’m a pastor at the Episcopalian Church. I’ve known Ernest for a little while now, and I think he’s a good man who made a mistake, but he paid for it and should be allowed to move on. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

“I understand that,” Jayne says, “but I have other tenants to think about, too.”

“Let me ask you this. Did he seem dangerous to you?”

“No, but—

“Do you think it’s fair for you to discriminate against an old man who’s paid his debt?”

Discrimination? Jayne is surprised to hear him accuse her of that.

“He doesn’t have any family. He’s a veteran. He’s been homeless. Can you open your heart a little to someone like that?”

Jayne sighs.

“Look,” he says, “I let him stay with me, and I have children. He’s harmless, really.”

“I don’t think everyone would feel that way,” Jayne says. “It might make my other tenants uncomfortable to live in the same building with a sex offender. I have to respect that.”

“Have you asked them?” he says. “Have they met Ernest?”

“No—

“Just tell me you’ll think about it,” he says.

“Fine. I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you,” he says, and hangs up.

Jayne has a feeling he is the type who will keep pushing.

*

The next night to hang out, and Jayne’s glad to have another person to talk to, another woman’s opinion she can get about the old man.

“And he didn’t say anything else about it? Didn’t try to make some excuse? He just said, ‘I raped a girl’ and left it at that?”

“He didn’t even say it was a girl,” Jayne shrugs. “He didn’t really say much at all. He

just

said was that he did time, that he was young when it happened, and that he was in the military after that.” Jayne ticks off the three facts on her fingers.

“Leave it to you to turn away a homeless war hero,” Chloe teases.

“Who says he was a hero?” Jayne says and waves away the notion. “I don’t know anything about his service. But the rape happened back in the day and it went to trial, so it must have been pretty bad, right?”

“I don’t know. If he was young when it happened maybe he was drunk or something, which doesn’t make it right, but who knows what really happened?” Chloe shrugs. “And after prison and the military he probably learned his lesson, right?”

“I don’t know. Do people like that really change?”

“Well it’s not like he can do anything like that now.” Chloe sticks her finger straight out in front of the crotch of her jeans, then slowly lets it droop and laughs.

At the bar, red mood lighting shines over booths along the walls and a long mirror above the bar reflects black shadows and the red glow. Chloe orders two long island iced teas and hands one to Jayne. She prefers drinking at home, where everything is familiar, but Chloe is her only friend in this town, so she’ll put up with it to have some company every once in a while. Jayne’s never been comfortable in social situations. She didn’t need to grow up being teased to know she was ugly, but the bullying drove it in like a nail. There’s no controlling her curly hair, so she pulls it back and it poofs out the back like a raccoon’s tail. Her eyes are bugged out and the left one has a habit of crossing slightly sometimes as if it were moving independently of the other. On top of that, she has buck teeth her parents couldn’t afford to, nor see the point in, putting in braces. With features like those, she gave up on trying to do anything with her appearance a long time ago.

Halfway through her drink she starts to feel better, though. Happier, less self-conscious, less worried about renting apartments. Chloe had turned away from her where they sat at the bar to talk to a guy in a button-down shirt. Jayne stands up, touches Chloe’s

shoulder, and points to a booth to let her know she's picking a new seat. Chloe nods and gives a wink.

The plush red cushion of the booth seat is much more comfortable than the bar stools had been. From there she can see the whole room. A lot of the guys look like the one talking to Chloe, and Jayne imagines them all getting their going-out-to-the-bar-to-meet-girls-shirts at the same store. She laughs to herself at the thought.

Had Ernest been like them, she wonders, and her smile drops away. Then one of them leans over her table.

“Need another drink?” he asks.

She looks up at him from under the red lights, and he moves back a bit, surprised at her face when he sees it up close. She looks down at her empty glass, and when she looks up again he is hurrying away.

She pushes the glass away and gets up to find the bathroom. Chloe is still where Jayne left her. A sign over a doorway at the end of the bar says Restrooms and leads to a dark little hallway with two doors. It makes her think again of the time the stranger flashed her, then grabbed her in the women's bathroom. She'd been out with Chloe that night, too, and when she'd found her and told her what happened, her eyes had grown wide. “Oh my god,” she had said. “Are you okay?”

Jayne had nodded and Chloe shouted to the bartender, “Did you hear that? Somebody grabbed my friend in the bathroom.” She turned back to Jayne and said, “What did he look like?” before turning to scan the room like a woman on a mission.

Jayne started to describe him when the bartender yelled, “What?” as he leaned across the bar toward Chloe.

She repeated again, louder, “Somebody grabbed my friend in the bathroom.”

He had looked at Jayne and said, “Really?”

“Why would she lie?” Chloe demanded.

Jayne looked down, embarrassed. “Let’s just go,” she had said, pulling Chloe’s sleeve.

“You’re a real asshole,” Chloe had said to the bartender as she got up.

When Jayne comes back out of the bathroom, Chloe is sitting at the booth where Jayne had been, looking at her phone while she waits. Her slender legs are crossed under the table and her hair is brushed over one shoulder exposing her long neck. She has a new drink for each of them. Jayne slides in across from her.

“That guy turned out to be a douche,” she says.

“Aw, sorry,” Jayne says. “What’d he do?”

“He kept adjusting his junk in front of me—like, he was making sure I could see what he was doing—and he was just getting obnoxious. I could tell he was gonna be the type who gets shitty after a few drinks.” She sticks out her tongue like she’s gagging.

“Ugh. I was just thinking about when that guy flashed me and followed me into the bathroom,” Jayne says. “Do you remember that?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Has anything like that ever happened to you?”

Chloe makes a face that says, *are you kidding?* “All the time.”

“Oh. What did you do?”

“You just gotta be tough,” Chloe says. “Know when to tell a guy to fuck off or kick him in the balls.” She laughs. “My mom taught me not to take any shit from guys.” She sits

her phone down and leans across the table. “One time, when I was like twelve this guy hollered at me from his car while I was walking home from school, then kinda creeped along following me saying nasty shit. You probably know the guy, Langley Briggs?”

“Oh my god, yeah. He used to live down the road from us.”

“He was convicted for having child porn when you and I were in high school.”

“*Really?*”

“Oh yeah. He was a real perv. So, that day he followed me, when I got to my house I opened the door and yelled for my mom. She came running and *chased* his car, cussin’ him halfway down the road.” Chloe laughs and shakes her head.

“Were you scared?” Jayne asks.

“A little bit. But, yeah, it was my mom who showed me how to deal with it. And how to be careful, you know—like don’t leave your drink unattended, keep your keys in your hand when you’re walking after dark, stuff like that.” She inhales and cocks her head to the side, thinking. “But I don’t want to live that way, you know? Scared. Does bad shit happen? Sure. But should you just sit at home and never do anything?” She shrugs. “I don’t know. I try to be careful, and I guess I have enough nerve to stand up for myself, so I’m not scared anymore.”

Jayne thinks she doesn’t have the same nerve Chloe does. In fact, she *knows* she doesn’t, the same way she knows no one else is going to stand up for her.

*

Ernest’s friend Randy calls back again. “I was just wondering if you’d made a decision,” he says.

Jayne's alone at home, trying to relax with her second glass of bourbon. She takes a breath and purses her lips. "I'm afraid it's going to be a no," she says.

"Are you serious?" he asks. His tone is a bit startling.

"I'm afraid so," she says, the bourbon and her talk with Chloe having made her a little more courageous than usual.

"I told you he's harmless enough to be around my children. I don't understand what the problem is."

Jayne wonders what Randy's wife thinks of the arrangement and imagines her cooking up breakfast for her kids and the old rapist.

"How long does he need to pay for this crime? It's not like he killed someone. He shouldn't be punished for the rest of his life."

"*That* is not my problem," Jayne says evenly. "Just because he's old now I'm supposed to believe that who he is inside has changed? Just because he's not physically able to be what he was before?" She feels nauseous again, thinking of the old man's coldness when they met.

"He has a condition," Randy says, calmer, quieter now. "A mental condition."

Jayne sighs. "Is that supposed to change anything?" If anything, it complicates things further.

"I think that makes him easier to understand, to forgive."

Maybe, she thinks, but it's not her place to forgive him for anything. "I'll tell you what's easy for me to understand," she says, feeling bolder, "it's not my job to find this man a home. Let him go find a place with other men or something."

She hangs up the phone knowing it doesn't change anything. It just makes it not her problem, for now. And when she thinks about the old man she's not even sure she made the right decision, but she's not letting someone else bully her into saying yes when she wants to say no.

*

The next morning, Henry, who owns the house, calls. "What the hell is this I hear about you turning down rent from an eighty-year-old man?"

Jayne is a little stunned and stammers.

"A guy called me and says he has a good tenant lined up, but you thought you were too good to rent to him." Here he changes his voice, making it sound nasal, mocking Jayne.

Jayne wonders how Randy got Henry's number, and is a little surprised at the lengths he must have had to go to to try get the old man in her apartment. "It's not that," she says. "Did he tell you the man was a rapist?"

"Yeah, and I don't give a good god damn what he did sixty years ago."

"I just didn't think it was a good idea with a girl living in the front apartment alone."

"Aw, he ain't gonna bother her."

Jayne wonders why this type of shit always happens to her. Did Randy try to push anybody else into renting to the old man, or did he see her at the house one day and decide, there's the one?

"They're gonna be over there at ten. You meet him there, get the rent and give him the keys." He hangs up.

*

A man wearing cargo shorts and sandals stands next to Ernest when Jayne arrives, and she knows it's Randy. She wonders how smug he's going to be about all this—forcing her to rent to someone she didn't want to. At least she's not alone with the old man, though. She takes a deep breath and gathers her paperwork, receipt book, the keys, and holds it all against her chest.

Neither of them waves or speaks as she walks up. She glances around. The alley is quiet.

“You must be Randy,” she says.

He gives a little nod.

She decides to push through this whole thing as quickly as possible and get it over with. What else can she do? It's three men against her, and none of them had cared that she said no.

A FAST-MOVING STORM

It's a Wednesday in the middle of February when Jayne gets a call about the tree in front of one of the rental houses she manages. Crushed beneath a limb as big around as a whiskey barrel is a new car with the dealer tags still on it. It sits parked in front of the house, branches reach out past the hood of the car and sideways into the street. Broken glass and twigs litter the ground. The car is lime green and sporty. Jayne imagines it probably belongs to a college student who parked in front of the rental house and then walked to class. The tenant who called comes out and says it sounded like a car accident when the limb fell. There's a hole in the trunk of the tree where the limb broke off. There hadn't been a storm or any reason for it to fall, and through the hole Jayne can see that the tree is dead. It's hollowed out where it has rotted inside.

A police cruiser pulls up as Jayne is calling the owner of the house. She figures it's the old man's responsibility to see to the maintenance of hundred-year-old trees on his property, but he says it's not his problem since the thing was planted on the other side of the sidewalk, closest to the road. "That's up to the city," he says. Sure enough, the officer agrees and radios somebody downtown. A bucket truck shows up and a couple of men in white hard hats go to work cutting up the tree. Jayne hangs around watching them work, to make sure no stray limbs hit the house. Eventually the owner of the car walks up. He's dark haired and looks to be about nineteen. He stops and puts his hands on his hips, not particularly upset so much as amazed at how the roof of the car is now resting on the dash. "I'm sorry about this," Jayne says.

“It’s not your fault,” he says, and then calls his parents. While waits for a ride home, he tells Jayne that his parents’ insurance will take care of everything. She’s relieved because even though it was an accident, she couldn’t help but think of how much a new car costs, and that somebody, somewhere was going to have to pay for it. Jayne is one who’s used to bad news, and has grown to expect responsibilities to fall on her.

*

Jayne’s phone rings as she pulls into her driveway. Her friend Chloe explains that a friend of her boyfriend is looking for a place to live as soon as possible. The wind has picked up and it whips Jayne’s coat around her body.

“Where are you?” Chloe asks.

“Just got home.”

“I can barely hear you.”

“I’m outside. Hang on.” Jayne unlocks her front door and steps inside, dropping her purse on the floor by the door. “That better?”

“Yeah. Like I was saying, this guy, Mal, needs a place to live and I was wondering if you had anything open right now.”

“I’ve got a one bedroom,” Jayne says, then her phone beeps. She looks at the screen to see that the property owner, Henry, is calling. “Hang on,” she says, and answers the call.

“You got the heat on in that empty apartment? It’s supposed to be down in the teens tonight and I don’t want the water lines to freeze and bust.”

Jayne leans against the front door and puts her head down. “I don’t know,” she says. “I’ll go back down there and check.”

“Alright,” he says, and the call ends. She puts her phone back in her pocket, forgetting that Chloe had been on the other line.

*

Back at the rental house, which looks very naked against the gray sky without the tree in front, Jayne goes in and turns the thermostat in the empty apartment to sixty degrees. Her steps echo on the hardwood floors as she walks through and sets the water dripping in the tub and the kitchen and bathroom sinks. Dusk is coming on and the apartment has grown dark. Shutting the front door to the building, she’s facing the stump of the old tree. The ground is muddy around it and dusted with shavings left behind by the chainsaws. It changes the look of the street in a way that Jayne thinks will be hard to get used to.

It’s dark when she gets back to her house, and starting to rain. There’s a guy sitting on her front step. She pulls into the driveway trying to figure out who he is. He smiles and stands up, waiting for her to get out of the car.

“Hey,” he says when she opens the door. “I’m Mal. Friend of Will’s. Chloe gave me your address. I would’ve called, but I don’t have any minutes on my phone right now.”

He wears cargo pants and a camo jacket. A black backpack and a bike sit on the porch next to him. It crosses Jayne’s mind that he might be homeless.

“Oh, right,” she says. “Chloe said you were looking for a place. All I’ve got is a one-bedroom. I actually just came from there.” It’s not far, but she hopes she won’t have to go back down there again. She grabs the folder she uses for rental paperwork from the passenger seat and comes up to the porch. The wind has a cold bite whenever it whips through.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the step, she looks up at the stranger on her porch and

tells him where the apartment is and how much, which he nods along to. “I can give you an application,” she says opening the folder.

“Great,” he says. “I’ll fill it out right now.” But it’s too dark to see the words printed on it.

She sighs and says, “I guess we can go in.”

He puts a chain around his bike and locks it to the post on her porch and follows her inside. She flips on the light, drops her purse on the floor with a *thunk*, and hands him a pen. There’s a small desk against the wall in the entryway to her house, so she clears off a spot on it, thankful she won’t have to bring him any farther into her house.

The application is one page, front and back. He’s filling it out pretty thoroughly, which is usually a good sign. She goes to the back of the house to let her dog out, and when she comes back he holds up the application, pointing to a line, and says, “Under the third previous residence, I don’t remember the guy’s name or how long I was there. Is that okay?”

Jayne’s phone rings. “Hang on,” she says.

It’s Henry again. “Have you seen the weather?”

“No, why?”

“They’re calling for a bad storm. You still got them bags of salt?”

“Yeah, they’re in the shed.”

“I want you to go throw some down on the sidewalks in front of all the houses. I don’t want anybody slippin’ and fallin’ and thinking they can sue me for it.”

Jayne purses her lips and breathes in, then out through her nose. It figures. She puts her hands on her knees, leaning over to take a breath to quell her frustration before going back out for the third time.

“Everything alright?” Mal asks.

She exhales. “Yeah. Fine. I just have to head back out. Apparently there’s some bad weather coming our way and I need to go batten down the hatches at all the properties I take care of.”

“Oh,” he says. “Are you going to the one you were telling me about?”

“Yeah, and some other ones, too.”

“Could I ride along with you and check the place out? I’ll help out with whatever you’ve gotta do.”

She looks at him for a second, thinking an extra set of hands might get things done faster, maybe even in time for her to get her own house ready for the storm—the fridge is pretty bare if she’s going to be snowed in for a while. He sits at her desk waiting for her answer. To Jayne he looks like a grown child. Dark hair and freckles.

“All right,” she says with a shrug.

He helps her carry the twenty-five pound bags of salt from the shed to the trunk of her car as the rain starts coming down steadily.

Jayne heads to the house farthest from hers first, thinking she’ll make a big circle. Lines of red brake lights shine through the rain streaked windshield as they sit in traffic. It seems everyone in town is out to get a loaf of bread or snow shovel at the last minute, before they go back home to their families and shut their doors against the cold.

Mal sits up straight, looking out the windshield like this is the most excitement he’s seen in a while. Jayne tunes her radio to a news station, though she’s not really expecting to hear anything important. People always get in frenzy over stuff like this, but it never amounts to much.

“You remember that storm back in ’98 when it snowed a foot overnight? You think this will be like that?” Mal says.

“I don’t know. I didn’t live here then.”

“Oh. Where are you from?”

Rather than try to explain exactly where the little hill she grew up in is, and how far from which little towns he never would have heard of anyway, she just says, “Eastern Kentucky.”

“I’ve got family in Eastern Kentucky,” he says.

“Seems everybody does.”

At this, he doesn’t say more.

Once they’re off the main roads traffic isn’t so bad. When she turns onto Cedar Lane only a few cars pass them before they pull into the driveway of a white house. She puts her hood on and Mal pulls a black toboggan out of his pocket that he fits over his head and ears.

“All I have to do is throw some salt down on the sidewalk and the front steps,” she says. “Then on to the next place.”

He nods and they get out of the car. Each of them gets a bag out of the trunk. Jayne goes up to the porch and throws a few handfuls on the porch steps, then walks backward covering the walk with little blue granules. The rain has turned to a fine sleet that creates a shushing sound as it comes down. It sounds almost like a quiet, detuned radio. It’s peaceful after the busyness of the day. Mal finishes covering the sidewalk in front of the house, driveway to driveway. They replace the bags in the trunk and head to the next stop.

At a stoplight, Jayne sees the drive-thru backed up around the corner of the building at the liquor store. Some people have the right idea. She's looking through the passenger side window, past Mal, but he sees her looking over and starts talking.

"So how did you get into this line of work?" he asks.

Jayne shakes her head. "Just lucky I guess."

"Doesn't seem like a bad gig."

Jayne laughs.

They turn left as snow starts to come down with the sleet that's ticking against the roof of the car like pins dropping.

"Would you want somebody telling you to go out in this?" she asks holding her hand up to the snow and sleet coming down against the windshield.

Mal just shrugs. "I don't know. It's a bit of an adventure, isn't it?" He gives her a half smile.

The meteorologist on the radio is telling people to drive with caution and watch out for patches of black ice. Traffic reports list accidents in every part of town. Because of all the congestion on the road, Jayne can't drive fast enough to get into an accident. They stop at the light at the top of the hill looking down toward a park. Then stop again at another light. When they finally turn down the alley that runs behind the house they're headed to, Jayne is ready to get out into the cold, out of the stuffy car making small talk with the stranger she's already spent too much time with.

"This is the place," she says. She sends him to the front of the house and says she'll meet him there. She salts the stairs to the back porch and the sidewalk running up the side of the house. Flakes of snow catch on the edge of her hood. Everything is wet and cold and

dark. She gets her giant ring of keys and meets Mal on the front porch to show him the empty apartment. Inside, she flips on the lights and watches him walk across the living room. She follows along as he looks in each room but doesn't point out features or say anything about the place.

"I like it," he says. "It's got character."

She nods. After being here three times in one day, she's ready to go.

"I left the application back at your place. I can finish filling it out when you're done with the other places."

"So you're ready, then?"

"Yeah, I've seen enough."

It's not a good sign, but she says, "All right," and they step outside. The road out front is wet and shining under the street lamps. Slush has gathered in dirty piles at the sides of the road, and an inch of snow coats the powerlines overhead. On trees across the street, every limb and twig is outlined in white and the yards are covered. The snow makes the night brighter and the sky purple as the flakes and sleet come down. Their footsteps crunch on the salted sidewalk leading back to her car.

No cars have passed down the alley since they arrived, and it hasn't been treated like the main roads, so it's hard to see through the snow where the pavement stops. Jayne cranks up the heat, the car's fan so loud it's hard to hear Mal's voice over the noise. She hears "tonight" and something about the weather, but doesn't ask him to repeat himself. Her car creeps down the alley and turns back the way they came. She tries to stay inside some tire tracks as her tires whirl through the slush. The wipers thump back and forth to smearing ice and snow across the windshield, which is fogging from the heat coming out of the vents.

“It’s really coming down,” he says over the noise of heater.

“Yeah,” Jayne says. “My boss said it was supposed to be a fast-moving storm.”

The digital clock on the dash reads 7:46, but the streets are deserted. She puts a little more pressure on the accelerator and leans close to the windshield, her cold hands at the top of the steering wheel. The light at the intersection is green and there are no cars in sight. The turn signal ticks before they turn right. When she cuts the wheel the car only moves halfway through the turn, then starts sliding straight across the two lanes. Jayne feels it the instant the car starts sliding and simultaneously knows there’s nothing she can do. A reflex, she stomps the brake. Her body tenses. She sees the telephone pole and vaguely registers Mal’s voice as he says “Uh oh.” The beam of her headlights flashes across the white no parking sign—the last thing she sees before she closes her eyes. She keeps holding the wheel firmly to the right but the car keeps sliding straight, hurtling toward impact.

It feels like the wheel and underside of the car fold against the curb before the driver’s side slams into the pole. Jayne’s head thumps against the window and Mal’s body is slung toward her.

The next thing she’s conscious of is Mal shaking her arm. He’s saying, “Hey, hey.”

With her eyes still closed she sees a red flash with each throb of pain in her left temple.

Mal is louder now: “Are you all right?”

She opens her eyes and looks at him, confused about why he looks so concerned.

“I think you blacked out for a second,” he says, quieter now. “Are you okay?”

Jayne blinks and looks around. The car's heat is still blasting. "Yeah," she says. "Yeah, I think so." The throbbing in her head dulls a bit. "Yeah, I'm fine." She puts the car in reverse.

"Are you sure?"

She nods and looks over at him again. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says. "Just a little shook up."

She nods again, then turns in her seat to look behind them and hits the gas. The car rocks a bit but won't move.

"I don't think it's going anywhere," Mal says.

She puts the car in park, drops her hands in her lap and takes a deep breath.

"Are you sure you're okay? You seem a little out of it." Mal puts his hand on her arm again, and Jayne notes how odd it feels to be comforted.

"My head hurts is all," Jayne says. "I want to go home."

Mal nods, a look of sympathy on his face as he rubs her arm.

"The other two houses are on this road," Jayne says.

"Okay. Hey, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

The temperature inside the car is dropping. Jayne tries to open her door, but it won't budge. Mal gets out and leans over to offer his hand as she climbs across the seats. When she's standing outside the car, Mal puts both hands on her shoulders and says, "How does it feel standing up? You're sure you're okay?" He looks down at her face and rubs her arms. "No concussion or anything?"

How the hell is she supposed to know that? Why is he touching her so much? She shrugs his hands off. "I'm fine," she says and gets her things out of the car.

Mal goes to the trunk and gets what's left of the salt. Luckily they're not far from her house. As they start to head down the sidewalk, Jayne looks back at the car.

"It'll be all right," Mal says. "Nobody's going to be out in this mess for a few days. You can have it towed after the roads are cleared off."

Jayne dreads finding out how much that will cost. The car's probably totaled, she realizes, but unlike the kid with the limb on his car, she doesn't have parents to take care of it for her. She feels tears welling in the corner of her eyes but squints until the feeling recedes.

They walk through the snow and ice, down the sidewalks nobody else had been bothered about salting, slipping here and there. It's still coming down steadily when they reach the other two houses Jayne's in charge of. They sit side by side, a duplex and a four-bedroom. The salt might not even melt through what's already accumulated. She wrecked her car for nothing.

"This is it," she says stopping on the sidewalk at the edge of the first house's driveway. "These two," she says pointing.

"Okay," Mal says, "You just wait right there."

She watches him shake the salt over the sidewalks. Her breath comes out in a cloud in front of her as she stands under the yellow glow of a street lamp. Her legs feel hot from the walking, but her feet, fingers, and cheeks sting from the cold. When Mal dumps the last of the salt out on the ground and crumples the bags into a ball. She points to a garbage can where he throws them away.

"Thanks," she says. "You didn't have to do that. I'm fine. Really." Yet it feels like her body hurts from the inside out, her bones and muscles sore from the wreck.

"It's no problem," he says.

They walk in silence for a while, and she remembers when her roommate moved out to live with her boyfriend. Maybe this is how she feels. Maybe this is how it feels not to face everything alone. She remembers his hands on her and lets herself think for a moment that maybe this could be good.

When they see the red neon light from a liquor store down a side street they both seem to think the same thing—it'd be worth the detour. Mal smirks, and says, "Let's go." They pick up the pace and then are relieved when they step inside the heated store.

"What's your pleasure?" Mal asks.

"I drink bourbon mostly," she says. "But anything's fine."

He picks out a fifth and a two liter of Coke. At the register he slides the bottles across the counter with some junk food he's picked out and says, "I got this."

Jayne is surprised by another small kindness. He won't let her help carry the bags, even when she offers twice. By the time they reach her house, the limbs of the trees across the street are leaning over with the weight of snow and ice. The smallest trees look like they're taking a bow. In the dark, Jayne opens her front door and leads Mal through her house to the kitchen. She lets her dog out and watches him bound through the snow. He burrows his nose in it, barks a few times, and runs back wagging his tail.

"Glasses?" Mal asks. She points to a cabinet, feeling the strangeness that is someone in her house, and tries to ignore it. The dog looks at Mal and a low bark catches in his throat. "It's okay, Pepper," Jayne says. She pulls a bag of off-brand dog food from the mantle over the old fireplace in the corner and gives the dog some food and water. He gulps it down and follows Jayne to the thermostat where she turns up the heat. She hangs her coat on the back of a chair as Mal hands her a drink. "Here's to the end of a long day," he says.

Jayne laughs. “Long ain’t the half of it.” They clink their glasses together and take a sip. She thinks again of her car, not knowing how she could possibly afford a new one. A low-grade panic settles in her brain. She could cry if she let herself.

Mal looks at her and cocks his head. “Everything’s gonna be all right,” he says.

She can’t believe how good it feels to hear that. To hear anything. Not to be alone after the day she’s had. She takes another drink and the sweetness slides over her tongue and down her throat like mercy. He and Pepper follow her to the living room.

Jayne takes her usual place on the couch and her dog curls against her. On the other end, Mal sits on the edge with his knees angled toward her. She takes another sip. “That’s good,” she says, pointing to the drink.

Mal nods. “I’ve had plenty of practice making those,” he says. “My dad was an alcoholic.”

Jayne looks at him but doesn’t say anything.

“How’s your head?” he asks.

“Okay. But it feels like it’s out to here,” she says holding her hand several inches from her face. “Is it swollen?”

He gets up and leans close to her to look. She watches his eyes looking at her. He smells like booze and oatmeal.

“Yeah, it’s a little swollen. Your skin looks kinda puffy around your eye.”

She watches his eyes traveling over her face. They’re a warm brown. He leans back and sits down on the coffee table across from her and says, “You think we’ll get snowed in?”

“God, I hope not.” She’s feeling the bourbon already, and takes a long pull.

He purses his lips and nods.

“I didn’t mean—I’m not saying—

“It’s fine.” He drains his glass, stands up and holds out his hand to collect hers. She turns it up, then hands it over.

She follows him back to the kitchen. The glasses are on the counter and he’s picked his jacket back up. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m not the best host.”

“It’s fine. You seem like the type who likes having their space.”

Jayne considers this, and all the nights she spends alone. “You could say that.”

He looks straight at her and says, “Do you want me to go?”

She can feel her heart pounding in her chest and in her swollen head. Her breath feels shallow and she’s warm from the drink. She doesn’t know if it’s a good idea for him to stay, but she doesn’t want to be alone. She says, “No, I don’t want you to go.”

A smile breaks over his face.

“I don’t want to have to make my own drinks,” she teases and walks back to the living room, looking over her shoulder as she goes. She sits down again and thinks, *What are you doing?*

Mal practically twirls back into the room and hands her the glass. He sits down and smiles again. It’s all over his face.

“Thanks,” she says and breathes in the smell of bourbon and Coke.

“Thanks for letting me stay,” he says.

Jayne takes a big swig. They hear the wind rip through the space between her house and the neighbor’s.

“Sounds like it’s picking up out there,” Mal says.

“Yeah.” Jayne goes to the front door to look out the window at the street. Her driveway is empty with her car gone, which drops worry in the pit of her stomach again. Mal comes up behind her. Jayne’s a foot shorter than him, so can see over her head. Icicles hang from the power lines and the gutters on houses. The trees across the street have dropped limbs on the ground. She knows the tall trees in her backyard will probably lose limbs too. “I hope this doesn’t cause too much damage,” she says.

“You want to turn on the TV, see what they’re saying?”

She doesn’t see the point in it. “There’s nothing we can do. Just gotta wait it out.”

Mal laughs, “Yeah, I guess. That’s what they say, right? There’s no controlling the weather.”

No controlling much of anything, she thinks. She nods and takes a drink, thankful for the comfort it brings, the way it eases the tension she’s feeling in every muscle of her body. Mal drifts back toward the couch and pets Pepper, who’s sniffing his pants.

“He seems like a great dog,” Mal says setting down his glass and using both hands to tousle Pepper’s floppy ears.

“Yeah, I got lucky when I found him.”

They’re sitting on opposite sides of the couch, the dog between them again. Jayne runs a hand through Pepper’s gray and black fur and he looks back at her with his happy dog face, his tongue hanging out.

“So you never said how you got into this line of work,” Mal says.

“The guy who owns the houses is a friend of the family,” Jayne says. “My folks died and he gave me a job.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Jayne gives a wave of the hand to dismiss his sympathy. She finishes her drink and spins the ice around the glass.

“Oh, here, let me get you another one,” Mal says, and jumps up.

The fresh drink is deliciously cold. All her rough edges feel blurred. She smirks.

“So—

Mal cocks his head. “So. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know we don’t have to talk,” he says and gets up. He sets his drink on the table and shoos the dog from his spot on the couch. “We don’t have to say anything at all.” He leans toward her and her heart thumps in her throat. Up close, she can see a bit of stubble on his face, and thinks, he’s not an overgrown child after all.

When he kisses her, the hard heat of his mouth surprises her. She has to catch her breath when he pulls back, then fight the urge to giggle.

“I’ve been waiting all day to do that,” he says.

She bites her bottom lip to keep from smiling like a maniac or laughing at the absurdity of it all. It’s been years since anyone showed any interest in her. The wind howls on through the snow outside, but the living room’s warm and glows under the bare incandescent bulb in the ceiling. As she watches him take their glasses to the kitchen for another drink, her body says, maybe the *whole* world’s not against you.

In a flash, he’s back and there’s another drink in her hand, in another flash he’s kissing her again, and in another they’re standing in the center of the room—but what are they doing? —and it’s spinning. Then she’s confused to find tears in her eyes, there’s another drink in her hand, and they’re going outside. Laughing, they shuffle through the snow in the

backyard, then fall backward into the softness. Pepper bounds out the door, then runs tight circles around them where they lie, kicking up snow and barking. They look up into the purple sky bordered all around by a circle of icy fingers—the tree branches high overhead, looming taller than the house, among the stars. “It’s your ice kingdom,” Mal says stretching his arms up in the air above them. “You’re the little princess.”

Jayne laughs hard at this. The cold melting through the back of her shirt, her pants, in her hair and on the back of her neck numbs her skin the way the bourbon had numbed everything else, but then it starts to sting. She tries to get up but her body feels heavy, so she rolls around until she can push herself up, completely wet now, and then runs back to the house, still laughing.

Through the open door she hears Mal calling, “Hey, wait!”

She pulls her wet clothes off on the way to her bedroom as Pepper runs back inside with Mal.

“Shit it’s cold,” he says slamming the door and stomping the snow off his shoes. “Where’d you go?”

At this she starts giggling, and she trembles from the cold. The light is off in her room, and she can’t remember where the clothes she wants are—in here somewhere or hanging on the back of the bathroom door? She looks around in the dark, then grabs a blanket off the bed and wraps it around herself. It pools on the floor around her short frame.

In a rush, he charges into the room and tries to scoop her up, blanket and all. Instead, they slip and fall like they’ve been poured on the floor. In the dark, his hands are everywhere and Jayne’s panting. Then he’s peeling his wet clothes off and his mouth is all over her. As she looks up into the dark room, his face appears over her and he exhales long and slow. “I

like how little you are,” he says, his eyes traveling the length of her lying there in her underwear. “You’re like a naughty middle schooler,” he breathes into her ear. She stops at this, but his breath sends shivers up her neck and she tells herself there’s some meaning she just didn’t catch. He kisses her again, soft enough to make her put it out of her mind completely. When he’s inside her, it feels like something’s come unhinged.

*

Jayne wakes up in her bed, but the blanket is still on the floor. There’s sunlight coming in the window and the swollen side of her head feels like it’s been hit with a brick. Naked, she gropes her way to the bathroom where it smells like someone’s taken a nasty shit recently. She leans over the toilet and it feels like something clicks on inside as she throws up what feels like a gallon of liquid. Her sides spasm when there’s nothing left. She drinks some water from the tap, then after a moment she’s heaving again, so she doesn’t try to drink any more. In the mirror, she can see little purple dots of broken capillaries all around her eyes. She hadn’t meant to get so drunk, but somehow it all got away from her. A t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants are hanging on the back of the door. She pulls them on remembering flashes of the night before both embarrassed and afraid of what it could mean. When she opens the door, Mal is leaning against the kitchen counter. “Sounds like somebody could use a little hair of the dog,” he says.

Jayne feels like death. “Hell with that,” she says.

“You just need to eat something.”

She walks past him, back to her room and falls sideways across the bed.

“I guess that’s an option, too,” he says, standing in her doorway.

She doesn't look over at him. She doesn't move at all. "How are you so damn perky?"

He laughs. Then she feels him running his hands up her legs, pulling at her pants. The sunlight coming in through the window is harsh, reflecting light off the snow and ice.

Wanting nothing but sleep, she hides her face in the pillows, twisting away from his hands.

"What's the matter?" he says, sitting up on his knees, trying to be playful.

"I'm fucking hung over," she says.

After a moment, when she still hasn't looked out from under the pillows, he says, "Fine," and lays down beside her.

It's a little after noon when Pepper's whining wakes Jayne. Her head's still throbbing but she lets the dog out and looks in the fridge. There's part of an old pizza in there. She takes a bite out of a slice while microwaving another. "That's the spirit," Mal says from her doorway, shirtless. He's really made himself at home. She goes to the back door and watches the dog. The tracks where they'd all gone outside in the middle of the night are covered over. A few black branches lay in the yard near the fence. One rests on the roof of the shed. When Pepper comes bounding back inside, Jayne tosses him the crust from her pizza. The dog trots to the living room with the treat wagging his tail as he goes. "Do you mind?" Mal says, pointing to the pizza. Jayne gestures to the fridge, then joins her dog in the next room.

The microwave dings from the other room as she stands at the front door looking out. The road is a mess and flurries are still drifting down. She won't be able to get her car towed for a while. She sighs and turns back to her living room, which is also a mess. The empty glasses, the two-liter of Coke, empty bags of Doritos and pork rinds, and the bottle of

bourbon are scattered all over the room. She's surprised at how unfamiliar it seems, how much she doesn't remember.

Mal comes in and sits down on the couch with his pizza. "You think that liquor store is open today?" he asks.

She looks at him like he's fucking crazy. Pepper sits up on the couch next to him, staring at the food.

"I've got an idea," he says. "It'll help with your hangover."

She doesn't know what he's thinking, but figures it's not a good idea.

"You got a phone book?"

She retrieves it for him and he finds the number to the liquor store in the yellow pages. He borrows her phone, calls, and finds that they are open. He pulls his clothes on telling her to just relax while he's gone.

Once she's alone again she stands against the closed door and sighs deeply in the quiet house. She drinks a large glass of water, still fighting the hangover, refills the glass and turns on the TV. Pepper snuggles up beside her and puts his soft head against her neck for a moment. She's thankful for him. He dozes off after a little while, and she feels like doing the same. The last thing she remembers is a newscaster saying that people all over town have lost power.

She wakes up when she hears the front door open and Pepper startles. The TV is off and the house has grown cooler. Mal walks past them smiling like a kid who's up to something. He comes back after a couple of minutes and hands Jayne a tall glass of tomato juice. "Bloody Marys?" she says. She's never been a fan of vodka.

"You need some vitamins," he says.

She frowns and takes the glass. “What’s it look like out there?” she asks nodding toward the door.

“Messy. A lot of ice on everything. There’s limbs down everywhere and a pretty big tree fell across the road by the liquor store.”

She nods. Even though it’s not something she ever would have thought she’d like, the tomato juice actually tastes pretty good. It reminds her of the off-brand Spaghetti O’s her mother used to dump into big pots of chili.

It takes them about half an hour to realize that Jayne’s house has lost power. With the heat off, the temperature drops steadily. They light a few candles, and Jayne uses a match to light all the burners on the gas stove. She nails a blanket over the doorway to the living room to section off the back half of the house with the intention of keeping what little heat comes from the stove in the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. With a slight buzz from two bloody Marys, Jayne doesn’t mind doing any of these things. Her mind seems to have shifted to a kind of unquestioning, dutiful mode. She dresses in layers and puts on a pair of boots.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to build a fire,” Jayne says.

“With what?”

“The limbs outside.”

“Everything’s all wet. You’ll never get it going.”

“I guess we’ll see about that.”

Jayne finds a bow saw in the shed and sets to work on a limb in the backyard. After a few minutes, Mal comes out to help. It’s not like he has anything else to do. They pile the manageable-sized pieces by the back door, and Jayne heads over to the pile on the opposite

side of the shed. All of the dead branches the trees had shed throughout the year have been piled there. They shake off the snow and ice, break the limbs apart, and carry them to the back door. Jayne finds two cardboard boxes in the shed, breaks one down and lays it on the floor in the kitchen next to the fireplace. She throws the other one in the middle of the floor. They move the wood from the ground outside to the flattened box in a hurry, assembly-line style, so the back door isn't open too long. Jayne gathers as much paper and cardboard as she can find. She takes the bags, out to use cereal boxes, gets toilet paper tubes and junk mail out of the trash, and breaks down the other box she found in the shed.

“You don't have a knife do you?” she asks Mal.

He fishes a Buck knife out of his pocket and holds it up.

“We gotta strip off the wet bark.”

Mal cocks his head and purses his lips, considering.

From a bedroom drawer, Jayne retrieves a brown-handled pocket knife Henry gave her. They sit in kitchen chairs peeling bark off small sticks and pieces of wood as big around as their wrists. The curled slivers fall to the floor. It's a long process and partway through Mal opens a couple dark, stout beers she didn't realize he'd bought. When they have a decent stack of vanilla-colored wood Jayne takes her coat off to start the fire. “Keep going,” she says. “This is going to take a while.”

“Have you ever used this thing before?” He points to the fireplace.

She shakes her head and opens the folding glass doors. Cold air comes through. There's ash in the bottom, so someone used it at some point. She turns on the flashlight on her cell phone, sticks her head in the fireplace and shines the light up through it.

“What are you looking for?”

“Making sure the chimney’s not blocked.”

“And?”

Jayne balls up some newspaper and puts it inside the fireplace. She tears the thin cardboard from cereal boxes and adds it to the newspaper, then a piece of the box from the shed. She makes a small, loose stack of the thinnest sticks on top of that. The paper goes up, and gradually the cardboard catches. The sticks pop a bit, but the fire burns out before they catch. She uses a piece of cardboard to scoop them up and start over with twice the amount of paper and cardboard. This time the sticks catch, but the fire starts dying almost immediately. Jayne shuts the doors to let the chimney draw air out. The flames reach higher. After a few minutes, she opens the doors and adds more wood, a piece at a time to keep from smothering the fire, and to give the cold wood time to catch.

“I’ll be dipped in shit,” Mal says. “I didn’t think you’d do it.”

Jayne is still squatting in front of the fire. “It’s not gonna last long without any good-sized logs.”

They’re both quiet a moment, and finally Mal says, “Maybe they’ll get the power back on soon.”

She looks at him. “Maybe,” she says. But she doubts it.

It’s already dark by the time the fire is really going. They sit at the kitchen table in front of the fireplace drinking the rest of the beers. Jayne gets a couple of calls from the tenants up the street who have also lost power. There’s nothing she can do about it, so she tells them to leave all the faucets dripping before they go to stay with friends or family who still have heat.

“Where are you gonna go?” Mal asks.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go,” she says, and she knows he doesn’t either. If he did he would have said something about it by now. He’s using her, she thinks, but she’s buzzed, so it doesn’t bother her as much as it should.

“You hungry?” he asks.

“I could eat.”

“I got these,” he says, getting out cans of Dinty Moore beef stew.

“That liquor store’s got everything,” she says.

“You got a can opener that doesn’t run on electric?”

“In the drawer.”

“Pan?”

She points and he starts making them dinner, if you can call opening cans and dumping them out making dinner. Still, no one but her mother has ever done that for her. Sitting at the table across from her, spoon in hand with a goofy grin on his face, he reminds her again of a little boy.

After he rinses out the bowls he says, “I got dessert too.” He pulls out the vodka, a small bottle of liqueur, and a quart of milk. “I need a big bowl,” he says.

She points. He puts on a jacket, takes the bowl and a spoon and goes through the curtain Jayne had hung over the living room doorway. She hears the front door. After a bit, he comes back with a big bowl of snow. “You ever had snow cream?”

“When I was a kid.”

“This is my take on it,” he says. He packs snow into glasses, pours vodka and liqueur over it, sprinkles in some sugar and a dash of milk. He stirs all this together and hands Jayne a glass.

She laughs and shakes her head. It tastes like a sweet coffee, but the cheap vodka comes through and burns her sinuses a bit. “Not bad,” she says.

He gives a thumbs up.

Thinking, she looks at him sideways and says, “Do you always drink this much?”

“Do you?”

She pauses. “If I got a reason to.”

“What’s the reason this time?”

“Being snowed in I guess. And totaling my car.”

He nods. “Sounds fair.”

As they sit in front of the fireplace, Jayne adds more sticks, and eventually the bark they’d shaved off the wood, which has dried some. She considers breaking apart the chairs and burning them too, but decides against it. They were left behind in a house when someone moved out, but it’d still be a waste. She hopes that between the fire, the burners on stove, and all the candles they can hold out until the power comes back on.

When all the snow Mal brought in is gone, he stands up and tugs her hand, pulling her toward the bedroom. She can’t imagine taking her jacket off, let alone all her clothes, but she follows. The bedroom is considerably colder than the kitchen. She’s already put all the blankets and quilts she has on the bed, and they’re heavy when she gets under them, still fully clothed. Mal laughs at her. “You’ll be surprised at what a little body heat can do,” he says as he peels off his shirt and hurries under the blankets. Eventually she finds he’s right. Although they can see their breath, it’s bearable in bed.

Not as sloppy drunk as she'd been the first time, Jayne feels more self-conscious in front of Mal, but he climbs on top of her just the same. She breathes in the smell of his dirty hair—neither of them has showered—and tries to pull all of his heat against her skin.

Afterward, neither of them wants to get out of bed. They lay awake in the quiet room pressed against each other for warmth, and after a while Pepper comes in and jumps in bed with them. When Jayne can't hear the fire anymore she makes herself get up to shut the doors. She dresses quickly and puts on clean socks. There's nothing left but the orange glow of the tiniest embers. She shuts the doors and watches them go up with the draft, then disappear.

It's one in the morning and so quiet in the house without the hum of electric passing through the appliances or water in the pipes. Everyone in the neighborhood who lost power is probably gone. There's no traffic passing. There's only her breath and the dripping of the faucet. She hears Mal shift in bed, then his steps on the hardwood.

He comes into the kitchen fully dressed again. "I can't sleep," he says. "It's too cold."

"Me either."

He looks at her where she sits in front of the empty fireplace and clenches his jaw. He walks through the kitchen opening cabinets and looking inside, then the fridge, which he slams closed. He flops down at the table and pours some of the cheap vodka in a glass and then throws it back like a shot.

"I guess that'll warm you up," Jayne says.

He doesn't reply, only looks at her as he pours another.

"What's your problem?" she says.

“I told you; it’s too fucking cold to sleep here.”

Jayne is caught off guard. “What, are you mad at me about it? I did everything I could.”

He gets up and paces the length of the kitchen. “What about Will and Chloe? You think they still have heat?”

“I don’t know,” Jayne says. “My phone died.”

“We should go over there and see.”

“It’s the middle of the night. And what if they lost power too? That’d be a long walk for nothing.”

“Goddamn it,” he says. He makes a fist and holds it.

“You can go if you want, but I’m not walking across town in this.”

“You just want to sit here and freeze?”

“I’m just gonna wait it out. It was a fast-moving storm. They’re bound to get the power back on soon.”

“What the fuck do you know about it?” He leans over her where she sits.

“Hey,” she says, standing up. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

He scoffs. “Who do you think you are?” He smacks a can off the table into the floor.

“Hey, I let you stay here, the least you can do is not be a dick.”

“Well fuck you.”

“Why don’t you get the fuck out my house, asshole.”

Then the slap connects—palm to cheek—and everything stops. In the moment, Jayne’s shocked, but she’s not surprised. There’s a recognition in the pain, an unconscious acknowledgment that yes, this makes sense on some instinctual level she can’t articulate.

Mal hangs his head and sighs like someone frustrated, inconvenienced. “I’m sorry,” he says. He doesn’t even try to make it sound like he means it. “I’m just cold and tired and sick of this fucking weather,” he says.

Jayne hears the excuse but doesn’t process it. Even more than before, her brain is in survival mode—but neither fight nor flight is an option—de-escalation, she feels in her gut, is the only choice. She feels her movements slow down, unthreatening, and her voice lowers.

“Let’s just try to sleep,” she says.

In bed, they lie in the dark huddled together against the cold and Jayne listens to the limbs creaking and snapping in her backyard, expecting that any moment now a whole tree will come crashing through the roof and land in her bedroom the way that limb crushed the green car parked in front of the rental house. She listens to Mal breathing next to her while the weight of the ice outside breaks down trees that have stood for decades. Her body is clenched under the blankets as his chest rises and falls next to her, and she feels like they’re in her car again, hurtling toward that pole, suspended in that powerless moment before her head hits the glass. The side of his face is the last thing she sees before she closes her eyes.

THE MISSUS

Mrs. Mabel Cowan pulled up her knee-high stockings before slipping into her clunky black heels. She knew that hardly anybody wore pantyhose like they used to, that they just went around bare-legged no matter what the weather, but she wasn't about to slip into impropriety just because everybody else was letting things go to hell. She knew most women didn't wear slips anymore either because she once saw a gust of wind catch the skirt of a woman in the IGA parking lot and show her backside to God and everybody. And that woman was old enough to have known better; she had two little ones with her and was no young thing.

Henry laid in bed with his back to Mabel, snoring away even with the sun coming in the window opposite the bed. He didn't do things like he used to either. He used to work. He used to get things done. It took a little prodding sometimes, but at least he did something besides sit around the house all day making one mess after another for Mabel to clean up. It seemed to her that ever since the Parkers died and he let their little gal start taking care of his rentals for him, all Henry did was stay on the phone. Mabel swore he called that girl five times a day, like he needed to explain everything to her down to how to change a light bulb. Retirement, Mabel thought. Right. She slipped on her brown cardigan and pinned a cornucopia-shaped brooch to the right lapel. It being the Saturday before Thanksgiving, she was headed into town for groceries.

The phone started ringing in the living room and Mabel let it go long enough to wake Henry up. When she answered and heard Jayne's voice on the other end, she just said, "Hold on a minute," and took the phone to Henry.

As Mabel clopped down the produce aisle, she thought again about that Parker girl. At least she was in Lexington now, where Mabel never saw her. When she and her folks had lived in the county Mabel hadn't seen them much, but whenever she did see that girl, who looked so much like her ugly mama, it just reminded Mabel of her husband with another woman and she hated the girl for it. She knew it wasn't very Christian of her but she just couldn't help it.

Mabel placed a bag of onions and a bag of potatoes in her buggy. Some of the onion skin flaked off and came through the netting of the bag. She gave the bag a good shake to get as much off as possible so as not to bring that mess into her house. Turning the corner to the canned goods aisle, she reminded herself again that it wasn't her fault. What Henry did before wasn't her fault at all. She put two cans of yellow corn in the buggy for corn pudding. She used her mama's recipe every year. She didn't even have to look it up anymore. Mabel bet that Delores Parker wasn't as good a cook as she was. Look at how skinny they all were. Mabel grabbed two boxes of Stove Top and marked them off the list she'd written on the floral stationery with her name printed across the top. She turned her buggy down the next aisle.

At her age, you wouldn't expect she'd still think about things that happened almost thirty years ago, but she did. It hung about the back of her mind like a stray cat, always there, slinking around behind every thought about her husband.

Realizing she forgot the cranberry sauce, she turned back. When she saw an empty spot on the shelf about knee high she felt a pang of worry, afraid they'd already sold out since she waited until almost the last minute to go shopping. She bent over and looked to the

back of the shelf and was relieved to find two cans waiting for her. She only needed one, but took both anyway. Their Thanksgiving dinner was for only five people: herself and Henry, and Henry's brother and his wife and teenaged son.

Mabel and Henry never had children of their own. Maybe that was part of it—her mind never became occupied the way a mother's did—so she had plenty of time to go over it in her head, turning it over one way and then another. She sure couldn't say anything to Henry about it. She did once, years ago, and he bellowed at her in such a way that she shut her mouth on the subject and never opened it again. But how could she not think about it? There was just no way to forget a thing like that—no way to figure out what Henry could have possibly seen in that woman, even when she was young. Sometimes Mabel blamed it on drinking, a habit Henry had given up long ago. Sometimes she figured it was a seven-year-itch-type thing. But it was a betrayal, plain and simple, and sometimes it burned Mabel's skin to walk through this town with everybody's eyes on her just knowing they saw through her. Even though they were kind to her face, she was sure they laughed at her when she wasn't within earshot.

At the end of the aisle Mabel noticed Mrs. James holding a package of Oreos. Mrs. James waved and Mabel said, "Good morning, Beatrice," as she walked by.

"Good morning to you, Mabel. How are you?"

"I am just up to my eyeballs in alligators with all I got to do to get ready for Thanksgiving," she said, slowing a bit, but not wanting to stop and talk.

"Well bless your heart. You are always such a good hostess, going to so much trouble."

Mabel waved a hand.

“How’s Henry?”

“Oh, he’s just loafin’ around these days,” Mabel said and made a face.

“Oh, well, you know how men are,” Mrs. James chortled.

Mabel narrowed her eyes. “I better get going. It was sure good to see you.”

“You too, dear. Take care.”

Mabel waved as she pushed her buggy down the next aisle, then rolled her eyes as soon as her back was to Mrs. James. She picked up the pace a bit to get out of the store before she ran into anybody else. She felt aggravated with everything all of a sudden and didn’t want to talk to anyone. In the checkout lane, it occurred to her that she forgot to eat breakfast, so her blood sugar was probably low.

Back at home Mabel didn’t try to come in quietly. When she came in the door she saw him in the recliner with the TV going. She made sure to make some noise with the bags, bumped them against the door and gave a little huff to show she had her hands full. He ignored her and made no move to get up and help. She huffed again and walked past the television into the kitchen where she dropped the bags on the table, then she rustled through them to start putting things away. Henry turned up the volume.

After everything was in its place she poured herself a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats and sat at the kitchen table. “What’s for breakfast?” Henry said.

She turned in her chair and looked at him over her glasses. “I’m having a bowl of cereal.”

“Cereal?”

“Yes, cereal. Do you want me to toast you a bagel?”

“A bagel?”

Mabel knew none of those things sounded good to Henry. She knew he'd rather have country ham and eggs every morning until he keeled over from heart failure, but she was tired of giving that man everything he wanted. He pulled in the foot rest on the recliner with a thump. "I'll get something on the way to Lexington. I gotta go up and take Jayne some plastic for her windows. That old house is gettin' cold already."

Mabel's mouth dropped open a bit. "Why can't she get her own plastic? She's not helpless."

"Goddamn it, Mabel, don't start."

"I'm just saying. That girl costs us a lot of money."

"It's my money and I'll do whatever I want with it."

"Why do you want to blow it on that girl?"

"It's twenty dollars, Mabel, what does it matter?"

Mabel got up and put her bowl in the sink. "It matters because it's not just twenty dollars," she said. "You could be renting that house she lives in."

"Goddamn it, Mabel, you don't know what you're talking about. That house needs more work than I can do."

"Well you ought to have it torn down then."

"You'd love that wouldn't you? To just throw it away. That's the dumbest thing you've said in a while."

Mabel washed the bowl with her back to Henry where he stood in the doorway. She dried her hands and turned. "Don't you see that you taking care of Delores's girl is like a slap in my face?"

When she said the other woman's name he stopped moving. It was supposed to go unspoken. Saying it out loud was like saying everything else out loud.

"I ought to show you a slap in the face," he said, leaning toward her before he grabbed his coat off the back of the kitchen chair and left, slamming the door as he went.

Mabel sat back down at the table and looked out the windows that faced the back yard. It was starting to rain, slicking the bark of the trees black and bringing down the last of the yellow leaves.

Mabel told herself it's not right what Henry did and it's not right what he's doing now. As she sat at the kitchen table, the sadness she felt because of the way he talked to her hardened into anger. It wasn't right to give that girl their money. Mabel knew he had "retired" because of that other woman. To help that dead woman's child. And even the child was his, he never claimed her over all those years, and over all those years it was Mabel who had been there, not Jayne. Mabel had been the one to mop floors and clean out refrigerators and answer phone calls and sign leases and hand keys over to people. She'd been the one who worked alongside her husband for years and she wasn't going to let him waste it all on that girl just because he slept with some tramp twenty-some years ago. She slapped her hand on the tabletop and got up. She looked at the frozen turkey she hadn't yet put away and thought about throwing it through the window but decided that would be a waste of a perfectly good bird, so she just put her cardigan back on, hung her pocketbook on her arm, and left.

Mabel pulled her Buick into the parking spot in front of the only lawyer's office in town. She looked in the rearview mirror and patted her hair. It had only rained on it a little. She squared her shoulders, lifted her nose and took a breath. When she looked through the

windshield at the dark windows of the lawyer's office she remembered it was Saturday. No one was there. She pursed her lips. She could wait two days to file for divorce. As soon as everything went through she would get her half, fair and square, and he could go move in with that girl if he wanted to take care of her so damn bad.

Mabel put the car in reverse and pulled out of the spot, back onto the road. She headed up the hill going out of town, the wipers' swish and the hum of the car's motor the only sound as she traveled the road back home. She wondered where she should go after she left Henry. She'd never lived alone before. A pick-up passed going the opposite direction and splashed water against the windshield. She recognized the truck and knew it was a neighbor of theirs. She realized then that she couldn't stay here, not in the house where they'd lived together, where everybody knew them. She'd have to get her a new place somewhere, away from this town where everybody'd feel sorry for her every time they saw her.

That girl had been living alone in Lexington for a couple years now. Mabel imagined her up there all by herself with no one to talk to. She came upon a tractor and had to slow down as she followed along behind it. They passed empty fields where tobacco had been cut and rain was making everything muddy. She didn't bother trying to pass because she knew it would turn off the road soon.

Mabel didn't have anybody else. Her parents were gone and she had no siblings, no close friends to speak of. Nobody but Henry. She knew this to be true for the girl, too.

She sighed as the tractor continued to chuff along and she poked along behind it. The rain let up a little and some sunlight came through. It'd be a big hassle to move. She'd been in the same house for thirty-eight years. The beam of sunlight streamed harder through the rain toward the hill where hers and Henry's house sat. She regarded the sunbeam, and said, "I

hear you, Lord.” The heat was starting to drain from her face and her blood pressure had gone down. “I hear you,” she said again, and though she knew she shouldn’t, she took a little satisfaction in knowing that Henry would have no idea how close he came to her walking out and a judge signing half his properties over to her. She smiled slyly knowing she was not half as dumb as he thought.

STABILITY

Jayne sits on the floor in the corner of the little loft apartment, paintbrush in hand, down the street from her house. She has to get this place turned over soon. It's been empty too long already and Henry is going to be after her to get it rented. She tries to push herself to move faster, to get it over with, but can't drum up the motivation. Maybe it's because she's burned out on managing rental property for little pay, maybe it's her dwindling hangover, maybe it's something else, but she just sits there, letting the time pass, letting the sunlight creep away knowing she'll have no choice but to quit for the day when it gets dark, since the electric's been shut off.

The orange shag carpeting seems to trap the heat in the upstairs apartment. Everything feels sticky; the drying paint on her fingers, the sweat inside her clothes, and on her skin, but still she sits, looking around the room. The sharp angles that follow the roofline go all the way to the floor and remind her of the shrinking corridor in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. You can't walk across a room in this place without ducking. She imagines tenants that move in here have to literally climb into their beds unless they put them in the center of the room. She wonders who will end up renting this place next. It usually attracts students or artists, but sometimes "artist" is just another word for unemployed, which is another word for hassle.

Jayne puts the lid on the paint, sets the brush across the rim, and goes downstairs. The change in temperature is an instant relief. She gets in her car and goes to the gas station down the block for a six pack. Everything is easier when she's drinking, and the work goes by faster. When she gets back to the apartment, she pulls a For-Rent sign out of her trunk and

puts it up in front of the house before she goes back in. If anyone calls, she'll tell them place will be ready early the next week.

Back in the apartment, the paint brush is a little tacky. She probably should have wrapped it in plastic before she left. She bends the bristles against the wall a few times before popping the cap off a bottle and getting back to work. As much as she wishes she could do something else, this is a job she knows how to do. She can't start over now. She knows what places in this town rent for, but working for Henry, she gets a two-bedroom house in a decent part of town and makes enough money to drink on. The rest she makes working at a restaurant down the street. A different job—a different life—is something abstract, out in the ether, a fantasy like winning the lottery. But this work fits her like a glove, and now it feels like a part of who she is. She drains the bottle and notices how after all this time the paintbrush knows where to go, how it pulls her hand along behind it, the creamy paint forming a perfect line between the wall and ceiling without her even trying.

When she's almost finished the six pack and one room is painted it's too dark to see anymore so she takes her brush and roller to the bathroom downstairs and cleans them out. The milky water pools in the bathroom sink. It takes forever and no telling how many gallons of water to get the roller sleeve cleaned out. She uses a putty knife to push the paint out as she holds it under the faucet. She should probably just buy a new one, but Henry doesn't like her to spend money on maintenance. If he looked at the place now he'd probably say it was good enough to rent, even though there's black mildew in the grout over the tub and holes in the walls upstairs.

In the mirror she sees there are white dots of paint in her hair and on her face from where she'd rolled the walls over her head and paint had flipped back on her. She uses a rag

cut from an old t-shirt to scrub her wide forehead. Her frizzy hair will have to wait until she gets home.

She grabs the six-pack and heads out, leaving her supplies there for the next day. It's a little after eight. Draining the last one, she puts the empty bottles in the recycling and walks to her car. Since it's right down the road, she should walk up here, but like everything else, she just tells herself this and doesn't do anything about it. In front of the house, someone's looking at the For-Rent sign and putting the number in their phone.

Being half-drunk, she probably shouldn't talk to anyone in any kind of professional capacity, but she does anyway. She feels more like herself when she's drinking.

"It's not ready yet, but I'll show it to you if you want," she says.

"Oh," the guy says, looking up. He's young, maybe not even eighteen yet, but Jayne's not good at judging age. There's acne splashed across his jawline, but his black hair's thinning above his forehead.

"It's back here," she says, walking down the gravel driveway to the side door. The house doesn't look like a duplex from the front and a lot of people, once they get a look at the little apartment in the back, say, "Oh, no, this won't work at all."

The boy follows her and uses the screen of his phone to light the steps in front of the door. A little waning daylight comes in the window over the kitchen sink.

"The bathroom is back here," she says walking through the kitchen, "and everything else is upstairs."

He follows her up the steep stairs, shining his phone around. The place smells old. Even the fresh paint can't cover the smell of age.

“This is cool,” he says taking in all the angles, the way the ceiling drops down, the small skylight, and the short doorways.

Sounds like a little kid checking out a treehouse, she thinks. And this place is more like a kid’s room than an apartment. Perfect. “I’ll probably be done painting and cleaning up by next week.”

“It looks good to me,” he says. A streetlamp shines a little light in the front window, but you can’t tell how rough the place is in the dark.

They walk back down the stairs and he asks how much it would take to move in. When she tells him, he pulls out a thick wad of cash and starts counting. She sighs. This isn’t normally how it works. “You have to fill out an application first,” she says. That’s usually the part when she makes up her mind about prospective tenants. While they’re writing out names and phone numbers, she asks questions to try to determine how much money they make, whether or not they seem like the type to take care of their shit or the type to run out owing a month’s rent and leaving behind a small truckload of garbage. The latter happened more often than not.

“I’ve got one in my car,” she says, thinking he can take it with him and she can be on her way.

He stands behind her while she looks through a folder in the passenger seat of her car. “You got a pen?” he asks when she hands him the application.

She frowns and fishes one out of her purse. He puts the paper down on the hood of her car and starts filling it out. She looks over his shoulder as he’s writing in his name and birthdate: Danny Holmes. 8/28/1989. He just turned eighteen a few days ago. When he hands

the pen and paper back to her she takes a good look at his face. She doesn't want to be the one to show him the way of the world.

"You've never lived on your own before," she says.

"No."

She purses her lips, thinking, weighing the risk of it, and it seems to be the first time it's occurred to him that she could turn him down even though he has the cash.

"I've got a job," he says. "And I've got the money." He pulls out the wad of cash again. He has more than enough.

"Been saving, huh?" she says. "You know you gotta get the utilities turned on in your name too, right?"

He gives a semi-blank stare. There's no way he could know how much that would cost. "Okay, yeah. I'll take care of it," he says, then counts enough for the deposit and first month's rent and puts it in her hand. In her receipt book she fills in the date and amount and tears his copy from the book. A yellow carbon copy remains to remind her of his name later.

He shoves the receipt in his pocket while she takes a key off the janitor-sized ring she keeps in her glovebox. "All right," she says and shakes his hand, amused at how grown up that must make him feel. As she pulls her car out of the driveway, her headlights shine on his legs as he opens the door and goes inside.

At home Jayne lets the dog out the backdoor and finds two beers in the fridge. She opens one while the dog runs a few laps in the yard, sniffs a few tufts of grass and pees. When he runs back inside they go sit in the living where Jayne turns on the stereo and drains the bottle. After she opens the second one, she craves a bourbon. Before she leaves the house

she convinces herself she'll only get a pint because she can feel that comfortable warmth and the gentle sway in her step coming on—her favorite state of drunkenness.

Inside the liquor store the fluorescent lights reflect off the amber liquor in the bottles neatly lined along the shelves. Her shoes say *yak, yak, yak* as she walks down the aisle where something has been spilled and left the tile floor sticky. Since she's not getting a fifth, she can afford something better than the cheap stuff she usually drinks. She carries a pint of Wild Turkey to the cashier at the front of the store, the neck of the bottle is cool and smooth in her hand.

"That gonna do it for you?" the clerk asks. "You know you can get a fifth for a few dollars more?"

"I don't need a fifth," she says with a smirk that she thinks hints at her drunkenness. She likes to think there's an understanding between them.

"It's more for your money," he says. "With the pint you're overpaying for the same whiskey."

She couldn't argue with that logic. Both bottles contained the same whiskey, why pay more for it just because it's in a smaller bottle? She buys the fifth he retrieves from the shelf.

As she walks back to her car, she sees one of her buddies across the parking lot. Dunn was someone she'd drunk with for a few years but wouldn't quite call a friend. He waves and she waits for him to get closer.

"What are you up to?" she asks.

"Beer run."

"Who you drinking with tonight?"

“Neighbors,” he says, crossing his arms. They’re long, thin, and covered in dark tattoos. He reminds her of a bat hanging with its wings folded around its body. “A new guy moved in across the hall. It’s just him and his girlfriend. You wanna come over?”

Jayne shrugs. “Sure, why not?”

He runs inside to get his beer while she sits in her car. After a minute or two he hops in the passenger side. Dunn lost his license some time ago for DUI, and it crosses Jayne’s mind that he only invited her over so that he wouldn’t have to walk the mile or so back to his place carrying a case of beer. He adjusts the thirty-pack in the floorboard between his long legs. She pulls out of the parking lot and when they’re on their way he opens a beer and passes it to her as thanks for the ride, then opens one for himself.

At Dunn’s apartment complex they sit in white plastic lawn chairs around a matching plastic table on the balcony of his neighbor’s third floor apartment. The guy and his girlfriend are both college students. He’s forgettable and looks like every other frat boy around the college bars, but Dunn is the type to hang out with anybody as long as they’re drinking. Jayne thinks the guy has the attitude of someone who’s attractive, but he doesn’t have the looks to match. His girlfriend is blond, but her eyebrows are dark and plucked, then painted over to give her a look of permanent surprise. Her nose is long and upturned at the end.

Regardless of the company, which Jayne would not normally have kept, she enjoys several bourbon and cokes while three of them work on their case of Bud Light. Later she has have some of their beers, too, and then she and Dunn start drinking Wild Turkey straight from the bottle.

As the dead of night settles in, they hear something on the roof. Clawed feet scratch the shingles, followed by some kind of chatter.

“It’s the fucking raccoons again,” the guy says. He adjusts the collar of his shirt.
“Management won’t do anything about it.”

“Wonder what they’re doing up there,” Jayne says.

Dunn crushes a beer can and says, “Dodging this,” as he chucks it up on the roof.

Everyone laughs when they hear the claws scratching faster, frantic-sounding, and Dunn grabs bottles out of a trashcan on the balcony and starts throwing those as well. Some bounce or roll off the roof and land in the bushes two stories below. He throws, faster and faster, until they’re practically raining back down. On the last throw, he puts his all into it, loses his balance and falls, knocking over the trashcan and table.

“Come on man,” the guy says.

All that trash scattered everywhere is going to attract more raccoons, Jayne thinks.

“That’ll scare ‘em off,” Dunn says. When he smiles, the chip in his front tooth shows.

Crazy bastard, Jayne thinks.

“I hope it does,” the girl says, re-crossing her legs as her boyfriend rights the table and picks up the trashcan. Jayne notices she’s wearing heels with her jeans. She’s also wearing one of those low-cut scoop-neck shirts that are so popular these days. She must be the type to dress up everyday, because no one would go to the trouble of looking like that just to sit on their boyfriend’s balcony with the stranger across the hall. Jayne couldn’t imagine being like that girl. She wasn’t even sure if she looked in the mirror that morning.

“I need to get me a little pistol or something,” the guy says, “take care of them myself since management won’t do anything about them.” He mimes aiming and shooting at the roof.

“What do you expect them to do?” Jayne asks. She’s quick to side with a landlord since she knows what they have to deal with. “I bet this place has a squirrel problem too,” she says with a laugh, gesturing to the tall pines growing around the property.

“Raccoons are pests, just like mice or termites,” the girlfriend says. “That makes it their responsibility. Plus, they could have rabies, which makes it a health issue.” She nods and raises those weird eyebrows as if she has said something insightful. “They should call somebody and have them removed.” She lifts her chin a bit, wetness from beer or spit glistening on her red lipstick.

She strikes Jayne as the type who expected to be treated a certain way because of the way she looks. She probably never worked a day in her life, Jayne thinks. Or does she say it? Heat wells up in Jayne’s stomach and rises into her throat. She feels aggressive, but also defensive.

This is another one of those moments where Jayne is keenly aware that she ekes out her own stability in this world and bears the weight of it. For some reason, she remembers a line she heard somewhere, something about how only a fool learns from his own mistakes, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others. But maybe it’s just the whiskey making her feel philosophical.

The next morning Jayne wakes up with a terrible hangover and no recollection of how she got home. She gets up and pulls a red Gatorade out of the fridge that she keeps for such mornings. She walks slowly from the fridge to the front door and looks out the window, for what, exactly, she doesn’t know. Maybe just to see that things out there are still how she left them; that the world stayed on its same path even while she was unconscious of its spinning.

It looks hot out, and her car is parked crooked, partly in the driveway and partly in the yard. The driver's side door is open. Jayne slips on some shoes and goes outside to close it, hoping the interior light being on all night didn't drain the battery. When she opens the front door, the hot, humid air hits her in the face and the sunlight hurts her eyes straight through to her brain. She squints and holds a hand to her brow.

The passenger side mirror is hanging off and she knows it hadn't been that way the day before. Walking over to have a closer look she sees a wide scrape along the fender. It's tinged red. She feels a wave of nausea remembering a story she'd heard about a man who hit a pedestrian while he was driving drunk, then drove all the way home with the guy lodged in his windshield and had no recollection of what had happened. It may not have been true, but it seemed entirely possible to Jayne. Without meaning to, she pictures a person's body thudding against her car as she drives on, drunk and oblivious, into the night. She squats down to get a better look at the damage to the car, and heat amplifies her hangover, blood pounds in her temples like a hammer. The red part isn't wet, but she doesn't know what died blood on a car looks like. Feeling sicker, she tries to work up the nerve to touch it.

At work, Jayne can't stop thinking about the car. More troubling though is the fact that she can't remember anything. She'd blacked out before, but bits and pieces had always come back throughout the day. This time there wasn't even a whisper of memory, and nothing triggered new recollections.

On the way home, she sits in traffic as heat waves buckle above the road, the asphalt radiating as she sits smothering in her car. Her boss, displeased, had made her leave early after she threw up in the bathroom. Even though she needed the money, she was glad to be

leaving because she hadn't felt like being there. She drives by the rental houses up the street and sees Danny sitting on the stoop outside his new apartment drinking a beer. She decides it's best to stop and ask in person if he ever had the utilities turned on in his own name. It isn't unheard of for a tenant to go without electricity or water for a while after moving in to save a few bucks, or if it was in the landlord's name, to go on using the utilities and claim they didn't when the bill comes in. Without water, the bathrooms will start to smell like outhouses after a few days and refrigerators will stink if they sit too long without being turned on.

Jayne parks on the street and walks up slowly, still feeling drained from her hangover. A boy stands across from Danny in the driveway, his beer sweating where it sits atop the central air unit. Under the tall trees shading the houses it's cooler and a breeze drifts between them.

"There's just something about drinking outside in the summer isn't there?" she says, trying to be personable.

He had set the bottle behind his baggy pant leg on the step. "I thought you'd say I shouldn't be drinking underage."

"What do I care?" Jayne says, then reconsiders. "Be careful, though."

"I can handle it," he says, smirking. "I've been drinking since I was twelve."

"I just don't want you getting drunk and doing anything stupid like damaging that property," she says, pointing to the door behind him.

He gives no response. She can't tell if he's trying to act like a tough guy or if that's just how kids his age are.

Jayne's had a hard time commanding authority over tenants since the beginning. It was especially tough at first, which she figured was because of her youth, her size, and her being female, but after a few years she toughened up and stopped caring what anybody thought of her. It was around the time she started drinking more often.

"I just stopped to see if you had gotten the utilities turned on," she says. "I've got the phone numbers if you need them."

"I called," he says. "Should be a couple of days."

Jayne frowns. She doesn't believe him. If he had really called, they'd have scheduled a time for a technician to come out and he'd know exactly when they were coming.

"Just make sure it's taken care of."

He says, "Okay," and picks his beer back up.

She gives a little wave and heads back to her car. She hears the other kid ask Danny if he really started drinking at twelve. He sounds impressed.

One night, around two in the morning, Danny's downstairs neighbor calls to complain about the noise. Jayne isn't asleep. She's nursing a bourbon on her front porch. One of the benefits of working nights at the restaurant was that she had plenty of time to recover from hangovers before work the next day, so she spent a lot of nights alone with bourbon. Two is a quiet time of night, most everyone up and down the street in their beds, and the air feels different from the lack of movement. Jayne drives up the street slowly. There's no traffic, hardly any lights on save for the street lamps. As she approaches Danny's apartment she hears what sounds kind of like bottle rockets followed by laughter. The pop is too faint to be fireworks, though.

She's trying to sneak up on him to catch him in whatever act he's in to avoid any lies he might conjure if he sees her coming. She coasts along with her foot off the gas, window rolled down, looking toward the house. She gets close enough to see into the driveway without being noticed. Three targets the size of garbage can lids are propped against the side of the house and Danny and his friend are shooting at them from across the yard with a paintball gun. They double over with laughter, then Danny leans back, draining a bottle before throwing it into the street. It shatters sending glass across the pavement. The other boy finishes his and sets the bottle in front of one of the targets, runs back to his original firing line, and shoots. *Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.* The boys fire off paint balls in a rapid succession before one hits the bottle and it bursts sending glass all over the driveway. Blue, orange, and green paint splatter against the house and the targets after each shot. Their laughter is even louder.

Jayne hits the gas, parks in front of the neighbor's house, and jumps out. "What the hell are you doing?" she calls as she runs up to the boys. Henry would kill her if these kids broke out a window or broke something he'd have to help her fix. "Somebody's gonna call the cops," she says, hoping to scare some sense into them.

Danny's friend sees her, tosses the paintball gun, and says, "I'm gonna go, man" as he takes off in a lanky jog. He's down the street in less than a minute. Danny watches him go, then turns his head slowly to look at Jayne. His stare gives her a chill.

"What are you doing?" she asks again, slower, quieter.

She wonders how drunk he is. The person looking back at her doesn't look like the boy she'd met before. Do people look different when they're blacked out?

“Nothing,” he finally whispers sharply, leaning forward, menacing, never breaking the stare.

“Look, I don’t need this. I have enough to deal with,” she says, and as the words come out, she feels the weight of it all: the restaurant job, being responsible for Henry’s properties, the hit and run, and now this. The heaviness of it makes her feel panicked, like she’s sinking, dropping below the surface of anything resembling stability.

“You gotta clean all this up,” she says, waving at the targets, the paint, the broken glass. She feels a squeezing in her chest.

He doesn’t reply. His face is greasy and his jaw is tensed. A slight breeze creeps into the space between them and she shivers. He tosses the paintball gun on the ground, turns away, and walks toward the street, his hands in fists at his sides. His sleeveless t-shirt sticks to the sweat on the small of his back.

“Where are you going?” she calls after him.

He just keeps walking. When he turns the corner, she throws up her hands. The bourbon has worn off completely and all at once she feels tired, her limbs heavy. She sighs and shuts off her car’s engine, then walks around to the back of the house and hooks up a water hose and drags it to the driveway where targets rest against the house. She puts them in a stack on the curb and hoses off the wood siding. The paint runs down the wall and pools in the driveway, the blue and orange mixing in a little river of dirt that runs through the gravel, turns brown and flows along the curb down the road to a storm drain. By the time she has it all clean, has picked up the glass, and put the hose away, Danny comes back. He walks straight past her into the apartment. She shakes her head and walks on to her car. When she

pulls away she sees him in her rearview coming back out wearing a black beanie and a black hoodie, and he's taking off down the street toward the corner again.

*

Someone's pounding on the door like they've been at it for a while. Jayne opens her eyes and looks at the clock: one p.m. As she walks toward the door she sees two police officers through the glass and stops breathing for a second. She's going to be arrested for the hit and run. She knows it, and it makes her stomach feel empty and the hairs on her arms rise.

They see her approaching and stop pounding. She opens the door. The one on the left, who looks more like a soldier than a cop, asks her name.

She answers and lowers her head, ashamed.

"We're looking for Daniel Holmes. We understand you leased an apartment to him. We tried there first, but there was no answer. Do you have any idea where he could be?"

"He worked at the pizza place down the road when I rented to him," she says, "When you tied his apartment did you knock on the door along the side of the house instead of the front door? That's where his apartment is. People have trouble finding it. The front door is to a different apartment."

The officers look at each other in a way that makes Jayne think this is new information.

"Can I ask what this is about?" she says, confused about what Danny has to do with anything.

"He is a person of interest in a homicide investigation," the officer replies without looking up from the note he's making on a little pad.

Jayne gasps. "He's just a kid," she says, thinking of when she'd first met him.

The other officer crosses his arms and leans back a bit, drawing attention to the gun positioned on his belt. He's shorter, but has the same military haircut, the stance. "Did he have a lot of cash on him when you rented to him?" His tone is accusatory, and Jayne feels defensive, but still scared. "He had stolen cash from his mother and she reported it right away."

"He had a lot of cash, yeah, and I thought that was odd, but I didn't assume—

"You didn't assume he was a thief. Do you do background checks on your prospective tenants, ma'am?" He accentuates the word ma'am as if she doesn't deserve the title. They can probably smell alcohol on her breath from the night before. "A background check would have shown his outstanding warrant."

"The owners don't like to pay for that kind of thing," she says. "He's just a kid. I didn't think—

"If we'd had a tip on that warrant, we could've picked him up and a man would still be alive." The officer is so intense Jayne feels she's being held complicit in the murder.

The first officer takes down Jayne's information, says she may be contacted later, and they walk back to their cruiser.

Jayne shuts the door and walks to the kitchen, in the back of her house, out of sight of the windows. She thinks about the person who was killed, tries to imagine Danny pointing a gun that doesn't shoot paintballs and pulling the trigger. She can't quite picture it, then she remembers him that night with the targets. The menacing stare. The black clothes. It must have been that night, she thinks. That's the only way he could have killed someone. Blacked out. Just like she had been the night of the hit and run.

It was alcohol that took that man's life, she thinks. Now it would be taking Danny's in the form of a prison sentence. She remembers the red stain on her car and feels her heart beat hard and fast, like a giant fist is gripping her chest, squeezing her lungs. She leans against the kitchen counter to brace herself against the thought, *has it taken mine too?*

Then she gets that itch, that feeling she gets every time she starts to think or feel something she doesn't want to. She needs a drink in her hand to weaken the thought and make her feel like everything is normal again, to feel like herself again. She opens the fridge but there's only an empty box from her last twelve-pack. The whiskey bottles on top of the cabinet are empty. She goes back to the front door, gets in her car and heads to the liquor store.

She goes slow down Danny's end of the street and stops a few houses down when she sees the two officers again. Danny walks between them, toward their cruiser parked on the street. His hands are clasped behind his back, cuffs around his wrists.

She turns around and hurries back home to hide, afraid they might take her too, as an afterthought. *But you didn't kill anyone*, she tells herself. She paces her living room. She sits down at her computer, still aware of her heartbeat, and taps her feet under the desk. When she closes the browser, no one will know she ever thought about it. She types the word "alcoholic" and hits search.

*

Later, she lets the detectives in the apartment and watches as they collect evidence. They carry out a pistol in gloved hands, gingerly, as if it were something fragile like a glass dish or a bomb. Next they bring out several clear bags containing some of Danny's more innocuous belongings. A neon green bong. The paintball guns. The trench coat.

A few days later Danny's mother comes and removes the last of his things. It's not even enough to fill a garbage bag. He hadn't had time to accumulate much. She places the bag in the backseat of her Corolla with a blank look on her face, her mind somewhere else. She and Jayne don't speak.

When the apartment is turned back over to Jayne to rent to someone else, she goes inside. It looks darker, and it seems that around the place there hangs the presence of loss. Jayne thinks it may be the memory of the man Danny shot. Or maybe his own life cut short, or just that something feels different in a way that she can't articulate but can sense. Maybe it's what life is like when you're sober.

She paints the whole apartment in one day.

THE COST OF LIVING

Jayne didn't like John Laroca the first time she met him. She may not have known him long enough to really like him. He was waiting at the doorstep when she pulled up to show him an apartment for rent. He fidgeted and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He was very neatly dressed in what looked like clothes from twenty years ago. When Jayne tried to shake his hand he turned away, so she just unlocked the main door to the building. He stopped to ask why there was a one and a three on the doors to the apartments.

Confused, she said, "Those are the apartment numbers."

"But two comes after one," he said, pushing his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose.

"One and two are on the first floor and three and four are on the second floor."

"But where is two? It should be after one."

"It's in the back of the house on the first floor, like I said, and four is back there, too, upstairs. One, two on the bottom, three, four on the top."

"But you come to these first, they should be one and two," he persisted.

"Well I didn't number them," she said. "Do you want to look inside?"

She unlocked the door with the one on it although number three was empty too. He walked through the apartment and then pulled out a small measuring tape and held it up on the wall between a doorway and a window. Jayne wondered why normal people never inquired about these properties. In all the time she'd been manager, only a handful of tenants had ever been average people who had good references, paid the rent on time, and made the process go as it was supposed to.

“A fish tank goes here,” he said. “I have three, but the one that goes here has porkfish. *Anisotremus Virginicus*. They’re a salt water fish that grow up to twelve inches long. I feed them shrimp and the tank has to stay between seventy-two and seventy-eight degrees Fahrenheit.”

Jayne nodded slowly. “Does that mean you like the place?”

“Yeah, I’ll take it,” he said and went back to talking about fish. He even picked the subject back up again after she interrupted to get him to fill out the application, which had launched him into another discussion about the apartment numbers.

She left exhausted, like she’d spent the morning with a young child instead of a grown man. Jayne would have liked to pass on an applicant like John because she could sense that he’d make her work for the four hundred a month he’d pay in rent. But since he had the money and Henry would have said something like, “I can’t afford to wait for somebody you *like* better.” Jayne set it up to get him moved in two days later. He arranged for her to pick up weekly payments instead of paying rent on the first of the month like everybody else. He insisted she come every Wednesday at 5:05 p.m. and regarded the situation as if it weren’t a special request. Apparently that’s how he’d done things at every apartment he’d ever lived in.

That night Jayne caught the local news. Normally she didn’t get home from her side job working at a restaurant until the late shows were on, but she’d been sent home early because business had been slow. There were reports on the number of workers signing up for unemployment and the number of households on food stamps. She looked at the wrappers from ninety-nine cent burgers on the coffee table, the stale greasy smell lingering in the room

and the taste of pickles and onions still on her tongue as she considered what she could buy with food stamps, but her pride wouldn't let her entertain the thought for long. Lamé jokes from the late shows weren't enough to shake the wearisome feeling she had before she shut off the TV and went to bed.

Jayne got a call about the other apartment and agreed to show it right away, eager to rent the place so Henry wouldn't start thinking she wasn't worth what he was paying, which wasn't much, but the house she lived in rent-free wasn't something she wanted to risk losing.

The couple was already there when she pulled up. Each of them must have been over six feet tall. The man stood perched on the front steps looking up and down the street, his long neck making him look like a giant stork, his wiry hair slicked back like wet feathers atop his head. His wife stood just behind him, taking slow steps with a kind of gracefulness about her. Her hair was long, all the way down her back, and swayed with her movements. When she turned to the side Jayne saw that she was very pregnant. She looked at them through her windshield, and the woman seemed to glide around, her hand on her belly, completely at ease with her size, both in terms of height and baby belly. As Jayne approached they both smiled warmly, which didn't happen often in this line of work.

They followed her up the stairs to the door with a three on it, and she let them inside. They both examined the apartment carefully, looking in closets, under the sink, in the oven, even behind the refrigerator. Louis double-checked the rent and deposit amounts to make sure he had them right.

"I want to be honest with you," he said. "We don't have a recent landlord reference. We lost our house. To be perfectly honest, we were set out when it foreclosed."

Here, his wife, Madeline, interjected, “I lost my job. My boss cut my hours. He knew I was pregnant, and I think he just wanted to hire someone else rather than pay for my maternity leave. When he cut me down to one day a week I just quit. I was having terrible morning sickness anyway.”

Louis continued, “We would’ve been okay on my paycheck alone, but at the company where I worked said they had to tighten down. Told me my productivity had dropped by two percent. I’d been there for nine years and they let me go, just like that. I drew unemployment for a while—the first time in my life—until I found a new job, but the pay’s not as good.”

“We’ve been forced to find a smaller home,” Madeline said.

“Where have you been living?” Jayne asked.

“With family,” he said. “Which is a little embarrassing at our age.” He assured her that their references would check out although they were dated.

“We just want to set up a stable home for our baby,” Madeline said.

To Jayne, the thought of this one bedroom apartment being a family home made the walls seem that much closer together. Seeing the two of them together, though, Louis with his arm around her, smiling at her, she could see how the apartment could be cozy. She took their application and they talked about the deposit. With his inclination toward honesty, Louis admitted that they didn’t have enough money. He showed her a pay stub to prove he could afford it after the first month. They could pay the hundred dollars they were short along with the next month’s rent, and claimed they had people to vouch for their good character. He promised to take care of the place as if it were his own.

She left telling them she would talk it over with the owners. She told them she'd try to work out a compromise on the deposit if they signed a two-year lease. Really, she wouldn't bother Henry with it at all, but she didn't want the new tenants thinking they could sway her so easily on the first try because who knows what favor they'd need next. She believed what they had said, but that didn't entitle them to special treatment. She knew the cost of living is high for everyone these days, and they weren't the only ones who could use a break. Jayne turned their check over to the owner saying it was the best she could do considering the economy.

After four weeks, Jayne had collected a full month's rent from John. Arriving at his apartment during rush hour proved a challenge, but when she was late the first time, he was so visibly distressed that she made an effort to be early, wait down the block and pull up at exactly 5:05 so as to avoid any more hassle from him. She never asked why 5:05. On the fifth Wednesday, he wasn't there. She waited in her car with the rain coming down in big uneven drops. Eventually an old Lincoln that looked to be newly smashed on one side pulled up in front of the house with John in the passenger seat. He fidgeted more than usual and his glasses were broken, but he wore them anyway. When he got out of the car he rushed over.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said. "Some idiot hit Sam's car." Sam was a regular customer at the grocery store where John worked as a bagger. He was kind enough to give John rides when the weather was bad so he wouldn't have to walk in the rain.

"Are you okay?" Jayne asked.

"Air bag broke my glasses," he said pulling out his rent payment. "But I didn't want to be late."

“You’re not hurt?”

“I had to be here at 5:05, we’d have never made it if we went to the hospital.”

“Do you need to go to the hospital?”

He put the money in her hand.

“I need to feed my fish.”

She didn’t try to argue with him. He went inside and she walked over to the driver’s side of the car.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah I think so. John sure was worried about getting here.”

“I bet. Do you think he needs to go to the hospital?”

“They might keep him locked up in there,” Sam laughed. He had a bright smile that made the creases at the corners of his eyes deepen. “Just kidding. Ol’ John’s a good guy. You know how it is; it rains and people forget how to drive. Some fool ran a red light and smacked into the side there,” he said, pointing. “We done made a police report.”

John came back outside. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Jayne asked him again. “Does anything hurt?”

“It hurts where the seatbelt was, and my neck is kind of stiff,” he said pointing to each place on his body as he said them.

Jayne looked at Sam. He leaned across the passenger seat to speak to John. “Hey, Buddy, what do you say we go for a ride?” It reminded Jayne of someone tricking a dog into a trip to the vet. Sam gave her a nod and a smile, and they drove off.

She was about to get in her car to leave when she saw Madeline waddling up with an armload of grocery bags. The rain had slacked up to a mist clinging to everything.

“You shouldn’t be lifting that,” she said taking the bags from her.

“It’s all right,” she said, but sighed with relief when Jayne took them. “Oh, thank you,” she said and fished her keys out of the pocket of her raincoat.

Jayne carried the bags up the stairs and stopped in the doorway when she saw the inside of the apartment. It had never looked so nice. There were vining plants hanging from decorative chains in front of the windows alongside wind chimes and sun catchers, large colorful paintings lined the walls, and the hardwood floor shined like the surface of a lake in sunshine. It even smelled beautiful; some combination of lavender and soap, and it was cool inside like the way it feels to walk on a river bank with bare feet. Jayne sat the bags on the kitchen counter. Bunches of herbs hung over the sink and potted plants filled the windowsill.

“Thanks so much,” she said. “Louis has been picking up extra hours trying to save as much money as possible before the baby comes, so I haven’t had much help around here.”

“The place looks amazing,” Jayne said.

Madeline waved a hand, dismissing the compliment.

“When are you due?”

“At least another month,” she said. “But this baby will come when it’s ready.” She smiled and patted her belly. She seemed so comfortable being pregnant, like it was no big deal, but her belly was so big Jayne couldn’t imagine how she’d contain it if the baby got much bigger.

It was such a relief to see a tenant taking care of an apartment rather than living in filth she would have to clean up later. Showing properties, signing leases and collecting rent was the easy part. The biggest part of her job was cleaning up after someone moved out.

Sometimes Jayne reasoned it was a pretty small price to pay for a place to live. Other times she dreaded it and wished her life had amounted to more than that.

The next Wednesday, John said that he and Sam were going to sue the person who caused the car wreck the week before. He said he got the idea on his day off from work when he was watching daytime TV. “My time off work and my injury is worth something,” he said. It sounded like he was quoting a commercial.

“Did you miss work?” John had a set schedule and was off every Thursday. Jayne had to change her own work schedule too to accommodate his Wednesday afternoon rent payments.

“No, but my pain and suffering is worth something.”

“Are you still hurt?”

“I was hurt, and the insurance company needs to pay me what I deserve.”

Jayne shook her head. “Well good luck with all that.”

Over the next month, John gave her weekly updates on the progress of the lawsuit. “The idiot” had insurance, so it would most likely be settled out of court and John and Sam would each get a check.

Jayne hadn’t seen Madeline lately. She assumed she’d given birth and was nestled in with her newborn.

Jayne knew when John got his settlement because of the smug smile on his face. He stood on the porch waiting for her to arrive. When she walked up he said, “Eight thousand dollars,” drawing out each word. She had begun not to be so shocked at the odd things John

said, but it was still strange to hear him talk about money like that. He pulled a wad of cash from his shirt pocket. It was three inches thick.

“Jesus,” Jayne said. “Do you think it’s wise to carry that much cash around?”

He peeled bills from the wad and handed her his weekly rent payment. “I might need it for something,” he shrugged.

At that, Jayne figured he might go through it all pretty quick, so she asked if he wanted to pay a couple months’ rent and get ahead.

“No,” he said. “Let’s keep our routine.”

She shook her head. “Okay. Whatever. So you think you might buy a car?”

He looked at her as if she’d asked a stupid question. “Why? What’s wrong with the way they are?”

Louis and Madeline came out of their apartment and headed to their car parked on the street in front of the apartment.

“I got eight thousand dollars,” he told them, full of pride.

“Oh, that’s great, John,” Madeline said sweetly with her head cocked as if talking to a small child. “Good for you.”

With a wave the couple drove off.

“Be careful who you tell about that money, John. You don’t want someone taking advantage of you.”

He looked genuinely puzzled as to what she could be talking about. He had that look he gets when he’s totally uninterested in what’s being said to him. He looked at his watch.

“It’s time to feed my fish,” he said, and left her standing on the porch.

A few days later, Jayne was up early because she couldn't sleep. She didn't work late much at all anymore and was starting to re-enter the world of people who kept decent hours. She was only half-listening to the news, having gotten lost in thought after a commercial for a community college. She couldn't work part time all of her life, especially if things didn't pick up.

Then she heard John's name, "...was found shot to death in an apparent robbery. Investigation is still underway." A tingle ran up her back and settled in her neck and scalp.

The anchor went on to a story about rising cat and dog populations in shelters due to people being unable to afford to keep pets. She tried to block out the sound of the newscaster, unable to process that John had been murdered while puppies and kittens filled the screen. She turned off the TV.

It didn't seem right to just keep sitting there as if nothing had happened when a man she saw every week had been murdered. "He's dead," she told herself a few times. "John's dead."

It would change their whole routine.

Finally, she went to her files and looked up his application to find his brother listed as his emergency contact. It was the first time she'd ever had to call one. That stupid settlement, she thought. To somebody out there, John's life was only worth eight thousand dollars. His life was over for the cost of a used car.

Jayne called John's brother and arranged to meet him at the apartment to remove John's things. His brother didn't seem upset at all. "We weren't that close," he said as he loaded furniture in the bed of a pick-up. "He was always kind of weird."

Must have been a lot of love in that family, Jayne thought, shaking her head. “I take it there won’t be a funeral,” she said.

“Nobody’d come. I donated his body to science. The university will pay for the cremation.” John’s brother had the same gait, the same hair. It was like seeing a different, slightly more normal version of John.

From the other apartment, she heard a baby cry. It was a rhythmic, staccato wail and then it stopped. She followed John’s brother around, helping carry out things from the sparsely furnished apartment.

“What about his fish?” she asked.

“I’ll flush ‘em and empty the tanks.”

“You can’t do that.” she said. “He loved them.”

John’s brother snorted. “I doubt he loved anything. You want ‘em? You can have ‘em,” he said with a shrug.

“Just leave them here and I’ll figure something out,” Jayne sighed. She stood looking at the tank. The fish swam slowly, back and forth leisurely and she felt a little love for them, orphaned as they were. They’d probably end up in her own house. Half of her stuff came from apartments where people had left perfectly good things behind. She doubted the next tenants, whoever they might be, would want to buy live shrimp to feed them and keep their tank’s temperature regulated between seventy-two and seventy-eight degrees.

The truck was full. “I’m going to take this load to Goodwill and I’ll be back,” he said.

“Okay,” Jayne said and stepped onto the porch. The other door opened; the one that should have had a number two on it. Louis and Madeline appeared in the doorway smiling.

“We’ve got a story for you,” he said as they came down the stairs.

“Oh yeah?”

“This is Claudia,” Madeline said slowly moving her arm and turning to show Jayne the newborn. “She was born right here in front of the apartment.”

“You’re kidding,” Jayne said.

“Nope,” Louis said. “It was two nights ago, three o’clock in the morning, and I was walking Maddie to the car to head to the hospital.”

“And I just couldn’t make it,” she said.

“She was born right here,” he said pointing to small patch of grass between the porch and the sidewalk. “I caught her and wrapped her in my shirt. A fire truck happened to pass by as I was handing her to her mama and they stopped and let me borrow a pocket knife to cut the umbilical cord. We went to the hospital after.”

Jayne was amazed. Both at their story and that two people so tall could make something so tiny. The baby’s little pink face had all the warmth and color of sunrise.

“Do you want to hold her?”

She passed the bundle over before Jayne could answer. Her little eyes moved back and forth slowly under their lids as she slept. Her lips were pursed as she made sucking motions in her sleep. She was so tiny she was almost weightless and she smelled like baby powder and a sweetness Jayne had never known before. She hoped she could find a good neighbor for her, but she doubted she’d find anyone like John.

GUIDANCE

The new tenants, Autumn and Phoenix, paid in cash, so Henry offered to pick it up rather than having Jayne get a money order and mail it. When she answered the door, she spotted a new car parked in her driveway, one of those boxy looking things. “Where’s your truck?” she asked.

“Totaled it a couple weeks ago,” he said. “Some kid texting or something ran me off the road. Damn thing rolled and landed on the roof in a ditch.”

“Oh my god.” Jayne couldn’t believe he was so calm, or even that he was up walking around, a man his age being in an accident like that. “Are you all right?”

Henry stood with his hands in the pockets of his blue coveralls. He rocked back and forth on his heels like a young man loafing, not like a man pushing seventy. “There weren’t a scratch on me,” he said.

Jayne shook her head. Henry Clay Cowan was tougher than a claw hammer.

“Wife says somebody was watching out for me.” He pointed a finger straight up.

Jayne was silent for a moment. A nailgun’s hiss and pop rang out across the street. Another new church was going up on the corner.

“That’s real lucky,” Jayne said, and felt the briefest stab of panic as she realized she didn’t know what she’d do without him, and it could all be taken away as easily as that.

“Luck ain’t got nothing to do with it.”

Jayne looked at her shoes and shifted her weight from one foot to another. Henry and his wife had found religion when their friends and siblings started dying off, but the opposite had happened to Jayne when she lost people, so she didn’t much want to hear about it. He

knew this, but would push it sometimes anyway, just because he could. This was one of those times.

“Did you know Jesus is coming back in a UFO?” he said. He smirked at her, knowing she couldn’t brush off a statement like that.

“Is that right?”

“Sure is. How do you like that?”

“I don’t remember ever hearing that.”

“Says it right there in Ezekiel. Go look it up,” he said, “Says fire and wheels in the sky. A wheel spinnin’ inside a wheel.” He moved his fingers in circles around each other.

“What else you think that could be but a UFO?”

“I don’t know, Henry,” she said, and shook her head again at the old man.

He went on for a while, but Jayne didn’t take it all in. Across the street the new church was almost done; the shingles were going on the roof now. The wall facing her house had two dark holes for windows, like eyes staring at her.

“I guess anything is possible,” she said. “I’m just glad you’re all right.” She fished the wad of rent money out of her back pocket and handed it to him. He unfolded it and fitted it into his wallet without counting it. God or no god, he was always in the best mood when somebody handed him money.

*

“Are these your real names?” Jayne had asked, when she first met the new tenants.

“Autumn Stargazer and Phoenix Wolfson?”

“We had them legally changed,” Autumn said.

Jayne raised her eyebrows.

Autumn's hair was the color of a sparrow's feathers and her eyes were set far apart, small and black. "We were born again as children of space and light, and our earth names would no longer do," she said.

Phoenix nodded once in agreement. His hair was black and shiny and he had those same dark eyes.

"What does that mean?" Jayne asked. "Children of space and light?"

"It means that we are among the few who can read the skies. There are signs in the sky," she said, "and one day soon we will leave this place."

Whoa, Jayne thought. "What kind of signs?"

Autumn spoke quicker: "Greater beings will visit once again—as they have since life on earth began—to bring back with them the chosen." She went on: "Their arrival has been documented before Christianity and since. Their images appear on cave walls painted twelve thousand years ago in France and Spain. Byzantine art: the Madonna, the crucifixion; all contain evidence of their existence and *proof* that they visited our planet."

At this point Jayne wondered, would she be leaving this place in spirit only? Would they get the notion in their heads that they could fly out this second story window, maybe? Like a sparrow? Who handles *that* mess after the coroner leaves?

Phoenix raised his hand like someone directing traffic. "There's no reason to be alarmed," he said. Diffused sunlight shined through the sheer curtains over the windows. "There's nothing to be afraid of. We read the sky. We watch and we wait. Until the time comes, we remain here and take care of our earthly responsibilities."

Their applications indicated they were artists, but they held day jobs as well. Autumn worked in administration for a nonprofit arts center and Phoenix worked for a children's

center for at-risk youth. Jayne figured they couldn't be any worse than the last tenants she'd had in that apartment; a couple who'd managed to knock off the refrigerator door handle, crack floor tiles *behind* the toilet, break an attic window, and put holes in the drywall that she'd needed an extension ladder to reach. But the worst part was that they'd kept puppies, and the dogs must have been left alone for days because the downstairs neighbors had called complaining about the whining, and dog shit had been walked into cracks between the hardwood floors before it dried. It made her eyes water the first time she walked in, and the initial cleanup involved a snow shovel and garbage bags. Standing in the apartment with Autumn and Phoenix she imagined she could still smell it even though she'd painted the historic hardwood a shiny slate gray, and the oil-based paint helped cover up the smell of ammonia and dog shit.

Phoenix and Autumn's applications looked as good as any she'd ever seen. The two of them were weird, but they seemed all right. The exchange took about an hour; signing copies of the lease, and exchanging money for keys.

*

"It's probably just the pilot light," Jayne said when she walked in Autumn's apartment a few days later to look at the gas stove that wasn't working. After moving the metal grates, she lifted the top of the range. She checked the valve on the gas line running to the stove and turned it on, then used a match to light the stove. After turning a knob, they both watched as one of the burners flamed. "*Voila*," she said, then turned it back off and replaced the top and grates. "The gas company is usually pretty meticulous about turning things off."

“I’m glad nothing was wrong,” Autumn said with a smile. “I’ve never had gas before. All of the other places I’ve lived had electric.”

“Once upon a time gas was cheaper,” Jayne said. “A lot of these older places still have it.”

As Autumn walked her out, Jayne noticed one of the walls in the living room had been painted with a mural, floor to ceiling.

“We’ll paint over it when we move,” she said when she saw the direction of Jayne’s gaze. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Honestly, I’ve given up on telling people *not* to paint,” she said. “They always do it anyway. Do you mind if I take a look?”

Autumn motioned for her to go ahead. Tree trunks in the mural reached from the floor to the ceiling, their branches and leaves stretching across the wall from either corner, a golden light shining on their foliage. In the center near the top were stars, planets, and the cosmic dust of the Milky Way. The painting seemed to capture both day and night. Looking closely, she could see animals in the forest scene, then she noticed little gray figures on the ground in the center of the picture. Naked, with large heads and big black eyes, they seemed to look out at her. Next to them was what must have been their ship: a golden disk that looked like the halos in renaissance paintings. There were three more of the disks in a triangle formation in the sky that she hadn’t noticed at first. That’s when she backed away. It felt like looking at something private. They *really* believed what they’d said before about space and light. “This is amazing,” Jayne said.

“Yes,” she said, her black eyes shining. “It took some time.”

It must have been the first thing they did when they moved in. “You’re very talented,” Jayne said.

“Thank you,” she replied, “but it is the light that guides my hand.”

Jayne raised her eyebrows. Here we go, she thought, but Autumn didn’t offer more. She just turned toward the door and thanked Jayne for lighting the stove.

“No problem,” she said, and started down the stairs thinking again of Autumn’s words: *It is the light that guides my hand*. What a weird thing to say. But maybe that’s all any of it is, really. Guidance. The religion Jayne had grown up with was full of holes and all her faith had drained out—a loving god who drowned the planet, a creation story that left out whole other civilizations, and that morbid image of Jesus on the cross—it was all too much. All she had left was a hope that maybe there was something greater, some force for good in this awful world.

*

Jayne was about to walk out her front door when Henry’s wife called. It was a massive heart attack, she said, and he went quick. She’d been sitting right next to him and all he had said was that his neck hurt, then he was short of breath, and then it struck him down like a shot. Jayne sat down and felt the news envelop her. It made her aware of her skin, like wearing wet clothes. The hairs on her arms stood up. She took a few slow, deep breaths. Jayne couldn’t remember the first time her mother told her about Henry. He’d been part of her mother’s background from the beginning, then he showed up when her parents died. Now he was gone. “God,” she said. “I am so sorry to hear that.”

Mrs. Cowan went on to say something about his going home to father and didn’t seem at all broken up about it. She said Jayne was to keep up the property as usual, for now,

and just have the tenants address the checks to her. Jayne wondered if he saw Jesus come flying in on a UFO when his heart gave out, and she smiled. Maybe he did. Maybe the pharaohs are in their chariots, the Greeks are sailing the Styx, and Vikings are in Valhalla where they are warriors still. And maybe Henry is with his flying-saucer Jesus. Maybe we'll all get what we want most. Jayne hoped we do. She closed her eyes and felt a few warm tears well for Henry Cowan.

*

A few weeks later, and a full week after their second month's rent was due, neither Autumn nor Phoenix would answer their phone, so Jayne left a note on the door. Still no response. She called their work numbers, but no one had seen them all week and they hadn't called in sick.

When Jayne climbed the stairs to their apartment the note she'd left the day before still stuck in place. She knocked on the door before she tried her key, but there was no answer. She opened the door a few inches and called out, "Hello?" but still nothing. It didn't look like they'd moved out because the apartment was still filled with their belongings. Clothes were in the closet and in the hamper, a half empty glass of water sat on the coffee table, and a half-assembled bookshelf lay in the floor in front of the mural. The box it came in, a screwdriver, and the instructions lay nearby. Aside from a bowl of soft, wrinkled apples on the kitchen table, it looked like they had just been there. A curtain fluttered in the breeze. The window was wide open. Jayne stood next to it feeling the wind against her skin. Her eyes traveled over the mural. It was different than she remembered. There were seven of the gray figures standing on the grass under the trees, and their faces were expressive, as if they were all standing in a circle talking to each other. A large, golden ship floated above them. It

seemed to reflect light and glow from its center. She thought again of Henry, remembered him on her front porch telling her about how someone watched out for him. And then she thought of the first time he stood on her porch, back home, when he walked into her life for the first time, how he said her mother would rest easy knowing someone was looking in on her. Jayne knew Henry's wife wouldn't be doing any such thing.

She closed the window and locked the door behind her. She had some plans to make.

THE OLD PART OF TOWN

The house on North Upper faced east. The year was 2002. A nation still reeling from the events of September 11th was Jayne's welcome to adulthood, and she was reeling for her own reasons. The front porch was shaped like an L laying on its side, the green door in the recessed short portion. The house could have been in any old part of town or in any old town in Kentucky that Jayne had never been to. If it were fixed up it could be called cute. Since she was a child, no other place had been more home to her. The house on North Upper, where she lived and worked, was where she became the person she is now.

When Jayne was shown the house for the first time, Henry Cowan let her in and led her through a second doorway twice the size of the first, into the living room with shelves above an old fireplace. She didn't try to imagine the empty house filled with her things. She accepted the house and the job managing the other properties because they were offered, because she had nowhere else to go at twenty years old, after the accident took her parents. Henry was of a generation that didn't talk about feelings, but it was understood that he had been close to her mother because they'd grown up on the same dirt road, and Jayne knew everything he did for her was all for her mother's sake, not because of any feeling about Jayne one way or the other.

Below the shelves in the living room, wainscoting drew the eye away from the cracked plaster walls and stained ceiling. The hardwood floor was painted red and sagged in so many places it gave the impression of waves. Tiny French doors opened up into a small hallway that led to the kitchen, bath, and second bedroom. An old fireplace sat in the back corner of the kitchen. Creamy honeysuckle blooms could be seen through windows in the

backdoor. Months later, when Jayne brought home her dog, she would spend more time in the backyard than in the house, a canopy of tall trees shading the place, reminding her of home.

After Henry died it took Jayne some time to make sense of it all—how her life seemed like a long stretch of things that happened *to* her—how after seven years, it felt like someone taking everything all over again, everything familiar, everything she'd put herself into, when his wife sold all the properties Jayne had been taking care of in return for a place of her own and a few dollars a month.

North Upper moves straight and steady and flows slightly downhill like a river headed south, but Jayne's car takes a sharp right, then crosses four lanes like it's sneaking into a junkyard at night or some other place she shouldn't be. She wants to look at her life now, to say goodbye, as best she can. She takes a left and then an immediate right tucked behind an old brick building. This is where people stood in the days of prohibition and watched the circus roll into town. People on this side of town couldn't afford a ticket to the show.

D'Rude Street flows gently downhill, landscape creeping up along the sides the road like a stray dog slinking behind the car. Chain link fence, junk cars, shotgun houses. Why did she take this road? No one comes through here by accident. You have to know how to find it.

She coasts through a bend to the right, under a bridge, and emerges at a stop sign next to a black funeral home. This is the unofficial boundary. Black people go to the right, white people to the left. She turns left toward the white end of the street. A regal looking brick house stands on the opposite corner. It's been painted pale blue. Just a few blocks toward

downtown the houses all look like this one, but they've been kept up. They belong to a different kind of people—the kind of people who need security systems, gates with coded entry, and privacy fences to keep people from this side of town out.

Jayne wishes the house in her charge had been stately like this fading blue one, a jewel amidst the coal dust that covered the first immigrants to this neighborhood, but it wasn't. It was a plain, white clapboard house with a concrete slab of a porch, little metal railings like vines holding up the porch roof. The inside was pieced together like Frankenstein's monster and you could see the stitches. A carpet remnant let the yellow subfloor show through around the edges of the room, rough gray barn lumber was nailed to the walls instead of paneling, patches of different patterned linoleum curled at the edges and were brought together with a brass carpet bar right down the middle of the kitchen, a pale pink bathtub had a white shower wall around it, different walls in the same room were painted different shades of white, and the kitchen cabinets were built from pieces of scrap lumber.

But that's all gone now. Bulldozers folded the house in on itself when it was sold. Now the lot is covered over in grass and the street looks wide open here since there's nothing but an empty parking lot across from where the house used to stand. There's not even a hint of the house or the shed that burned down one summer after a small explosion. Jayne will never forget that young man's burned face or the blank stares of the grandmother and the guy's sister, the one with the torn lip that healed forked like a snake's tongue. She'd sit on the porch sometimes, staring, with the baby on her lap, just like she had the day Jayne ran them all outside because carbon monoxide that had filled the house like trapped air in a bag.

Cedar Lane ends where a convenience store used to sit. Across four lanes of traffic, the street name changes. The other side is part of a new “revitalized” district where bars and art galleries have cropped up as if poverty were some kind of political statement. It’s become a place for tourists and loafers who have the luxury of visiting—and leaving—whenever they want.

Jayne takes the one-way street back toward the university, past houses and businesses that haven’t changed much in years: a drive-thru liquor store, a bike shop, a high-end clothing store. On toward the part of town that feels like hers.

First, she turns the other direction down Broadway and gradually things run down again. Lexington’s funny like that—the historic and elegant next to the slums, the distressed. Jayne likes to think this house sits on the border. It’s tall, old, and a little bit lovely, but the shabbiness is starting to bleed through. The slums are peaking around from behind. The shotgun houses jammed together in the alley behind the house were likely one tenant’s last sight before he tried to end his life with a leap from the back window.

The house is built with the old, heavy brick from 1907. Their edges are worn smooth, the mortar joints deep from erosion. The brick were a dark red once, now they’re painted a light gray because it looks brighter, cleaner. Four brass mailboxes used to adorn the front wall, but they were stolen and likely sold for scrap—there was a lot of that going on at the time—desperate people vandalizing property to get copper or anything else they could sell because the price of metal was up, just like the price of gas and everything else. There used to be a big oak out front, too, but one day a limb fell out of it, right on a car parked below, and crushed it, so the whole tree had to come down. The inside was rotted all the way

through. The house sits there like an old man who has seen all this and just waits his turn to collapse like everything else.

The house on Broadway was her favorite because you could tell it had been something once. There were flecks of gold in the mirror over the mantle and the tile around the fireplace had figures painted on them worthy of a Grecian urn. Wood floors like honey. The claw-foot tubs urged you to climb into them and rest your neck on the curve of their lips. The old woman who lived for a time in the back apartment didn't feel the same though, and was tormented by voices she claimed came from the vents, where also, she said, there were eyes watching her.

She wasn't the only one in that house plagued by despair. The man who had the house built back at the turn of the century, a notable politician, shot himself. It was a time when people didn't talk about their feelings, but he'd been unable to get over the loss of his son who had died serving in France during World War I. When he fell ill himself, faced with his own extinction, rather than stand there and scream, he chose to take his leave.

It hadn't all been bad though. The small square of a front yard caught a baby once, when the mother and father, on their way to a hospital, couldn't make it beyond that silky patch of grass. Another couple, too, had been happy there for a short while, before they disappeared, leaving behind a mural on the wall the likes of which Jayne had never seen before or since.

She slips down Fifth Street, past a daycare with chain link fence around its plastic jungle gym, past what used to be a school for the kids who are just a few steps away from jail or the streets, and past parking lots for the first university west of the Alleghenies, which

might as well be a world away from the lives on the other side of the street. Historic elegance fades into newer but cheaper homes.

The smallest house Jayne managed, a duplex, looks like a gingerbread house, or a dollhouse if dollhouses were cute and realistic instead of miniature pink mansions. It faces a park. The loft apartment is invisible from the road except for the air conditioner in the upstairs window popping out of the roof like a wart. The door to the loft is along the side of the house and opens to a steep stairway. It's the door police found when they searched for an eighteen-year-old boy who'd later be convicted of a violent robbery for which he'd spend much of his adult life in prison.

Upstairs the orange carpet keeps the place warm and muffles footsteps. The ceilings follow the angles of the roof, all hard edges and vertical lines. Prospective tenants either loved it or walked in and said, "Oh, no, this won't work at all," as they ducked through doorways.

A brick porch wraps around the front of the house, lattice lacing the edges, and a door bordered by windows opens up into a comfortably sized room. Duplex suggests equality, but this is the heart of the house; the warmth and light is here. Its three rooms are broken up by the kitchen at one side, the bath at the other, so it's open—there's no privacy, no secrets here. There's no front yard, but in spring clumps of lavender creeping phlox drip down the retaining wall that rises above the sidewalk, and a few royal purple irises stand in the back, against the wood siding of the house.

Next to the duplex, the four-bedroom house seems to ask for a family—with its fenced backyard and room for a swing set where Jayne found what would become her dog,

abandoned by tenants who had no business with a puppy. All the house gets, then and now, are college students who punch holes in walls and leave trash everywhere. In summer they abandon it, the grass grows wild, and the place seems to go stale with the absence of any movement. A different group rents it each year, but they are all the same boys, moving through this town from somewhere else, then moving on to somewhere else when they've got everything they need, or think they need, to build a life. Jayne thought she was building a life, those seven years she spent working for the Cowans, but really she was just getting by. Because she was doing something she knew how to do, she thought she was doing what she should do.

*

One more block down North Upper and she ends where she began, at her old home. It looks bare now, since the bushes are gone. They were the type meant to be shaped, but they never were. Their blue-green bristly branches were left to grow wild in any jagged direction they pleased. They partly concealed the front of the house and hid the bedroom window where a blanket hung to block out the light. Now everything looks wide open. The house was gutted when it was sold. Jayne looked at pictures online when it was put up for sale again and didn't recognize the place. Henry's wife gave it away. The new owners ripped it apart inside, made it something else, something artificial looking, and sold it for triple what it was worth when Jayne lived in it. Cowan's wife had a nephew, but she sold everything off rather than leaving it to anybody. Jayne heard she bought a Cadillac before she moved to Florida. Maybe spending a fortune on yourself is as close as you can get to taking it with you when you go. It all amounted to a waste. The energy, the work, the years—all of it was a waste.

When she goes past these places now, she looks at the faces of the houses that still stand, houses that could be in any old town in Kentucky, and thinks of all the people she saw move through those homes, all the long hours she spent in them, all the long nights alone with her dog in that little house, and she thinks of Henry, her last connection to her parents and the home of her youth. She thinks of him the last time she saw him, on that afternoon he stood on her porch, saying someone watched over him, that it wasn't luck at all that saved him that day his truck flipped, as if there were some plan for all of us that we can't see. And if it is true, Jayne thought, if we are all destined for this one life we lead without any evidence of a guiding hand, then what a capacious hand it must be. She relaxes her grip on the wheel and turns left, out of the steady current of traffic on North Upper, and heads the car away from the old part of town, away from this place altogether, and on toward something new.

VITA

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The Morehead News

Advertising Sales Representative and Reporter 2013

The Carlisle Courier

Reporter 2012-2013

Fleming County Schools

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AWARDS AND HONORS

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JMWW 2014-2017

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