

Scouts

an attempt to imitate
the Kishotenketsu narrative structure

by Rachel West

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Dedicated to the reader (in hopes your friendships will flourish and endure), and to the women who have been my friends.

Lincoln, Nebraska, USA
September 30, 2014

Also, I was the friend who never wanted to go camping. That was L's idea.
Lots of other things, too. I didn't acknowledge that last time.
Lincoln, Nebraska, USA
January 20, 2018

PART ONE

Ernestina had dumped the sacks of art supplies and was already going through the cabinets in Lila's kitchen as Lila slowly made her way into the house in her own careful fashion. Ernestina seemed intent on distracting herself quickly, as if to wash away the moments before: passing by the Growing-Up ceremony on the steps of the Capitol building; the ride home in the car that had been all too quiet suddenly.

"Now we'll have to go back out for groceries," Ernestina was saying. "Why didn't I think of that?"

It was that particular time of night. Ernestina was like a werewolf except instead of transforming into a wolf she would inevitably begin to think of spaghetti when the moon began to rise.

"Let me just smoke first," said Lila. "Why don't you have some tea and read the instructions on that plaster?"

Lila needed a moment. She didn't want to forget, didn't want the feelings to slip away just yet. Seeing the ceremony had moved her; she'd been driving and had stopped across the street to watch. Ernestina hadn't been in any particular rush until she'd felt the vehicle slow and stop, then realized what Lila was looking at. It was a congregation of young girls, all about the same age, all Scouts just like Lila and Ernestina had once been. Maybe, Lila thought, there were two girls within that group who were meeting each other for the first time today, who would remain friends for the rest of their lives. Ernestina had merely tapped her foot on the dashboard and seemed embarrassed. "They're going to think we're molesters. Let's go."

Now, having given up on the immediate prospect of dinner, Ernestina stood in Lila's kitchen with her hands on her hips, looking over their recent purchases.

"You know, sometimes I think we make too much money," she said.

Lila just laughed.

"Like, where's the ingenuity?" Ernestina continued. "Look at all this packaging. Cripes. I feel like only children buy this stuff. Or have it bought for them. Like Rob and Jeanette are our absentee parents and our paycheck's just a damn allowance."

"Thank god we don't have to live with Rob and Jeanette."

(Rob and Jeanette Walherns and the Walherns family were the owners of the local organic grocery store where both Lila and Ernestina worked.)

Lila went down the hall to her bedroom to have a brief smoke. She sat on her soft bed with its soft quilt spread over it, the quilt her grandmother had made. She felt deep peace as she filled the bowl of her pipe with a small serving of fresh green weed. She savored the scent and the tiny crackling moment of lighting. She needed the pause. Given her way, Ernestina would have Lila running errands all over town all night long. She wondered if they'd ever get around to this craft project they'd been so excited about an hour before. First it was shopping, next would be dinner, then they'd be in the mood for TV. Just a few more deep breaths of her own thing, though, and she'd be fine no matter what. When she was finished Lila tapped out her pipe, brushed some ash from the bowl, thought about giving it a proper cleaning. She liked to keep her things nice. No time right now, though. She put the

pipe back in the box she kept it in, then went back out to the living room.

Ernestina was lying on the woven rug leafing idly through Lila's coffee-table book of Odd Nerdrum paintings. "I guess we should just order in?" Ernestina said, sadly, dreams of spaghetti fading from view. Ernestina was just crazy for Lila's spaghetti. It's not that I'm a great cook, Lila thought with a smile, you've just got a peasant's palate.

Later that night they lay on their bellies on the floor in the half-dark, watching a vampire movie from the eighties, faces still slippery from petroleum jelly as they waited for their plaster masks to dry.

"What's yours going to be?" Ernestina asked.

"David Bowie," Lila answered. "You?"

"Lou Reed. Just kidding." They laughed. "I'm going to build on a horn and make it a unicorn. With feathers."

"Now we just need to find a party to go to."

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Sunday night. What a glorious night it had been. Lila flopped back on her bed, door finally shut, her friend bundled up asleep on the comfy couch out in the living room, the couch so comfy no one ever sat on it. Lila loved company, and she loved being alone. Now it was just her and the lamplight, in the perfectly private room. Ernestina never even came back here when she visited the house. It was as if there were some unspoken, invisible boundary. Or maybe there was just nothing interesting in here. Lila had set it up that way. It was full of things only of use to herself. Her bed, her lamp, her clothes... Nobody would even care to

peek at her shoe collection. And then there was always that one trashy fantasy novel, one at a time, kept by the bed for the purpose of relaxation. A few photos, a few candles. A sanctuary. A sanctuary from anything of interest. The perfect place.

Morning light began to make its misty presence felt on Ernestina's dreams. Once again she was waking up on the couch in Lila's living room, the one it was almost impossible to get out of in the morning and somehow she never, never let this stop her from getting into it at night. Everything always felt possible on a Sunday night. You've got all the time in the world on a Sunday night. Go ahead. Get on that couch. It won't ever matter. Tomorrow is just a concept; it doesn't have concrete existence.

And now it was here. What was it, six a.m.? Ernestina, always restless, envied Lila's ability to sleep so soundly and so regularly. Like she'd just decide when to sleep and when to wake up. For Ernestina sleep came like a fell sergeant, and departed like a skittish flock of quail, leaving quail shit and quail feathers all over. She was awake, but didn't want to be awake, not here, not now. She looked across that soft dim tidy floor that wasn't hers and felt torn between the desire to get up quickly before Lila came in (it would be so much harder once she was there; mornings made Ernestina so self-conscious if she couldn't be alone) and the desire to pretend she was part of the couch, to just somehow not move. God, should she stop sleeping over? After all these years? She was always so happy about it when she made the decision, and in the morning she always wished she was home, where she could deal with the shitty quails in private.

She decided to get up and get some coffee brewing. Make herself useful. Make the day hers.

At home of course Ernestina had a regular old drip coffee pot which she used constantly. No matter how many mornings she spent in Lila's kitchen she still looked askance at that simple device, the French Press. But she soldiered on, utilizing her best patience while

the coffee steeped. She gazed out Lila's back window into her garden. Lila's garden, Lila's pride and joy. The garden was probably the whole reason Lila had agreed to live in this house. It was the one thing she hadn't had at her old apartment, the one she shared with that guy she was with for a while... That was the period Ernestina had seen the least of her friend so she knew relatively little about it. Apparently it had all gone South between the couple but, well, it was hard to see how that could be a bad thing now, looking at this house, this garden, this new and better life.

So had it been five minutes yet? The one consistent factor when Ernestina made french press coffee was that she always forgot to look at the clock. She gave in and pushed down the plunger on the coffee pot even though she knew it was most likely too soon and the coffee would be weak, not as good as when Lila made it. But it'd be there, when Lila finally rolled out of bed all rosy and slow. The kitchen would at least be smelling of coffee, a good start.

Ernestina poured about half the pot into the largest cup Lila owned. The non-dainty one. Ernestina considered it her cup, since she couldn't imagine Lila using it. As she sipped the coffee it suddenly struck her, and not for the first time, just how much she potentially didn't know about Lila's life. Why did she even have this cup? It didn't match the others. Was it indeed Lila's way of accommodating Ernestina's style and preferences, or could it be a relic of someone else? An inherited item? From some other friend? That man? Some other man? Well, the mystery was there and would probably always be there. Ernestina liked to know things, but one thing she had learned was the difference between the areas of life that were masterable, and those that were forever secret. Basket weaving. Mask making. Cooking, supposedly. Even Physics. These subjects were out there waiting to open themselves to her the moment she applied herself. Human

beings, on the other hand, were only partly of this dimension and the closer you got to them the further they would slip into the beyond, infinitely expanding. They required a different approach, an entirely different type of knowledge. Not something one could just read about. Maybe not even "something" at all.

On the other hand, Ernestina considered herself the soul of simplicity. There was nothing, really, to know about her, as far as she could tell. She had compulsively told Lila everything all along. Everything she felt and everything that happened to her she immediately told to Lila or whoever was nearby at the moment, and it was never much compared to the things she imagined others experiencing. Maybe if she spent more time alone she would somehow become complex, too. But no. People just sucked it out of her. She gave it all away. When she was alone she barely existed at all, except for her worries. And none of her relationships with men had ever had time to get good, let alone go bad. Maybe if something bad happened to her like it had to Lila, her parents would buy her a house. Maybe if something good happened to her, they'd be happy. Who knows? Crazy how people rely on others, given that the one thing you can really know about people is that they're unknowable... Even Lila. She could have doubted it about Lila, could have really believed in her, except for that whole situation, how a man had gotten her to disappear. Still Lila was about as close as a human could get to having something even passingly in common with a rock. As in: "My Rock." That way of referring to someone who was stable.

Finally, here came Lila, like some kind of grandma in her flowery nightshirt. Ernestina was fully dressed and let this be her advantage. She even had her shoes on. Fast mover ready to move fast. Just standing here she felt like she might already be moving too fast for Lila to even perceive her.

Ernestina poured coffee into a small cup for Lila who took it with a smile and no words. At this hour she was probably thinking of nothing in particular, lucky soul. The less you think, the more you are, Ernestina thought.

"Sleep well?" Ernestina asked Lila.

"Always. You?"

Ernestina shrugged. "You know that couch."

"I've never slept on it."

Ernestina laughed. "Have you ever even used it once?"

"I'm not sure I have. I keep it for you."

"To trap and torture. It's a devilish thing, that couch."

Lila sipped her coffee. She always tasted the coffee black before she added the cream, and it was always pure, thick, full-fat cream. Sometimes she bought unpasteurized cream from people out in the country, one of the many endearingly illegal things Lila was into. Rising and going to the refrigerator she said "I dreamt I was taking trombone lessons from Lieutenant Riker."

Ernestina walked home around ten that morning. It wasn't far. She'd promised to come back that evening for a proper spaghetti dinner and to work on the masks some more.

Lila, finding herself unsure what to do, started cleaning up from the night before and while she did so she planned the dinner. She never cleaned in front of Ernestina, whether out of politeness or to increase the mysterious quality of the tidiness, or to disguise the amount of time she actually spent tidying. She wasn't sure which.

Her cup of coffee, gradually cooling, sat on the kitchen counter while Lila moved freely around her home. There was a little left in the carafe, too. It was a relaxing feeling. Lila liked it when Ernestina made the coffee. Things started out with an effortless quality. She never had to see the coffee getting made, just like Ernestina never had to see the place getting cleaned. Such acts of love were best performed in private, alone with oneself and one's loving feeling.

She wiped down the kitchen table and put the now-fully-dried plaster masks on it. She put all the materials they'd used into a shoebox marked MASKS and slid it into place in her craft cupboard, along with all the other bits and pieces from various other projects, all organized. There was the hamper of yarn which was the item most often pulled out; there was glitter, beads, fabrics, papers, everything one would expect from a well-stocked craft cupboard. Ernestina's apartment was full of more serious and costly tools: a loom, a soldering iron, pliers and wrenches and rags. These items each had their place as well. One thing Lila and Ernestina shared was a sense of the value of organization. It was essential. Ernestina probably had more interests crammed into her small apartment than

Lila had in her whole house. After all, Ernestina had an extra night off each week and she often tended to enroll in adult education classes at the community college. She had just completed a course in flower arranging. This had struck Lila as slightly out of character until Ernestina had started making arrangements out of thistles, clover and ditchweed. The whole thing had made Lila resolve to plant more flowers in her garden come Spring; right now all she had was collards, kale, spinach, sweet potatoes and squash, each in their little squares.

After Lila had finished cleaning inside she went out to pull some weeds and harvest some collards and spaghetti squash. Ernestina would never accept a substitute for pasta but Lila had taken to using shredded zucchini or, appropriately, spaghetti squash, instead. And indoors, Lila kept a potted bush of basil and a little pot of oregano, all for use in her beloved sauce. Sometimes she spent the better part of the afternoon putting it together. She knew this was unnecessary and even somewhat outré, given the whole notion of spaghetti as convenient comfort food, but she did like to take her time, when she had time. And today she had time. It was her weekend.

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Lila's garden was more or less faded for the year, but depending on the season one could find many things in it. For instance:

There were sometimes onions, varieties you couldn't get in stores. Some had pearly skins. Some were like garlic inside, with skins that wrapped around the buds. Some were dark purple. Some were white. Some were jade green.

Sometimes there were tall stalks of collard greens and kale, thick robust leaves of deep green that glittered with silver beads when it rained.

Sometimes there were twisting heads of okra, some with red and yellow stripes, some in shades of green. They pointed up at the sky like spears. Lila gathered the seed pods religiously, watching over them so she could snip them off before they got too dry. They made everything she cooked greasy and spicy, with little crunchy seeds. Lila loved the okra.

Sometimes there was french lavender, and many other kinds of herbs. Some of the herbs, like sage, were extremely useful to her, but the lavender was more of an olfactory decoration. It gave off a sharp, fresh, lemony-soft scent and produced clusters of purple flowers on its delicate filaments. Sometimes she had bunches of it drying all over the house, or she might put it into her tea. She gave it to coworkers. She hadn't really gotten the hang of it yet, but it smelled better than anything else in the world. It made her mouth water and her heart glow. It was so sweet that when she inhaled it her mind was immediately clean.

Sometimes there were tomatoes. They sprawled melodramatically and fought with each other for space and sun. She chopped their limbs off when they got too close to the other plants. It was no loss. She only planted the most productive and hardy types, so there was always more than enough. All she had to do was water them early in the morning, which she enjoyed. (By this particular day, of course, at this time of year, all the tomatoes were long dead, chopped into bits and thrown into the compost, their lives brutal and short.)

Some years she planted ground cherries, with green and purple pinstriped tendrils that were surprisingly firm, but soft to the touch. The leaves were velvety. They dropped sweet little wrapped berries freely and

generously. You could make the fruits into jams and pies and things but this was another thing she hadn't really learned to do yet. The fruits were good enough just as they were. She could fill bowls with them each time she went out, picking them off the ground and peeling back their little papery coats.

Sometimes there were carrots, growing from seeds to tall weedy greens with their hidden roots you got to pull up from the mud. Would they be little? Would they be gargantuan? Pointy or stubby? The surprise alone was reason enough for Lila to keep planting them, even though she preferred plants that gave multiple yields. The element of suspense about what you would get was like when she was a little girl and couldn't resist the silly toys that teased you with how many or what sort was in the package. Carrots were for gamblers. And maybe it was her way of compensating herself for not having slept with many men. How big? How fat? How long?

The soil was good here. She often imagined writing a tourism brochure that would mainly focus on that:

Stockley, Nebraska boasts a small liberal arts college and an even smaller community college. Both get good ratings in spite of being little-known. Property is affordable and school districts are among the best in the nation, making it attractive for families. Many students graduate and continue to live in the community, attracted by the cheap rents. Those who crave a faster pace of life eventually move on, and good riddance.

Stockley County has one of the best climates in the state for gardening. Parks, preserves and wildlands are managed by the county and offer many excellent opportunities for outdoor enjoyments such as camping, fishing and hunting.

Lila had stayed in Stockley to be near her family, and later she'd met Jim who had insisted they would eventually move to Austin or New York, and in a way, secretly, that only solidified her determination to

stay. She had no regrets, no aspirations to live anywhere that might be...what? More densely populated? Or that might have larger buildings? She couldn't see the point.

Coming back inside she put on a Belinda Carlisle record and finished her cooled-off coffee.



Ernestina was resting in her apartment, browsing the community college schedule of classes. Can I take an obedience class if I don't have a dog? Do they include a dog with the class materials? She figured it was really time to refresh her CPR training. It was a short class and inexpensive, if somewhat unfun. She might still have to save for it. Then there was that Advanced Small Engines class she'd been eyeing for some time. Every few years a custom detailing class would appear on the schedule and chills would go up her spine. She had a motorcycle that was her prized possession, as Lila's garden was hers. Ernestina had been working on her motorcycle off and on since she was fifteen. It had been a gift from her dad, the only gift, really, he'd ever thought to give her, busy as he always was on his own art. His art was an eccentric but functional one, which Ernestina had never had any aptitude for: furniture making. He had carved the family fortune out of hardwood. Then out of the blue he'd decided he wanted to have a project with her. The project was still underway to this day, though he had left it in her hands once the motorcycle had been made rideable. It was still her main mode of transportation, if a slightly unreliable one.

She made a pot of coffee and carried a cup out to the parking pad to take a look at old Lucifer, as she called it. It certainly could use a paint job.

The weird thing about this motorcycle was even after having it all to herself for years, she always thought of her dad when she looked at it. This made her worry that in the end she'd never truly find herself in it, even after all the time she'd invested trying to make it into a machine that could take her far away from everything she knew.

Plus, she was thirty now.

Ernestina had had a small fight with her mother a few moments ago which had made her feel well aware of that fact. That seemed to always be her mother's goal. Even if she couldn't control Ernestina personally, she liked to point out the holes in Ernestina's worldview and life strategy. It had started out harmlessly enough; she'd only come over in order to borrow a tool. Her father was out in the workshop and had probably been there since before dawn. Ernestina sometimes worried this made her mother lonely and was the source of her anxiety. So there they were, standing around in the kitchen (naturally Ernestina gravitated by force of habit straight to the kitchen whenever she arrived at the house) sharing coffee for a moment and talking.

"Have you given any more thought to retiring?" Ernestina had asked.

"How do I retire from self-employment? Alfred will never quit. If I don't sell the stuff we'll be drowning in it. He's out there right now working on a chest of drawers for...oh, that woman who's running for office, what's her name?"

"Which office?"

"Ombudsman, I think. You once talked about running for airport authority, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't serious."

"I don't see why not. Wouldn't it be fun?"

"No."

"Just the other night you were saying you hated your job. Well?"

"Of course I do. I mean, I don't. I just hate going. You complain about stuff you have to do, too, but you never take action so why should I have to?"

"Yes, and when I do complain you give me your advice whether I want it or not; turnabout is fair play, as you so often remind me."

"My life is as good as it can be."

"What on earth-- what kind of attitude is that?"

"I can pay rent and I get a four-day weekend, instead of being a regular person stuck with debt and kids and half an hour of free time a night at most. I heard something about that on John Tesh the other night, can you believe that?"

"I sure can believe that, based on how my day tends to go."

"You don't look so busy right now."

"You think I'm doing what I want to be doing? You're right; I should be retired. I should be on a beach somewhere but instead, here I am, waiting for my husband to come in for lunch, which he doesn't half the time."

"Well, do you have any friends to go out with? You could go on vacation with them..."

"There you go. See? You want me to just listen attentively to your problems and when I try to vent it's all 'go on vacation, make friends.' Well, I'm not a teenager, I can't just do whatever I feel like. You certainly aren't either."

Ernestina wondered if maybe it wouldn't be better not to visit so often.

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Meanwhile, Lila was on the phone with her own mother, Sarah. They tended to chat over the lunch hour. Ernestina had listened in once when Lila had put her mom on speakerphone. Ernestina had been a little jealous.

"You know," Sarah laughed, "we didn't buy you that house to have you stay in it forever. You can always dream a little bigger; it won't hurt our feelings."

"I bought half of it," Lila pointed out.

"That's true. So half the time you spend there is yours, the rest you have to do what I say."

"Are you on your cell phone in the computer lab again?"

"Nobody's here this period! Fine, if you think I'm weird, call your father."

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Ernestina wandered back inside and returned to her computer. It was about all she could think of to do when she was alone. That was why it was perhaps better to be with Lila. On her own she had difficulty staying in the moment. The computer was a time machine, an interdimensional portal. You no longer live in reality, you live in an ever expanding array of possibilities. Especially when you have an online dating profile.

Seen that one. Seen that one. Can't click there, they'll think I'm stalking. They'll think I'm interested. I'm not interested, I'm just trying to get a good look at that weird birthmark.

She tore her gaze away from the computer screen, looked out the window at the autumn leaves. Winter's a good time to have a lover.

She'd gotten a message from a man with a username she didn't like. It referred to something dumb. Why would anyone define themselves in terms of The Big Bang Theory? It didn't seem very heterosexual of him, either, plus Ernestina didn't have an affinity for nerds. Nerds nowadays are overconfident.

His message:

I see you're a Jim Henson fan. My conclusion is that it's impossible for a true Jim Henson fan to be a bad person. I wish there were more of us on this site. Or maybe you and I are the only ones being honest?

Tempting.

She didn't feel like writing now, but she didn't feel like being rude, either.

Her message back:

That's very interesting. Is honesty desirable in this context?

She left the computer, pushed herself away from her desk and tried to see her room again. Tried to know that everything was okay, there was no reason for this feeling of urgency and emptiness. It was a beautiful day. An ordinary day. She had her options open. She had somewhere safe to go. She was safe, right now. The men in the computer couldn't reach her with their value judgments.

Ernestina decided to go for a walk, to take the route between their two homes that led past the big church. She packed her messenger bag with a camera, pens, and her notebook that contained only haikus and sonnets. She was practicing writing formal poetry. She hadn't yet been able to find a night class on this subject and

most creative writing groups were very strong on slam poetry these days, and Ernestina feared that that would only exacerbate her natural aggression and lack of discipline. She already had a motorcycle.

Ernestina decided to sit in the courtyard of the big church and work on her writing. Would she write a sonnet or a haiku? Ernestina was determined that she would not write haikus the way they taught her in school, and in Scouts. She did not keep to the syllabic form. Perhaps that meant she was not writing haiku; perhaps no one could write haiku who could not write in Japanese. Damn. I must learn Japanese! Ernestina suspected there was Japanese heritage in her family somewhere that no one was admitting. Their pedigree was very All-American, and had a lot of military decorations around the time of WWII, so, no way. Well, Mom's family anyway. Dad just never talked about it, didn't seem to care. He was well into his sixties and hadn't gotten the genealogy bug yet, so it probably wouldn't happen. Too dignified, too buried. It was not the present he lived in. Maybe he lived in the past. You wouldn't know where his mind was, in what time or place. He just kept building, that was his only manifestation. Mom, she was future-minded, eternally. She planned meals weeks in advance and never cooked them.

Stones of the church
Interlocking towards heaven--
Vibrant leaves fall down.

Churches used to make Ernestina afraid. They seemed to represent the great unknowability of the universe. This was ironic since most churches were about demystifying the universe, providing answers, a literal shelter from it all. But once you start looking around and noticing how many churches there are, each saying different things, it becomes clear that nobody really knows what's going on, but they are all prepared to say that

they do. Any deeply held assertion one might manage to have, therefore, will inevitably be contradicted by another strongly held belief. Can't both be right. At least that was what she used to think. Now, sitting comfortably in a churchyard, writing haiku, Ernestina's mission of belief was to find out that contradictory things CAN coexist. It is, after all, the only explanation.

Since no more haiku were coming, she returned her things to her bag, went inside the church and walked around. It was wonderfully empty and quiet. The sanctuary was an immense room tiled in gold and blue, the stained glass windows glowing and sparkling and casting Disney-soft colored shadows on the dimness of the pews. There was dust in the air, always, though most churches seemed to be scrupulously clean and all had the same smell. In the front of the sanctuary loomed the brassy-gold pipes of a great organ. Its strange little keyboard console, connected by tubes and wires like some crazy science experiment, sat rolled off to the right side of the stage, or whatever they called it when it was in a church. But when you see all these bits and bobs and think of the stage-managing that must go on in order to get through a service or, even better, one of those special Christmas programs with lots of music, comparisons to the theatre were inevitable. For Ernestina that was no problem. Beautiful things, transcendent things, apparently don't just happen. Someone has to set up the props. Does that take away from the mystery? Does that tell us something about the universe? Does it prove the existence of God?

Ernestina had tried for one semester to be part of the theatre department in her high school, but she got overwhelmed by the bigger personalities and decided to go back to being the big fish in the small pond that was her all-but nonexistent social circle. Maybe that was why she'd stayed in Scouts so much later than normal. It was her whole social context. She and Lila

spent time together outside of Scouts, of course, but going to meetings and going camping and working on projects gave their friendship its thematic meaning. It was them, the two of them, and they had their role in the group: the capable ones. The other girls might be more popular at school, or better at selling cookies, or more spoiled by their parents (wishful thinking on Ernestina's part; she of the well-to-do, stable, single-child home... but NOT coddled, damn it, not coddled), but Lila and Ernestina were the engine that got things done.

Like the time they organized that garage sale and donated 3/4 of the proceeds to the women's shelter (that was Lila's idea, to donate to the shelter, and they did of course keep a small amount for the treasury). Lila had put the idea on the agenda one night at a troop meeting, and it had been voted upon and upheld. It was then left more or less up to Lila and Ernestina to handle the logistics. It had turned out pretty well, a good project that utilized all the strengths of the troop. Izzie (and her mother) had a lot of extra clothes of good quality, which she was eventually persuaded to part with since they were no longer in fashion. Kara was excellent at charming passersby and convincing them to shop. Janae was a natural upseller. All Lila and Ernestina had to do was delegate. Lila also handled the cash, officially under the supervision of the adults but in reality they hadn't bothered to check her work, since it was bound to be perfect. Even if Lila wasn't the best at math, she cared, and was careful. She self-monitored.

They'd selected Kara's family's yard and driveway for the sale, since it was in the neighborhood with the most wealth and the most foot traffic and the most old people, a veritable Venn diagram of impulse buyers. Janae's mom and Izzie's mom had been able to contribute actual clothing racks, enabling the girls to hang and display the clothing in a professional manner, to make

people feel like they were in some kind of magical department store that had grass and trees growing in it. They started early in the morning and had fun setting it up. They used card tables, and they had pieces of furniture for sale as well as a few sub-heirloom-quality quilts and afghans. Knick knacks were displayed artfully on all available surfaces. The girls had all made and framed their own watercolor paintings to sell, an optimistic touch which, as an added bonus, was earning them credit towards the Paints And Pencils badge. Throughout the day Janae sat on the porch and continued to churn out paintings. Even though there was no time to mat and frame them and thereby get more practice matting and framing, the presence of artistic endeavor did create a certain dynamism and it certainly kept everyone entertained. Janae ended up giving most of the paintings to the other girls, who kept requesting portraits of their pets or bespoke representations of their favorite cartoon characters in improbable crossover situations.

In the end they raised well over three hundred dollars, an astronomical amount for any Scouts project. Some of the unsold goods were donated as well. It had been written up in the regional Scouts newsletter which only Kara's parents subscribed to.

One time they'd put on a play. That had been Izzie's idea. It had not played to everybody's strengths but naturally it delighted the parents and the elders they performed for. Ernestina preferred not to recall this project. Later on Izzie made good in her high school theatre department; fortunately she went to a different school than Ernestina so Ernestina's stage failures were not exacerbated by comparison to Izzie. By then she was back to being called Isabella by those who hadn't known her before.

Lila was going through her craft cupboard hoping to set out a few extra items that might be useful when it came time to work on the masks again. She had prepared a new box in which to put the glue, the feathers (originally intended to be sewn onto a skirt for a "sexy chicken" costume modelled on the Rhode Island Red), the seed beads, the strings of beads (from a Mardi Gras junk catalogue), the glitter, the sequins (all the boxes contained sequins; once, in a moment of folly, she had entertained the idea of consolidating them into a single sequin box), the popsicle sticks (some were actual used popsicle sticks which had been run through a dishwasher cycle), the card stock (she'd done linoleum print Christmas cards one year, more trouble than they were worth; no one kept them; maybe everyone assumed they were storebought, not precious), the little glass stones (sea glass... from that one vacation), more feathers (she was grateful her parents never discouraged her from picking up feathers on the ground; apparently that was taboo in some families), and lots and lots of string and yarn bits. Was it enough? She piled it into a shoebox. Not enough color, and too much chaos. Nothing matched.

She had prepared to cook spaghetti squash for dinner, and a box of pasta. Ernestina's favorite: ziti. Honestly. And they still always called it spaghetti, even though neither of them had technically eaten spaghetti in years.

Lila had a freezer in her basement; it was full of stewed tomatoes from her garden. Since she'd moved in here she'd been planting more and more tomatoes each year. Once she'd gotten the big freezer all bets were

off; there was no way she could ever have too much food stored away. The way the two of them ate. More tomatoes. More and more. Alicante. Flamenco. Super Sweet 100. Gardener's Delight. Campari. Cherokee Purple. Enchantment. Olmeca. Pantano Romanesco. Granadero. Moneymaker. Brandywine.

...

Ernestina wished the community college would have a class on cobbling. Where the hell were the cobblers anymore? Ernestina's feet were oddly shaped and shoes never fit properly, something she was reminded of every time she tried to go on a long walk. Every religion in the world recommends walks, and here we are in the United States Of America and we've forgotten the pilgrimage. Everybody wears children's shoes. Big padded things for children who might hurt themselves. Big padded cars that also look like toys. Made to crumble when we idiotically plow into things in our idiotic, careless rush to get to work or go shopping. Ernestina's feet hurt. She took off her shoes, let her feet rest in the tough, pokey Autumn grass. This was not a very old church. She liked it anyhow. It had blue tiling around the doors. Ernestina knew that church architecture often had special names. Architecture would have been nice to study. Religious architecture, not commercial. History. Beauty. Not how to build new parking garages.

Here I am, in this place, unable to stave off bitter thoughts. Perhaps I should just become religious. I need guidance. I always have. I have always sought guidance! I mean what do you do at age thirty? You're not in Scouts anymore, Jesus, and to think Lila was the one who slowed down to gaze longingly at that ceremony, when she's never seemed to hesitate for a moment, even when she was ostensibly heartbroken from that thing with the guy. Fuck, she ended up with a house in the bargain. Better than ever. Maybe Scouts worked for her.

Am I jealous? Hell no. She works one day a week more than I do. And nobody helps me with my mortgage!

Who rakes the churchyard?
It is Monday. The protestants
sit in their cubicles.

...

One might well ask, Lila thought, where all these shoeboxes could possibly come from. If anyone ever did step back into her bedroom to peruse her closet all they would see would be a pair of sandals, a pair of boots and a pair of pink patent leather flats, pink because it was important to be whimsical when giving a nod to formality. And yet Lila possessed a seemingly endless supply of the endlessly handy shoebox. The reason was simple. Lila's mother, Sarah, liked to make a nod to formality every day, and thus had quite a collection of shoes. Her father, Benjamin, tolerated and even (somewhat unconsciously) encouraged it, because even though he had married the school librarian he also liked being married to the sort of woman who had lots of shoes. It meant something. Neither of them knew what. And it worked out well for their adult child Lila, who did not care for shoes but liked to be organized.

In the shoeboxes she kept useful things, the supplies for all possible projects, but she also kept photographs and scraps. Not a great many photographs, or so she thought, though if she looked at it honestly the boxes reserved for this purpose were stacking up. Perhaps the availability of boxes encouraged the storing of things in boxes. What was to be done? It had all started in earnest after she'd moved in here, so maybe it was a self-protective nesting/hoarding reaction after the breakup with Jim, or maybe it was just because she now had the space to do what she'd

always wanted. Both these reasons. Thinking about it now, Lila considered that it might be time to analyze this behavior more closely before it became a nuisance or a health hazard. She kept the boxes of photos and magazines in a secret place in her bedroom as if she knew Ernestina (her only visitor, really) would sneer at the sentimentality and the messiness of it, messiness camouflaged by organization. God, perhaps she needed more visitors, more ties, to keep her from becoming strange.

After all, she was thirty-one now.

She got out the photos. A lot of them were of Jim, or of her with Jim, or of her, taken by Jim. That had been the photo-taking period in her life, apparently. Did she even have a camera now? Maybe that was the thing to do. Throw out the old photos and start actually taking some. Maybe make a movie.

Here was a photo from that vacation. Best place to find sea glass. It was a picture of her, bending to pick up something from the beach. She didn't even look that pretty. Could you tell from a photo how the taker of the photo felt about the subject?

She put that picture on the No-Mercy-Throwaway-Pile.

What a morbid way to spend the day. What time was it? She should just start cooking.

...

"God, I had an awful day," Ernestina said as she entered the house, immediately making the place seem like a party. Lila could suddenly really hear the music she'd put on, really smell how delicious the spaghetti was going to be. Ernestina was complaining but who could care?

"What happened?" Lila asked.

"Nothing in particular. I suppose it's just the change of seasons. Maybe I get aimless when I finally have a day off. So much pressure to get things done. All the things I've been meaning to do. Now I finally can and all I want to do is watch Netflix. I try to restrain myself and just end up wasting time anyway."

"My day was somewhat similar."

"Hard to believe."

"Ernie, I never really told you about Jim, did I?" Lila heard herself say.

Ernestina just shook her head no. Oh, to finally hear about it. Was she ready?

"Well," Lila was backing down, since she hadn't planned this; she'd have to give herself a moment to catch up. "Let's give the food another minute to simmer. I just want to own up to something."

She stood over the sauce for a minute, pretending to work on it, then when she was ready she led Ernestina back to her bedroom, where the photos were all somewhat spread out. Ernestina didn't hesitate to enter the room but did so with a sense of ceremony and respect.

Lila knelt on the floor and let the shame subside. She had made herself leave the photos out like this, even after the impulse to tidy and hide it away came over her.

"I've been keeping these," she said, "these photos of me and Jim, from the Jim times. I feel like I didn't even notice I was keeping them until today. That worries me, you know? This creeping-up. I've got all

these dumb magazines and articles and clippings, too. I don't think I want to be that kind of person."

"What kind of person is that?" Ernestina shrugged. "I mean, it's ok to keep pictures. Look, that's you with your parents."

"I know. I was going to keep that one. All of those, there in that box, are legit. I think. But where does it stop?"

Ernestina shrugged. After a moment, she said, "I know what you could do. Have you got any of that stuff, that...decoupage stuff?"

After their dinner, they agreed to put on White Christmas in the background while they worked on their masks. They'd watched White Christmas a million times, in all different seasons. Winter was their least favorite time to watch it, for some reason. This might be the last time til the new year.

"Why did we decide to do this again? It feels like days ago since we started," Lila said, holding a photo in one hand and scissors in the other, trying to avoid beginning.

"I'm not sure, but I think we should finish," said Ernestina, her gaze turning meaningfully to the scissors.

Lila smiled and set to work. It was the photo of her collecting sea glass. She began cutting into the picture, cutting around her own shape.

Ernestina was rolling a piece of the card stock into a long, thin cone. "I sure hope this'll stay."

She still said that every time she used glue, in spite of her absolutely uncanny skill with the stuff. Nothing Ernestina glued ever came apart. Lila still had one of those dumb macaroni pictures kids always made, which young Ernestina had made and discarded at some kids' event. Lila had been there and had asked to have it. Ernestina's was special, Lila could see that, and she was right about this much: it had not shed a single macaron or fleck of glitter in all those years. It was back in one of the boxes; Lila knew exactly where. Surely it was appropriate to keep hold of the miracles and feats of engineering, the evidence.

"How's your book of poems coming?" Lila asked.

Ernestina considered, clearly thinking about talking it down. "I think I'm making progress," she said, finally. "Did you say you were going to make cookies later?"

"Nah, I don't have the stuff for it. You should make popcorn."

Ernestina was surreptitiously looking at all the photos Lila was cutting up. She wondered if this was the last time they'd speak of it. They hadn't even really spoken of it this time. But there was some evidence. Jim was a good-looking guy. Ernestina wondered who'd been there with them those times their photo was taken together. Probably a parent. Lila's parents were probably pretty excited when Lila turned out to be a heterosexual, maybe even the marrying-up kind. Not that having a boyfriend for a time really counted as proof positive. To their credit, Lila's folks were supportive when Lila had moved out. Thank goodness. Ernestina hadn't really been there for her, she realized. But it was hard to be there sometimes. Especially when it's someone you haven't seen in a while, for whatever reason... Oh well, fuck it, I'm here now. We're both here. She's not mad at me, I'm not mad at her. Look, I'm helping her process. There's Jim again. Shame it didn't work out,

he really is a looker. But he doesn't look very nice. And she looks kind of frumpy next to him, I can't help thinking. She needs someone more her speed. I wonder if he dumped her. Nah, it didn't sound that way. Sounded more like he was kind of a controlling jerk. I mean it's obvious; look at the way he styles his hair.

Ernestina hoped it hadn't been too bad for her, the two years in that relationship with that guy, that relationship she'd probably never know much more about than she was learning right now, peering over her friend's shoulder as she dismantled her memories, once and for all.

Finally, each woman looked at her mask as if for the last time. "Shall we, then?" Lila said. Ernestina went first, picking up her mask (a unicorn, as planned, covered in feathers and beads) and holding it in place while Lila tied the ribbon behind her head.

"I was afraid of that," Ernestina said, her hands fidgeting while she held herself still. "It's really heavy."

"Don't worry. I think it'll stay. It was good we plastered over the top of your head, too. It's going to look great! Wow, you're totally disguised!"

Next, Ernestina the unicorn helped Lila into her mask made of old photos, photos of her ex-boyfriend, photos of her taken by her ex-boyfriend. The surface was smooth and shiny with dried decoupage sealer and the face and eyes were framed with red glitter. Spooky, Ernestina thought.

They went to the full-length mirror in Lila's laundry room.

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"I don't know when I'll ever wear this," Lila said, "or what it's trying to say."

"How do you feel?"

"Powerful." Lila sighed. "Yes. I think I've done something I really needed. Thanks for the idea."

"Do you think we can eat popcorn through these?"

"One way to find out."

One last movie for the night. A big bowl of slightly burnt popcorn sat between them as they sat in their masks watching another all-time favorite, Labyrinth. In the dark it was a strange feeling for Lila to look over and see her friend lost in an incredible husk of feather and fabric. Ernestina had cut out the lower part of the face and placed a projecting snout made of card stock over the bridge of her nose. The eyes and the entire lining of the mask, which extended over the crown of her head, were rimmed with shining beads of gold and purple. The creature's horn was covered in feathers and its skin was made from an old t-shirt of Lila's which had the effect of giving it a tattoo on its cheek, a tattoo of a unicorn, of all things. Ernestina was slipping popcorn under the thing's nose and into her mouth, her black hair flowing wildly out from under the ears of the mask. She seemed to have lost awareness of the mask and become entirely comfortable, entirely one with it, and had become entirely absorbed into the movie as she always did, always had, ever since they were kids.

Lila had lined the interior of her mask with material from an old nightgown, one she'd bought herself long

ago and which had always given her comfort but which had become worn and stained variously by coffee, red wine and bacon grease. Now it made her feel more comfortable inside this Jim-mask, but it was still uncomfortable on the whole, heavy and shifting. Perhaps Ernestina was magical because she had no silly mistakes in her past. Lila was only a year older than her friend but still felt like there was a difference, as if more than just two years had passed for her in those two years with Jim. Probably that experience had meant less than everyone made it out to mean. She could feel the burden of it, though-- of missing him, of feeling ashamed of missing him, and the anger about it all would probably last, too-- as surely as she could feel the weight of this mask on her face. But she had come through it, and had stuck up for what she needed out of life. So in essence the whole point was that she was the same old Lila.

Maybe she should have stuck to her idea of the David Bowie mask. Oh well, they somehow had plenty of plaster left (they really had overbought), and there was always papier mache. They hadn't done a papier mache project since Scouts. The troop leaders had been big on recycling, not to mention saving money. Lila decided to put in a call to her folks who were subscribers to more than one daily newspaper, which Lila herself was not. Hard to recycle when you don't consume.

"You look fabulous," Lila said softly.

Ernestina the unicorn turned to her and her dark eyes glittered within the mask, its eyesockets weirdly gleaming in the light from the television.

Ernestina had talked of riding her motorcycle home while wearing her mask and how awesome that would be, but decided to save it for another day. After the movie she left the mask on top of Lila's TV and rode her cycle home, declining, this time, to stay the night. They made plans to meet for a late breakfast and coffee, elevenish, so there'd be plenty of time to meander and have adventures to talk about.

Ernestina usually slept well in her own bed, the computer on her desk set to automatically play pirated BBC sitcoms late into the night. On another monitor she had a game of The Simulateds™ (also pirated) which she simply allowed to run, rarely helping the artificial persons. They seemed to do better without her interference. She'd added on a modification which had promised to "make the game less silly" mostly by eliminating sex. Usually when she looked in on the game her characters were just watching TV in their underwear, or something else uncannily similar to what she was doing.

Now that she was home she went over to her small crate of records and pulled one out at random. It was a recording of early music she'd once received as a birthday present from Lila's mother Sarah. That was back when Ernestina was an obnoxious teenager and Sarah was big into early music and thought it would improve Ernestina's mind. It was a very loving gesture in its way. Not many kids were lucky enough to get birthday presents from their friends' parents at all. It spoke to the fact that Sarah must somehow think that Ernestina was a worthy friend for her daughter. Even then, with her lack of self confidence, Ernestina had taken it as a vast compliment, though she had no interest at the time in that kind of music. She'd finally begun listening to it in recent years. Now that she and Lila no longer lived with their parents,

Ernestina had much less occasion to see Sarah and Benjamin. Maybe they should get together sometime. Sometimes they celebrated lesser holidays together, the ones that Ernestina's parents didn't acknowledge, like Easter, Thanksgiving and Independence Day. Lila's parents were the fun ones, even if they did work with children, which did affect their behavior. Lila and Ernestina were now adults, but you'd never know it.

Adults of 30 and 31. In some ways they were treated more like children now than when they actually were children. Scouts, for instance. That was probably the last time anyone had asked Ernestina to preside over a meeting. How distressing.

At least she had demonstrably improved her appreciation of music that was not Incubus. This record had many interesting instruments on it that Ernestina wondered if she could ever learn to play. There were no Viola da Gamba classes at the community college. There was no badge to earn for it, either. Nowadays all people cared about was if you could make your car payments. Surely Lila was right that the days in Scouts had been better times. Children got more respect than adults. Children were expected to improve their characters. There was no badge that said Hey! Go get a job bagging groceries! Good for you!

Lila never complained about it. Ernestina supposed she shouldn't complain, either. She quieted her mind and let the music come in as she lay on her bed.

By night, my love, the viols play a rondeau in my room.
I will not weep or whine, my love, although our fates are strange.
For once I'll sit and think of something other than my doom.
Why not? You often say that there is nothing sure but change.
We met as kids and I was just a melancholy sort.
But now I love to listen to the music of your Mom.
It's true that I am still no good at instrument or sport.
At least I don't act like a Sub; in fact I am a Dom.
We don't discuss our sex lives, though, and that is just as well.
It can get kind of gross because it's two thousand thirteen.
Nobody gets married now because there is no Hell

but everybody has to use a lubricating cream.
I guess that's all I'll write tonight because
I'm really only picking navel fuzz.

One for the ages, Ernestina thought, laying aside her notebook.

...

The beeper on Ernestina's watch went off at six PM. Naturally she'd been watching the clock more or less constantly for the past hour and a half, as she always did when she had somewhere to be. Tonight, though, it wasn't so bad. It was only time to go to her night class. Once a week. Brief but charmingly different. The art of floral arrangement, part one of a fairly unapproachable certification program that would take years to complete. Ernestina knew she wasn't likely to pursue it that far. She'd been disappointed enough times with professional certifications. She had her associate's, fat lot of good it had done. The programs from then on were costly and time consuming. Invest everything you've got, literally everything, then get back in the job market along with the equally hungry overqualified attractive blonde BA's, MFA's and Ph.D's and see how many offers you get.

Her mind should be thinking more pleasant thoughts on her evening motorcycle ride out to the community college. She had enrolled in this class for its own sake, for beauty's sake. But of course they'd gone ahead and held out the carrot of employment. Forget it. She was fine where she was. She didn't have to interact with her supervisor. Her bread spoke for itself. Maybe she was right where she belonged. Who ever knows what they'll do for retirement? Everybody dies anyway.

"Baby's breath is a cheap flower. We don't use it. It also washes out the color of the arrangement."

Ernestina felt distracted. She was doodling in her notes, squeezing her clippers repeatedly. This sort of behavior was tolerated once you got out of grade school. She was on her own time now. She liked that about it.

"Unfortunately people still use baby's breath, but now you know better. Moving on to color theory..."

Finally they were given their allotment of roses, gladiolas, cherry blossom and assorted greenery and began their task of creating a three-level star-shaped arrangement that was balanced according to the principles outlined in the evening's class. She hadn't really been paying attention but she had an innate aesthetic sense and loved the feel, the look, the smell of the flowers. Purple. Pale Pink. Pale yellow. The greenery she wasn't so big on; she wished it could all be flowers. Maybe some would say she'd picked the wrong combination of colors for this bouquet, but she was here-- not just in this class, but in this world-- to be innovative, within the bounds of good taste, of course. Or not. "Oh, that's beautiful," said the woman at the table next to her. "Thank you," responded Ernestina, feigning intense focus. Probably she should be putting in more effort to get it right, as in "correct," getting more out of this class for which she had paid her precious income, but really she couldn't be happier. Listening to someone speak with all the seriousness of an economics professor, about something beautiful for once, that was worth it. Then, flowers. She would bungee the night's bouquet into the small cargo compartment of her motorcycle, and whatever hadn't blown away by the time she got home was hers to keep.

As she trimmed the stems and arranged the greenery she thought, actually, if this one makes it home, I'll give it to Lila.

"Whew! Good morning!" Lila thumped down in the booth across from Ernestina, who had already ordered and half-finished a pot of coffee. "You'll never believe what happened."

"Indeed, you are a full minute late! It must have been quite a white-knuckler."

"There was an overturned semi blocking the whole intersection at 48th and Highway 2!"

"No way! Did you loot it?"

"It was a Sara Lee truck. I was sorely tempted. But, you know, my diet."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"I guess I don't know." Lila hadn't really gotten past the fantastical whimsy of the situation. Leave it to Ernestina to be concerned about mangled corpses on the roadway. "I had to backtrack quite a ways. Maybe we should have picked the place closer in to town."

"I like getting out of the neighborhood once in a while, don't you?"

"Oh yes. Did you still want to go over to the thrift store after?"

"I need something shifty-drifty to wear around the house. All my yoga pants have holes in the crotch. Guess I should quit spending so much time watching Green Wing and drinking beer and scratching myself."

"Oh, Ernie, God forbid!"

"Maybe I should try doing actual yoga."

"Now that would be cool. I've been thinking of taking a class."

"I'm too broke. You know, in any other country, it would be forbidden to charge money for yoga. It's supposed to be free, by its very nature. I heard that somewhere. I think maybe it was my dad." Ernestina frowned. "Why would he have been talking about yoga?"

"Sometimes men his age get into disciplines like that."

Ernestina scoffed. "Not him. When he's not slavedriving himself, Mom does it for him."

"How are they?"

"I feel like I haven't seen them in ages but I probably have. You know. The same." Ernestina usually got treated to lunch or dinner at least twice a week by one or both parents. Often they shared the meal in virtual silence peppered with nonsequiturs and dark thoughts but it remained an indispensable part of her budget. And it was nothing personal. All of them, especially Ernestina and Alfred, were just like that. Alma, Ernestina's mother, had become more and more like that over the years, in spite of herself, though lately she had been focusing more on making friends who shared in those of her interests which her family did not. Ernestina could see that Alma was, consequently, blossoming. Ernestina wanted to take credit for encouraging her to do exactly this, but was managing to keep her mouth shut.

A woman named Jean was serving them that day. She came to their table with more coffee and a cup for Lila. "Having a good day so far?" she asked.

"There was a big accident on 48th and Highway 2," Ernestina said.

"Oh!"

"Ho-Ho's everywhere."

"It was Sara Lee, not Little Debbie," Lila corrected her. "Sorry," she said to Jean. "I was just telling her I passed an overturned Sara Lee truck on the way here."

"That's kind of funny," said Jean. "Hope everyone's okay."

"Yeah." Lila sighed. "Thanks for the coffee," she said, awkwardly holding the menu towards Jean, who gracefully accepted it. "I'll just have, uh, canadian bacon and the seasonal fruit."

Ernestina ordered waffles, pancakes, AND toast. The carbohydrate trifecta.

Jean was the one who usually served them when they came here. Ernestina had never had a proper conversation with her, but why should she? Diners and waitstaff can never be truly reconciled until society changes in fundamental ways. Ernestina had it on good authority. She'd never been a server but she had dated some, and had also read some Marxist texts. She couldn't help shuddering a little when she found herself in this position and wondered when she would swear it off for good. After all, she had Lila to cook for her. Lila even grew her own food. The only way to be more ethical was if Ernestina grew and cooked the food, without relying upon Lila's labor, and if maybe in turn she fed eight children so that their parents didn't have to work in food service.

"Ugh," Ernestina uttered into her coffee.

"You okay?"

"Sometimes I can't decide if my brain is a cool person or a real asshole."

"Your brain?"

"Okay, my ego."

Lila was still hungry as she left the restaurant and worried her mood would be spoiled by hypoglycemia and caffeine. Ernestina was high as a kite on all the maple syrup. Lila would have been fast asleep if she'd eaten even one pancake let alone four. Jim's eating habits had been more like Ernestina's than Lila's; maybe that was why they couldn't stay together. Maybe it was just his attitude. He just couldn't get why Lila refused to 'indulge,' why she always, according to him, 'overthinks.' "My Mom has diabetes" was never a sufficient answer for him. Ernestina was only a pest when it came to pasta, but at least she'd long since given up teasing Lila about it. Jim, perfectionistic junk food apologist, was by definition impossible to please.

They entered the thrift store and Lila felt a sense of pleasant calm, looking at all the available textiles. She could replace a few items of her own wardrobe and also get some fabric for future projects. She'd once tried unravelling sweaters for their yarn but the yarn turned out to be overprocessed and brittle. She'd used it to stuff a crocheted teddy bear and then felt awkward about it. She'd given the bear to a colleague who had admired a scarf she'd worn to work one day, a scarf which (unlike the bear) was too good to give away. Sometimes thoughts of the bear haunted her. She wondered how lumpy or full of holes he might have become, and whether the colleague still had him and

whether the bear gave pleasure or sadness to the household.

Ernestina was looking for a nightgown. Or a robe. Lila felt slightly uncomfortable. She was afraid Ernestina was going to buy weird sexy things and then Lila would have to wonder about Ernestina's sex life and perhaps feel jealous that she herself was not thinner, did not have a more graceful figure, was not having sex with anyone. Not that Ernestina was particularly graceful, or sexually involved with anyone as far as Lila knew. But Lila felt that if she had a small frame like Ernestina's, she would be graceful. As it was, with her full, muscular build, she was just slow-moving, not graceful. Slow, but precise. Ernestina was a little bit chaotic. She was being a little bit chaotic right now, nervously flipping through the garments on the rack in some obsessive cycle of dissatisfaction and anticipation. Lila drifted away. A dress would be nice, or some well-worn flannel to make throw pillows out of.

She'd been in something of a latent phase, it could be said, since the grand failure. It was unfortunate. Her self-confidence had been creeping up post-college, until the point she'd met Jim. She'd been an awakened person. Now, laziness.

She strode back to Ernestina's side. "Do handle those things gently," she said. "Finding anything good?"

"Here's something that might be a good fit for you," Ernestina said, not looking up as she handed the lacy gown Lila's way. Lila took it in hand, fingered its edges. It was only a couple bucks. If she didn't like wearing it it could always be turned into something else.

Ernestina had a set of black sateen pajamas draped over her arm, and a long grey camisole.

"This place is awesome," she said. "I can't believe all the good stuff they have."

"I'm going to look for some new work pants."

"Yuck, boring."

After they had finished shopping, Lila agreed to drive Ernestina's mask over to her apartment for her. Ernestina sped off on her motorcycle, her purchases stuffed into her backpack. Lila returned to her little red car and drove home slowly and carefully. When she got to her house she was tempted to try on the nightgown right away but she decided she'd better fulfill her obligations first. She unloaded her own purchases and retrieved the mask from where it sat on top of the television. She held it in her hands for a moment, ran her fingers over the edges which had been sanded smooth and covered with fabric. The more she looked at the mask the more astonished she was. Could this be worth millions? Nowhere in the world was there another like it, of that she was sure. The workmanship was perfect and the design was pure Ernie.

She placed it carefully in the passenger side car seat and headed over to Ernestina's. It was only about a mile and a half away, a three-storey brick apartment building with a parking lot on the side where Ernestina's motorcycle always gleamed duskily like the object of pride it was.

Lila parked in the visitor zone and carried the mask up the back steps/fire escape to the third floor where Ernestina lived. Her room was the last one on the left. There was a big window at the end of the hall and across from Ernestina's door was a stairwell that might once have been somewhat grand. There was still an old chandelier hanging at the top of the stairwell, gradually being picked apart, its metal fixtures

tarnished but somehow all the more beautiful. No one would think to install such a thing in a new building. The chandelier was like a grandfatherly resident that had simply outlasted everything else.

Lila knocked, heard rapid footsteps shuffling over the wall-to-wall carpet within. Ernestina opened the door and Lila entered the comfortable, clean, unprepossessing interior, typical of places that had been renovated within the past decade. Ernestina had lucked out when she moved in here. The place had changed hands abruptly since then and the new landlords were less interested in making improvements, but at least it was pest-free and half of the building, Ernestina's half, had its wiring up to code.

"Thanks!" Ernestina took the mask lovingly. "Come on in. I'm boiling water."

Ernestina carried the mask back to her bedroom. Lila sat on the old couch that she had helped Ernestina to reupholster. It was holding up well.

"There's this guy online who keeps trying to be intriguing," Ernestina was saying from back in her bedroom. Lila decided Ernestina wanted her to come in there, so she left her coat and purse on the couch and did so.

Ernestina had placed the mask on the shelf over her computer desk. As if to remind herself of something when corresponding with random men on the internet. Lila wondered if her own mask could offer that kind of protection.

"He's kind of cute, I guess."

"Have you met lots of guys this way?"

"I figure when I'm ready to settle down, maybe. The kind of person I like to have casual sex with doesn't seem to use this medium. There's not much middle ground. All these sincere text-based expressions. Look at this guy. He's so serious."

"He's smiling. He's got cool glasses."

"Exactly. He's going to be somebody's husband in no time. I just don't trust myself. I'm so damn insecure sometimes I could end up totally enslaved to a guy like this. Just some damn nerd."

"What exactly are you actually looking for, then?"

"I don't know. Maybe an older guy, a Jon Lovitz type, somebody ugly and carnal. Or somebody really young. Somebody who just really really wants to have sex all the time and that's it."

Lila sighed.

"I am fucking thirty, though," Ernestina continued. "I'm starting to become the sort of person the gross old guys marry and then cheat on with teenagers. What I get for being a late bloomer."

"You're sure you don't want to just get together with this guy in the glasses? He's like Jon Lovitz but--" she peered at the screen, "twenty-eight! Perfect combo. Just bite the bullet."

Ernestina looked like she was actually considering it.

"Your water's boiling."

"Damn!" Ernestina dashed to the kitchen. "I need to get a new kettle, one with the whistle on it."

"Imagine what a tea set this guy must have. It could be yours."

Ernestina was banging around in the cupboards for cups and tea. "You will stay, won't you?" She was opening a new box of tea. Lila could hear the cellophane tearing in frustrating little uneven pieces. "I got this new tea from the Asian market!"

"Sure. Of course."

Ernestina brought the cups back to the bedroom before Lila could consider returning to the living room couch with its coffee table designed for entertaining and probably never used. Lila accepted the cup and sat down in the computer chair and Ernestina sat on the unmade bed. "Sorry it's a mess in here." It wasn't much of a mess. The bed was soft and warm, small as it was. The closet door was open and things hung from the door which had a full-length mirror mounted on it. Necklaces, barettes, delicate draping tops, a feather boa she'd had since high school. Nothing too original but there's a reason some things are found everywhere, their charm self-evident. The mask was a wonderful addition to the room, Lila thought. They sipped their tea. It was some kind of white tea with jasmine and hibiscus, which made it strangely pink. It was good. Ernestina's cups were all Festaware, and Lila felt certain this had been a gift forced on her by her mother, who disliked the poverty chic which reigned in the rest of the apartment. Ernestina's coffee table, tableware and computer, all gifts, were the only things Ernestina possessed that were worth more than thirty dollars. Gradually Alma's sense of taste might make inroads, but Lila rather hoped not. If anything, it should be Alfred furnishing their daughter's home. The coffee table was one of his creations, of course. It was undeniably splendid and when any of the Festaware was laid on it, like the sugarbowl Ernestina kept there as a centerpiece, there was a jarring mismatch. Not all

expensive things go together. It was sad to think of Ernestina's private life being haunted by the contrast between her parents. That's what happens when you accept gifts. But what else can one do? Life itself, they say, is a gift.

"That was fun last night," Ernestina said. "I hope you don't mind but I was looking at all those pictures you were cutting up. You got through a lot of them, huh?"

"There weren't really as many as I thought. I threw out most of what was left this morning. The magazines were easy. It was just, all those self-help articles. I always meant to read them. And Mom kept giving me more."

"That's what the internet's for. I can't believe magazines even exist now."

"I wonder if it's just our parents buying them, how many otherwise defunct industries the boomers are keeping alive."

"They're keeping me alive," Ernestina laughed. "I'm going down right along with Redbook if they ever kick off."

"But think of the government jobs that will open up."

"As if the government will replace any of them. They'll just have one intern doing the work of whole departments til it all collapses."

"Then we'll start again."

"Amen."

They clinked their brightly-colored teacups.

"Tell your mom I've been listening to that record she got me," Ernestina said. "She probably won't remember."

"Sure she will. She'll be delighted. Really? You have?"

After Lila finished her tea, shouldered her purse and headed back out to her car, Ernestina put on a Dictators record she'd spent her extra cash on a couple months back. She would just lie on her bed and listen to it today. It was impossible to write while listening to music with lyrics anyway. She'd just lie on her bed, listen to the music, and look at her mask.



Lila got home and put on her Belinda Carlisle record again. It had developed a tendency to skip.

She let it play while she went through the plastic bag with her new clothes. She took her time sorting, putting the scrap fabric in the appropriate box in the craft cupboard, putting the work pants in the work pants drawer, then she came to the negligee.

"I'll put it on," she said to herself, "but I won't vacuum in it."

She looked at herself in the soft nightgown in the laundry room, a glass of vodka in her hand, sandy hair lying flat over her shoulders.

There's something there. Something.

There was still time to spend the rest of her last day off in the garden. Little to do at this time of year, but she put on a pair of warm leggings under her new negligee and took her drink out into the back yard where there was a small wooden table and two chairs. She sat and crossed her legs, looked at the dying garden, still full of squash and a few tottering collard plants. Lila had a small wheelbarrow she liked to use to gather the big collard leaves and truck them back to the kitchen, in through the sliding double doors. Her yard was entirely surrounded by a high fence and in the back by the alley she had a small parking pad that was perfect for her small car and Ernestina's motorcycle. They'd come in through the gate in the fence and walk the gravel path through the garden to the patio with its rarely-used grill. The table and chairs, however, were regularly used by Lila. She often sat out here of an evening, often with a drink or a smoke, doing nothing at all but watching the sky darken, watching the plants live, thinking about the

plants, dreaming. It was time to plant bulbs for the spring. She had time now if she had had the will to go to the nursery, but it didn't seem likely. Wearing this negligee in the late afternoon, looking at her garden, she had sudden feelings of grief, fear that keeping all this for herself was not enough. What happened to sharing a home with someone? Ernestina... At best the friendship lacked a shared interest in these living things, in this kind of labor that meant so much to Lila. At worst, they were happy to be apart, doing their separate, solitary things. Maybe it was okay. There were so many ways for Lila to build in the world. The world was just waiting. She was waiting, too. Next year she'd plant sunflowers, the biggest possible variety, ones that would tower over the fence, would look outward and find someone for her.

She should join the neighborhood association and stand up for that sort of thing.

The hoop houses and cold frames would just have to wait til next weekend. Winter. Pesto time. Good time to use her employee discount to stock up on walnuts which would blend with her late-season spinach and the basil that was her main indoor companion. Quantities of it. She had plenty of her tomatoes stored. Somehow she felt less lonely, thinking about all this. And she had one person to feed besides herself.

The season for camping was almost over, too.

Lila got home from the store around seven in the evening. She felt happy about today for some reason. It felt like she'd said all the right things to everyone, even the obnoxious customers she didn't feel like talking to. That was really the ultimate achievement in her line of work. It was all about interaction: avoiding or improving. To the max. She felt like she'd maxed it out pretty well today, but then, as Ernestina would tell her, there were no half measures in maxing it out.

It was dark so she left the hoop house parts in the shed for another day. She smoked a little weed then ran a bath, let it fill slowly while she stood and looked out at her yard. It would be a perfect, if short, night. She had two bottles of red wine in the pantry, a cheap one and a less-cheap one. She selected the latter and opened it. She got out one of the two wine glasses she possessed. Blue glass, narrower at the lip, rounded out then swooped in again at the stem, very graceful, and spotless. These glasses were probably for white wine. Red wine should be poured into big, round-bottomed glasses, made to look like a great drop of dark blood hovering in the air. There was something futuristic about the shape of this glass, too cerebral, like something the Jetsons would use, something far removed from the bloody, bacchanalian history of human imbibing. Good enough for Lila alone in her bathtub. Minor transgressions of good taste.

The scene was beginning to look set. It was starting to beg for a few final details to make it complete, even stereotypical. Namely: the candles and the waterproof vibrator. Again, some things were popular for a reason.

In this state she could go so deep. In water up to her neck, eyes closed, the universe swirled around her in waves of stars. She couldn't keep it out; everything was there. Jim. Ernestina. A million memories and

strange ideas. She relaxed, immersed in it all. The warm water was there, she was safe, she was protected, she was loved. Flavor of the wine. Warm water. The pricey vibrator. Sweet, sweet alive feeling. Radiant pleasure. Dissolving. When she let her ears sink under the water she could hear everything that was happening in her body. Her breath. Her pulse. Like some loud and distant storm. I am so happy. The beloved is everywhere.

...

Ernestina was going to work. She was far away from herself, she felt, getting farther with each block she rode away from her home, where her computer was sitting with a message from a man. Where her mask was. It didn't have to be that way, did it? For instance she went nowhere except on her own feet or her own motorcycle, so how could she ever be separated from herself, when she had these things to remind her, to carry her?

It was a good job she was going to. Maybe a job could be seen as a vacation from the self. A dip into the mortal world. Work. Labor. Good labor. What was more poetic than baking bread?

She turned the key in the lock and entered the building. There was hustle and bustle, great big handtrucks overloaded with foodstuffs. Jason, one of the night crew, was pushing the handtruck and obstructing her path to the bakery. For a moment as she approached she took the opportunity to observe the angular sweep from shoulder joint down to the narrow waist and hip, so masculine. He was maybe six years younger than her; were they still at an age where the observed such a small difference in years? Not right now. Not when just looking.

"Sorry I'm in your way," he was murmuring, sounding fatigued. They must have been hard at it today.

"You're fine," she said.

It would be better when the crew was gone and she had the place to herself. She usually went in around ten, loaded up on the deli's leftover coffee then started the white and the wheat, the simplest recipes. Once she was sure that everyone or at least the managers were gone she'd launch into the celebration of life that was her solo work night. Often the only thing that made this celebratory approach possible was Lila and Ernestina's practice of hiding little notes in the store for each other. Ernestina could almost always depend on finding an encouraging note from her friend somewhere in the bakery. In return she would leave a note for Lila by the cash register, somewhere only Lila would know to look.

...

Dear Ernie,

It should pain me to think of you starting your work day just as I am (I have promised myself) reclining in a ginormous hot bath with, probably, bubbles-- I say this not to torment you but rather because you have often said that it is helpful to be reminded of the good things in life, the reason we do what we do, and because you have often said that you like to think of me being happy even when you yourself are having a hard day-- but I have had such a fine day today and I feel so much hope for the future that I can't help but assume you are going to have a wonderful experience baking in this bakery tonight. In fact, as I am in my bath I will be thinking of you and the good work you are doing, and all the things we have to look back on and all we have to look forward to.

No, nothing in particular to report from the day, just a good feeling. Yes, I am still and forever single; my good mood as ever has nothing to do with men. How about you?

Write soon,

Lila.

...

Ernestina felt herself calm and rested and ready to begin. It was something she was good at even if she

didn't particularly enjoy it. It was like a game. Tweaking the conditions to make the bread rise higher, higher, to the very limit! And she could exert her will upon the yeasts so effectively that perhaps she could be back home in bed munching on fresh bread (and old cookies: the spoils of war) by two in the morning, like it had never happened.

Ernestina owned a good mp3 player she'd found for cheap on craigslist, and in her second year in this job she had invested in a high-powered yet compact speaker system to attach it to. She liked to extract the audio from her favorite movies and television shows, interspersing these with hours of music, all arranged in different playlists to suit different types of nights. She had a high-energy playlist for when she felt (or wanted to feel) like her life was an extended 80's dance scene, and she had a self-care playlist for when she felt depressed by the prospect of even being there. The speakers could project adequately throughout the entire store, loud enough to be heard over the roar of the ovens and vents and industrial sized mixing bowls as Ernestina did her baking. It helped that she knew all the words already.

If all went well it would be a punk rock playlist kind of night from start to finish. She'd never have to resort to disco. Or liberal talk radio podcasts, which at least had a way of taking her mind away from what was really happening. Last resort.

Warm water. Honey. Yeast. Now wait. Or rather, don't wait but instead begin weighing out the white flour, using the big metal scoop. From the bin to the bowl, from the bowl to the mixer. She had this down to an art. She knew how many scoops it would take to make a batch of this white bread, even though she couldn't imagine anyone eating it, it was so bland. Good profit margin, no doubt. A little bit of salt goes into it and that's all. Now on to the multigrain. Much more fun.

Mix up a big hot bowl of six grain slurry with hot water and molasses, like the most delicious breakfast mush you've ever had. Ernestina liked to cheat by cooling the mixture off in the big walk-in freezer so she could throw it in with the yeast sooner, without threatening the yeast. You learn how to push those microscopic little dears to the limit. Every night is a massive conflagration. The yeasts wake, feast, then burn. Life isn't fair, but you don't hear bacteria complaining. They had their chance. They had a few golden moments, swimming in honey and their own waste; nothing could possibly be more desirable.

The luckiest yeasts were the ones that spent their life cycle in the raisin bread, the sweetest bread of all. Well, until the cinnamon was added, at which point they probably felt a little oppressed, because cinnamon has antibiotic qualities, you know.

At least in this job one was always warm, always surrounded by pleasant smells and cheap food. In a way, Ernestina was as happy as a bacterium.

While the pumpkin-maple muffins baked Ernestina went up to the break room, ate a snack and composed her return note to Lila, to be stuck to the bottom of the cash drawer to be discovered in the morning.

•••

Dear Lila,

I know I promised never to make fun of your dietary choices again, and I'm really not, but I know you secretly love bread even more than I do and I only wish you could be here to appreciate the work I do. By the time you arrive, oh so late in the morning, everything is cooled and packaged and the magic from the ovens has faded. This fresh bread has a power few can understand. I am pretty sure that I am the best baker here. Have a great day. Let me know if you want me to snag some write-off pumpkin-maple muffins or soda bread for you. By the

time I get in at night all the brown bananas are always gone, so I hope you're getting your share. I am the one who gets first dibs on the scones, though, so, there's that. And nobody knows how many cookies I steal. Sorry to go on like this.

Love,
Ernestina

p.s. let's go camping soon. like, lush camping. shit-tons of food and booze. ok? ok.

...

In the morning Lila would smile as she refolded the note and put it in her pocket. She always felt proud of her friend when she got to work and saw the fresh bread laid out on the rack. It was true that Ernestina's bread was always the tallest. Lila thought it must be kind of nice to work the way Ernestina did: to have an actual goal to accomplish, after which you could simply go home. Lila sometimes thought she and Ernestina would be better off switching jobs. Lila was physically stronger, would surely be good at hefting those heavy bread pans safely. Then again, she tended to move at a slow pace. Maybe that wasn't a problem. Maybe Ernestina's speed was a disadvantage. All she was doing was undercutting her own pay night after night by rushing through it. Lila cringed with worry whenever she pictured Ernestina doing this in her typical chaotic way, all the possible burns and muscle strains... But Ernestina would probably go nuts if she had to stand at a register for hours whether there were people buying or not. Maybe Lila, with her cultivated immunity to feelings of uselessness or hurry, was uniquely suited to cashiering.

Things had changed a lot since she and Ernestina were in Scouts, Lila mused. There was no booze on the camping trips back then. Or maybe she was just being naive about what the troop leaders got up to.

Like that time they went tubing down the Niobrara
river...

PART TWO

Perpetually underfunded Troop #492. Six girls, three women, one van. The girls: Lila, Izzie, Melanie, Kara, Janae, and the new kid Ernestina. She was the one who'd switched from her former troop to this one; rumor was that her dad had insulted a troop leader or that her mom had insulted another mom. Insult or no, this had been great news for Lila because now that Ernestina was here, Lila was no longer the quiet one in the group. More and more the two of them constituted a base of power.

It was good news for the leaders MaryAnne and Barbara, too. They considered Lila to be a good influence on the others who were all too rapidly approaching their teens. Anyone who could give Lila more confidence and who would willingly follow her lead was an asset on these big trips. Also along was Marsha, Kara's mom. Marsha always got roped in to help because, technically, Kara had special needs. It was rarely Kara who was the troublemaker, though. In any given group of kids, everyone took turns being the troublemaker.

The van was crowded with bouncy kids and camping equipment. Lila felt anxious. Ernestina had fallen asleep with her head on Lila's shoulder. Izzie, Janae and Melanie were pretending to be older than they were and talking about boys they knew at school. Those three all went to the same school and knew all the same people, and Lila always felt left out. Lila didn't really know any boys. Lila's parents were considering home-schooling, and Lila could only hope this would not come to pass because that would make her even less likely to ever know any boys. At the same time it felt kind of like a wonderful dream, the idea of not having to go to school with all the other kids. Ernestina wasn't in Lila's class. Lila wished she was. She was sure she'd be fine if only Ernestina were with her. Was it weird to want someone around that much who was

younger than you? It was terrible the way they divided everyone up, made sure you were stuck with people you didn't like and kept away from those you did.

"Lila! Do you have a boyfriend yet?"

Melanie was possibly just trying to be nice, trying to include her, but Lila blushed and immediately felt like crying. She would rather be left alone. So many hours in the car. How could anyone still be talking? Ernestina moaned into Lila's shoulder but didn't seem to wake.

"I don't need one. I'm gay," Lila blurted out, then laughed. Nobody else laughed.

That was the sort of thing she often did, say things she wasn't even sure what they meant that always seemed to have a weird effect on people. Now the other girls were looking at her and Ernestina disapprovingly.

"Lila, that's grody," said Izzie.

"It's okay if you are," said Melanie.

"Whatever. She doesn't even know what it means," said Izzie.

"What does it mean?" said Janae meekly.

"Like I'm going to tell you." Izzie rolled her eyes. "If you don't know ask your mom. She's a lesbian, right, Janae?"

"Shut up," said Janae.

"Can we roll down the window?" Lila shouted desperately.

"This isn't an appropriate topic of conversation," MaryAnne was saying distractedly, keeping her eyes on the road. Why were they out here? Everyone hates everyone.

Lila was the only girl who knew how to do the tents, the others always acted lazy and grouchy, didn't want to do anything when they arrived. Tents were easy, Lila knew. Anyone could do it if they would just be nice and pay attention, but for some reason that was hard for them.

Lila didn't think Ernestina knew much about camping, either. Her parents almost hadn't let her come.

The girls had quieted down but there was a sullenness over them all.

"Do they deliver pizza to campgrounds?" Izzie asked.

Lila wanted pizza, too. She wanted to go home.

But she can't show it. Ernestina, last to get out of the van, looks small and shy and vulnerable, Lila feels she has to be tough and businesslike to reassure her, Lila is first to jump in and help get camping equipment out of the van, Ernestina follows along but is tired and has weak arms, starts complaining but does it too softly for anybody to really notice.

"It's gonna be cold," Ernestina mutters, dragging a zippered bag containing tent stakes.

"Hey, it's okay," Lila says, putting her things down and turning to face her friend directly. She looks into her eyes. "Seriously, it's going to be fine. We'll get to share a tent. And remember the good food we brought?"

"Izzie doesn't like me."

"She really does, she's like that with everyone. Haven't you noticed?"

"Well, I don't care. I don't like her."

"So it doesn't matter if she likes you or not."

"That's right." Ernestina is firm and determined, like she'd thought of Izzie's irrelevance herself. Lila is just glad she seems a little stronger and less sleepy. They start setting up tents on their own without even waiting for the leaders. MaryAnne, Barbara and Marsha are all just sitting at a picnic bench. Lila hears Marsha say "I bet we're not allowed to smoke here, is that right?"

"How come you're so good at putting tents up?" Ernestina asks. It wasn't unusual for her to phrase compliments as if they were insults.

"We've been on lots of camping trips before you got here," Lila says. "Plus my parents like it. Plus they let me camp out in the back yard in the summer."

"That's weird."

"I like sleeping outside."

"My dad thinks it's barbaric."

"Is your dad even American?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. The way he talks, he sounds foreign."

"He's German."

"That's cool."

"But he's lived here since he was, like..." Ernestina hesitates. "Well I forget."

"Was he our age?"

"No. Older."

"Maybe when we get back he could come and talk about it to us. Or your mom could. I bet we could get a badge."

"A badge for being foreign?" Ernestina scoffs.

Lila thinks perhaps she's been rude. She wasn't sure how to talk to Ernestina about her dad. Ernestina's dad is kind of scary, very tall and very quiet. When he spoke he was kindly but Lila always felt like he was judging her, like Ernestina was secretly brilliant and Lila, with her outdoorsy ways and bad grades, wasn't worthy to be her friend.

"Sorry," Lila says.

Ernestina looks up. "For what?"

"I don't know. Are you mad?"

"About what? Oh just be quiet and let's do the tent. I want to go inside so I don't have to see them."

"Just be nice to them and they'll be nice to you."

"Whatever. Do you wish you had sisters? I don't."

Lila shrugs. "Everyone else has them."

...

After the hot dogs, hobo dinners, s'mores and ghost stories, Lila and Ernestina talked in whispers while Janae slept.

"Are you having fun?" Ernestina asked.

Lila shrugged. "It's nice out here."

"The food was good. You're really good at cooking. Do the grownups even know anything?"

"MaryAnne's good at making fires."

"And Marsha knows good stories!"

"I don't really like stories. I get so bored just sitting. I just stare at the fire."

"It makes my face hot."

"Yeah," Lila laughed.

"I know a better ghost story," Ernestina said, putting on a scary smile.

"I really don't want any more stories," Lila laughed nervously.

"It's about a river."

"I mean it. Don't."

"Like the one outside. Hear it?"

"Oh man, knock it off. You're so lame."

"Scared? Already?"

"I'm tired from doing all the work at dinner."

"It's a German story."

"Oh, so it'll be boring and weird? Great."

"German rivers are much, much bigger than American ones. They're older, and deeper. And there's tons of them, and forests nobody goes into. Or if they do, they never come back."

Lila's heart was pounding because she could already see the forest. This always happened.

"The deepest, longest river in Germany... is red at night." Was she making it up as she went along? Lila couldn't see her face. The tent was completely dark except for the faint moonlight; the girls in their sleeping bags were just black mountains in front of a black sky. "In the daytime it just looks like a normal river. It has a little tributary that runs by a village. My grandmother comes from there. When she was a little girl her best friend got tricked by the river. It made her go into the forest, where it gets deep."

"Stop it."

Ernestina paused. "Really?" She put her hand out and touched Lila's body. Lila was trembling. "You're really that scared?"

"I'm cold. And I'm tired. So."

No one spoke for a moment. "It's not as cold as I thought it would be, though," Ernestina admitted.

Lila didn't answer.

"You were right," Ernestina went on, worried. "It's not that cold at all, is it?"

Lila lay down in her bag and with a whisper of nylon drew it up over her head.

"I didn't even get to the scary part."

"Just stop, I said."

"I said sorry!"

Janae stirred. "Shut up already. You'll get in trouble."

Ernestina sighed, lay down and shifted in her bag. "I'll never get to sleep out here. I don't know what I was thinking. I hate camping. It's scary as hell out here."

"Quit swearing!" Janae sat up then flopped back down. "Seriously, just go to sleep."

They were all quiet for a little while.

"Lila," Ernestina whispered.

"Listen to the river," Lila murmured. "It's a good river."

...

In the morning the grownups tried to get everyone to go together to the shower room to take showers and brush their teeth but some of the girls didn't want to get up and for some reason Ernestina wouldn't budge from the picnic table under the tree. She just sat there staring at the river, wearing the same clothes she'd slept in. Lila sat with her. Kara was there, too, and Marsha stayed with them, tried to make coffee on the grill, lit up a cigarette once the other adults had gone.

"We're going fishing today," Lila said. "I think whoever wants to can go fishing. Kara didn't want to do the innertubes. Do you want to do the innertubes?"

"I don't know. What's an innertube?"

"They talked about it all at the meeting. Don't you remember?"

Ernestina shook her head no.

"You just sit on them and float down the river. It's really fun, actually."

"You're going fishing, though?"

"Yeah, I think I'd rather do that."

"Then I'll stay with you. Do we have to catch supper for everybody?"

Lila shrugged. "If we can't get enough for them, then we'll just eat whatever we catch before they get back and they'll never know. They'll have to order pizza."

Ernestina laughed. She liked that.

As Lila and Ernestina fished from the shore of the river they talked about Ernestina and her family. Lila tried to ascertain what skills and abilities Ernestina had, or wished to have. Lila took Scouts very seriously. She saw it as a way to prepare for life, envisioning life as series of tests of preparedness. Ernestina seemed to be a fast learner when it came to tents and fishing and even building and putting out fires, all the main things to do with camping, but she didn't seem especially interested in them.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Lila asked.

Ernestina laughed as if it were a silly question. "Why do people always ask me that?"

Lila shrugged. "I just think it's good to know. I'm going to be a landscaper."

"What's that?"

"Someone who gardens for other people."

"For other people? Why?"

"For money."

"I'd never let anyone garden for me. Unless it was my husband maybe, or my kids. Or anyway, someone I lived with. I'd never let anyone do anything for me."

"Wow." Lila didn't understand. "So you mean you're going to do all your own cooking, cleaning, gardening..." She thought about it. "Plumbing? Will you wait on yourself at restaurants?"

"I just want to take care of myself, that's all. I don't think I need anybody."

"Well, now you know how to fish."

"How do we... kill them?"

"Easy. Cut off their heads."

"Which leader taught you to do that?"

"My mom taught me. The leaders can't do it and don't like to watch. I'm the only one who knows how. Except now you will, too."

Ernestina looked off into the distance and thought for a moment. "I can do it. It's my responsibility."

Kara and Marsha and Lila had all been fishing together before and they all knew what was coming. They knew Lila would clean the fish and Kara would watch stoically. Together they caught enough for dinner. Even Marsha caught one. Ernestina watched Lila clean the first few and after a while was ready to try herself. Marsha was extremely nervous about the knives but over time it had been decided that it was all right to let Lila do as she pleased, and Ernestina seemed like a competent and careful child when it came to serious things like this, so there was no adult interference. It was just as well, though, that the others didn't come back from tubing til much later, when all the fish was cleaned and ready to cook. The other girls didn't want to give Lila too much credit so they more or less acted as if it were par for the course to have fresh-caught fish for dinner on a camping trip. Izzie remarked more than once on the smell but she ate her share with relish.

PART THREE

"Simon! Over here!" Terry's booming voice made everyone in the bar turn their heads. Simon came to the table where Terry sat with a pint of beer and a laptop. His eyes were red and vague but he wasn't overly aware of this. He was in the zone.

"This is going to be so awesome," Terry said, gazing into the screen. "This is definitely the one I'm going to film."

"Are you going to finish it before you film it?"

"Fuck it, I'm scouting locations already. How's the economy?"

Simon belched. "I have been in class since seven."

"And you were up til 5, right? Quit bragging. Wanna be in my movie?"

"Hell no."

"It's about saving the world, though."

"You'll never sell it with me in the lead."

Terry abruptly shoved away from the table and wandered towards the bar to buy a pitcher. He shuffled in between two young women each apparently drinking alone. The bartender knew Terry but didn't like him: he filled a pitcher for Terry without a word and with little eye contact. Why were people so damn sad today? Terry could feel nothing but joy and distractable excitement. He'd been writing nonstop for twenty four hours. He had moved from coffee shop to coffee shop to home to coffee shop to coffee shop to this bar. The walks in between writing locations had been filled with surreal and colorful insights. The world was a fantastic and barely comprehensible place when you were running on no sleep.

"Have you eaten?" Simon asked when Terry returned.

"Can't say."

"Well, you should. Get a pizza."

Terry was up again and headed for the bar before Simon could ask him to be still. He returned again a moment later.

"Pizza's on its way. Good idea."

"Gus and Brittany are-- There they are. Gus!"

The others got busy talking to each other about nothing particularly interesting to Terry. Terry kept drinking and sank back into the world of his screenplay. It filled his eyes with a magical light. He could see the future this way, a future of violence and majesty, a very big future of his own design, into which others would be swept up. His script was a futuristic apocalyptic fantasy. There was no doubt in his mind that he could film it, even though it called for a lot of special effects. He was just putting ideas on paper at this point. The universe would provide the rest. All he needed to do was believe hard enough. Bar bar bar, blah blah blah, everyone's an extra.

He went home that night to his apartment with blue walls and poorly insulated yet beautiful windows. It was so artistic and run-down and it was a shame no one ever visited him here; no one properly appreciated it.

He had set up a special tray so that he could write in the bath, surrounded by candles. I know I'm working too hard, he thought, but I am possessed by genius. Plus, it gives me a sense of purpose. If I stopped writing this, I would lose my right to exist. This is what

graduate school is all about. Work. Work. Work. Just ask Simon, always grinding away, always burning the midnight oil, and what will he have to show for it?

The fellows at the bar had been so negligent. Weren't they supposed to be his friends? No one even asked about his project. Perhaps he'd brought it up too many times in the past. Perhaps he'd been too pushy with Brittany. But she WAS right for the part... What part? Had he written that part yet? Or had she preceded the part? Oh well. She was Gus's girl. Terry could find another.

Fine. It was time to at least attempt to close the laptop and view his surroundings for a short while. The big clawfoot bath was still filling. He removed the computer tray from the rim of the tub.

Yes, he could already see why this might have been a mistake, however peaceful the room had become he was feeling both wired and sad. The computer called out to him. Why was he slacking off? No, not slacking. Embracing reality. For just a moment. Wait it out, Terry. Stick with it.

He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He was all pink and round. He'd put on weight this semester. Too sedentary. Too much convenience food. It had to stop. At the very least he should go back to black coffee and lean steaks starting Monday. No more chips, candy or beer. He'd drink and eat like a gentleman. Like his grandpa, the old beatnik playwright. Drank like a fish and probably shot heroin, but never drank beer. Never got fat. Well, there was plenty of time for personal mythologizing later, when he had his own progeny to lie to. First things first.

He lay quietly in the tub, arms draped over the rim like a puffy pink Marat. Hit me. Go on. Let it rain down. Let the void open up over my innocence.

The emptiness of his apartment. Ghostly creaks and sounds from other rooms. His heart filled with sorrow. He closed his eyes and returned to his world, the world of his script. A sun-baked world where people survived on their wits, their genuine merit. Being overweight was a badge of honor in the post-apocalypse where there's no more junk food, no more food of any kind unless you're willing to fight for it... Babes on motorcycles doing stunts among the decaying corpses of Dairy Queens. Alchemical wizards remaking the world from scratch, for the sheer fun of it. Why was everyone so afraid? Why was Simon racing to understand and thereby save the capitalist economy, when there was so much to look forward to? Terry could show them. Forward, not backward. Face the void. Face the fear.

He felt better, practicing what he preached, even if he must practice alone. He'd find someone to read this script.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

FADE UP ON reflection in CASSANDRA's brown iris. Extreme close up. A plume of dust rising off a dune is visible in this reflection.

MATCH CUT TO BLAKE's motorcycle careening motocross style into the air as he tops the dune.

CASSANDRA flees, struggles to run in the loose sand.

Terry was thinking of shooting it all in black and white. He usually eschewed such affectations, had even gone so far as to make an entire short film using only smartphone footage and an opensource editing suite. But earlier in the year when an assignment had required him to research traditional film techniques (that word: traditional-- like shamanism and arranged marriages), he'd developed a certain flair for it. It would

certainly go nicely with the subject matter. A messed-up retrofuture.

It was getting close to dawn. He still hadn't slept.

CASSANDRA's sandal leaves shallow imprint in sand. Sand quivers. SAND BEAST bursts up in epic shower of sand and slime. BLAKE's cycle spins out of control as he attempts to avoid the beast.

Pure gold.

And the gold of sunrise.

He decided to welcome the day by shutting his laptop and watching the dawn. He put the kettle on for coffee. Yes, it was time to slow down. Appreciate life. Another day was dawning, a day of classes, meetings, fateful interactions that could affect the future of his movie. He could hardly speak to anyone without imagining them in a role of his own design, without wondering if they'd be willing. That, he supposed, was its own problem, one that he was probably mostly just sublimating here. To be a writer. A director. To dress up and command everyone as if they were his toys.

And the sun rose, beyond the houses and trees as he stood before his large front window, sipping a steaming black coffee.

He went downstairs to pick up his newspaper, carried it back to his dining room where he sat and ate a huge bowl of oatmeal loaded with sugar (brown sugar AND white) and cinnamon, and butter. Fats stop the sugars from getting to your system so fast. So Terry always consumed the two together. With plenty of coffee.

First class was at 9, a poetry workshop. The morning ones attracted only the most neurotic and gifted writers. They were all terrible at reading their stuff

aloud, probably because of the hour, but the professor liked to do things his own way. Terry was okay at poetry but to be honest most of the classes he was in this semester were for the purpose of seeking actors, or people who might conveniently have a family estate where he could film in the wild. It was not unknown for such persons to attend this school. If they didn't have estates available, they could always give money.

And if they had neither estates nor money they might have sex appeal.

Terry was quite fond of an underclassman named Teana who was the youngest person in the class, and by far the best writer. She did not seem to return his affection, however. She was too young, perhaps, too inward. She hadn't learned to look to others for all the wonderful things they could potentially give. By ignoring Terry, for example, she was missing out on her chance to be an indie film ingenue.

"I feel," Terry was saying, "like the rhyme scheme was super predictable in the third stanza. Honestly you could throw that whole bit out and it wouldn't change the meaning."

"You just said you didn't understand the meaning." Teana did not raise her eyes from the paper but he could see the disdain in them.

"Exactly." Terry narrowed his eyes at her, wishing to impress upon her that he was older, wiser, infinitely deep and well versed in these matters. "Why, just the other day I deleted half of the second act of my script because it was too predictable. Most of my readers said that was the only part they had understood. Well that just goes to show--"

"If we could stay on topic," Professor Urgm interrupted.

"You see what I mean, though, right?" Terry appealed to Teana.

"No, I don't."

Terry's screenwriting class did not meet that day, and he found it impossible to get interested in any of the other classes, so as usual he skipped them all in order to write. Everything else was grounded in a world that just wasn't important right now. How could it be? What did he even have besides his script? No one cared about him, no one was here to stop him from living in a fantasy. No one would even help him live it out, for the benefit of the world. They were all trapped in their own fantasies, weren't they? No one's reality was in any sense MORE real, more correct, than his.

Simon did text him in the late afternoon to tell him about a party.

"I can't go," the text read, "but all the people you like will be there."

Simon kept his distance, all right. Simon hid behind his classwork. Simon would never truly achieve anything. His ideas were not radical enough. Simon would just be another pencil pusher, another predatory lender, another victim of the next bubble or whatever.

"Which people?" Terry texted back.

"Girls."

Terry always made time for a good party.

Forms projected into fantasy, into future.

He could not possess anyone, but he could write about them.

He could not invent anything so wondrous as a real person, even glimpsed in a brief moment of drunken dancing. Oh yes. Terry always made time for a good party. There were no bad parties, as long as there were people present who were willing to drink, and dance. So there could be no bad parties, for everywhere Terry went, Terry was there.

Young people, older people, old people, people Terry's age, all standing around drinking boxed wine, in groups of various sizes. A small alcove served as the main dancing area, but no one was truly dancing yet. Young men with skinny legs and nice hair, young women with sparkling eyes, all smiling and overcoming their inhibitions together, barely moving. Terry would leave them to it for an hour or so while he warmed himself up.

The owner of this house, or at least the person whose name was ostensibly on the lease, was a gentle woman who loved most everybody, who provided a lot of support and a lot of opportunities. She welcomed Terry into their midst and helpfully pointed out where the drinks and the snacks were, which snacks were vegan and which were gluten free and which contained bacon.

"Great music, Mirelle! Your place looks awesome! Your parties are the best!" Terry found it easy to become effusive around her, she was so nice. Her presence made him almost ecstatic immediately. There weren't enough people in the world who were comfortable touching other people. Touch was better than wine. But wine was a good substitute.

Mirelle kindly accepted his compliments.

"I think Ben and Brittany are here somewhere, they were looking for you," she said.

Terry wasn't sure if it were possible that Ben and Brittany would be looking for him, but again, the immense kindness of it all made him cast off all his cares; to do otherwise would be base.

Soon he had his drink and was listening to Ben and Brittany and Mark and Gus who were all talking about a professor they had each studied under at some point.

"He's not here, is he?" Brittany paused to ask, looking sheepishly around the room.

"I always feel kind of weirded out when profs show up to parties," said Mark. Mark was just a freshman.

"It's true," Terry semi-agreed. "They naively wish to believe the power relationships can be mitigated whenever it suits their libidos, but the hierarchical structure is entirely cemented. Fortunately I'm nobody's assistant right now or I myself would be denying my place in that structure for the sake of a wholly illusory sense of belonging. People need to get real and know that there are some places they can't enter."

Brittany was giving him a saddish look, but smiled. "That's an interesting point. Kind of depressing, though."

"You of all people should understand. Women's studies, women's spaces, et cetera."

"I don't know where you get this stuff, Terry."

She gave him a little kiss on the cheek. They had known each other a long time. She had started out in the English department and had never jettisoned her friends

from freshman year. They'd been in the same dorm too and had shared memories of fire alarms being pulled at 4 AM. That was the sort of thing that brought people together.

"Quit gaslighting me, Brittany."

He went home pretty late, but at the right time: late enough not to miss the dancing, early enough not to be one of the last, sleepy people there. That was not his role, not his place. People knew who they wanted to be with at the end of the night, and Terry had never done the emotional work necessary to become one of those people. He was a lone wolf who occasionally came to town. That was nothing to apologize for.

He had danced, he had hugged men and women, he had gotten pretty drunk but not too drunk. It was refreshing. Life was beautiful. He was alone again, where he belonged.

The party house was within walking distance of his own apartment, so he walked, hands in pockets, feeling like Cary Grant or something. He looked up at the stars, saw his own breath. He wished he had a cat. It would be so nice to pet a cat right now.

Terry always got a slightly panicked, excited feeling when he stopped to unlock the door to his apartment. It was the last possible moment someone might need him, the last possible moment before he was safe in his own domain. Door opens; he has made it home. Terry went inside. It was warm, empty, smelled familiar. His laptop sat open on the kitchen table. He put the kettle on for tea.

He felt a little bit tired now but it would probably pass. He had more work to do.

EXT. FOREST no BADLANDS - NIGHT

The tribe dances around a huge BONFIRE.

No music. Pure energy.

Sounds of breath, song, vocalizations, whoops of joy.

CASSANDRA dances with MELISANDE and a tubby, blonde-bearded man...

Around 10am Terry got bundled up and prepared to venture out for groceries. It was his day off. No classes today. Ideal. He needed time to recover from the party, and since the day before had also contained a writing workshop, this day was doubly sure to be a stay-at-home-with-cheetos day. Naturally he would buy healthful things too, so he made his second stop at the organic grocery which was across the street from the particularly rank gas station he favored for his snacks, magazines and the occasional cigarette or cigar, all of which he was going to need today.

Ah, but the hippie grocery was clean and rectitudinous. The cashiers were the most wholesome people he had ever seen, though he felt he could tell by their pallor which were vegans. He preferred the buxom, healthy, rosy-complexioned one with straight blondish hair who always occupied the middle lane. Today she looked a little sleepy and her hair was wet. She wore a rather grandmotherly dress printed with roses that, while somewhat sexless, nevertheless was sure to inspire good feelings in all who beheld her. He'd chat with her later after he picked up his necessities-and-then-some.

This was another good place to be alone, surrounded by well intentioned strangers in various stages of eccentric overdress. Surrounded by fine cheeses. Grateful to have generous parents and already-established siblings with families and good jobs.

He began filling his basket and getting excited about the day. The knowledge of cheetos was the one thing that could make Terry set and hold to a deadline for the stoppage of his writing day. He couldn't write and eat cheetos, and he couldn't not eat cheetos. It would be a night of classic film, all in black and white, all action-packed. He would sprawl out and let it wash over him as he imbibed. It still counted as research. He was feeling pretty definite about the black and white. He wondered if it were true that the best substitute for blood was chocolate syrup. He tossed several bottles of chocolate syrup into his reusable shopping bag as he passed down the baking aisle. He made sure to get a few different brands so as to test the consistency of each. He wondered if the film department would lend him the camera. There was to be a fair amount of blood in this film, but not to excess, nothing unnecessary. In fact, if there was to be blood, it had to be treated with special respect and attention.

Although he appreciated the fact that this cashier never ever commented on his purchases, no matter how attention-seekingly outlandish, Terry really wanted to talk about the chocolate syrup today and he hoped it would not annoy her.

"It's for a movie I'm making," he said as she rang up the third bottle out of five bottles, each one different with a different price.

She smiled. "Right. Didn't Hitchcock use chocolate sauce for the blood in Psycho?"

"So I gather."

"Sounds like an urban legend to me."

"I believe all urban legends. It would be a potentially deadly mistake not to. Besides, all of Hitchcock's techniques are verifiable."

"If you have the primary sources."

"Exactly."

She'd probably attended college, well, maybe. Her name was Lila. He knew he'd forget. He looked at her nametag every time and never remembered it.

He always forgot what it would be like when he had to actually carry all his purchases home. At least the reusable shopping bags saved him some pain. As long as he used them while shopping he never bought more things than the bags could hold. Their handles were soft and supportive and durable. But there was no mitigating the weight of three bags full of frozen steaks and chocolate sauce in glass containers. The family size bag of cheetos floated and bobbed precariously on top of the rest. Terry shuffled home painfully, each step noticed, each step an effort of concentration. It was not Winter yet but piles of waterlogged leaves filled the place that snow would soon occupy, weighing down his feet and dampening his sneakers. Nearly time to break out the muck boots. Terry's circulation was very poor. He got chilblains every Winter and sooner or later it would be trench foot for him, or worse, if he was not careful.

Home at last. Burden dropped inside the front door, waiting to be put away. Now warm up slowly. Resist the urge to plop feet in front of the radiator. It's not even that cold yet. Save some suffering for later!

Five bottles of chocolate sauce go into the fridge. Steaks in the freezer, one in the sink to thaw. Cheetos

sit invitingly on kitchen counter. Not now, but later, oh yes.

Terry was always thankful for his lack of interest in the internet (for all things except porn, of course). He'd watched his contemporaries again and again reaching their hard-won work time only to get caught up in something going on on facebook-- or, indeed, nothing going on on facebook. Terry had never seen any evidence of anything happening on the internet. He knew what "something happening" looked like to him, and that was writing, partying, or sex. Only one of the three had any real presence on the internet, and he was rarely tempted to look at porn before dusk, either, so he was completely in the clear. He poured some scotch over ice in an old-fashioned glass and returned to his kitchen table.

He had a message on his phone: Simon wanted to come return the box of video tapes from the 80's and 90's that Terry had leant him to help him impress a girl on their third date. A losing strategy if ever there was one, and Terry hoped Simon had employed it honestly or not at all. Simon's actual lack of character and taste would shine through when it became clear he had no interest in or knowledge of the movies. It could only avail to interest the girl in the absent friend who had had the thoughtfulness to lend them.

"Come on up," Terry texted.

Simon, when he arrived, said he was out doing errands, which meant he couldn't stay. He seemed to have his eye on the door the whole time, a man hunted by his own ambitions.

"Yeah," he said, tapping his foot rapidly on the floor, "we watched Splash and that was it."

Terry just grunted and kept typing. If Simon wanted to share information about his sexual conquests or lack thereof, he could just bloody well say it.

"Anyway, yeah, I gotta go pick up some dry cleaning, so."

"What are you, Patrick Bateman?"

"If I had a nickel for every time someone asked me that..."

"Very well," Terry said, "toddle off, then. We should hang out sometime, for chrissakes."

"That all depends on you, Terry. You're the one saving the world."

Simon was edging gracefully backwards toward the door, like some kind of vampire in his long wool coat.

"Fucking call me! Buy me dinner." Simon was already gone as Terry muttered his last rejoinder. Terry grunted with irritation. The world was so chaotic. What was he supposed to do? He looked down at the cardboard box loaded with video tapes.

Later that night he was eating his cheetos, drinking cheap wine and watching The Joy Luck Club with his hand down his boxers. He hadn't gotten much done, and he wasn't really paying attention to the movie. He was gone into a corn snack haze, wishing the film he was watching was his own. Wishing that was CASSANDRA and BLAKE fucking up against the wall. Good idea? Bad idea? He tried to file it away mentally but he felt it slip into an apathetic abyss before he could even focus on it. No one is here to pull me out of this. No one can help me. No one cares about my movie but me and I am too debauched to ever finish it. No one will even listen to me talk about it. It's my fault. I've

alienated them all. I never helped them with their projects. What does Simon even do? All Terry knew was that Simon sometimes disappeared into the university library for weeks at a time. Who then was Simon to shame Terry for his own current compulsion? It was for a degree, too! Terry was working hard for his degree, his master's degree, from a respected university, a respected program. So what if it wasn't an applied fucking science?

His emotion subsided as he ate another cheeto. He gazed into the screen with its rich colors swirling about. The power of film. He just wanted to be a part of it.

He fell asleep on the couch before he'd even finished the film or the cheetos. He woke up late for class, skipped it in favor of taking a long shower. He cleaned himself thoroughly, shampooed his hair with an astringent tea tree preparation, soaped and trimmed and oiled his beard, brushed and flossed and gargled to rid his mouth of the disgusting flavor of despair. He threw away the remaining cheetos and then paraded through the apartment in his prized bathrobe burning a sprig of ceremonial sage.

He got dressed in appropriately clean and warm clothes, filled his messenger bag with things he needed for class, and slid his laptop in as well. He put on his earbuds and walked slowly but resolutely to campus listening to a recording of music from the Renaissance, cleansing even his interior of any distortion, static, or overwrought conceit. He had to start doing right.

At the coffee shop after his 800-level Medieval French Poetry class he spotted Teana. He felt the impulse to go talk to her but resisted it. Sure he could always say something useful but what could you do if someone didn't want to be talked to in the first place? How could you undo the harm? He acknowledged her with a nod

and then took a seat at the other end of the room, facing away.

BLAKE

Cassandra, I've been a fool.

CASSANDRA regards him with suspicious eyes.

BLAKE

I've hunted and tormented you because I loved you once. And you loved me.

CASSANDRA

How dare you speak of love after what you did to my family? To me?

BLAKE

I am a creature of my times. My actions are cruel. The universe is cruel. Our only choice is to find some kind of happiness, some kind of shelter.

CASSANDRA

I had shelter. You're the one who took it away.

BLAKE

And yet here we are. Me, begging your forgiveness. And you, doomed to yield to me.

CASSANDRA shatters WHISKEY BOTTLE against the side of his face.

Terry felt better today. He had the inner resources to govern his life. He sat at the coffee shop for a couple hours, drinking a hot cafe mocha. They made delicious mochas here. He watched Teana's reflection in the window as she packed up and left, a vast distance in her eyes. She did pause to wave to him on her way out, so he appreciated that. A good sign for both of them, a sign of their potential to one day grow up. They didn't have to be friends, or lovers, but it was no use pretending other people didn't exist or somehow weren't needed. That was the true horror in the world.

Next, Terry brought a coffee to Simon who he found smoking outside the library.

"I don't really know what I'm doing," Simon said. "I feel like I've done too well up to now and now everyone expects things."

"Sounds like burn-out."

"How are you so calm today? You've been in a worse state than me. Frankly that was all that gave me hope, thinking I wasn't the most fucked up person on campus."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. At least I don't have to worry about you."

"When do you ever worry about anyone, Simon?"

Simon looked hurt, then smiled, hoping Terry was joking. Terry felt bad. He sat down by his friend on the concrete bench, took out a cigarette and lit up.

PART FOUR

This was the first time Lila and Ernestina had gone camping in an age. There was some apprehension on both their parts.

Their first camping trip as adults had been rough, or rather, a good opportunity to get over all the humps at once. Even though they'd driven themselves there, they still felt somehow like kids who'd been dropped off in the middle of nowhere with no way to survive. Lila had tried to draw on memories of the trust that had existed and grown between them when they were girls, when it had been them against the lazies and the meanies. Unfortunately at some point there's no one around to be the lazies and the meanies except you. "Remember how we used to be the best at setting up tents?"

Ernestina looked worried and cold. "I didn't really check.. is this tent even big enough for both of us?"

"Well, let's just put it up and see." Lila was feeling waves of dread wash over her at this point. She felt like crying but had to resist because it was far, far too early in the day for that. She felt ashamed that she didn't have her own tent and had had to rely on her parents, as always, that she knew nothing whatsoever about camping after all. She kind of resented Ernestina, though, who ought to know by now, ought to be able to pull her own weight and not just rely on Lila to know everything, after all these years. Bad signs, bad feelings. "Let's just get this one thing done and then we'll sit and look around." She took a breath and tried to clear her mind. "This one looks pretty easy to put together." Nobody was ever fooled by positive thinking, especially not on a camping trip. But they set to work. Who were they, after all, but Lila and Ernestina?

They went again the following year. Lila had purchased some better gear and had gotten still more for Christmas and her birthday. Since the previous trip she had been conscientiously amassing all the equipment she could, but by the time they went she hadn't gotten around to learning how to use it. They figured it out, and they played it straight, and it was better, but still Lila had visions of truly satisfying outdoor living. They had achieved basic competence. Mastery was still a long way off. They had had a wholesome good time. They roughed it. They felt dirty and grimy in the mornings and ran out of things to say to each other and got frustrated with everything. Ernestina wished she was home more than once but did not say it, not that she had to. Ernestina's "I Want To Go Home" face was very easy to spot.

They hadn't seen any deer.

Then came the Jim years, where there were no camping trips. Lila felt she'd spend the rest of her life making up for that mistake. Not that Ernestina begrudged her. Lila just felt the loss of time, time that could have been spent building herself up, instead of rebuilding.

So this had to be the one.

Lila was just thankful that Ernestina was willing to try again, willing to help her live her dream of something better. Ernestina knew it was important to her. Had watched her collecting and preparing. Had watched it all get derailed by love.

For all these reasons and more, Lila was feeling the pressure a bit, knowing her friend was really counting on her, knowing it had been her advocating for this trip for so long, making big promises about how nice it would be, just like the best time they ever had in

Scouts but now better because they were adults and could take liquor with them. As long as the park rangers didn't catch them. Oh well, Lila knew how to handle them. Lila knew how to stash things. She even planned to bring along some pot. It would help her be more effective in this important time.

"You do seem a little stressed out. Is there more I could be doing to pull my weight here?" Ernestina asked.

"That's a lovely question. I'll try to honor it by giving it some thought. Right now I feel pretty focused. Maybe I should just slow down, huh?"

They were shopping for groceries. The trip was two days in the future. This was a work night for Ernestina but she wasn't complaining. It seemed to be helping her. Thinking about the trip was better than thinking about work.

"It'll be so nice, won't it?" Ernestina said. "Just you and me for once."

Lila had to laugh at that. She kind of knew what Ernestina meant, though. They were getting away from something. Ernestina was buying the booze (though they had promised each other not to overdo it), Lila was buying the meat and the fuel for the fire. Lila was scouting the location. Lila was providing the gear. The state park had all the desired things: decent latrines and shower rooms, grills, plenty of space, hiking trails... Lila looked forward to the hiking. The two of them, indeed, out in the unspeakably green and...well, maybe not so green right now but still intensely magical, and of course some trees would still have their leaves. Anyway, they could face death together, out there looking at the passing of seasons.

The spooky long-armed elms, the gnarly cottonwoods, the bland somewhat depressing look of the trail with its mowed weeds and wood chips. Autumn. A challenging time.

They were only going for a couple days. Lila had gotten her hoops set up and her garden winterized. It would be fine without her. It was just another reminder. Might as well be beautiful.

"Granola?" Ernestina asked.

"If you really want it."

"Do you have any of that homemade jerky left?"

"You better believe it. But that's not gonna be enough. This trip has to be really good."

"Your jerky is super. I could eat it for days."

"Well, I wouldn't want to. Too much sugar, for one thing."

"Meat candy. What could be better?"

"Nothing, really. What else do we want?"

"Tomato chips. Potato chips. Bananas. Grapes. Salami!"

"Steak. Brats."

"I want to build a tent within the tent. I want it to look like a desert fort."

"I have a bin full of tapestries. I will air them out."

"Yes! I have a ton of pillows. And my parents have a bunch of extras in their basement. Blankets, too. How do you think we can hang them?"

"I think the structure of my tent can support it. We'll hang string or something around the walls. It's a big tent, too. You'll love it."

"What do you want to do for fun? When we're not hiking, I mean." Ernestina was being nice about the hiking.

"We'll drunkenly recite poetry."

"Let's read Macbeth aloud."

"How about The Tempest?"

So that was the shape of things to come. Their dreams kept getting richer. You just had to keep asking yourself: What would Lila and Ernestina do? What were they forbidden to do, as children? What did they forget to do last time?

Ernestina was getting so into it that she would call Lila on the phone anytime she had a brainstorm. "Lila, Lila, I'm bringing posters. We're going to hang up beefcake posters."

Lila laughed and glowed. "That's a great idea."

"I've got a Legends Of The Fall era Brad Pitt. I've got Jonathan Taylor Thomas."

"Ew, Ernie, I don't know if that's okay."

"Come on, don't get serious on me. I bet I can find some old issues of Seventeen and maybe that religious teen magazine my grandma subscribed me to. You'd be surprised, they have some good information. Stuff I was surprised to learn, about what's happening to my body!"

"What exactly are we going for here? This teen dream theme is news to me."

"It is a threat, not a promise. I'm also bringing pickles. My grandma's pickles. You lucky duck."

"Why not just bring your whole grandma?"

"Imagine that! I should. Why don't people go camping with their grandmothers? Still, she would probably disapprove of our drinking and that would defeat the purpose of this trip."

"She would disapprove of the JTT poster, too."

"I wish your grandma was still around. She was cool."

"I wish she'd been alive when I turned twenty one."

"It's really a shame the experiences this culture conspires to deprive us of. You should have been allowed to drink in a bar with your grandma."

They continued to prepare mentally and materially, by talking on the phone, by shopping as much as was deemed necessary. It wouldn't amount to that much when all was said and done. Camping was still a pretty cheap way to take a vacation. And camping was most definitely what you made it.

Away we go.

Finally the car was loaded, completely packed with the tent, sleeping bags, blankets, pillows, mats and cushions, plus all kinds of food. They only planned to stay three nights but they weren't going to be caught short.

Ernestina was taking her motorcycle so that the passenger seat of Lila's sedan would be available for supplies. Plus, Lila thought, Ernestina wanted to take it out for a spin. They weren't going far out of town. The motorcycle wasn't necessarily reliable for crosscountry trips but it had been road tested in conditions similar to this. She'd been working on improving it, so she had high hopes that this trip would be a triumph for her motorcycle, "the love of my life."

It was a beautiful day for a short drive. Autumn was in its festive attire, and it was morning. The light was exploding and shimmering through the foliage; it was impossible to think of death, impossible not to trust in these trees, living their lives in such fearless color. Lila was alone in her car, driving pretty slowly, Ernestina a short distance behind. Lila could hear the low growl of Ernestina's engine, and it was comforting right now, to know she was near, rolling along safely. And the sound of the bountiful supplies rattling around in the car with her. That was good, too. Good baggage. It meant you were prepared, not burdened.

Beautiful day. Beautiful.

Soon they arrived at the site. It seemed like the tent was up and being decorated before they even knew what had happened. It was tall enough to stand in.

"Let's put this tapestry on the East side so the sun will light it up in the morning!" said Ernestina.

"Good idea!"

They had modified the tent, adding loops of plastic to the corners and along the edges of the ceiling so that they could string up their tapestries and blankets. Already it was feeling like a rather warm, plush

lounge. The floor was covered with rugs and blankets, and Ernestina was piling pillows everywhere. The front door opened onto the best view.

"We can keep some unopened bottles in here safely, I think," Lila said. "Maybe keep them sealed in the cooler. The rest of the food will have to stay in the car, though."

They had parked the car directly adjacent to the tent, so it wouldn't be at all inconvenient to go out there. It was like a big red metal pantry. Next to the car was the motorcycle, and then where a couple of trees were close together Lila had put up a big hammock. Ernestina had plopped pillows into this as well. There was also a large folding chair. Both the hammock and the chair were near enough to the fire pit that it would make a good spot for Peter Pan-like nighttime gatherings and storytelling. And songs.

After they had set up their site they rested themselves in their outdoor seating area. Ernestina went straight for the hammock, Lila reclined in the chair.

"Let's start a little fire and heat water for tea," Ernestina said.

"And let's have some of those buffalo dogs."

"Afterwards, let's hike on that weird trail we passed. We'll come back at dusk and get a real fire going."

"I like your thinking, kid."

The sun shone on Lila's face and neck and she felt unspeakably happy.

After their midafternoon tea, they got into their hiking gear. Ernestina felt very stable and very ready

as she laced up her hiking boots which she was not used to wearing but seemed to fit. They were newish but pretty well broken in, partly through a process of beating the leather with a hammer and running them through her parents' noisy old drier while they weren't home. They fit snugly and warmly and hugged her ankles in a reassuring way. She felt like a racehorse with dainty forelegs all bound up with athletic tape. She was ready to feel the trail under the tread of her mighty feet, ready to feel her legs swing and brace on a downhill slope. It was cool but not cold. She had her favorite hooded leather jacket and some gloves. She was wearing pearls also (fake ones on her wrist, real ones on her neck), and her worn-soft plaid pants. She had planned this outfit carefully: punk hiker. Lila, of course, had an off-brand puffy vest-coat over a flannel shirt, shapeless jeans and thick socks; her boots were the most expensive part of her wardrobe.

They set off down a trail that seemed like a dried creek bed, a little valley of earth with its floor thickly carpeted with layers of leaves, some fresh and some mushy. It was clearly a popular, well-used trail but there was no one there now but them.

As they walked Ernestina scanned for something that would serve as a walking stick.

"I brought some of my carving tools. If I find a good stick I'm going to decorate it and then take it home and varnish it and keep it forever."

"Careful with that forever stuff," Lila said, looking at her feet as she walked.

"There it is!" Ernestina veered off the trail, hopped up the shallow cut out bank and started rummaging through the brush. She came back triumphant with a gnarled stick about 5 feet long and nearly the thickness of her wrist. "This is the perfect one. Look

how it tapers." She walked along with it, testing it out. "I never really figured out what the point of a walking stick was, but it does feel good. I'm gonna peel the bark off it right here," she indicated a point about five inches from the top, "and I'll sand down the top, here," she ran her fingers over the rough snags of the broken branch. "And I'll carve the rest. My spirit animal is a unicorn, you know."

"So I've gathered. Since when?"

"I know it sounds twee, but it came to me in a dream. A few years back, actually. Right before you and Jim broke up. I was in the woods, just like in one of those tapestries, and suddenly I became aware of something just huge walking beside me. It wasn't one of those dainty unicorns, like you usually see. It had thick legs, big hoofs like the size of dinner plates. It was tall, like an elephant. It was white. I could feel its body heat. I reached out to touch its hide and it felt just like a horse, a really big horse. And I looked up and sure enough it had a horn on its head. Pure white, like ivory."

"Sounds wonderful."

Lila wished she had a walking stick, a spirit animal, and dreams like that. On the other hand, here's what she did have: top notch hiking boots and a very good jacket. She had her whippy-tousled sandy hair up in a bun on the top of her head. She had fingerless gloves she'd made herself. She had a cozy tent to go back to once this trail looped back around to where it had started. She had a house of her own and a garden where spinach was growing, to return to once this camping trip was over...

She didn't have a grandma, either.

Lila squinted up at the sun-etched canopy. Late in the year, light fades fast. More golden time, though. Always golden, in fact.

"Ernie," she said, stopping.

"What?"

"A haiku!" She gestured, a beckoning motion, towards her heart.

Ernestina smiled. "Oh man. Pressure's on. But you're being so cute."

She looked around them, thoughtfully.

"Women on a path
In Autumn; dead leaves--
But the sun is so bright!"

Lila smiled.

"Help me remember it so I can write it down when we get back."

"Careful with that forever stuff," Lila said, winking. They walked on.

They got back as planned, as it was starting to get dark. They had picked up kindling to help with the fire, but Lila had brought plenty of fuel along.

"Fuckin no worries," Ernestina was saying. "Can I help?"

"Sure. Pick up some more dry sticks!"

"That was a nice walk," she said, sitting down in the folding chair with her walking stick and her set of

carving tools. "Nice and leisurely. Not like how they used to march us around in Scouts."

"Did you ever go to the summer camp?"

Ernestina was shearing the bark off what was to be the handle of her stick. "Thank god, no."

"I think the flaw there was that the people in charge didn't really enjoy what they were doing and wanted to go home too."

"Was it really bad?"

"I went three times. I liked some of it. But yeah, sometimes they took the fun out of hiking. And it always seemed like so few of the kids actually wanted to be there. It was like Lord of the Flies."

"And yet you went three times."

"Well, I DID want to be there. I was one of the inexplicable few who didn't get homesick." Lila shrugged. "What can I say? I love hiking! And they would do a lot of crafts. One year they actually had us do enamelled copper. I think we just, like, sprinkled the enamel on and they fired the pieces for us. I made a heart pendant and gave it to my Mom. She wears it. It looks pretty bad-ass, cause I did such a bad job, it's all scorched."

"Fuck, that's awesome. I want to do more things with fire."

"Well, in a minute here we can do some serious cooking."

They soon had a fire going in the fire pit, nice and strong and well-controlled. They put some buffalo-meat hot dogs on skewers and held them over the fire. As the

hot dogs blackened they emitted a mouthwatering junk food smell that pleased Ernestina deeply. Lila was dubious.

"Yeah, I'm going to get out the skillet next and do up a steak. These hot dogs aren't going to cut it for me," said Lila.

As the steak sizzled they started to sing.

They opened a bottle of red wine. They carried on singing, louder and louder, everything they could remember, every song they could think of.

"Remember when I did We Don't Get Fooled Again at karaoke?"

"Do it! Do it!"

"No way, the other campers will think we're killing each other."

"What other campers?"

"Look out there, there's some kind of craptastic lantern going at that camp site on the other side of these trees." Lila was peering into the dusky gloom. She reached for her binoculars. "I see one car, one little tent that appears to be falling down, no fire. Sounds like the car's running, hear it?"

"Maybe we should go help."

"We don't want to humiliate anybody."

"What if they freeze to death?"

"Oh shush, it's not even cold." Still, she felt a little curious about the occupant of that camp site. She thought she could hear some repetitive, tuneless

guitar strumming, and occasional silence, and then the flicking of a telephoto lens. "Maybe we should check it out."



The sun had gone down but total darkness had not yet covered the land. Terry was wondering if he should get back to town before it was too late. He could be on the highway at least, within sight of civilization, before the cold of night. He had given it his best shot, setting up the tent, and he had neglected to really bring any supplies, except the guitar, which he supposed he could use for firewood if it came to that. Why had he decided to stay, if there was no way he himself alone could replicate any of the conditions called for in the film, such as campfires? Well, he did have a ramshackle shelter set up, which was at least a nod to survival, but this one of his would shame his characters, born in-the-wild nomads, hunters, fire dancers, creatures of strength and beauty. He would maybe be able to keep his head and upper body out of the elements. Maybe he would sleep in the car, where it was warm. He'd turned on the engine and cranked up the heat and opened the doors facing his sad little campsite, hoping some warm air would waft over him, as if he could somehow warm up the Outside.

Just as he was feeling defeated it got worse. He could hear something moving in the trees. He stared at the battery-powered lamp sitting in the ash of his empty fire pit and tried to believe that there was no danger, that what were the chances of anything bad happening to him, that he didn't even have any food to attract bears. He timidly rang the bike bell he held in his hand.

The sounds were getting closer.

He looked.

His breath left him as two women emerged from the dark forest.

One had long, straight, dark hair and a lithe, lean body. She moved about like a snake, uncertain, peering at him from behind the other, who was more thickly built and stood firm, with shorter, lighter hair that picked up the fading light. He couldn't quite make out their faces. He feebly held up his lamp, which flickered because the batteries were going to die soon.

"Hello?" he said.

"You're not... taking pictures, are you?" said the fairer, larger one. As the light of the lamp illuminated her face he recognized her.

"Hey, you're the girl from the grocery store," he said.

She frowned and narrowed her eyes.

"I mean, no, I mean yes I was taking pictures. Of the forest."

"Of course, why not?" said the smaller of the two. "Get some good ones?"

"I did, I did. I'm actually thinking of making a movie here."

"Cool!" said the smaller one. "We're just camping. Sorry if we disturbed you."

"No! Not at all!" He shook his head, awed, gazing at them. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

"Are you okay out here?" asked the blonde, the cashier, what was her name? "I think I remember you, from the other day. Same movie?"

"Yep! And actually I'm... Shit. Do you have any, like, jerky I could buy from you? And!" he shouted as they started to confer. "Please please please please please

let me tell you about my movie," he gasped. "I must. I must tell you. When you came out of the woods just now it was so striking. It was like I had gone into the world of my script and it had become real, like it was all real. I know I'm doing the right thing now, I know it!"

The women looked at each other.

"He told me about this the other day," said the cashier. "I think he's okay."

"He's just a bad camper," said the other.

Soon the three of them were sitting around the campfire Lila and Ernestina had built. Lila was trying to figure out how to make sure he didn't spend the night with them. She wasn't afraid of him, didn't even dislike him especially, but she didn't feel like having an interloper during the final quiet hours of the day, the moment of falling asleep in a tent, and not just any tent, this ideal tent they had designed. It was theirs and theirs alone. It was supposed to feel like home.

Ernestina seemed fairly taken with him, but not to an untoward extent. Lila felt certain they were on the same page.

"How did you make this fire?" the man, Terry, asked.

Lila and Ernestina looked at each other. "How to explain? Well... We went for a walk today and gathered kindling. I also brought along some wood suitable for the purpose."

"Then you just... light it."

"You start it with paper. Then it goes from the paper to the small sticks, then outward to the bigger ones as it gains strength."

Terry shook his head in wonder. "Fantastic. It's the best fire I've ever seen. Just like I always imagined. Not, like, quite as big as a bonfire, though, is it?"

Ernestina laughed. "Are you an alien?"

He looked up. Then he laughed, too. "I have never been camping before. I only see this stuff in movies."

"That's ridiculous."

"Ernie, be nice. Remember how much you hated it the first time?"

Ernestina smiled. "I'm just teasing, guy."

"Do you want help putting your tent back up?" Lila asked. "You do have a sleeping bag, right?"

"I do have a sleeping bag. Will I be okay?"

"It's not that cold. You can stay warm if you zip up."

"Can we meet again? Back in the city? I truly could use your help with my movie. If nothing else, if I could just sit you down and pick your brains about all these amazing survival skills you have."

"Yeah, sure, I wouldn't mind at all," said Ernestina.

"Anyway, I'm sure we'd see each other at the store," said Lila.

"I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable," Terry said. "I shouldn't have come out here like this, probably, but now that I have I feel like I'm going to be able to

finish my script. I really feel like this is my contribution to the world. I'm really determined."

"I liked the idea," Lila said. "Sounds like a combination of Mad Max and Ishmael. Should find an audience." She sounded a little unsure, though.

"Exactly! I mean, that's kind of how I would pitch it, maybe more subtly, but that's the essence right there. Fun, but meaningful. Educational, even!"

"Could I read your script?" asked Ernestina.

Terry smiled broadly, laughed out of pure joy. "God, I'd love that. You guys..." He gestured at them. "You guys are so perfect. You're just who I needed to meet today."

They returned Terry to his campsite and did their best to help him set up the tent, which was missing a few parts. Nevertheless he watched them in fascination and seemed to grasp the basics of the procedure.

"Man, I'm totally asking for a new tent for Christmas," he said. "Watching you guys do this is totally inspiring. And that setup you have over there looks comfy as hell."

"That's right," Ernestina said, brushing off her hands. "It doesn't have to be all about being cold and wet and miserable. They just tell you that so you'll stay in the city and buy stuff."

Terry laughed. "Thanks, guys." He held out his hand. "Ernestina. Lila." They shook hands. "So good to meet you. I will definitely email you when I get home, which will be tomorrow. I'm getting the hell out of here in the morning, no offense."

"It's just as well," Lila said. "This is one crappy-ass tent."

"No offense," added Ernestina.

Having put Terry to bed they took their flashlights and headed back to their own tent. Lit from within by kerosene lamps, it was the perfect scene of luxury.

"Now, let's read," said Ernestina, tossing a copy of *The Tempest* over to where Lila lay propped up on pillows and covered richly with soft quilts and blankets.

They entertained themselves with Shakespeare, wine, cookies, cheese, jerky til late into the night. Neither of them had their phones on, thus no way to even know what time it was. Out here, you sleep when you're tired, you wake when the sun rises.

They put out their lamps.

"Ernie?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember that story you told me one time, the one about the river?"

"The river."

"The German river. The one that's so deep."

Ernestina laughed. "German?"

"I guess not."

"You tell it."

"You never got to finish it. I got scared."

"So make it up."

"Well,

There's this river, in Germany, near the village where your grandma-- on your Dad's side-- grew up. It starts out such a nice little river. It feeds the village. It's cool and clear and not too deep. Flowers grow on its banks and deer are always stopping to drink. It's full of fish.

But the river has a double existence, a duplicitous purpose.

Every so often, especially in the Fall after a very good harvest, it becomes an evil river. It beckons little children away into the forest, where this river becomes immensely wide, and deep, and cold.

Down in the depths of the river dwell the River Mermaids, the hungry spirits of the river.

Some say they tempt children with songs, with sweets.

"With cookies? Oh no!"

Some say they stand on the bank of the river in the guise of ordinary women. But all they want is to drown children, and eat them. Eat the flesh right off their bones.

One day, your grandma's best friend, Hilda--

"Hilda? That's so stereotypical."

Hilda was seen wandering into the woods, as if in a trance. She had a basket on her arm and she had been

gathering flowers by the riverbank. Why oh why didn't anyone call her back? Her name caught in their throats.

"I can barely say it, myself."

Days later her bare bones washed into the village, washed up along the bank of that river, stripped entirely. Your grandma knew it was Hilda because your grandma remembered the day Hilda had broken her arm, right there where you could see the bone had healed recently. Hilda had been eaten, every last bit of her, by the River Mermaids.

"Oh, Lila. That was good."

"Do you remember the story now? How it really goes?"

"No, not at all. I was probably just making it up as I went."

"How would you have ended it?"

Ernestina thought quietly for a moment, then her big smile was visible in the faint moonlight.

"I would have said that the River Mermaids used to be little girls of the village. That after Hilda disappeared-- her body never found-- a hunter in the woods stopped by the river to drink, and there was little Hilda. She pulled him into the water and drowned him. Then they all ate him together. And HIS bones washed up in the village. And the villagers mourned him, and ground up his bones to spread on the crops. That's what they do in Germany, you know."

Lila laughed and clapped her hands.

In the dark and silence, after the stories were finished, after they'd softly sung one or two more songs, after Lila had fallen asleep, Ernestina lay awake. She wondered if she'd ever make it to sleep now. It was hard for her, lying awake in a room-- a tent, a house, a room, whatever-- with someone else sleeping soundly. She was envious, and afraid to do anything for fear of waking her friend, who was lucky enough to have drifted right off, leaving her here, awake in the dark, listening for weird sounds. She couldn't help it. She wished she had her computer, or her smartphone, some headphones. Next time she'd definitely bring a smartphone. Fuck it. Lila wouldn't object, she wasn't a hardass about nature. And it had all gone so well so far. How odd about that guy Terry over in the next site. Ernestina's mind started wandering around him. What if he snuck over here in the night? Snuck into the tent? The thought was strangely arousing. He wasn't a particularly attractive man. She guessed he was a few years younger than them. He was cute, sure, a little tubby around the middle, soft doughy arms. The way he reacted to them was flattering. Like somebody finally noticed how incredibly cool they were, how incredibly cool their campsite was and how great Lila was at making fires and setting up tents. He'd admired the walking stick Ernestina had begun fashioning. Everything they did seemed marvellous to him. It was, indeed, rather like meeting someone from another world. But he was just a grad student. Well, maybe that was enough; neither Lila nor Ernestina had ever finished their degree, though Ernestina had a great surplus of community college credits.

Ernestina distracted herself by thinking more about this man, fantasizing about creeping out of the tent, through the trees, to his little pitch. Unzipping the fly, crawling in, sliding up the length of his body, her thighs hugging his hips, immediately feeling his

excited manhood jumping up into her lap like a fish. I came to warm you up. Wouldn't he be surprised?

"Coffee coffee coffee," Lila chanted as Ernestina staggered out of the tent into the magical cool dewy morning.

"Coffee!" Ernestina zeroed in on the coffee pot sitting on the grate Lila had placed over the fire pit. Percolating. What a joy.

"Sleep at all?" Lila asked.

"Eventually, apparently."

"I slept great. So damn warm and comfy in there. We did it!"

"Yeah, it was comfy. I couldn't quite forget I was outside, though."

"Well, tonight you'll be super-tired. I'm going to make you hike all day."

"Oh no!"

"Just kidding. Let's fish, how 'bout?"

Ernestina shuddered inwardly at the reality of cleaning their own fish, but think, just think, of the flavor. Lila had even brought some flour and oil to batter-fry the little darlings. Lila was really taking a carb vacation. Better accomodate her wish to fish.

It must have been midafternoon when they hiked out to the lake. They found a shady spot and opened up some beers.

"I think I'll start a motorcycle club," Ernestina said thoughtfully.

Lila smiled. "Like the Hell's Angels?"

"No. Like a mechanics' club. So I can help people learn like I learned. Except I'd be nicer to everybody than my Dad was to me."

"There are so many things you're good at."

"I'm good at online dating too but nobody needs a class in that. I mean, this mechanics class could be more accessible than the classes they give at the community college. And free, even!"

In Scouts there had always been all those cute little projects in the book, with hints on how to go about it, what to do in the first place, why it was important. If nothing else you'd earn a badge. What did you get for things you did as an adult? Entry into Heaven? Heaven on Earth.

"If you want I could teach you how to knit and you could help me make scarves to donate to the women's shelter."

"Scarves?"

Lila looked sheepish. "Well, I wanted to help, and they take most things. They make great gifts. Sometimes they raffle them off at fundraisers."

"I didn't know you still did that."

Lila shrugged. "Yeah, I wanted to. Cause...I mean, it never got abusive with Jim, not outright, but sometimes I think how lucky I am. That I was able to get out when I did, that I had my parents to help me, to support me, who fucking bought me a house."

"You bought the house, too. With help."

"The fact remains that I couldn't have done it by myself. Maybe I didn't even need a house. But it really helped settle things, when I was feeling really unstable. I mean in a practical way. Like I didn't know where I could go, somehow. Anyway." She sighed.

"Shortly after I moved in some folks were collecting donations for the shelter and it just kind of rang a bell, so I've stayed involved. I don't really do much but I try to do practical things when I get the opportunity. Makes me feel better, at least."

"I remember how many projects we did for the shelter when we were in Scouts. I guess you always were pretty committed to that."

Lila pulled her blanket around her shoulders and sipped her beer as if to illustrate how important it was to have blankets, beer, a safe place. Lila looked at Ernestina.

"You were a big help, too, Ernie. I don't know if I ever thanked you."

Ernestina was surprised. "What did I ever do?"

Lila looked away, unsure now how to say it. Her hands started to shake a little, she tried to steady her grip on the fishing rod. "I guess because... you took me back. You kept me company. You didn't ask questions. You just... sewed. Went shopping with me."

"I thought I was being shallow. I couldn't think what else to do."

"It made me feel better." She was looking at her friend with shining eyes. Really remembering, really savoring how much it had meant to have Ernestina in her new

house with her. "It was like there was a point. In having the new house. In living." She laughed.

"I guess I missed you when you stopped calling as much," Ernestina muttered. "But it was hard to be mad, really. You needed help and I didn't know what to do. So I did everything, I guess. Figured I'd ask you later what the hell happened."

"I'm sorry."

"Well don't do that now. I mean it's obvious you didn't know what you were doing, and neither did I, anyway we're here now. We have it pretty good."

Lila shook her head. "I don't know if that's good enough. But we'll see, I guess. I sure wouldn't want to force you to forgive me."

"Maybe you already did. Maybe there's nothing to forgive. I don't know. I was mad, sure. I was."

Ernestina's reel spun wildly. Got one!

Along with everything else they'd piled an assortment of musical instruments into Lila's car. Glockenspiel. Ukulele. Acoustic guitar. Kazoo. Harmonica. Plastic recorder. Little bongo with one head busted in. They tried them all in different combinations. They tried making new instruments out of other bits of junk they'd brought. They played enough songs in one night to earn a badge, for sure.

Fish dinner, too. White wine to go with that. Little potatoes fried in the skillet.

If Lila could succeed in making Ernestina wish they could camp just one more night, she'd have won.

Finally the morning came when it was time to head back to town.

It was important-- one last challenge-- to make breaking camp fun, not sad, not a chore. But they'd have to get started early.

Lila made the coffee one last time. Ernestina, taking a page out of the Terry playbook, turned on the car so they could hear the radio. Lila put out a few snacks in the driver's seat so that every time something got loaded into the car there was another opportunity to eat cheese. They took breaks, played quick card games.

"Sad to see the tent go down," Ernestina said as the last blanket was folded. "It was probably the nicest place I've ever lived."

"What about your parents' house?"

"Well, my parents were there." They laughed.

It felt strange to be alone again, in the car. Lila could still see Ernestina in the rear view.

Ernestina's voice came over the long range walkie talkie they'd brought. One of Ernestina's ideas. "Let's stop at the outlet mall."

"Roger that."

Going through the racks of last season's NYC NEW YORK brand clothing, their thoughts turned again to the city.

"Are you really going to email Terry when you get back?" asked Lila.

"You didn't like him, did you?"

Lila shrugged. "Maybe I just didn't like the way he showed up right then. I mean, last thing I want to see on vacation is an obnoxious customer."

"Is he obnoxious?"

"Not bad. At least he doesn't make The Jokes." (That was the cashiers' term for the mildly demeaning jokes they heard twenty times a day from people who thought they were the first) "Last time I talked to him was kind of funny, actually. He really is making a movie. Though I'm guessing all that chocolate syrup he bought has already gone onto one giant ice cream sundae or some gross drink involving Red Bull."

"Wow, you really hate his guts."

"Stop saying that! I don't."

"Stop saying that you don't?" Festaware

"I like Terry. I like him just fine. Why are we talking about him like he's already part of our lives?"

"In answer to your previous question, yes, if he emails me I'll email him back. I'd like to read his script."

They didn't buy anything but there was a Dunk In Donuts nearby so they stopped in for coffee before moving on. Ernestina had a donut. It was still fairly early in the day. A pleasant amount of light came into the shop which faced East. It was one of those barren strip malls near the highway, nothing around to block the sun. Sitting at the dirty table in the corner of the shop Lila wished she didn't have to travel anymore, kind of didn't want to go home ever, let alone return to work. Oh well, she'd get home and there would be her kitchen table. She could sit back down and drink more coffee, or her favorite tea.

"One donut is never enough," muttered Ernestina, licking her fingers.

"A hundred aren't enough. Death is the only way out."

Outside there were dirt pushers and diggers and men in orange vests. It was impossible to tell what they were doing. Just doing what they were always doing. Moving things from here to there, tearing down one mall and putting up another. Providing a comforting sense of activity. Lila could feel that particular something wrong in her soul, that something that preferred to watch construction than gaze across a completely empty stretch of nature. Or maybe it was just the corn fields she dreaded, the fields that surrounded this strip mall and this highway, so unnaturally flat and serene and square, so uniform, going on and on and on. Yes, better to watch the men at work, building little shops and

parking lots. You could forget that it was all fueled by those vast fields of corn, subsistence food, sweeteners, fatteners. Being out in the forest was restoring, but why did there have to be these wastelands to cross to get there and back?

Ernestina stowed her coffee in Lila's cup holder and got back on her motorcycle, which had performed wonderfully. Ernestina was loving this trip, this drive. Somehow she felt she had tuned the bike to vibrate at just the right frequency. It elevated her mood, it felt good all through her body and particularly soothing to the crotch. It was keeping up its speed and balance and burning fuel efficiently. It looked and felt great. She put on her helmet and mounted up, eager to feel her body cutting through the air, nothing separating her from the speed at which she was moving. In a car, you could forget how unnaturally fast you were going, but this was serious, this was real. In a car, you could forget how dangerous internal combustion was, how dangerous interstate travel was. At least one car driver, Lila, would be mindful of this danger, since she had her eye on Ernestina, vulnerable human body shooting through space like a projectile launched from a cannon.

Back to civilization.

INT HUT - NIGHT

CASSANDRA and MELISANDE and OLD JAMES sit together in a hut thrown together from assorted junk: old Volkswagen parts, torn military tents, the skeleton of some megabeast et cetera [note to self: let's go to a junk yard!]

In the center of the hut there is a small fire.

CASSANDRA, MELISANDE sit across from OLD JAMES in respectful silence.

OLD JAMES

The ancients had knowledge. Vast knowledge.
They had knowledge of the shape of the universe.
They had knowledge of the smallest particles.
They had knowledge of great emptiness.
They had medicine. They had access to unlimited power and energy.
They did not have wisdom, children.

He pauses, looks meaningfully at the women.

OLD JAMES

The troubles we know now, are as nothing.

CASSANDRA and MELISANDE glance at each other dubiously.

OLD JAMES

Do not envy the ancients.
They would envy you.

MELISANDE

If they had wisdom, you mean?

CASSANDRA looks down, ashamed of her friend's sass.

OLD JAMES just laughs.

OLD JAMES

Yes, my child. If they had wisdom.

They all gaze into the fire, lost in their own thoughts.

Ernestina lay on her bed with her laptop, reading Terry's script. She turned to look at the digital clock on her desk, as if to verify that it really was 4 AM. The numbers glowed through the gentle lamplight room, a fire-colored reminder. The script wasn't finished. It looked messy, too, the work of some derangement.

Ernestina had been reading it voraciously for hours, ever since she had gotten up the nerve to open the file he'd sent. They'd engaged in some back-and-forth correspondence, establishing each other's characters and motivations, before the text file had come over. She'd promised to spend some time with it over the coming days, so she had flexibility, wasn't locked in to a time table, wasn't signed on to anything yet. She'd procrastinated for a while, naturally, but it was the most intriguing thing on her desktop. She couldn't quite get interested in anything else. Finally she'd opened it.

FADE UP ON:

EXT. BADLANDS no FOREST -- DAY

MOTORCYCLE GANG shoots dangerously amongst trees like in that scene in Star Wars with the

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST VILLAGE -- DAY

VILLAGERS go about their business, unaware of coming danger.

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST -- DAY

GANG continues racing towards village.

Leader of the gang is BLAKE, young, hardened, battle-scarred.

CLOSE IN ON

BLAKE's cold eyes, which seem to peer into a future of merciless carnage, a very near future.

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST VILLAGE -- DAY

CASSANDRA, young woman with long hair, lifts child in her arms.

CASSANDRA hears something, looks off into forest in dawning alarm.

FADE TO BLACK

OPENING CREDITS

TITLE: APOCALYPSE RECON (A TERRY FINGERSMITH JOINT)

Ernestina had some thoughts on the project, but wasn't sure how to organize them. She realized one thing: she was already thinking of it as if she were going to play the main character. The phrase "dawning alarm" would have to go, she felt. Maybe it was no good putting it into words. Maybe they'd just work it out as they went.

Dear Terry,

Just finished reading the script. A few notes in no particular order: We can definitely film it in the forest. I don't know about riding motorcycles in there though. Try stock footage. Or you could take that scene from Star Wars and photoshop in motorcycles. would anyone care? I think Cassandra should kill one of the gang and steal his motorcycle and become a solo mercenary seeking revenge, or like a Ronin. You seem like someone who's seen lots of Kurosawa, so let's stick to what we know.

Needs more explosions. Stock footage?

Have you seen the film Wizards? maybe we could animate it somehow.

Also maybe the bad guy could be a woman.

Lose the love story.

--Ernestina

She cc'ed Lila.

"I do think I've read him correctly," Ernestina said, standing over Lila's shoulder watching as she stirred the spaghetti sauce. Another week had passed and they were returning to their happy weekend routine, starting with spaghetti. Two pans contained rotini for Ernestina, steaming Winter squash for Lila. "He was super excited about everything I said in my email. Even the big changes. He was out in those woods looking for guidance. We're perfect!"

"Exactly. We're perfectly fine without another big time commitment."

"Have you read the script?"

"I'm not looking for guidance."

Ernestina had been trying to convince Lila to sign onto the project, which as far as Lila could see hadn't even been offered to her yet. Lila was somewhat concerned that Ernestina would be doing the poor gentleman a disservice by hijacking his film. He seemed helpless to resist, however; or completely uninterested in resisting, judging by the exuberance of the emails she'd been receiving copies of as they flew back and forth. Maybe Ernestina was right, though. Terry had the energy and drive but seemed to lack some key thing that he needed to realize his world vision. He needed someone else to believe in it, perhaps. Lila hadn't read the script yet. She didn't know what that world consisted of or what she could contribute to it. All she knew was that *her* world was just fine.

Lila looked over her shoulder to see Ernestina merely gazing into the pot; she had lost herself in the aroma of the sauce. Nothing much had changed with the new addition of this Terry idea. Nothing much would change.

After dinner Lila taught Ernestina to knit and they both worked on scarves while watching Masterpiece Theatre. Outside it was getting colder, crisper, darker each day.

Dear Ernestina,
We've got to start soon. I don't think we can wait for the script to be finished.
Will you play Cassandra?
Will Lila play the villain? She can write her own part.
--Terry

Dear Terry,
Can you and I get together sometime?
--Lila

Lila read the script from the comfy couch in her living room. Two unfamiliar sensations at once. She struggled with the format at first; it made her eyes hurt. The content was bombastic as well, all those capital letters and all those fight scenes. She sipped some more vodka and relaxed into the couchness of the couch, summoned all her patience. It was a nice evening. She'd spent the day in her garden, she'd talked to her mom on the phone, she'd talked to Ernestina on the phone, she'd had lunch downtown with a friend from work and visited the library and an art supply shop afterwards, she'd finished a scarf and she'd cleaned the house. Now there was just this one last thing to do.

"Oh, Terry," she murmured as she sipped and read.

She could see though that his enthusiasm was natural and infectious. The script was more of an open letter to the universe. Terry and Ernestina had already been deconstructing it day by day in their emails, til there was little left of it, really. And the villain? Well, the villain had started out as a maniac on a motorcycle trying to destroy the last vestiges of humanity left on the planet after an ecological disaster of some kind, followed by many wars. He believed that the species could not be redeemed, would only rise again to destroy again. Maybe Lila could see where he was coming from. Naturally the character would be changed by love, but was that a good thing or a bad thing? Ernestina was right, that was too easy. And maybe humanity deserved to be destroyed. Or would humanity prove itself worthy, by some means other than maternal instinct and elder worship? Not that there was anything wrong with those things. Maybe humanity would just keep outlasting. But the world, the world would get old.

Lila fell asleep on that couch, script unfinished. She woke in the morning groggy and sore, with a slight

panic that reminded her of when she used to fall asleep on her grandmother's water bed and wake up convinced she was trapped in a tar pit, or quicksand. Past life, maybe.

She got up and made the coffee, had ham and eggs and black beans and queso fresco for breakfast. She thought more about the flowers she would plant in her garden, how nice it would be to sit here in the kitchen and look at them. Maybe she wouldn't be willing to cut them after all, or maybe she would. For Ernestina, who did not have a garden. For Terry, who did not even have a view.

She arranged to meet Terry on campus at the coffee shop where he did much of his writing. The cafe had a nice outdoor seating area but she found him inside, at an uncomfortable table with uncomfortable chairs. He had his laptop with him. The laptop was open but sort of pushed off to the side, facing out into the room with a commanding view of everyone and everything, as if even when he wasn't using the computer it had to be present, had to be included. Lila wondered what he would do if she shut it.

There was still something pleasant about the moment when she came to the table and sat down, set her cup of coffee between them and started unwrapping the scarf. She smiled but felt a little self conscious, unsure how to begin.

"Thank you for coming here today," he said.

"I never finished reading the script," she blurted out, then reached for her coffee, clutched it with her hands as though to warm them up. She sipped from the cup and looked into it, followed it with her eyes all the way back down to the table. Terry was already answering, in a tone of utter forgiveness.

"The script's nothing," he said, laughing. "It's just a framework. A coloring book!"

"I've been reading the emails with interest."

"And?"

She suddenly felt terrified. She wanted to be involved but how? She couldn't say what she wanted. She was afraid, afraid to begin imagining, dreaming, playing. My god. She was being invited to a game of make-believe and everyone was looking at her, asking Who do you want to be???

"I'll take the part."

"Blake?"

"Yes. I want to keep the name."

"Ernestina thought the love story was weak."

"I agree."

He hesitated. No doubt he was trying to get up the nerve to suggest some kind of homoerotic context and Lila wasn't sure how to shoot him down without appearing to be a prude.

"Well, Terry, here's what I think about the two main characters." She paused. Sipped her coffee. "Well, you wrote them as two sides of the same coin, basically. They will always be that. Terry, what I really wanted to ask you today is... Are you sure about this? About us?"

"What do you mean?"

"What about your vision? Do you feel... Do you feel it's being treated fairly in this process?"

He laughed, shook his head in that way he had, like someone about to describe a particularly breathtaking piece of ecclesiastical architecture. "I know there are directors out there who consider themselves 'auteurs.' Some of them aren't any more organized than I am and yet they refuse to compromise. Some of their stuff is great, but there's so much wasted effort, so much waste of resources. So much that just falls apart. I can see already what would become of me if I wasn't open to receiving help. That's what I see when I look at this collaboration."

"We're just two girls you met in the woods."

"Yes. Exactly. The three of us were the only ones out there. Everyone else was at home watching TV. We're the ones who are supposed to be working on this, if anyone is."

Lila smiled into her coffee. He had her, there.

"Well, then, how do we start?"

"Let's speak of it tomorrow," Terry said, closing his laptop and starting to pack his things away. "I want to go home and contemplate. I think you should, too."

Lila raised her eyebrows. "Oh. Okay. Well, I think I will stay here and finish my coffee."

"Good idea. I find I get a lot of good ideas when I do just that. Just sit and stare." He glanced over to where a darkly-clad young woman was sitting in the corner of the cafe behind him. This girl had been watching them off and on throughout their meeting. Lila found this amusing for some reason. He broke the tension by waving briefly to the girl. She looked away. "Well," Terry corrected himself, "I try not to stare. Nobody likes that. But, you know." Terry zipped up his

messenger bag and put on his jacket. "Til tomorrow, then. I think we should all get together somewhere and talk more about process. Our process."

Lila smiled goodbye, holding her coffee close to her face. When he was gone she turned her gaze back to the dark liquid and the pale reflections in it, as if she could scry some answer as to the shape of the future. All she saw was her own face.

Terry was elated as he walked home from his meeting with Lila. In the chill he thought of Christmas. Finally, something was beginning. Later he would meet Simon for a beer; right now he was going to take a much-deserved nap. He had been borderline insomniac all semester and he wished for peace. He would need all his strength, too, to keep up with this project, which was so much bigger than him, now.

Funny how Teana (she'd been watching them in the cafe) immediately became interested in him once he was no longer considering her for a role. Or maybe she was just worried about the welfare of the woman he was with. Oh well, fun to speculate, but nothing to be gained there. He walked briskly into the future while savoring the present. Autumn. Lovely Autumn. Not much time before the snows would drown out the light, but that was a concern for later, if they even got that far. Ahead lay his lovely apartment, his home. The only question now was whether to nap first or bathe first, and whether to masturbate as part of the nap or part of the bath, or both, or neither. He felt sure he would finish his day with Kurosawa and a middle-grade red wine. More than three dollars but less than twenty. And finally he would be refreshed and grounded and ready to listen, really listen. The will of the universe was speaking.

Lila made tea as if for the last time. She always felt this way before the start of something big. It was if she would never be alone again. Last time she'd remembered feeling this way was when she started her job. Of course, it wasn't quite the end of the world. So far all the things she'd begun had always ended. At least she got to come home at the end of the day. She would always have tea.

This felt different, though. This was something that was going to happen inside her. She couldn't hold anything back, they wouldn't let her.

How would she play the villain? She'd agreed to do something she had no clue how to do. Or what it even was.

She wanted to call Ernestina but then she'd miss out on this last chance to know herself as she currently was. The end of the world. The beginning of another world. She was going to carry on, even though things were changing. She was going to carry on. There would still be tea. There would still be Ernestina. What if Ernestina changed? Well, there would still be tea. You've got to let it happen. Tea. Tea doesn't change and that's enough. That's all you get.

"Ernie? Did I wake you?" She had given in and called.

"What time is it?"

"It's kind of late, I guess."

"You didn't wake me. Are we getting together with Terry tomorrow?"

"Yes, that's the plan." Lila swallowed. "Ernie, what am I supposed to do?"

"What did you tell him you'd do?"

"I told him I'd play Blake."

"As a woman?"

Lila hadn't really considered playing Blake, herself, as a man. "Well, I had assumed..."

"No need to assume anything. Lila, I see a fantastic possibility here. We can make up our own story."

"We always do that."

"Indeed. But this time it's bigger. And, Lila, this could really help people."

"Help people? How?"

"Oh, honey. I'm glad you called. I thought we were on the same page."

"Ernie, I feel like I'm just going along with something. How am I supposed to fit in?"

Ernestina paused. Lila felt her throat tightening, her chest, suddenly she felt like she was afraid of dying.

"Lila," Ernestina said, finally, "trust yourself."

With those words, the anxiety lifted off of Lila like a heavy wet cloak slipping from her body. "Oh, right."

The next day the three gathered in the park, in a big open space. They stood in the shape of an equilateral triangle. Terry had his camera under his arm.

"Well, you two have read the script, we all know basically what this is all about, right?" Terry said jovially. Behind him it looked like a big storm was gathering. The clouds were clustering up and forming big shadows.

Lila raised her hand. The others looked at her. They waited. She waited. Finally she gave up waiting for permission to speak and simply spoke.

"Where are our props?"

"Today," Terry said, "we won't need props. Now. There have been some changes to the storyline. Ernestina, you are playing Cassandra, head scout of the Deer tribe's hunting party. Lila, you are playing Blake, head scout of a rival gang. The scene we're filming today is, well, what do you think we should start with?"

Ernestina looked at Lila. Terry looked at Lila. "Why me?" she asked.

Terry shrugged. "It doesn't have to be you."

"No, Lila, it'll be easier if you just dive in."

"Tomorrow it'll be clearer," Terry promised. "If you guys have time tomorrow, that is."

"I don't have to work till Wednesday," Lila said distractedly.

"We have time," Ernestina said.

"So," Terry said, looking at Lila again, "what scene should we do?"

"The part where I first creep over that hill," Lila pointed South, surprising herself with her sudden certainty. "On my belly. I look down and see Cassandra across the clearing. She's just discovering this new place, this big open area that may be unsafe for both of us. Who will reach the middle first? Who will take control of it?"

"Control of it? Why?" Ernestina asked.

"Because. It's a holy place. It was holy. It was said to be a place where no one had ever died a violent death. And the first person to break the peace here would be cursed. Blake's goal is to defile it."

"Yes. Yes." Terry was nodding, his eyes closed, he was smiling.

"How? How will he defile it?" Ernestina asked.

"By killing a snake."

"And Cassandra wishes to come to this place to meditate. She's trying to be reunited with her people."

"Blake will try to kill her instead of the snake?" Terry asked.

"He'll try to get her to be cursed instead."

"She's afraid of snakes."

"All right!" Terry said. "Shall we move into position?"

Lila looked into Ernestina's eyes; Ernestina looked back at her. Lila nodded. Ernestina nodded. They turned and ran in opposite directions, towards opposite ends

of the park. Lila hurried to the place she'd pointed to, at the top of a rise in the grass. She got down low as if to hide herself. Suddenly she heard and saw a tremendous explosion coming from the East. She looked, terrified; there was smoke rising from behind the trees.

"Ignore it!" Ernestina was shouting. "Remember, bombs go off all the time!"

Lila looked back down into the green open space. Terry had set up his camera on a tripod on the East end of the field. He was fiddling with it, seemed not to have noticed any explosion.

There it was. The holy field. Lila gazed at it, felt its significance. "I am Blake," she muttered.

Looking across the field, suddenly she saw Ernestina, Cassandra, partially concealed by the trees on the other side. She had not spotted Blake yet, in his superior position. What to do? She would enter the field in a moment. If she reached the center she would be unassailable, protected. She could conceivably make contact with her holy man. She'd bring him here. They'd build a new temple, establish guardians, draw perpetual strength from this place. The fool didn't even know it, didn't even understand the significance and power of this place. Only Blake did, and he was going to tie up that loose end right now. If he could just get there first. If he could just stop her from praying.

She was afraid, scared by the bombs. She was on her own. She took a step into the clearing, timid as a deer. She carried weapons and tools, all the standard gear of a Deer scout. She could kill a snake, all right.

Blake crept down behind the hill and to the West, trying to get closer under cover of the trees. She

would hear him if he made one false step. He was used to travelling noisily but now he had to be quiet, had to. In the pack on his back he had several small animal cages, all empty except for one, which contained a snake. He was near to her side of the glade now. He crouched silently, opening his pack, reaching for the snake cage.

Another explosion. Damn. She'd be on her guard, and desperate to reach her holy man.

She was in the center now. She was on her knees. Blake released the snake.

"Jesus. Today was insane."

"You dove right in. I was impressed."

"So how'd it turn out?"

"Terry said he got great footage."

"I could have sworn it was all real."

They were sitting at Lila's kitchen table, the evening after the first day of filming. Terry had taken his camera home to do some editing and to review all the footage. Lila hadn't wanted to see it. She wasn't sure she'd ever want to see it.

"What did you think of Cassandra?" Ernestina asked.

"I didn't... I wasn't sure I liked her. She seemed weak."

"Well, she would, to you."

"No offense, of course."

"None taken."

"What did you think of Blake?"

"I wonder how he'll turn out. Strange that he's still a man."

"I guess I didn't really have a clear idea of my own. Do you suppose it can change?"

"I do suppose so. It'll look the same, from the outside. The characters haven't really even met yet. We haven't used any pronouns."

Lila held her cup and looked at the edge of the table.
"I feel too tired to cook."

"Let's order something. Chinese?"

"Yeah. Fine. Anything. Will you put the order in? I don't even care what I get."

Ernestina looked sympathetic. "I'll have them leave out the rice." She wandered over to Lila's fridge where a selection of menus and ads had been posted, usually for Ernestina's benefit since Lila rarely ate any kind of food that could be delivered. "Terry won't be a true director til he gets us a caterer. I'm too tired to order."

It reminded Ernestina of that one year of college. The good parts always revolved around ordering Chinese food and eating it while wearing pajamas. It was her way of healing from all the other aspects of college life, which she hadn't taken to. If the only good thing in your life is take out or delivery, drop out. Still, she felt nostalgic.

"Let's not watch TV tonight," said Lila.

Ernestina was disappointed. "Why not?"

"It's too weird to watch movies and make movies at the same time. Let's pretend we're camping again. Let's just sit in silence if we have to. No more alternate realities. I can't take it."

"Well, did you at least have fun?"

"Oh, yes. More than I ever dreamed."

They ate their food right out of the styrofoam boxes it was delivered in, all while staring at the flame of a large, white, unscented candle Lila had placed in the middle of the living room, as a replacement television. It was strangely effective.

Terry was watching the dailies, a big truck stop soda on his desk. The girls were stronger than he'd imagined they'd be. He had had to ask them to repeat some movements so that he could film them from different angles, and this now required some light correction. But it was all easier with the technique he was using, a rather scratchy and washed-out black-and-white. He had the equipment to go from film to digital, and back, if he wanted. He wasn't using digital filters. That was the essence: No filter.

He watched, again and again, the unhesitating snakelike perfection of Lila's crawl up the hillside- Blake's crawl up the hillside. The clothes she'd been wearing that day were perfect already. No wardrobe necessary. He'd wished Cassandra had manifested a little more scant in the clothes department, but no doubt Ernestina's choices had made sense. They knew how to dress for rugged terrain and potential danger.

It had all seemed second nature to the girls. They had such trust in each other, such a deep history. Would it hold up once he gave them lines? Would he give them lines? Would they speak? My God, he thought. It's a silent film. About the future.

If he had been in love with the project before, why, this was like dying in its arms.

...

"Here's to success!" Simon held up his beer.

"I'll drink to that!" Terry and Simon clinked glasses and drank. It was bubbly, heady and sweet in Terry's nose. Everything was sweet.

"Tell me, the girl you got to play your wank fantasy..."

"You know it's not like that," Terry laughed.

"I mean I wondered if you'd ever get the right girl. Is she..." he raised his eyebrows, "the right girl?"

"Insinuate all you want," Terry said. "It's out of my hands anyway. Whatever designs I may have had, it's clear now that purer forces are in control."

"Purer forces?"

"The God-- or Goddess-- of Art."

"Bacchus?"

"Oh, no, I don't think that's correct, no. Oh, Simon," Terry sighed, slumping forward over the table, "I hope you discover the formula that brings justice and peace to this country."

"It can be expressed in numbers," Simon said pensively.

"And it can be done. I no longer hold any doubts."

The next day, Lila decided Ernestina should teach her to ride a motorcycle.

"You need a special license," Ernestina said.

"We'll only use it for a couple scenes. I'll go slow and Terry can speed it up, maybe even edit in a forest. It'll be funny!"

"If you crash my motorcycle, I swear to God--"

It had already been decided that Cassandra would be the one with all the big riding scenes, but Blake would have to appear menacing on a motorcycle at least once. Perhaps Cassandra could steal the motorcycle from him.

"Ernie. I've got it. You pretend to be me."

"Of course!"

"He could probably edit in a whole gang of you if he wanted!"

"And whenever Cassandra has to do a push-up, you pretend to be me."

They laughed.

"We'll put me in spanx and a padded bra."

"And we'll cut off your feet."

"Exactly."

At the end of their first full week of filming (they did night scenes with Blake alone while Ernestina was working; They did day scenes of Cassandra alone while Lila was working; They got everyone together on their

days off) the three had another meeting at the campus cafe.

Terry was gratified secretly that Teana was there again, still sulking in her corner seat, more and more intrigues, no doubt.

"I have all the footage in my possession," Terry said, "and it is safely backed up as well. You've both indicated that you don't wish to see any cuts before it's finished, so I'll offer to share what observations I've assembled over the hours I've spent watching and shaping the material."

"Yes, please," said Ernestina.

"Agreed," said Lila.

"The clarity and purity of your acting style is shining through in every moment, Ernestina. Cassandra is a bright flame. Everything we wanted to convey is coming across very well, in my opinion. I imagine it will all look somewhat different to an audience, but I have no doubt that whatever they see, it will be something beautiful. You, Lila, are a powerful and subtle presence on film. Blake-- well-- I'm not sure if he's a man but there can be no doubt of his intent."

"Intent?" Lila frowned and leaned back in her chair. "Am I being-- sexual?"

"Lila, remember, it's not you. And no, I wouldn't say that. Blake's intent is not sexual. It's... a sort of impassioned nihilism. A death eros."

Lila sighed. "I'm not sure I like those words."

"Consider changing your approach. Or, consider accepting it. Remember who Blake is. I feel what you've been doing is very appropriate."

"Maybe we should switch." Lila heard herself saying. She had crossed her arms. Was she really upset?

"Lila," Ernestina said, "don't doubt yourself. Don't second guess. Not with this. It's our chance to really do it up, let loose, say what needs to be said."

"I don't want to be predatory."

"It's not you."

"Of course it's me."

"Maybe it's Jim," said Ernestina.

The table went silent.

"What are we all? Ghosts in each other's heads?" Lila said.

Meanwhile, in the far corner, Teana sneezed onto her laptop, grumbled with displeasure as she wiped the screen with a paper napkin.

"I can't put my finger on it," Lila said, eyeing the volume knob on the car's radio console, "but there's something wrong with pop music." I'm old, she thought. That's what I mean.

"Don't worry. I'll find someone fit to do the soundtrack."

Soundtrack? "Oh." She felt a little thrill of excitement. "I hadn't thought of that."

Terry and Lila were in Lila's little car on their way to the national park where they'd first met. When they got there, Ernestina was going to off-road. Hopefully no one would catch them. Ernestina's unicorn mask was secured in the back seat with Terry's camera equipment and a sack full of Lila's manliest clothes, some suitably over-small, which she'd been saving for rags and scraps since that time years ago when she finally went through the heaps of old stuff she'd left at her parent's house.

Soon they were getting their equipment into position in the clearing they'd selected. "You've really thought about music?" she asked.

"Oh yes. The film will need a score. Especially if it's a silent film."

"Couldn't it just be screened in churches with an organist?"

"Ideally, yes. But this isn't a perfect world. We should try to package the music with the film."

"Funny, neither of us ever learned to play."

"Maybe you should."

"No. I'm sure there's someone qualified who'd do a good job. They deserve a chance. Nobody can do everything by themselves."

Terry nodded. "Still, you could learn."

"Okay. Ready?"

Terry sat in the trunk of Lila's car which was backed as far as they could into a stand of trees.

"I feel a little bit bad about this."

Behind the car several yards was Ernestina on her motorcycle, preparing to go forward just fast enough for the bike to stay upright.

"It's gonna look great!" said Terry. "If we have to we can loop it. And after this we'll do a take with Blake's outfit and the mask!"

Terry thought it'd be worth the risk, so the others went along with the plan. Ernestina liked something about the setup, imagining the ridiculous effect of a camera perched in the trunk of a moving car. This was how they were creating the effect of a motorcycle speeding through a forest. Just enough to give a fleeting impression. Hitchcock never showed the knife entering the victim's body, Terry reminded them. And Ernestina would wear the unicorn mask whenever she rode as Blake. It would convince everyone, he promised, as long as it was done with absolute faith. Zoom in close enough and the thing will seem monumental. Terry's camera catalogued the features of Blake's mask: feathers and furs from exotic game; gems and pearls sacked from the treasure hoards of bigtime warlords; gold dust... And who had crafted this wonder? Only legend could tell: whispers and rumors of a magician or an old master of forgotten technologies, either bribed

or enslaved by the demon-warrior Blake to craft and enchant a mask that would inspire even more terror and worship than the all-but-unknown sound of a combustion engine. There he is, resplendent and terrifying as he enters Cassandra's territory-- the Deer Tribe's home land.

The people would scatter before him, divided, helpless, cut off from their last source-- the persistent wildness of the land, and the persistent resourcefulness of its people. They'd be weak without their home fires, their holy places. Some would even join him, believing at last the evidence of the innate corruption of man, the evidence that was all around them if they could be taught to see it-- the ruins of cities, the wastelands of toxic garbage, the radiation sickness, the terrifying rainbow of chemically damaged landscapes-- This was the reality in the land where Blake was born, and he had come to the so-called Good Lands to spread the gospel, and put an end to the blind suffering they called "hope"-- once and for all.

When it was Ernestina in the role, for riding and any other stunts she might specialize in, they'd simply put her in Lila's clothes and add a little padding-- the key was a few iconic pieces of jewelry, accessories like black military surplus riding gloves. And then Lila would take her turn wearing the mask. The illusion of Blake was being assembled. Terry knew how to create a sense of continuity where in reality there was none.

Ernestina knew people at the community college who could play the Deer Tribe. She called each of her most skilled classmates and arranged a time for Terry to come and film them doing their favorite outdoor activity or their favorite craft. Thus the Deer Tribe was assembled: archers, ball players, painters, farmers, each immortalized in the act. The footage would give a sense of what was at stake. Cassandra's heart was populated.

Yes. It was all coming together before Terry's eyes.



When the movie was finished, Lila wondered, would Blake disappear? If he existed only on film, no longer a part of her, no body, he'd have no more power to act in the world. Unless someone saw the movie.

This was the sort of thing she thought about at night now, in her room with the door closed, Ernestina out on the couch as always. She'd fallen asleep so easily, exhausted and angelically satisfied by the day's labors. Well, Lila reflected, it was easy for her-- she got to be the good guy. In fact Lila had never seen Ernestina so harmonious. Probably she was thinking of Cassandra 24 hours a day just as Lila was thinking of Blake. Ernestina had something nice to think about at work now-- a better friend. Whereas Lila had invented just another abusive boyfriend. However, he was going to lose. That was as it should be.

Lila lay on her bed with her lamp on. On impulse she went out to her craft cupboard, found a piece of heavy red fabric, a cheap scratchy velvet with a burn-out pattern of burlesque fleurs-de-lis. She draped it over the lampshade and the room became darker, redder. Now she could see him.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" he asked, as if anticipating all the bad things he would be responsible for.

"Enjoy this time," Lila responded. "Soon we'll part ways and I'll go back."

"You can't go back."

"Then I'll go forward."

She snatched the fabric off the lamp and tossed it on the floor like dirty underwear, if she'd been that sort of person. She looked at the potted plant in the

corner, on the table by the window. Her mask, the one she'd made of all her photographs, was there too, leaning against the plant, its empty eyes regarding the room imperturbably. It had nothing dangerous inside. If she put it on she could gaze through and beyond everything it represented. Here it is: your past. Afraid? It's only a mask! Look...

When she woke she could smell the coffee. Ernestina must be up. Lila went out to find her standing in the garden, looking up at the sky.

"It's too dark and cold to film today," said Ernestina. "Don't you think?"

"Staying home sounds good," said Lila.

"I'll call Terry," said Ernestina, getting out her cell phone. "Then we'll make a stew."

They spent the morning filling the slow cooker with practically everything in Lila's kitchen. It would cook down til evening and taste great.

"I wonder what it'll be like portraying a man while I'm menstruating."

They were working side by side, each with a cutting board.

"Well, if your boobs aren't a problem I don't imagine a little menses will change much."

"But, emotionally."

"Well the way I see it, it can only improve matters. According to a book I read once, at that point in your cycle you are most in touch with death."

"Me?"

"People in general."

"It's nice being alone with you again," said Lila. "Do you think it'll ever be like it was?"

"It never was. Everything's a cycle."

"Ernie, please don't go away from me."

Ernestina looked up from her chopping, a surprised look on her face. After a moment she put down her knife and came and put her arms around Lila's shoulders.

That night it was nice and cold. The big candle was glowing in the living room. There were bowls of deep dark stew in their laps, quilts over their backs.

"Let's watch White Christmas," said Lila.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Then Kill Bill."

"Then Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet."

"Maybe tomorrow we'll finish the movie, eh?"

Terry closed down his editing software for the night and went home. Entering his domicile he wondered if the women would still be his friends after the movie was finished. It wouldn't matter. He had a movie about the future. What do you do with a movie about the future? That's what a practical person would ask. Something his advisor, for example, would ask.

Outside, the street was busy with the same old cars. Bundled-up people walking dogs. Terry poured a glass of bourbon and looked out the window. Where were they now? He didn't even know where Ernestina lived. He hoped they were keeping warm. How was it that none of them had cats?

The darkness sparkled in the late Autumn. It was getting frosty, killing the gardens of the houses in the neighborhood. Almost all of the leaves were down, some raked into piles or bags, some mulched, some left crisply carpeting the grass between the sidewalk and the street. Not much time left to be outside-- To be fully alive. Terry only missed the outdoors when he couldn't go outdoors. He'd spent the summer writing a script. What would he do now? Watch movies, stay buried. Mourn. Wait. Walk slowly and with pain. Or, he could search for a musician to compose a score. They could meet again in spring and see what had been written in the deep isolation.

My love, the Autumn's here, and we're still working on the film.
You started crying in your sleep and told me not to go.
No need to fear, my love, no matter if the light gets dim.
There's more to life than you or I would ever need to know.
When we are old we'll watch ourselves and wonder at the sight.
We'll wonder why we ever feared the things we fear today-
We'll be together, or apart - in dark or in the light.
We'll be a part of everything no matter what they say.
Old ladies going camping - ain't it rich and ain't it grand.
Will we have kids and husbands? Somehow I don't seem to care.
And in the fall we'll hit the beach and sprawl out on the sand.
Cause ladies on vacation know just when to go and where.
I love you more than you will ever know.
I think that it has just begun to snow.

Shit, thought Ernestina-- I've been writing in Iambic
heptameter. Nobody wants that.

Finally the day came when it was time to shoot Blake's death scene. It would be the last scene. Terry wanted it to happen on the coldest day of filming. At least he catered this time. When they met in the park, the holy park again, he had sandwiches.

Lila looked at the sandwich, then at the sky. No one was talking. Ernestina at least knew that Lila never ate bread, but for some reason she would eat it today. It was cold. Lila unfolded the sandwich from its waxed paper. She bit in and it was thick with roast beef. She felt it come over her: the character of someone who had been starving, someone who was about to die. Here. Out in the open.

She finished her sandwich, folded the paper and lay it on the ground.

Blake looked up. Cassandra was standing in the center of the field, her face reflecting light from the sinking sun and from the flashes of flares and bombs in the distance. The sound echoed around them. She was watching him, knew he was there. He thought, If she means to kill me, she won't do it here. She's weakened herself again. He felt his hand on the hunting knife at his side. He drew it from its sheath and threw it to the ground where it planted itself blade-first.

He trotted down the hill towards her, his mask under his arm.

Cassandra watched Blake come. She was steady, firm and grounded in place. The earth was solid beneath her. She could see the glinting eyes of his mask, the one he used to strike awe in the hearts of the ignorant. She had knocked him down from his motorcycle long ago but had failed to capture this last source of power. Til today, that is. How little he must fear her. That he would so arrogantly bring it with him today, after all

the times she had escaped, whittling him down piece by piece and he couldn't even see it.

I have a mask, too! she shouted fiercely before he got too close. He stopped in his tracks, both hands now on his mask, preparing to engage her in battle.

Cassandra reached over her left shoulder into the small satchel she carried. She drew out the mask. It was composed entirely of mental images made solid and laid one over another like shimmering plates of armor: they were Blake's own memories. Impossible magic! Cassandra was not so powerless after all. Each time they had met she had stolen from him one dream from his past, something he could now no longer remember, something that only she knew.

What have you done? he uttered in rage and fear.

Do you still wish to contest against me? Cassandra cried. I hold ultimate power against you!

Impossible.

I know holy men, too, Cassandra said, walking towards him. But I don't kill the ones who help me. Their magic grows strong. It heals me. It reduces you.

Blake looked over his shoulder to where his knife rested in the ground. He felt one last surge of rage, of defeated effort, of desire to attack the woman who stood before him. It faded and left him serene. He looked up at the sky. The clouds above him seemed to thin and glow, separating to show a ribbon of light, like an ice floe breaking up. He could feel it in his chest, the breaking. He went to his knees. He looked down at the fading earth that would receive him. Darkness pulsed in around the edges of his vision.

Do it, then.

Cassandra gently took his mask from between his hands. I will not do you violence. I will take your life. She put on the mask and Blake looked up for the first time into the horror of what he had been. The creature in the death mask handed him the mask made of his memories. As he held it to his face it all came rushing back, drowning him completely. He fell at her feet and knew no more.

Lila became aware of her heart pounding. She rolled onto her back and pulled off the mask, looking up at the bright sky, panting. "Shit!" she gasped. Ernestina the unicorn was looking down at her; she pulled off her mask, too. Lila laughed. "I'm alive!"

Ernestina smiled. Lila got up and they both started shouting joyful shouts that echoed off the trees and the plastic playground equipment and the houses and the cars around the park. "Woohoo! Yeah!"

"I guess we're done," Terry said, coming towards them. "I have to just pack up my stuff and then I need to be taken straight home. I'm feeling very emotional."

"Do you want to come over?" Lila asked Ernestina as they pulled away from Terry's.

"Tomorrow, I'll feed you dinner," Ernestina said.
"Don't ask how. I'll find a way. Come to my place."

Lila nodded, set her course for Ernestina's apartment, where they'd unload the mask and some assorted costumes and weapons. Blake's knife, of course, was Lila's own. She was still the only one who could clean a fish or field-dress a deer, though technically she'd only done that once and probably never would again. It was important to know, and the knife had power forever because of all it had accomplished.

"I wrote this poem for you," Ernestina said, pulling a folded sheet of paper out of her jacket pocket. "I'm sorry its scansion is awkward. And I didn't rewrite it because I don't believe in that." She placed it on the dashboard. "Wait til you're alone to read it. I'm too self-conscious."

...

Lila pulled onto her parking pad in the back of her house, went through the gate into her back yard where her neglected garden was still fearlessly producing greens, if not for much longer. At least the hoop houses had kept the plants safe from the little bit of snow that now lingered in patches between the still-green blades of grass.

It was good that it was Winter now. Change was coming anyway. It would seem natural. They could do what they always did in Winter. What everything did: burrow under. Maybe they needed some time alone. Maybe they needed to make new friends. Maybe they needed lovers, or big dogs. Or both. Or babies wrapped in furs. That was her idea of the post-apocalyptic future. There

would be nothing but families. People could only really live in good places; in the long run, people and beauty are to be found together. Beauty was invented by people, a term for something that is needed for survival. In the long run it would turn out that way. Beauty and people would perish together or endure together, inseparable.

As for Lila, tonight she'd just light a candle, put on a record and do some knitting.

•••

Under a bright window,
the motorcycle--
Distant train.

Ernestina liked the nighttime, so she liked the Winter. On a day off it just meant less time to wait before you could call it good and plop yourself down under a quilt to watch a movie and eat chips. She felt like she and Terry had this understanding in common, and maybe now that Terry's movie was done he could relax, get back to the good life. Making great works of art was part of a good life, to be sure, but it was like running a marathon. Something occasional, something you could only do maybe once a year, or every couple years, with lots of preparation. Terry was overcommitting, she could tell. And now, of course, he had editing to do. Bah. Editing. She'd talk to him about it, suggest that he take it easy and just put together a cut any way he could, keep to the schedule of finishing before the deep snows. Spend the Winter thinking of something else. Ernestina was ready to think of something else. To be something else. She was ready to learn to cook.

•••

"You once said you thought we could help people, with this film. What did you mean?"

Ernestina seemed vague and unsure as she gazed out her window. "Maybe I just meant you, me and Terry. We were helped."

"I don't think so," said Lila. "I think when we see this movie we might be surprised."

Ernestina laughed. "You mean by how bad it is?"

"No. There's no time for thinking like that. I am prepared, I mean, all I need to learn about myself from this project I learned while we were doing it. What's left on film is by its nature outside of me. I am going to try to remember that, when I watch it. If I watch it."

"If?"

"Maybe it's not for me. You know?"

Ernestina nodded. "I knew what it was like to be transformed. I was, for a while, someone strong, in all the ways I've always wanted to be strong."

"I gave in," Lila said. "I was certain, for once. I was in the flow of my own sense of purpose. Then I died." She laughed. She had never really thought it through, that if she continued to be Blake she would die with him. Maybe she had sensed it, maybe she had wanted it. His obliteration. His surrender. Having played his part. No blame. "Maybe there is something to it. I think it's a very hopeful demonstration."

"Oh, I agree."

Ernestina really was cooking. She was cooking a chicken she'd bought at Trader Joe's. She'd read on the internet that it was pretty hard to mess up a chicken. You just put on salt and pepper and let it roast away.

Perfect for a cold evening. Her apartment had never smelled so good. It smelled kind of like Lila's house.

"I can't believe you're making me a chicken!"

"Hey, I didn't make it. I'm just cooking it."

"I never cook animals for you."

"You always make my favorite things. A big piece of meat is the closest thing to convenience food I would dare to serve you. Honestly, it's not hard, is it?" Ernestina smiled, sitting down next to Lila on the couch in the living room. They clinked their glasses together. "To bad wine in festive quantities."

"It's perfectly good."

"It's nice having you here."

"We should do it more often!"

"Even though I don't have a TV?"

Lila laughed. "Your place is very cozy. If we wanted to watch something we could just use your computer."

"Darkness plus immobility. Baudry's Apparatus. The Lacanian screen."

"Terry has some interesting ideas."

"He has them, yes, and many of them are actually his own. I'd like to take some classes, too. Maybe photography. Maybe I could make my own mask like yours."

"The community college has a photography class."

Ernestina drank from her wine, got the distant look again. Looking out the window, not making eye contact, as if she were ashamed of something. Lila looked at her friend's deerlike face.

"Maybe you needed to defeat me."

"So we could go on."

"Nobody else would have done it."

"Maybe that's enough."

"Do you trust him with what we gave him?"

"Oh, yes."

"He will make it into something."

"He gave up everything."

"You think so?"

"All he did was give us new names. We rewrote the whole script for him. And he was all for it. He saw what we saw and we saw what he saw. It became three-dimensional."

"Four-dimensional."

"And then it just existed by itself. The easiest thing in the world."

"Much easier than writing."

"Obviously. He was glad to give it up."

"In exchange for a movie."

"Yes. We threw out the script and replaced it with a movie."

They laughed.

"So." Ernestina paused. "Should we just leave it at that since there's nothing more we can find out for now, until Terry finishes the edit?"

"Let's just live in the moment."

"The chicken! Right?"

"The chicken."

"More wine?"

"Yes!"

"And let's watch Green Wing while it cooks."

"No. Something appetizing, please."

"Black Books?"

"Better."

"What about that show about the chef?"

"Too stressful."

"The ayes have it. I'll grab the jug and meet you in my boudoir."

Lila went in. Dark, jangly with mirrors and beads. Soft quilt. Bed somewhat too small but nicely fit into the wall, pillows piled on either end. Good blankets. Good smell. Warm smell. Not laundered all that often, just a warm body smell, a room smell. It's okay because we like each other. The smell of your room is not quite

like the smell of my room but it's a place I know I'm safe. Snow is falling outside the window. You're on your wireless keyboard. Somehow you are really good at using a computer. You don't seem to need a mouse and that is the hallmark of someone who knows their computer, right? You're starting the show, right at episode one. Lila gathered a blanket up around her neck and snuggled in. The smell of the chicken cooking, the warm dusty fabric of this room, this room full of junk, the window hung with beads and Christmas lights shut tight against the cold.

Terry had been editing almost nonstop for days. With the women all but out of his life, at least for the time being, his sense of balance was definitely on the wane. Plus the only way he could see them now was on film, in black and white, replaying the same actions again and again. It was deeply hypnotic, deeply compelling. He supposed it was just as well he didn't own any of the editing equipment he was using, otherwise he would be working on the project literally 24 hours a day. As it was he had to utilize the university's editing lab for most of the work, and the lab was not located near to any food sources and had no place to sleep, so inevitably he would creep out, red-eyed and almost dead, to take care of his basic needs. This couldn't go on. If he had learned anything it was that adults, like Lila and Ernestina, could focus without destroying themselves, took pleasure in a variety of activities, were very capable of being alone and being still. Terry wanted to be like them. But he couldn't stop watching them, couldn't stop the intensely pleasurable process of shaping their actions into something beautiful and structured, forming the raw footage back into a story. He knew the time was coming soon when he would have to release it, abandon it to its fate. He would show it to Simon. Perhaps Teana. They would see it in their own way. They would show him what it was really about. So many compromises had been made, if you could even call them compromises. Renewals, revisions, but so many, that Terry was sure none of the three of them could possibly see it whole. Anything could happen at this point. Just like at any other point. What could be more chaotic, more wonderful?

But at some point he had to sleep.

Reluctantly, he saved and exported his data and disconnected from the bank of machines. He attempted consciously to slow down, to compensate for his

exhaustion by employing deliberation and patience, as he got up, stretched, looked around the room to take it in, to reposition himself in the present moment. He put on his coat. He checked his pockets. He took one more moment to think and then headed out into the cold night.

He liked walking, even though the weather was colder each night. And at night it was particularly pleasant, crisp, dark and as silent as the city ever got. The acoustics were always wet at night.

He hoped to meet someone on his walk. Terry realized he was lonely and unchallenged since the filming had ended. He must keep the momentum. He must keep on making new friends. Wouldn't it be nice to run into someone he knew now, someone to warm him up a little? The way he'd been living his life... That's it, he thought to himself, I'm getting a cat. Tomorrow.

The apartment. It definitely needs more things. Totems. Comforts. I am not intentionally minimalist, that's obvious. I'm just someone who doesn't look around him. Look at this mess. Socks on the floor. Underwear on the couch. Don't be like this. He started picking up his clothes at least. Suddenly as he looked around everything seemed incorrect. He had his editing brain on and couldn't turn it off. Damn. He felt as if he wouldn't be able to sleep until he had repainted the walls in his living room. Absurd. Too late to call anyone to talk him down. Oh well. He had a rough cut of the first fifteen minutes of the movie which he had burned to dvd for safekeeping. He put it on. There it was. Apocalypse Recon. Blake on his motorcycle, with his mask, in the trees. That deadly knife at his side. Or her side. Honestly once you watched the film it became kind of obvious that the character was female. He'd edited in a few dialogue cards already, simply from remembering what they had said. None of it, well,

very little of it, was from the script as he had written it. It was more like the words he had written had merely been the seed, the preexisting form. What had grown out of it had been so much more beautiful than he could ever have intended. Even though it wasn't yet done and it wasn't even clear what sort of film it was, he loved it naturally, like a parent would love a child. And all children are beautiful.

Watching the brief cut somehow put him back on level ground. Just watching it, unable to make changes, only watching and absorbing, letting the images fire themselves at his passive, receptive brain, he was able to realize how profoundly peaceful the film was, how strangely giving it was in spite of the violence they had intended to portray. After only fifteen minutes he felt as if he'd been sitting in meditation. Perhaps it was the silence. He suddenly knew that he had been off-base in his intention to add music. Only a particular kind of music would do, and he wasn't sure yet what it was. How much chaos can one man sit comfortably at the center of?!

During her shift at the grocery store Lila realized with relief that she no longer thought about Blake. The burden of creating him was lifted. It really did feel like a completed work. However, when business was slow and she found herself standing at the register not helping anyone, and during those rare times when she was not talking to Catleene or Steven or whoever else was on duty with her at the time, she would simply stand still, looking vaguely down the snack aisle. Anyone would think she was daydreaming of corn and soy, but the truth was that she was thinking of Terry, wondering how he was coming along with the edit of their film. She still hadn't decided whether or not she ever wanted to actually watch it, but somehow it was important to her to know when it was done. Like wondering about a distant, aging relative one no longer even writes to, perhaps a person who has gone so far down their own road, toward the end of their life, that if they should turn and look back they won't even see you anymore, they can only look forward, peering into the mist. What would be there? Hopefully something good.

"Didn't you want a break?" asked Catleene, returning to the register, tying her purely-cosmetic uniform apron around her.

Lila had more or less forgotten to take her break. It wouldn't have been much of a break anyway, just a quick fifteen minutes in the break room upstairs, where there might be a tub of hummus and a bag of chips that she didn't even want.

"You know, I feel like I'd rather just push on through," said Lila vaguely. "I guess I was daydreaming."

"I was surprised to see you just standing there, usually you have a knitting project or something."

Catleene was the one who admired Lila's knitting the most-- fiber art, as Catleene called it.

"I've been working on other things, lately," Lila said. She finally drew her gaze to focus on Catleene's young face. She was small, roundly built, with a winning smile and innocence. Lila enjoyed working with her, wished she could feel normal enough to want to converse. Catleene was too polite to want to pry but she was looking at Lila curiously. "Have you ever made a movie?" Lila asked.

"Oh, sure. I mean, I've been in a few music videos."

"How long do they usually take to edit?"

"I don't know," said Catleene, shifting her weight and turning her gaze upward to consult her memory. No doubt she knew artists of every type. "It depends on who's editing, I think. I feel like some things I never get to see. Either they never get done at all or they forget to send it to me. I'm usually just an extra. The chorus line." She laughed. "Did you get to be in a movie?"

"I did."

"I always enjoy it."

"It was enjoyable. I suppose that's the word."

"I'd like to see your movie."

"I wish I knew what to tell you," said Lila. "I am a little out of the loop at the moment. But I can't stop thinking about it."

Catleene looked concerned. "I hope you won't forget about all your other projects." She smiled. "After all,

Christmas is coming up! You must have a lot of mittens to knit."

Lila smiled. It was true, Lila always gave mittens as Christmas gifts. Or scarves. Or socks, if she was really ambitious. Probably no socks this year. Probably just scarves. Scarves were the easiest but they had a way of getting too long.

So one thing we now know for sure, Ernestina thought: this motorcycle is "the bomb." Ernestina normally self-censored but not about this. Not today. It was the first time since filming that she'd really looked at it. She wanted to clean it and wax it but in this weather there was really no point. And she wouldn't be going on any more big trips for a while. It would just be sitting under the tarp, maybe carrying her across town now and then. But in the Spring she was going to do some serious detailing. Oh yes. She could see it now. She was pretty confident she could do the paint job herself and have it turn out at least good enough. Especially if she used her dad's garage. She'd do it while they took their annual vacation. She was going to add feather graphics, and color it to match her unicorn mask. It would be even more unique... Well, a thing was either unique or it wasn't, Ernestina had to remind herself. She'd been trying to think more precisely, and the poetry was helping. Come to think of it, if she ever found herself a really good haiku, she would stencil it on to the rear wheel housing. Like where people normally/"normally" put a bible verse.

My motorcycle is a part of me.
Behold its majesty, ye simps, and awe
Should fill your tiny minds as I go by.
I hope my muffler won't stick in your craw.
The world will know a thing or two about
The way I live my life when they see me
Upon my bike when I deign to go out
Among the base forms of mortality.
But really boasting isn't what I mean
To do when I express my love so dear
For this my own magnificent machine
That all the world can't help but see and hear.
It's tricky being me and thus I ride.
I hope to safely reach the Other Side

Oh well, eventually I'll get it, she thought. It does help. Since I started writing poetry my mind has never been clearer, more ordered. It filters things. Somehow,

too, I always end up putting things in a positive light when I'm writing sonnets.

Early Winter street
Is always empty-- A friend
Approaches through snow.

"Terry! What a surprise." Ernestina let her hand fall from its perusal of the surface of her bike. She pulled her coat around her as she walked towards Terry who was standing at the other side of the parking lot.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

She tilted her head. Not that she was uncertain. She just had to wonder what this visit would bring. She invited him up, sat him down on the couch and started hot water for tea. He looked cold. He had probably walked here. He sat on the couch, looking around but otherwise quite still, making no move to take off his coat, scarf and underlayers. She suddenly felt very tenderly towards him.

She put tea in his hands. He held the cup for warmth, raised it to his mouth and sipped. Little droplets clung to his moustache. She drank her tea, watching him mildly. They didn't speak. Finally she laid her cup aside, took his from him and set it on the coffee table as well. She reached for his scarf and unwound it from his neck. She folded it in half and put it over the arm of the couch. Smiling, she unzipped his coat. He leaned forward, allowed her to slip it off his shoulders and arms. Under this coat he was wearing a zipped-up hooded jacket. She unzipped this, too, and removed it. Next was an old, worn athletic sweatshirt which had to be pulled up over his head, mussing his beard and hair. Beneath this was a long-sleeved white thermal shirt, somewhat tight-fitting. This he removed himself. Beneath was a white t-shirt and his bare, pink arms furred with blonde hair. He glanced at her and she

nodded. He slipped the shirt off over his head. His chest had a crosshatch of the same curly blonde hairs. His nipples were pink, oval and flat, his bellybutton a horizontal fold in his midsection only revealing itself when he straightened his back to remove his pants, and also the long underwear and billowy boxer shorts which bunched awkwardly at his ankles til he remembered to remove his shoes.

For a moment they just stayed like that, as if they'd gotten him naked just for the sake of doing so, while she sat at his side. He was calm, fine with this. She encouraged him down onto his back on the couch as she pulled off her tank top, undid her pants and crept out of them, like a molting thing, a cicada or snake. She let her thighs slide over his. She lay on him, warmed him with her arms. She reached over to the Festaware sugar bowl on the coffee table, lifted its dainty lid with a clink, and pulled out a condom.

Finally slipping herself down deep onto his penis, she smiled at the perfection of the feeling, was glad, so glad for it as the rich music of sex vaulted up into her brain. He had his hands resting on her hips. She laughed. He smiled. Everything went into soft focus. No more thoughts of Winter.

Afterwards they got dressed again, with less ceremony, and she made more tea. Soon they were sitting on the couch as if nothing had happened.

"I finished the edit," he said. "I brought it with me. Do you want to see it? Does Lila?"

Ernestina sipped her tea, thought about it. "Just show me the ending."

They watched the last ten minutes of the movie, Blake's death scene and Cassandra's ride into the sunset. They watched it in Ernestina's bedroom, side by side on the unmade bed with fresh cups of tea and blankets over them.

"It's not how I thought it would be," she said. "It looks different from the outside."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it. It doesn't seem violent at all. It really reflects how I felt, just, differently from how I thought I felt it."

"Without the sound, it's somehow more itself."

"I like the dialogue cards. You made it look very nice."

"Thank you."

"I think Lila doesn't want to watch it. But I can tell her what I know."

"Thank you. I think I'll go home now. I should rest."

"I'd offer you a ride but there's really not room."

"I know."

He put his outer layers back on, and then washed his tea cup, repeatedly throwing his scarf over his shoulder to keep it from dipping in the dishwasher. Then he left.

Ernestina lay down for a nap. She felt great.

Before Terry could go home, he realized he had one last stop to make. He headed back towards the campus.

"Teana," he said, standing over Teana at her usual table in the coffee shop. "Will you do me a favor?"

She looked up at him, said nothing for a moment, then closed the book she'd been writing in. "Sit down, Terry," she said. Once he had sat down, she continued. "I know you and I have kind of butted heads in class but I know you really do have something to say. Maybe we can settle this. All I ask is that you show a little more respect for my point of view."

"Have I been disrespectful?" he asked.

"You come off as pompous and I feel I react to that in a way I have difficulty controlling."

"I think I have been on the wrong course," Terry admitted, "but it's better now. I have been collaborating more, and I think that has helped me be a better listener. I know I was being a little too forceful with my personality. I was insecure. I was pushing myself too hard, really. But I've finished."

"Yes, yes. Your movie."

"I really need your help."

"I told you--"

"The movie's done. I don't need actors. I just need an audience. If anything I need someone to tell me what it's about. My friend Simon's agreed to watch it, but I would like you to be there, too."

Teana shrugged. "When?"

"Tomorrow night. I want to get it done with but right now I'm completely exhausted. After this I'm going straight home to rest."

"How far is your place? Let me give you a ride. It's really coming down."

Teana's conveyance was a station wagon completely loaded down with papers and books. Terry had to admit she was serious. The disorder proved it. Disorder was a stage in the process and he felt like he was only just passing through it, even though he was a couple years older than her. Who knows how long she'll stay in this nest of chaos before she realizes it's not necessary? Still, when one is vulnerable it's better to be surrounded by poems than emptiness, no doubt.

She let him off at his apartment and he was grateful. "You saved my feet," he said.

She smiled and drove away.

It was all arranged. It was nearly finished. Terry went up to his apartment and laid down on his bed. After this was over, he was definitely getting a cat. He'd have time now. Time to care about things that were really there.

It started with an image of a knife buried blade-first in the earth, wind blowing the half-dead grass around it. White text on a black screen with white scrollwork says: Apocalypse Recon. Next, a woman by herself, windswept dark hair, she stands in an open field. She looks to the sky.

On a black screen: TEN DAYS EARLIER...

A masked figure tears through the forest on a motorcycle, holding out the same knife from before, recognizable by its size and the fashion of its grip.

The woman is running.

The motorcycle is gaining on her.

The masked figure has overtaken her, leaps off the cycle. Catching up with the woman, the masked one throws her to the ground and pins her there.

The figure takes off the mask: it is a woman with blonde hair.

The pinned woman gasps, utters something. The black screen translates: Blake!

The violent one responds: Cassandra.

Blake holds the knife to her throat: Your people are dead. Scattered.

Cassandra is still, terrified: They'll never give in to you.

Blake smiles cruelly.

Cassandra closes her eyes, tears running. She remembers her people. In her memory they are strong, able survivors, working on looms, hitting targets with their weapons, smiling, laughing.

She gathers strength. She throws Blake to the ground, overpowering her right at the moment when she thought Cassandra was at her weakest. Cassandra gets free, runs. She hops onto the motorcycle and speeds away. Blake stands alone in the field, silent rage.

"They're old friends," Simon said. "That comes across."

Terry had vowed not to make any remarks. Only to listen. Teana hadn't said anything yet, but she was watching very seriously, leaning forward, her brow as tensely knitted as he had ever seen it. After a while, he asked their permission to stand behind the television and just observe their reactions. They consented nonverbally, waving to him to be quiet, even though there was nothing to hear.

So he watched them. They were like little boats bobbing on the subtle waves of emotion that flowed out from the narrative. He had a sense of the timing of the events. He could see that they were reacting appropriately, that they were under the spell.

"I get it," Simon said, as the credits rolled. "Wizards shouldn't do battle with one another. They should unite to protect what is good in life. Goodness wins."

"What?" Teana said, shocked. "I didn't see that at all. Frankly I couldn't make sense of it without the music."

"What music?" Terry gasped.

Teana gestured at the screen. "It doesn't have music? Well, shit, it should. Let me do it. I know exactly

what's supposed to be there. It's got nothing to do with wizards."

"What, then?" Simon asked, laughing. "I thought it was pretty straightforward."

"It's just two women. Trying to make sense of history. Hence the apocalypse. What is history but a series of wipings-out of what came before?"

Simon shrugged. "What about the masks? The magic fighting?"

"That didn't seem important to me."

Terry was amazed. He wished he'd been filming this. "Teana, I would love it if you'd do the music."

"I do this sort of thing all the time on my computer. I want to be credited, though. I can tell this is going to be big."

Simon just looked at Terry.

Dear Lila,

I heard from Terry that the screening went well. He showed it to a few close friends. Each of them seems to think it was about something completely different. Sounds about right. But everybody likes it. He swears everybody who sees it comes out more focused, more positive, wanting to give something. I hope that's true. I know Terry has a mind given to fancy but for some reason I believe it. Maybe just because I want to.

Just in case this movie doesn't save the world I think I am going to try to get into knitting, like you. And maybe I'll think about doing all those other things I talked about. Maybe just having skills is enough to set a good example? But I have this sense it all has to be shared. So I want you to teach me everything you know and I'll try to do the same if there's anything you think I'm better at than you.

p.s.

Smell of bread baking
on a Winter's night--
a siren goes quiet.

Dear Ernestina,

If anyone can teach storytelling, you can, and you have. Storytelling. Storyliving. And poetry. Fast cars and hot women. That's what I want to know about. I feel like I've learned a lot from the things we've been doing together. There's so much more to do. I have so many doubts. I'm going to take up running again. But only in the literal sense.

p.s.

There once was a lady from Stockley
Who loved eating bacon and broccoli.
I can't think of the rest
Though I did try my best.
By the way, I'm the lady from Stockley.

THE END

Thanks for reading this. It has been my unimaginable privilege to share this brain-time with you. I'd like to encourage you in whatever weird and difficult and unucrative dream you might be following at this time in your life. Know that I too am striving to be gentle yet accountable in my actions and determinations.

If you want to let me know *how much you loved this book*, find me on Twitter @rachelwestbooks where I will be available at least for now.

Be brave. Be kind. Take breaks.