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SHORT STORIES

By

Karley Miller

B.A., University of Cincinnati, 2015

M.A., University of Louisville, 2017

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in English

Department of English  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017

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A Thesis Approved on

April 12, 2017

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## DEDICATION

For Austin

ABSTRACT  
SHORT STORIES

Karley Miller

April 24, 2017

My creative thesis consists of a number of short stories. Each individual story stands alone, though all pieces in the project are doubtless connected by setting and syntax. Perhaps due to my own lack of imagination the stories take place, at least to some extent, in a small town. Though this may not be made explicit in every story, it can be deduced. Small town life, and particularly small town folk, are of interest to me; they are also what I know best. For example, Tom of “Neighbors” is a man living in a small town. The old man next door, Ron, has died and a new family has moved in. This unsettles Tom, a man who has served in Vietnam and carries invisible scars, and he does not leave his house until he has learned the new family’s routine and can do so while they are away. Later in the story we learn that Tom is known by the locals as “Walking Tom.” This demonstrates the contradictory nature of living in a place where everyone knows you. On one end, just as Ron had helped Tom for years, the sales associates at the Ben Franklin he frequents know Tom and can help him get what he needs for his project. On the other, he is a spectacle; people know of him and watch for him. The complication that arises out of this connectedness is a theme throughout my work.

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## DECOY

The day mom died I went duck hunting. Earlier that day, I went to her house to apologize for Ella, who had refused to talk to her for months. After the McDonald's incident, anytime I tried to bring Mom up, the flowers out front needed watering, or she'd have to hurry to the can. Ella'd even tried to keep me from going to visit her, promising if I so much as called my Mom, she'd leave. She'd threatened similar things before, though, and hadn't actually gone through with them. I think she realized, deep down, that she was wrong this time. Honoring your father and mother is a commandment, and I'd never had a father. That day, after I apologized to Mom for myself, I apologized for Ella. Although she never said she forgave us, she did start making lunch, which was as much as I could ask for. Mom wasn't what I would call an affectionate person. She didn't say "I love you" too often but she showed it. She dropped dead while fixing corn chowder, and I still think about her heart pumping blood out of that tear in her artery all the while she was stirring my lunch. Until there was no more blood to be pumped, and they came to get her. When they left, I dumped the pot out without eating. I was hungry that night, but it felt good. I didn't deserve to eat.

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The Division of Wildlife gives us one hour of between times: thirty minutes at either end of the day, between light and dark, during which to bag ducks. That night, I set weather-cracked decoys out by Charlie's pond and spent the last of

the day's light fidgeting with my new call, one they said would practically lift 'em right out of the water. It was pretty looking, but not what I was used to, and I couldn't quite hold it steady to make a sound.

I haven't bought new decoys since that night, last season, and tonight I watch as Charlie presses the last phony duck into the ground, its beak crumbling, leaving a bowling pin head. Decoys are expensive, and neither one of us makes much working at Stanley Tool. It was my turn to buy last season, and he wasn't about to shell out for supplies this season just because I'd skipped.

"This duck's shit, Jack. It ain't even a duck anymore," he says.

"It never was," I say, and walk along the bank, carefully considering my footing as frogs squeak a warning and hop into the water.

I stop halfway around, remembering the first time, on this inward curve of land, that I kissed the girl who would become my wife. We were sixteen, then, and had just left homecoming. It was cold outside. Homecoming occurred during basketball season because Ironton's too small to put together a football team. It was the first time I'd told her anything at all about Mom. Just before I left to pick Ella up, Mom had stood me before her and told me that she didn't know why I was going at all. In my excitement that morning, I left a water glass on her coffee table that made a watermark in the wood. She didn't know a girl who'd spend any kind of time putting up with that kind of oversight. I remembered this as I held Ella's hand, and my palms got sweaty.

"You're thinking of kissing me, aren't you," she said, squeezing her fingers a little.

“I have to tell you that I put a watermark on my mom’s coffee table this morning,” I replied, “she says if you know this about me you’ll never want to marry me.”

“Sure I will,” she said, and, squeezed a bit harder. “Will you kiss me first?”

“I will,” I said, and Ella turned towards me.

It was a typical first kiss. Not one of those you see in movies where both parties know which way to tilt their heads for more than a second. Yet, it was in this moment I first thought I might be okay. I stepped backward from the kiss, coating my left leg in mud. Charlie’s daddy let me wash off at his house that night, and the three of us, Charlie, Ella, and I whispered until daybreak.

Everything did turn out okay for me, as Ella and I got married two years later. In the 20 years that’ve passed between then and now, though, Charlie hasn’t found anyone.

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Concealed by the blind, I look down at my 12-gauge. Charlie’s settled in by his window and has opened a bag of cheese doodles, as is custom. Though I haven’t spotted the bag, the dusting of orange cheese powder on the barrel of my gun lets me know he’s opened one. Charlie opens snack bags by smashing them between his hands until the top, or bottom, in some cases, bursts open. I glance upward and for a moment and consider describing for him Ella’s recent passive-aggressive strategy to convey her disapproval of my choice of leisure activity. After Mom died and she didn’t have her to complain about, she started on how I should spend time talking to her, that I needed to work through grief and

we could do it together, that now I could finally heal. As though I'd still feel guilty if it weren't for her keeping me from Mom during the last months of her life.

Charlie, however, has brought his lanyard-bound duck call to his lips, and begun humming the kazoo-like call of a Mallard. I move my eyes back to my gun.

Unlike the bowling pin duck, the waterfowl who ate their last bug as a result of that 12-gauge were once ducks. Are still ducks? Do ducks go to heaven?

"Hey Charlie, you heard that horseshit about the angel?" I can hear him crunching chips in the near darkness.

We always spend a pretty big chunk of our time talking about the town. I used to talk to him a lot about Mom and Ella, but since Mom died there's just been Ella, and things have gotten worse there. Charlie can't say anything, but he just gives me this serious look and nods gravely anyway.

"Yeah, man, Janet up at the Eagles was tellin' me her mom saw it." He dusts his fingers off on his vest. "She was out waterin' her 'tunias and saw something lookin' sorta like a specter, only it had wings and gave her this calm feeling. Said it was the most excited her mom's ever been about anything."

"You're kiddin'," I said, "What about that poster on South Main? Ella and I were going to Dollar Tree and we saw this crazy paper tacked to the window saying there's an angel in town and Jesus must be coming."

I put my palm against the trunk of a birch to my left. The fading light makes the bark grainy.

“Can you believe that, Charlie? I’m really askin’ you if you believe it. Jesus. Being shouted down to *us* by an angel. I always knew I shoulda gotten the hell out of this town.”

“Maybe I believe it Jack, I don’t know, man, but you can’t leave now!” Charlie says, wiping dayglow orange from the corners of his mouth.

He is silent for a long while, and then rapidly starts again. “Janet’s mom saw the angel – thing – and, well, I’m going looking for it tomorrow after work.”

“Charlie – ”

“They say you have a better chance of seeing it if you’re down on your luck,” he says, looking down. He keeps his eyes lowered, “And, well, I figure I been down on my luck for a long while now, Jack, so who better to spot it than me? You know,” he continues, looking up, “I didn’t want to say anything, but I heard you and Ella’s been having some problems.”

“That what you heard?” I say, “Well, it’s nothing but the usual.”

“So I thought maybe you could come too?” he says, before I can start into further explanation.

“Nothing’s ever been serious wrong between me and Ella.”

If I thought he meant to hurt me, I’d tell him his angel plan is the biggest piece of stupidity I’ve ever heard.

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I was around 13 years old when Mom got the curio cabinet for her collection. Before she spent her money on the glass display case, her angels lived on every level surface in the house: above the cabinets and on the

refrigerator, on tables, nightstands, bookshelves. Most of the angels wore calm expressions and glittery dresses, but one of the angels, the one she kept on my nightstand, stared at me in bed. It had these stern eyes on it, as though it was unhappy with what it saw. This angel had been carved by Mom's friend, who came over every night for a while when I was in junior high school. He sometimes had dinner with us, and sometimes he came over after I was in bed. When he came, Mom didn't sleep with me. She was lonely is all, is what she'd say to me after. But every night her friend wasn't around, she would come in after I was supposed to be asleep and curl up next to me in bed. Sometimes she would touch my face, and sometimes she would tell me about what she was like when she was a young girl. The prettiest in all of Ironton. Just the most gorgeous girl. My daddy had fallen in love with her for the way she pinned her hair back, showing off the strong jawline of someone who'd borne a lot and come out fine. Her mom, my mamaw, kicked Mom's daddy out when the love was gone. Mom never stopped missing her daddy, but she made do without him. My daddy took care of her until I came along, and suddenly there were two of us to care for.

The night I broke the angel wasn't the first night I'd dreamed about undressing my mother, comforting her. It was the first night, however, that she hadn't been there when I awoke from the dream. Instead of Mom lying in bed beside me, I woke to the angel staring at me from a foot away. The outlines of its eyes were carved deeply into the wooden figure, leaving the impression that the eyeballs themselves were protruding from the angel's head. An imprecise hand had painted both eyes blue, the paint spilling into the holes of its depressed

pupils. Its mouth was puffy, as if imagined by a child who still believes women's lips fuller than men's, and draws them accordingly. Her hair was blonde and her eyebrows black, forming a V shape that made her almost unbearable to look at. I knew that the angel knew what I had dreamed. I wrapped my right hand around her waist, under her pin-straight arms, and with my left, severed her head and shoulder from the rest of her body. In my midnight stupor, I shoved the broken angel under the bed. The next day, seeing that my angel was no longer on my nightstand, Mom made me show where I put it. She saw the shoulder and head of the angel that her best friend made her lying in the carpet and demanded that I pick a switch from the willow tree and offer it to him as part of my apology. The next time he came over, he ripped my pants down and switched my thighs, making me wonder if he'd somehow found out about my dream, although I was sure this was impossible.

The curio cabinet came not long after this incident, and not long after Mom stopped sleeping with me all together. She gathered all of her angels into this four-shelf glass case, and I imagined them flying there on porcelain and ceramic wings. Although he was out of her life not long after I began high school, she kept his glued-together angel on the third shelf, right at eye-level, until she died.

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Ella never liked how close we were—me and Mom—and while at first she did her best to keep her mouth shut about it, she gave up after the first couple years of our marriage. It didn't really come as a surprise that she wanted Mom out of our lives, but there's no way she could expect the same of me. I'd take a

lot from her, but I wasn't going to listen to that. Sure, I guess Mom did get pretty dependent on me there at the last. In the couple years before she died, she'd call every morning at six a.m. to check up on me. Just concerned for me, was all. On the last morning that I answered the phone, she'd wanted to make sure I'd had my prostate examined—I guess she'd seen a commercial on television about how stubborn men were more prone to cancer development. That same morning she asked if I could drive her to McDonalds, and I did. A lot of the older folks in town met up for breakfast on Saturday mornings to drink senior-priced coffees and talk about who was shacking up with who since their spouses died. Mom wouldn't entertain the thought of sitting with the regulars, but wasn't self-conscious about sitting separately from them—her man had left, not died, and she had told me a dozen times that she'd never consider another.

That very morning I tried to bring it up again. Jimmy Gallagher's wife had died a few years back and I knew that he was lonely, having just retired from ABC Tire. I suggested she think about a date with him. I'd talked to him at the factory a few days prior and he'd mentioned he was interested. After Mom screamed at me to leave the restaurant, she called Ella and demanded to be taken home. I was heartless, she said. Ella refused, and I ended up turning the truck around after receiving a call. Mom whimpered pathetically on the other end, and Ella screamed at me when I got back home. It wasn't right, she'd said. She understood wanting to make a parent happy, but my mother couldn't be made as much, at least not while her son remained married to another woman.

I was furious. I called Charlie that night, asking him what he'd do in my situation.

In a moment of wisdom, he said, "Well, you know I believe in takin' care of parents. Maybe Ella's just having a hard time because of something you don't know about. You know that happens with women sometimes."

I knew it did, and the way Charlie said it, matter-of-factly, made me believe what he said. She probably had some elaborate issue worked up in her mind. One that could somehow be solved by cutting Mom out of my life, when in reality Ella had no right to push Mom out of the picture. The woman raised me, after all, and she deserved the best life I could give her.

I could explain this to Ella but she wouldn't understand. She would blame Charlie for filling my head with "that nonsense," and explain to me the myriad reasons he'd never been married.

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A rustling to the left of me signifies that Charlie's spotted the emerald green head of a male Mallard. He aims his weapon and fires, and the bird plops on the bank like a thrown dog toy. His waders are nice, new, and I watch him glide into the shallow water to retrieve his bird. I've wasted the evening, and it's a struggle against the retreating twilight to see Charlie's face.

"Ya'mong the living, there, Jack? This poor bastard sure ain't!"

His face twists into a devilish smile as he emerges from the mud and hangs the lifeless fowl beside him. Where only a month prior, locusts had filled

the night with sound, tonight is quiet except for the rhythmic burrruping of bullfrogs, dreading their impending winter's nap.

"Yeah, I'm here," I say, after a moment, although I'd not been. "I'm pretty tuckered out if you wanna go ahead and turn in for the night." I switch the safety on my gun. "It's getting dark anyway, and that looks like a good one you've got."

Charlie rises from his seat, and now-stale cheese doodles crunch on the ground as he shuffles, untying the night's kill and folding his chair, saying, "I reckon we can head back."

I stand as well, taking one last look at the pond before walking the half mile to the farmhouse Charlie resides in alone. I can see myself climbing into my truck and returning home to Ella who hasn't spoken to me since I told her I made the plans to hunt with Charlie. I can see her face, the back of her head reflected in the darkened window above the sink.

We emerge from the cover of the blind, betraying our position to the frogs nearby, who once again leap from land to water, chirping a note of surprise before diving below the surface. Though conversation usually flows freely between us, tonight we are quiet. Charlie feels it, too, and I want to tell him I'm not okay.

"We still on for Sunday?" I say.

"Actually, Jack," Charlie says, looking over his shoulder, "I meant to tell you today that Janet and I've kinda started seeing each other. Sure, she ain't pretty or nothing, but she's real sweet, and I told her that I'd help her mom to church that morning."

I don't know why the hell he can't look at me. It isn't like I have something against his seeing someone. It's not like it will last either. Nobody can stay with Charlie; he's too messed up, like Ella says. Charlie'll be alone again soon, probably before this season's even over.

"Jesus, you know I don't care that you have a girlfriend. You remember how I was when Ella and I first got together—crazy about her," I say, "and you know how quick that died down."

"It ain't that, Jack," he begins, but then he freezes, and motions for me to freeze also. We can't hear anything but the water, pulling against the shore.

"Look at that over there," Charlie whispers. "You think that's the angel?"

I look where he is pointing, beneath a row of pines. Standing there is a woman who looks exactly like the old pictures I've seen of Mom, down to the hairpin. She is looking at me the way she used to, when she was sad, when she wanted me to feel sorry for her. She appears backlit, her hourglass silhouette against the darkened trees.

"Charlie, angels don't exist," I say, taking aim.

## REGINA'S

Noah hadn't seen his hair since he was six. Denise brought him in that night and told me to give him a high and tight, which is how he wore it after turning seven. The Johnsons were always my last appointment on the third Tuesday of every month. Courtney needed her bangs trimmed, and Noah came in with his mom and sister because he was diagnosed with Batten Disease when he was five, and lost his eyesight when he was six. I never charged Denise for Noah's cut, partly because he was never actually due for a cut, but also because I never felt like I was cutting Noah's hair. He couldn't see it; he didn't care. It was unsettling, barbering a blind boy. Courtney had Batten too, but through years of monthly appointments I learned that hers was a different type and wouldn't affect her vision until its later stages. Courtney was seventeen with the mind of a three-year-old, and cooed in satisfaction when I trimmed her layers.

The Johnsons' plum-colored van pulled into Regina's' parking lot and I watched as Denise slid the side door open and helped Noah take careful steps onto the gravel. Noah's blond hair looked almost no different than it did when I saw him the month before, but I noticed that his face had begun taking on the dimensions of a young man's. He was fourteen now, so I guess that made sense. Noah's eyes wandered as Denise shut the door and helped him to the stairs.

"Hi guys," I said, opening the door, "where's Courtney?"

“She’s in the hospital,” Denise said, helping Noah inside. “Tim is there with her. They don’t know what it is, exactly, but we’re assuming it’s another side effect of the seizure medication. You just can’t keep track.”

“Oh my goodness, Denise. I’m so sorry, I hope they figure it out.” She gave me a look of thanks, and I took Noah’s hand and led him to my station. “Are we doing the same thing as always?”

“Yeah,” she said, “I didn’t think it’d be good for Noah to change his routine.” He didn’t like the tightness of the apron around his neck, so I wrapped him in my daughter, Caroline’s, blanket before getting my clippers. She left the blanket at Regina’s one day after taking a nap in-between school and soccer practice. In a few years she wouldn’t need me to drive her to and from school. I paused for a moment before remembering that, relatively speaking, I had no excuse to pity myself.

“How’s Tim holding up?” I said, putting the guard on.

“He’s all right, all things considered.” Denise picked up a People magazine and flipped through the first several pages. “I’m just glad he was able to get her to the hospital. He’s put on even more weight and I’m afraid of losing him before we lose them,” she continued, glancing at her blind son, putting the magazine down and looking at me. “I understand depression. We have every reason to be. But he doesn’t help me.”

I wanted to tell her about Wade but knew better—this wasn’t the time. Though I’d been listening to her same story for years, Denise didn’t come here to experience further emotional drain from having to sympathize with her

hairdresser. I looked at the yellowed comic taped to my mirror. “A women’s best kept secret is her beautician.” When I put it there, it made me feel better about my lot in life. I was more than a cosmetologist—I could remove unwanted hair and, as a bonus, prevent the onset of wrinkles by affording my clients the opportunity to air any and all grief they needed to work through. I’d heard so many stories over the years; some that made it difficult to actually give a good haircut. The worst I ever messed up was on a woman who wanted a bob. I was in the middle of trying to get her sides even when she told me that her husband wanted to have sex with her while wearing his union army uniform. He was a civil war reenactor, and she thought his costume made him feel masculine. She wanted to know if I thought she should let it happen, or if I thought she should be concerned. On the one hand, she was glad that he wanted to keep things interesting. On the other, she was afraid that it was just a bit too strange; like maybe there was something he was hiding. Would I do it, she asked? It depends, I had said, and shrugged. Later I told her that I put the layer in because her hair needed volume.

I think that must be the allure of telling a story to your hairdresser—she’s too involved in her work to actually give you an opinion, so the story just hangs in the air. You can look at it, turn it over, consider it for yourself without losing its contours within the rest of your thoughts. It doesn’t work the other way around. Once I told a client that I was developing a Plantar Wart on the underside of my big toe. The next week, a different client brought me a glass vial of Compound-W.

Tuesday used to be my only late night, but when Ironton's other salon closed about a year prior, Regina's picked up all of its clients. Regina was working on hiring a new girl to help lessen the load on all of us. I had been her last new hire, and that was over ten years before. A fourth station would make our room a bit crowded, but working in the tight space was worth leaving before eight, five nights a week. Had this happened a bit earlier I might've actually caught Wade with Miss Walmart before Olivia presented me with her hypothesis. She had called me, from home, after finding a note in one of her dad's books. "Dinner's on the table," it had said. It wasn't my handwriting. Even if it had been, Olivia'd been making dinner for the last year, and even before probably couldn't remember the last time I made something substantive for them to eat. Much less took the time to leave Wade a cute little note framed with hearts. I tried to imagine scenarios in which having dinner ready would warrant a note. Did she leave it on the table for him to heat up? Was she sitting at the table in some slutty number, waiting for him? That night, in bed, I had acted like I knew exactly what he was doing, and he admitted to it.

Even after stumbling upon Wade's little secret themselves, the girls were still surprised when I told them Dad had to leave for a while. I guess this must've had a lot to do with age. Olivia was sixteen, and even at that was a bit young to wrap her mind around the fact that life need not go the way she wanted it to; that many things were out of her control. I wish it could've. When she called about the note, I told her that I used to write in cursive and that the book was probably one

he picked up years ago and hadn't finished; that he must still have the note he used as a bookmark. I didn't have the strength to tell her the truth, and besides, the girls didn't need to know their dad cheated. Even so, the night I told them that Wade was going away for a little while, Caroline squirmed out of my embrace and shut herself in her closet. Olivia took a walk. Wade had stayed at his parents' house the past couple of nights, and that night was supposed to come over to start packing.

I finished Noah up, double-checking his neckline. Denise thanked me and I hugged Noah, sending them home without accepting her payment. For the first time since I began fixing hair, I considered that I might not be able to give favorite clients their discounts. Though I was supposed to charge nine dollars for a kid's cut, in many cases, such as Denise's, I just couldn't justify doing so. After the low-income apartments were put in over on Markley Square, I saw more and more kids who looked like they hadn't had a bath for a week. I was afraid that when I told the parents how much it'd be, they'd punish the kid for existing. I was pretty sure Regina was aware of this, although she never said anything to me. If I had to guess, I'd wager that she did the same. She and her husband owned a dairy farm and weren't bad off for money. They did all kinds of sponsorships for the community. Just the year before, Caroline's soccer team jerseys advertised "Utter Farms." Though we certainly weren't that well off, Wade's parents both spent most of their lives working for Ford, and gave me a chunk of money every month to spend on the girls, their only grandchildren. If I left Wade, this money would be placed in his hands instead of mine.

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I pulled into the drive at the same angle as usual and saw that the lights in both girls' rooms were on. When they were younger, I came home on Tuesdays and scolded each for being up past her bedtime. In truth, though, I was always glad to come home to those lights. The house looked the same as it always did, and I would've been content to imagine for a moment that it was the same, but Wade met me at the door.

"I thought I'd come early and grab as much as I could," he said, shrugging with a garbage bag in each hand. "You know, the girls are pretty pissed that you aren't giving me a second chance."

"The girls shouldn't know our business. They wouldn't know the difference between this and your being gone for work had you not told them," I hissed, and walked in my door.

"Walmart employees don't go away on 'business,'" Wade said. He used the same tone he had taken after I congratulated him for getting the Walmart job. My heart had hurt for him the first time he used it—he sounded so embarrassed and wouldn't make eye contact. After the breakdown, Wells Fargo let him go. It followed him through a yearlong job search until Walmart. In this way, she made sense. Had I the foresight to Google, "My husband lost his job," I probably would've been forewarned. Nothing screams pending infidelity like something as emasculating as a job loss, much less, a breakdown. The sites that turned up in my search most likely would've included such as wisdom as, "10 ways to be supportive when your husband loses his job," and, "The Lord will provide when

your husband loses his job.” Both of which articles might begin with, “Step One: Make him dinner (with deity-provided food) and share feelings.”

“You have one hour before I need to get to bed, and then I want you gone,” I said. I was tempted to follow him around the house to make sure he grabbed only his belongings. I knew the girls were up, though, and while they hopefully hadn’t heard me, I certainly didn’t want them to see me antagonize their father. Stephen King’s latest was sitting on the coffee table, and I figured now was as good a time as any to pick it back up. I was able to read the sentences, at least, hear the words aloud in my head while listening to my husband shuffle his belongings into plastic bags and cardboard boxes, and out of our door. I might have turned three pages in the course of that hour.

Before walking out of the door Wade looked back at me, half asleep under an afghan, and said, “You know, if you file, I will go for full custody.”

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I got to work late the next morning after Caroline remembered to tell me she needed snacks for her Spanish class. Chips and mild salsa, specifically. I left plenty early enough to pick up the food before my first appointment, but I hadn’t accounted for a meltdown in the snack food aisle. There were blue corn chips, restaurant style, unsalted, rounds, more variations on the theme of corn chip than I, or anyone else, would ever need in their life. It was exactly as I was deciding which bag to buy for Caroline and her classmates, which bag would be suitable for a group of seventh graders to munch on while watching documentaries about Spanish-speaking countries, that I realized I couldn’t make the decision. I

scanned the labels, moving my eyes quickly from bag to bag, hoping that one would stand out. It was as if my brain couldn't put anything together; I saw the rectangular red, gold, green-colored labels on the packages, but not one product seemed better or different from the others in any tangible way.

After standing in the aisle for what seemed like much too long to remain stationary without attracting concerned attention, I grabbed some organic blue corn chips and walked to the only check-out aisle open. IGA had been going out of business for a while—the grocery in the town over had closed and been replaced with Save-a-Lot. If that happened here, I'd have to start driving into Ashland for produce. Or perhaps not, if I didn't have the money for it. Maybe Save-a-Lot would be a good thing. I wouldn't be tempted to buy the blueberries, no matter the supposed health benefits, because they would be growing mold. As I approached the register, the girl working it popped her gum and said hello, had I seen my husband yesterday. I took a second to study the girl's face. She looked 30 or so but could've been a bit younger. I was pretty sure I'd never done her hair. I said no, why did she ask? Just wondered, she said, I saw him and a blonde coming out of China Buffet yesterday.

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I was in the middle of apologizing to my client when the phone rang. After recognizing my voice on the line, Denise began talking in the muffled way people talk when they're holding back tears. Courtney had died last night, and she needed me to do her hair for the visitation. Of course I would, I'd done hair for visitations before and while it wasn't the most pleasant thing, I had done

Courtney's hair for most of her life and knew what she looked like when she was looking her best. She'd keep me updated, but was hoping to have the visitation and funeral on Friday at the Nazarene Church. I'd have to be at Cahall Funeral Home early on Friday to prepare her face for the viewing. After hanging up the phone, I felt a wave of guilt rise as I recalled the evening before. While she had been talking about Courtney, I had ruminated over my husband's affair. Though in reality I had little idea what Denise's day-to-day looked like, I imagined her making dinner for her family and wishing like hell Noah could see to butter his own bread. Maybe he could, though. I had no idea what blind people do to eat. I was sure, however, that when Courtney seized, Denise had worried that the dinner would come back up and drown her.

My client needed a permanent, which was the most time consuming thing she could possibly want, and put me even further behind for the rest of the day. Regina came in around noon and asked me where I thought she could fit a new station. I suggested in the corner by the shampoo bowls. The brick wall graphic was getting old and peeling off in that corner, exposing the uneven white paintjob underneath, and age of the building. Although Regina didn't seem pleased with me or my suggestion, it must have proved better than any she thought of because the next day a new mirror lay beside several boards in the back corner of the salon. By Friday morning when I came to grab tools for the funeral, a new station was assembled by the leftmost bowl.

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Cahall funeral Home sits on the corner of 125 and Plum Street, across from the Marathon. Its dirty white siding made up for by an emerald felt awning over the main entrance. The last time I was there I had attended Barbara Neal's visitation. She graduated high school with me and died at 42 of cirrhosis of the liver. She suffered female pattern baldness, and the beautician who worked on her curled her hair into terrible ringlets to cover her exposed scalp.

The funeral home was empty that morning except for Paul Cahall, the director and the father of one of my clients, who was gathering flower arrangements to send to the church. I nodded a hello at him and seeing my bag of beauty equipment, he motioned for me to go ahead about my business. Funeral homes without the crowd, without the strangely formal music playing at the entrance, are disquieting. All of the run-down Victorian-style furniture looks like a set stage rather than a place of mourning. I'd been to a few other funeral homes for the services of distant relatives, but most all of the funerals in Ironton are put on by Cahall. The other corpses I'd worked on were also embalmed there, so I knew full well how to get to the embalming room.

Courtney lay on a porcelain table near the center of the room. The floor was gray linoleum, the kind that gives the illusion of tile flooring but retains stains from years of dripping embalming fluid. Her final outfit, a pink and white plaid dress, was hung on a metal bar in the left corner. It always struck me that there were no shoes with these outfits, but I suppose they're unnecessary. Courtney's body was covered up to her neck with a white sheet, and her head rested by a counter that supported several containers of different sour-smelling chemicals.

My bag had accrued several stains over the years, but the smell always made me a little queasy, so I did my best to condense the jugs of fluid before setting my supplies on the counter.

Although, in life, she enjoyed getting her hair cut, Courtney never really got to decide how she wanted it herself. As a result, Denise's 16-year-old daughter wore her hair in the style of an overdone Farrah Fawcett. The coiffure required a curling iron, which I pulled out of my bag while searching for an outlet. Using heat on a corpses' hair makes the odor worse, and so before beginning to curl Courtney's coarse, black hair, I pulled the blanket up to cover the valve in her neck. Having to see that while also wafting the air toward my face put me on the edge of sickness.

As I was finishing up the curl, my phone began vibrating in the front pocket of my bag. I put it on vibrate that morning because I had planned to spend the day without reading Wade's texts with urgency, as though he could undo his affair with a well worded text message. What I hadn't accounted for, though, was that unless I found myself in a particularly noisy room, vibrate was just as noticeable as not. I would've been content to ignore the noise, but one of the girls could need me. I lay the iron in the sink to the left of my bag, and pulled my phone out of the pocket. It was Wade. Although I could still choose to take him back, he had filed for divorce because whoever files first has the advantage as far as the particulars of the divorce are concerned. He was going after my kids, claiming that I couldn't provide for them, and he advised me to get an attorney. Although it probably wouldn't do me much good. After listening to his speech, I

hung up the phone and held onto the counter. I could no longer smell the chemicals, nor could I afford an attorney.

I won't lose my kids, I thought again and again as I plucked Courtney's eyebrows. Her face was cold in my hands, and tweezing felt like pulling hair out of hardened clay.

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At the funeral, Tim sat in a chair by the head of his daughter's casket. Denise stood, smiling and talking to everyone as they passed by in the line. I supposed this is how it worked when a parent knows their child is going to die, has known it for years? Instead of sobbing hysterics, the receiving line wore a look of bewilderment. It felt oddly casual. I didn't bother to make small talk with those by me in line, waiting to give their condolences to the family, even though most of them knew me. I'd lived in Ironton my entire life. If I started conversation, the China Buffet would almost certainly come up, and I'd be forced to make up some lie or receive more sympathy than the departed. Wade's sleeping around was a disturbance, a surprise. However tragic, Courtney's death wasn't. Soon after the Johnson kids had been diagnosed, the community had held spaghetti dinners, T-shirt fundraisers, but slowly the tragedy worked its way into the very fabric of the village. It was as though a needle had teased the pulled thread into position again. The pull became a part of the collective consciousness. It was no longer a thing to be helped, rather something remembered. Ah yes, the Johnson's kids are dying. Have you heard, they're dying, isn't it awful? I can't imagine.

Approaching the casket, I saw that Courtney's hair had been messed up through the dressing and transporting process. The hair on her crown had been flattened, and she looked like she'd been rained on after using too much hairspray. Had they pulled it under her with too much force? They'd done a better job with her face, though. Her smile wasn't completely wrong.

Denise recognized me in line and said, "Hey Beth, I can't believe we're seeing each other again so soon, under these circumstances."

"I'm so sorry Denise," I said, and hugged her. Tim and I made eye contact and I expressed, again, that I was sorry. I felt again the urge to tell Denise about Wade, what he had said to me on the phone. I wanted to tell her that I could empathize with her, and that she should listen to me, right there in her daughter's wake. I couldn't help her by fixing their hair, and she knew that. She knew that and she told me about them anyway, made me listen to her talk while I prettied them up. I stifled these thoughts by reminding myself that I couldn't know what it was like to lose a child.

Though I hadn't planned to stay for the entire service, I took a seat in the back pew and watched as the end of the line moved through the front of the church. The pastor began the service, accompanied by a startling blast from the organ, and we were all invited to pray for Courtney and her family. I couldn't concentrate on prayer so I scanned the crowd, wondering who else was having trouble. That's when I noticed Wade and the girls standing behind me. They hadn't waited in the receiving line, I supposed, because they had only known Denise through me. I smiled at the girls and they didn't acknowledge me. Wade

grabbed Caroline's hand and held it where I could see, resting it on the back of my pew.

The service moved quickly, with a slideshow and an acapella version of "Jesus Loves Me" that we were all asked to participate in singing. I grew more lightheaded with every word I heard him sing. Finally, after deciding it would be better to talk during the service than to leave it prematurely, I turned around to face Wade and asked him why he was there, and why the hell he brought the girls with him. I didn't think Caroline was old enough to attend a funeral. I was met with a response from Olivia. "Why didn't you tell us that you made Dad leave? And why didn't you tell us Regina fired you for letting people have free haircuts? If you cared about us you would take all the money you could get to make our lives better!" I couldn't respond. I turned around, ignoring them. Regina would've told me had she planned to fire me, and in any case, there was no way that Wade could've known before me.

For the final portion of the service, the pastor announced that Tim and Denise had decided to play some of Courtney's favorite music through the speakers, and have the congregation file through to the front of the church again, as a goodbye gesture. I knew I couldn't stand up to say goodbye, but I'd sit through the music. We all agreed, in the silent way that a group of emotionally charged people can agree, that this was a good idea and it would be right to say a final goodbye. It seemed, however, after minutes of agonizing silence, that the church was having trouble with their sound system. The organ player shook his head in a definitive "no" after I assume he was asked to play some new-wave

Christian music. The projector showed the frantic efforts of the sound man's mouse, darting from icon to icon. After a few minutes more, the pastor approached the podium again and said in a muffled voice, "I'm uhh, I'm sorry. It looks like we're not gonna be able to do that for them. It looks like there won't be any music today." At this, a laugh rang out from the row of pews opposite mine. Noah seemed to be having a good time playing with his cousin.

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Although I wanted a confession from both of them, I eventually let this go. I was smart enough to Google "What to do when you're unreasonably angry," and began to explore the feeling. I sat with the feeling for a long time, I journaled about it, I resisted the urge to unload the feeling onto others. I forgave myself for the discounts; she would've found an excuse to get rid of me anyway, knowing it was only a matter of time before I found she and Wade out. If she wanted to reduce the workload, she could've picked up some of the late hours herself. Although I could've called her husband, I didn't. It was much easier for me to find another shop than for him to face the potential loss of his farm through divorce. I was willing to drive the extra thirty minutes if it meant I could keep my girls half of the time.

When I ran into Regina this morning at the gas station, I smiled at her and asked how she was doing. She didn't answer my question but told me, in a hushed voice, that Denise had been diagnosed with breast cancer, wasn't it awful. She had just helped get rid of the remaining hair. I watched Regina walk into the station, and then fixed my gaze on the numbers flashing in the price

display. They were moving so fast that I couldn't make out each individual digit before it became another. I opened the passenger seat door of my car and sat down. Regina came out of the glass double doors and silently waved through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "You better watch getting in like that. I heard the static can cause an explosion!" The man on the other side of my pump said, looking directly at me. I supposed he was right, although I'd never heard of that happening before.

## BETWEEN THE EYES

“Michelle, you know I’d take care of you,” Frank explains. “You would never have to work again.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I like to work,” I say. Frank’s a regular. This is the third time in two weeks that he’s proposed. Usually, I don’t guess the meat temperature of my male customers. When I do, they often end up proposing. After they propose and I decline, they quit coming back to me and I lose tips. Frank’s been around since before I knew I could guess steak temperature preference with 96% accuracy. The first time he came in, I looked at him and said I bet you want an 11oz Sirloin, well-done. He’s proposed several times—and I’ve declined several times. I’m beginning to think he likes me for something other than my meat skills.

I grab Frank’s empty water glass and walk towards the bar. He requires a slice of lime with each refill. Jessica knows this and automatically hands me a slice in a ramekin. “Did Frank propose again?” she asks. “I can’t understand that whole thing, I mean, you’ve got a good ten years on him.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either, but I’m definitely not taking him up on the offer.”

“I didn’t say it sounded like a bad idea. I’d gnaw off my left leg to get out of Longhorn.”

I return to the table and Frank is taking the last bite of his Sirloin, well-done. The first time I saw him he was wearing a red flannel and muddy, steel-toed boots. A real blue-collar guy, barely distinguishable from the wannabes I now see, who order their Sirloins medium. Rookwood Longhorn used to get a lot of the medium-rare/rare people—big tippers— but after they put in the new steakhouse, higher end, across the street, they are a rarity themselves.

“I’ve known since the day you knew what steak I wanted that we were destined to be,” Frank continues, as if I haven’t already made my position clear. “Do you remember that day, Michelle? It was crazy!”

Before I can fondly reminisce on this moment, in an effort to make sure he tips me today, a woman grabs me from behind and demands that I follow her to her table. Frank must recognize this woman, as he barks “Cheryl” before heading towards the bathroom, after being ignored. Cheryl and I walk to the back of the restaurant and sit in a corner booth.

“You’re sleeping with him aren’t you, you ugly old bitch,” she says. And, turning to the room as if for appeal, screams, “She’s got a mole right between her fucking eyes!”

I move my hand to my face—no one’s pointed this out since grade school. “If you don’t stop fucking my man I will tell your manager how this place is nothing better than a meat-serving brothel.” I can tell she’s on the verge of tears.

I consider telling Cheryl that I haven’t slept with Frank, and explaining my story. The problem is that if I tell her why he wants me instead of her, there’s a

chance she will actually believe there's nothing more to it than that, and I might have to as well.

## NEIGHBORS

Yesterday, I was able to remember and replicate the exact location and position of Lisa. I used a rubber band to tie her hair up, and leaned her against a large stone that I found in the ditch and stuck in the sand. She was there that night, but until yesterday I hadn't been able to remember what she was doing. Turns out, she wasn't doing anything but being passed out drunk by this big rock. I remember saying something to Janet about her not being a good friend, and that's how I also remembered why I said it. They were supposed to be looking out for each other at the beach that night, Lisa and Janet, but instead, Lisa got rip-roarin drunk and Janet had her heart broken by me. I walked to the Ben Franklin and bought a spare Ken this morning so I could replace Paul's head. Turns out squirrels like chewing on Malibu Ken heads. So far, Lisa and Janet haven't been decapitated and I'm guessing it's the hair that keeps them safe.

I had taken the driveway several times in the past couple weeks and so today needed to go a different route. I walked just to the left of the gravel, keeping my eyes on the grass. It was tall and beginning to form seed clusters at the top. Ron Gast, next door, died last winter and he used to mow it for me. Old Ronny used to wear this plaid shirt and read dime store smut novels on his porch every morning while the weather was okay. One day it had gotten cooler outside, but I wouldn't have noticed except that Ron brought me over a spare, plaid button-up to wear along with him. We got along well after that. I'd have to find

someone else to mow this season. If I was right, and they had taken notice of the pattern in my travel there would be trip wires hidden in the leaves, tied to trees that formed a barrier between my house and the house that used to be Ronny's. The sheer volume of grass was making it more difficult than usual to exercise proper precaution, but I needed to get to the beach.

Last night was calm unlike the last week or so since I started trying to recreate the details of that evening. The sand in the six by four foot frame I'd built had largely stayed in place. I wouldn't have to refill today. I popped a new head on Paul and buried his feet in the sand as far as it took for him to stay standing. I still hadn't gotten Paul quite right but that was because I didn't really give a shit about Paul at that point. I'd gotten my card three days prior, and he was only seventeen. We'd planned to go on this trip to Virginia Beach before the selective service got hold of my name or else I probably wouldn't have gone. Lisa's dad had this VW bus and we all piled in alongside a week's worth of booze and clean skivvies and headed for the coast. Janet sat on my lap at least half the way down and the other half she spent with her head out the window. Black hair which normally lay flat and stringy whipped frantically in the wind and now in my dreams. The good ones, on the nights I sleep long enough to keep my mouth shut on that beach and stare out at the water and not have a hand in deciding that part of my fate.

A truck pulled into Ronny's driveway even though Ron was dead and buried and possibly even growing mold at this point. Thank God I planted those trees a good twenty years ago, because the truck came from the direction behind

those giants and I don't think it saw me. I moved as quickly as possible into a squatting position directly behind the largest pine. The truck was carrying a leather couch and a plastic-wrapped mattress on its side that I could see. A door swung open and a large pair of boots hit the ground, followed by sneakers that appeared on the other side beneath the vehicle. The man wearing boots pulled a seat forward to reveal a small girl. I never had any kids so I wasn't any good at guessing ages but she looked around five with curly red hair and shoes that lit up when the man plopped her on the ground. She immediately began running in circles around old Ronny's yard. "Don't you leave this yard!" the man yelled after her. He and the woman in sneakers lowered the back of the truck and began dragging the mattress out and into the house. Meanwhile, the little ginger trotted increasingly closer to my trees, her eyes examining the needles that carpeted the ground. She picked up a pinecone and threw it down after coating a hand in sap. My feet were pretty near numb by this point, but even six year olds could tell their parents they'd seen something.

"Allie, get back here now!" the man said, walking back down the front porch steps and reaching for the woman's hand. The hair on his forearm was dark, black, and I wondered if he wasn't the little girl's father.

"Look at all those Barbies, Mommy, I bet there's a little girl I can play with," the girl said, pointing in the direction of my mailbox.

"Come inside and look at the new house! Aren't you excited about it, sis?" the woman said, and the little girl ran inside, stumbling once on her way there.

The woman looked at the man, “Do you think that’s going to be more of a problem than the realtor let on?”

The man took the woman’s shoulder and turned away from my house, telling her to help him unload the rest of their shit, he wanted to stay that night. I wanted to go inside my own home but couldn’t risk being seen. The sun set, and spring peepers had begun singing from my ditch by the time I made it inside.

The next day, and subsequent days that followed, I had to wait until the truck pulled out of the driveway to walk to the beach. On weekends, I couldn’t even leave the house, though my mind raced with adjustments to be made. Through my side window I was able to keep an eye on the girl playing in her yard, in between attempts at napping. One Friday about three weeks after they came and several days without sleep of any sort, I decided to make another trip to the Ben Franklin for fabric paint. I had monitored their weekday routine long enough to know that they wouldn’t be back until five thirty, and couldn’t stand another weekend shut in without making progress. The store was about two miles down the road and it took me close to an hour to walk there and back, not including the time I spent in the store. I knew that if I left after the truck, I’d have more than enough time to make it home before my new neighbors. It was now or never. Malibu Barbie wore a blue bathing suit, and the one Janet had on that night was burgundy. It actually might have been just plain red, but the dimming light gave it a burgundy look, and that was what I remembered for sure. Jeff at the Ben Franklin would help me find the right color.

I swung the door open and kept my head tilted back to check the frame before entering. This fat cashier saw me coming and said, "Hi baby, Jeff ain't here. I hope he told ya he left. His girlfriend had a new baby and he needed to make more money." Jeff hadn't told me. "It's all right if you want to get whatever you need though." I knew where the fabric paint was. It was in the aisle with the fabric. Even if I wasn't sure, I could walk around and find it. I had been going to this store for years, and had done just about every suggested activity on every flyer located in bins around the store. I walked to the fabric aisle and looked over all of the colors in little tubes. A boy ran past me with a model helicopter. There were at least ten different variations of red. I felt the sweat bead on my forehead. I had to get out, but I needed that red for Janet's suit. It would be so much closer to real if she were the right color. My hand shook as I reached for a tube I thought would work, knocking several yellows to the ground. A loud pop came from somewhere in the store, and I ran to the front of the line with the paint, knocking over a cardboard stand full of king-sized Kit-Kat. It was a mine, I screamed at the fat lady. "No honey that was just a balloon. You're all right." I threw three dollars at her. The blue-faced old lady I'd just cut in front of gave me a wild look. I ran out of the store and knew I'd have to wait awhile before I could come back. Long enough for the fat lady to forget.

On the way home I had to keep reminding myself that I didn't choose it, that Army engineer was not my career of choice. Sure, it was my choice after I got my card, but that was because I didn't know engineers were really fancily-named mine and grenade detectors, ground clearance. I kept telling myself that I

was gonna be okay, and that the ones that didn't make it were already okay, because I was raised believing in heaven. A jeep full of kids slowed down and hollered in my direction, "Hey look, it's Walking Tom!" before whizzing off, laughing. I was happy for them because they probably hadn't made that decision yet, the only thing in life they really had any control over. They hadn't lain on the beach in the middle of the night, looked at the girl they didn't know then, but would know years later they certainly loved, and told her they had separate lives to live. They probably wouldn't ever have to remember the moment they made it, or if they did, it would be to remember it fondly on their fiftieth anniversary because they would make the right one. They wouldn't have to go to the Ben Franklin to buy paint from the fat lady, and that was why I was happy for them. I was probably teaching them a valuable lesson. Don't choose alone. I was glad they had taken notice.

When I got home I went straight to painting Janet. I had planned to spend more time in the store, which left me plenty of time to work before the truck got home. I forgot to buy paintbrushes in all the mess, and couldn't find any of my own. I would have to use my finger. The paint wasn't difficult to work with, and as long as I put a little bit on my index at a time I was able to avoid smearing red on her skin. Only, try as I might, I couldn't make her skin anything but plastic. There was nothing I could buy, no amount of remembering I could do to fix that. They were all plastic with nothing more lifelike than leg joints that were once used to help real people with prosthetic fingers. I finished Janet and threw her down on the beach, picking her up only after realizing that the sand would stick to my wet

paint and ruin it. I decided to reposition her next to me on the sand, like we were that night. We were lying near the water, the tips of our toes just within reach of the retreating tide. She had told me she loved me before, and I believed her. I knew she wanted the picket fence, the two point four kids, the whole nine yards. I was scared shitless, but told myself I wanted adventure, war. Uncle Sam called on me; I had to want it. It was my only option, so I may as well embrace it, right? I'd be a hero. A hero who can't even remember serving. Can't remember serving except at night, at night when he doesn't want to remember it. At night, alone, when he doesn't even have anyone to share his hero stories with except the people on the beach. The people who knew him before he was a hero. He can't tell them his stories, though, because he can't bring himself to taint that last moment.

I sat by the beach until I saw the truck pattering down the lane. The grass was so high by this point I was uncertain of whether or not they'd see me if I didn't move. I watched them like I'd done when they first came. Everyone piled out. The man and woman both wore suits and I figured they must work in the city. The little girl, donning pigtails, clutched a coloring page. I imagined she must go to preschool or something. She looked in my direction, and I tried to remember if I'd moved. I'd wanted to and hadn't, but I knew she'd seen me anyway. I watched to see if she'd say something to the woman. She didn't. She just followed the couple into the house, glancing once again over her shoulder at me. Tomorrow I would have to stay inside.

When I made it in the house I immediately regretted throwing Janet down. Even after I'd scraped the sand from her bathing suit, the paint job remained a disaster. It would have to be redone, and I couldn't do it tomorrow. I thought instead I might be able to work on my tractor. It was an old blue Ford my parents gave to me when I came home. If Janet would've been with me I imagine we would've gotten candles and plates and stuff as housewarming presents, but I got a tractor I hadn't used since Ronny started mowing for me the day it backfired and I lost it in the front yard. The trees were little at that point, and my neighbor saw me fly off the machine and breakdown in front of my new home. It was the first and only time I'd cried about it. Ever since that day it's sat motionless in the connected garage. I imagine it'd probably still run. I mean, nothing was ever wrong with it. Something was only terribly wrong with me. Tomorrow, though, I'd check on the tractor before making a list of things I could do to the beach.

I was awake for every moment of the night. They had predicted storms, and storm it did. I sat in my chair and stared at the plywood back of a mirror I had hung backwards. I wanted something to take up the empty space by the table, but didn't like the reflective surface of the mirror. I planned on painting the back to make it more appealing, but hadn't gotten around to it yet. I was sure I'd have time in a few days. The dawn came, as it has a tendency to do, but with it came giggling from my lawn. I approached a front window and looked out, slowly emerging from my own nighttime fog, making sure my body was fully concealed to the right of the glass. The little ginger must've let herself out of the house to

play early this morning. The couple must not be awake. Thank God I didn't fall asleep; I could've killed her.

She picked Paul up and laughed at his again half-eaten head. She picked Janet up, still clutching Paul in her other hand, and pretended they were kissing. I should've been the one kissing Janet, but it didn't matter. I could almost see our little girl there, playing with her.

## WHEN WE PRAY

When Sherry was a child, she saw figures moving across her room at night. They looked a little like shadows, but even in the darkness she could tell that their forms were full, like the bodies of real people. She lay in bed, blankets pulled up past her face, and watched as the figures paraded across the end of her bed. Although they were silent and slow-moving, they frightened her. She'd lay perfectly still, rubbing circles into her palms with her thumbs to calm herself. She couldn't make out their faces—they were dark and didn't have distinguishable features. Though she was too afraid to run to her parents' room on nights when they visited her, she would usually tell her mother the next morning. Although her mother said that children often see monsters in their room at night—that the occurrence was common and would go away with time, Sherry knew these were different. She tried to explain that these ghosts weren't monsters, they were people; like the saints she learned about in Sunday school. She'd heard of these things happening to adults too. In fact, if she convinced herself that they weren't real, it would be in direct contradiction to the faith of a good Catholic. Her mother would know this if she paid attention in church, as she prodded Sherry to do. The other realm was closer than what many would admit to believing.

Sherry did her best to instill this belief in her own daughter, Veronica. When she was little, around eleven years old, Sherry spent a summer taking Veronica to religious grottos in the Midwest. She hoped that her daughter could share in the faith—that they would grow closer this way. The “Our Lady of Lourdes” grotto in Bellevue was supposed to be one of the most spiritual places in Ohio. It was a replica of the actual cave in France where Mary, the Immaculate Conception, appeared to Bernadette of Lourdes. Mary blessed the stream and told Bernadette to drink, which healed the girl. The grotto looked like a terrestrial coral reef, all coveys and arches and shrines. People from all around the states came to Bellevue to collect small plastic vials that were said to have been filled with water from the blessed stream in France, and contain the same healing property.

“You don’t realize how lucky we are that this place is only a couple hours from Ironton,” Sherry said, taking a final left onto the gravel drive.

“I guess,” said Veronica. It was the last week of her summer vacation, and she wasn’t particularly thrilled about spending it visiting mosquito-ridden caves with her mother. However, it was better than staying home with Dad. Dad was mowing the lawn today, a task that he used as an excuse to go to The Eagles. When Dad got home from The Eagles, he would continue drinking on the couch. If it was a bad day, he would pick a fight with her mother. The last time they fought was when Dad didn’t cover his food in the microwave. It bothered her mother that Dad let his food get hot and splatter all over as it bubbled and popped, instead of covering it with a paper towel. When her mother told him to

please cover his food, he screamed at her about what a miserable life she had forced upon him. Veronica was hiding in the living room as they carried on. She tried hard to remember the exact words of the fight, and decide whether or not she also heard hitting, as she followed her mother to the grotto.

“You can already tell this one is more important than the others we’ve been to,” Sherry said, looking at the flowers lining the stair rail. She was happy that Veronica had been coming with her, and wished Eddie would as well, but she knew that he had the yard to take care of. Saint Gengulphus, patron saint of difficult marriages, might be more apt to answer her prayers if they both prayed them. She was fairly certain that Veronica had heard them the other day. It had gotten so bad she had begun to consider divorce, although she knew, deep down, this was out of the question. Not only had Sherry not given prayer enough of a chance, but she also had no source of income. She couldn’t work a job and take care of her daughter. Surely Gengulphus would hear her soon, and help change her husband’s heart. And hers, if it needed changing.

As they approached the shrine, Sherry noticed that Veronica was sweating. “It is pretty hot out, isn’t it?” she said. “I hope Dad’s not killing himself to get the lawn mowed in this heat.”

Veronica didn’t acknowledge her, but kneeled down at the little wooden altar, before the statue of the Virgin. She prayed that her Dad would die, or—that was too bad, and she couldn’t risk praying a thing like that, even if no one was actually listening. She prayed that her Mom would leave him. At first she tried with her eyes open, but she started thinking about how the statue looked like it

just had a fresh paint job. She could see individual brush strokes in the white paint. She had a bit more success with her eyes closed, although she couldn't shake the feeling of talking to herself.

Sherry petitioned on behalf of her marriage, only opening her eyes when she felt her daughter shifting weight beside her, impatient for the air conditioning of the car.

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"Sherry," the voice said. It had been nearly fifty years since she had actually seen a figure. She rotated from the table and looked up at a short man, whose face startled her. His brimmed hat cast a shadow over what she thought were his eyes, although it didn't seem like they were accompanied by eyebrows or lashes. His face blurred into a pale solid. It was as if he was wearing a latex mask. His skin was a grey beige and appeared thick, his nostrils misshapen. A quick glance down revealed he was overdressed for Community Lanes, wearing a dark sport coat and loafers, and she wondered if he was here with someone, a group maybe. She looked past the man but didn't see others in similar dress, so it couldn't have been for a wedding, or a dinner, or a birthday party.

"He—," she stifled a reply, too afraid of what he'd say in return. Sherry felt that this figure was here to confirm what she already knew, that she was at fault for Eddie's drowning. She had known it was only a matter of time before they came for her.

The day it happened, the drowning, Sherry had woken to the smell of spiced deer meat, made into a kind of sausage that she found in the refrigerator and warmed for breakfast. Although he hadn't always been the best husband, by anyone's standards, Eddie had always cooked breakfast for her—or, at the very least, cooked enough for himself that she was able to have his leftovers. After clearing her plate and leaving it in the sink for later, she changed from her nightdress into a pair of old overalls and garden clogs. Veronica was having a few friends from work over to the farm that weekend, and they had several chores to do before the group came. It was early June, and she had yet to bleach the plastic lawn chairs that her daughter and her friends would want to use to lay out by the pond. Grabbing a bucket and bleach from under the sink, she walked outside to the carport, where she mixed a 1:3 bleach and water solution. After fixing breakfast, Eddie tilled the garden and was already floating in an inner tube in the middle of the pond.

Sherry stared out at him for a moment before remembering that she had asked him to fix the crooked fountain. Although it seemed inconsequential, the fountain bothered her. Instead of shooting water straight upward like it was supposed to, the fountain swiveled on its base in the pond, spurting water in a circular pattern. Eddie had turned the fountain off and unplugged the power source before swimming out to work on it. This was one of the first things the coroner had checked after pronouncing him dead.

That morning, without the whooshing sound of the fountain, the shore was quiet when Sherry dragged the first chair from the dock onto the grass. She was

bent over scrubbing a chair leg, back towards the pond, when she first heard the gasping. It cut through the silence, sounding like someone attempting in vain to scream during a nightmare. Rather than trying to force air out, though, Eddie was in the pond trying to suck it into his lungs and failing. Sherry would've had a hard time figuring out what the noise was had she not turned around and seen his eyes wide, staring forward in panic. The inner tube was on the far side of the pond, rocking back and forth with the waves Eddie created.

Unable to swim, Sherry waded knee-deep into the water. She extended a pool noodle toward her husband, who was beginning to move away from her, head bobbing up and down, actively drowning. She knew that she would die too if she tried to swim out to him, so she ran back onto the bank and through the trees separating their land from the neighbor's. She had lost a clog in the thick mud of the pond bottom, but couldn't feel the stickerbushes underneath her foot as she ran. The neighbors heard banging on their back door and were hesitant to answer, frightened at the urgency of the knock. Sherry threw herself against the door, unable to do anything else, certainly unable to come up with another course of action. After pleading for what felt like five minutes for someone to come help, a young man opened the door.

He could barely understand what she was saying and thought that this was something that happened in movies—a hysterical woman beating on the door, screaming “I can't swim.” He followed her back through the trees to the pond, but did not see her husband in it. Once in the yard, she ran back towards the garage, leaving the man by the pond. It looked like she was searching for

someone, as if a person were lost in there. This wasn't the case though, for as the man was walking the perimeter of the pond, he saw a foot in the shallow water close to the bank. Acting on impulse, he stepped into the water and grabbed the foot, pulling the body out backwards onto the shore. He yelled to the woman to call an ambulance, and began beating on the husband's chest. Unable to look at the man's face, which was covered in mud, he stared out across the water and fixed his eyes on an overturned paddleboat and an inner tube big enough for two on the far shore.

Hearing the stifled response, her companions at the bowling alley turned towards Sherry. "Did you have something to add?"

She turned back to the group, refocusing on the game, the moment at hand. "Not at all! I told you he was lying about not having bowled before," Sherry said, turning to look at the score. They all laughed, deciding to play another game.

When she turned around again to look again at the man with the strange face, he was gone. He hadn't sat down at any of the nearby tables, wasn't at any of the lanes, wasn't sitting at the bar. She considered walking out to the parking lot to check there, but didn't want to cause a scene. She didn't need proof, anyway. Since Eddie died, a voice had shouted at her between one and three o'clock each night. Spirits always come at the same time each night, and bad spirits always make themselves known between the hours of one and three. Sherry knew this. She never answered the voice, which always shouted her

name. Now, she was sure that it was appearing to her in person. Her sleeping was always spotty. She hadn't slept more than a couple of hours in days, always staying up as to not be awoken by the voice, and always unable to fall back asleep after it shouted her name. Some part of her hoped every night that that night would be the night it stopped. Yesterday she had made it nearly to two o'clock before beginning to doze off, unable to stop herself. At precisely the moment she felt herself losing control, the voice came again.

She decided to wait until the second game to ask her friends if they'd seen the strange man, hoping they wouldn't be able to tell she was afraid. After bowling her fifth turn, she returned to the table and attempted to casually ask them if they'd noticed anything.

"Did y'all see the man standing here during the last game? I mean, there were several men passed by, but this one was too well-dressed for the lodge," Sherry said.

"I didn't see anybody dressed that way, and I'd prolly remember," said Nita. "Could you describe him for me? I know jus' about everyone who comes in here on Fridays." Everyone else at the table looked down or at each other, frowning their brows and pursing their lips to show that they were trying very hard to remember if they'd seen the man Sherry was describing.

"He was wearing a dark sport coat and loafers," she explained. "He had a bit of grey-blond hair towards the back of his head, and his face looked as though it had been caked with foundation. I know it sounds odd, but it almost looked like

he was dressed for a costume party, at least with that layer of makeup on his face.”

“I know a lot of bald men, but I don’t know any makeup wearing bald men,” Nita said, readjusting herself in the chair and smiling at the woman sitting next to her.

“You probably saw the burned lady,” Maryann said. “Everyone’s scared of her, her face is so messed up. She comes around here sometimes, although I didn’t see her tonight, and I’ve sure never seen her wearing a suit.”

“You know, you’re right,” said Maryann’s husband, nodding in agreement.

“I bet that was it,” Sherry said, although she knew better. She thought about the first time she’d seen the burned lady. Her name was Tammy, and she graduated a grade above Sherry in school. She did not, however, learn her name until nearly thirty years later, when word spread all over town that Tammy had been lit on fire by her husband. They hadn’t gotten along for some time when one night during an argument, he doused her with gasoline and took a match to her. She went through an awful ordeal with all of the surgeries, and when she was finally well enough to go to town on her own, Sherry had run into her at the Quik shop. Although Sherry hadn’t spoken to her in school, she said hello and how are you mostly as an excuse to look at her. Tammy, then, was wearing a long sleeved turtleneck and long pants, which disappointed Sherry, but when Tammy turned to address her question, she was able to look closely at her face. It was as if the skin had been melted, she thought, and it had. She wondered if she didn’t have the money for a better job than that. She’d seen a few burn victims,

mostly on the news, but this was the worst. She almost regretted saying something to her, but was glad for the perspective. She'd think about that in her prayers, she thought. She'd thank the lord that wasn't her face. That Eddie didn't hate her enough to do that.

No, Sherry thought as she waited for her ball to exit the conveyor, this man wasn't Tammy.

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After carrying her bowling ball to the closet, Sherry walked back to the kitchen window. The night after Eddie drowned she pounded a wooden cross into the bank of the pond, right where he was drug out. Veronica, who had fallen out of touch with the religion, thought it was morbid looking and begged her to remove the cross, but Sherry liked looking out at it. She was sure that Eddie had gone to heaven and that the cross served as a kind of reminder. After surviving the night, Sherry would stand with her coffee and look out the kitchen window to the cross, which glowed warmly in the morning light. She had gotten back later than she'd wanted tonight, and the darkness was such that she was unable to see the cross, even with the reflection of stars on the water nearby.

The spirit that appeared to her at the alley did no more than speak her name. This gave Sherry confidence. Perhaps he couldn't do more to break her. Thinking she might be able to sleep tonight, she grabbed a bottle of Seagram's and a can of Sprite from the refrigerator. Tonight, she was would to risk the drowsing effect of alcohol for its promise of sleep. After pouring a drink, she walked to the living room and sat on the couch under a crucifix she had hung

several nights ago, in the hope that it would stop the calling. The door to their bedroom was closed, and she had no plans to open it again, much less sleep there. The couch was comfortable enough and had reclining seats, which made it easy to watch T.V. while trying to stay awake, or make an effort to sleep after three o'clock had passed. She pulled the lever to let her feet up and took a sip of her drink. Seagram's and Sprite was her favorite, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd been without it on hand. Although Eddie had gotten in to trouble with alcohol, needing it to calm his nerves, Sherry had only ever drunk it because she genuinely enjoyed it. After the first couple of sips, she could feel it beginning to warm her insides.

The ice was cold against her lip as she tipped the glass to get the last bit of liquid. She used her calves to pull the footrest in and shifted her weight to her feet, thinking that another wouldn't hurt. As she stood, the room began to spin around her. She felt as though she might vomit and stumbled towards the kitchen, where she had left the light on. She prayed that she wouldn't hork on the floor, knowing that it would remind her of the times she had yelled at Eddie for doing the same after a night out. She made it to the sink only to realize that she was passing out. She held tight to the counter while lowering her body to the floor, preparing to go. As she was losing consciousness, she wondered at what point during drowning this happened.

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Veronica was named for Saint Veronica, the woman who wiped the face of Jesus as he carried his cross towards Calvary. Her mother had wanted

the name for her daughter, and her father had surprisingly relented. While she was happy that her mother had chosen the name for her, she assumed it was only allowed to happen because the woman was canonized for wiping a man's face. The miracle was that Jesus' face appeared in her handkerchief. It couldn't even be claimed that the Lord worked through her—rather He worked on her rag.

Although the greater part of her adulthood she had gone by Roni in an effort to undo the story of her naming, her father's death had her reconsidering. She'd decided to share this with her mother at the very moment the woman lost consciousness in her kitchen.

With the exception of holidays, Veronica had been out of contact with her father for the last five years of his life. When she called home and her father answered, she offered nothing more than "is mom there?" Veronica knew that this bothered Sherry a great deal, but that she understood anyway. Her husband hadn't always been the best father, and she was willing to see her daughter less if it meant that Roni was living a happier life. When Sherry called to tell her that her father had drowned and did she want to see the body before they took it away, Roni's first thought was that her mother was overreacting. That, or he'd drowned in his own vomit—not the pond. Her father could swim, and was doing well for his age. Although she wanted to ask her mother if he'd been drinking before swimming, she held back. No matter how many times she brought it up, Sherry's answer remained that she had no recollection whatsoever of her husband ever having a drinking problem, that he certainly didn't have one as she spoke. She also couldn't recall Eddie ever telling Roni to "learn how to laugh," or

that she had fat on her knees, or that she, Roni, was his problem. Roni held fast to these memories.

Perhaps it was best to forget, Roni thought as she dialed her mother's house. Had her father really been that bad? He was dead now, anyway. She had changed her name to spite her parents, and it had hurt them both. While the opportunity to apologize to him had passed, she could still repair things with her mother. And while they had never stopped talking, she knew that Sherry held back much of what she wanted to say.

When the answering machine picked up, Roni was immediately worried. Her first thought was that she couldn't stand to lose her mother too. Although she knew she might be overreacting, she decided to drive the fifteen minutes to her parents' farm. She was more than sure that her mother was still awake, as she knew Sherry hadn't been sleeping much since her dad died.

The porch rail was lined with flower arrangements that had been sent to the visitation. Although her mother had offered them to her, Roni had refused to take any home. In the orange glow of the porchlight, the cut flowers were beginning to turn brown, and she noticed that her mother hadn't been watering the planters either. Their leaves were wilted nearly to the ground. This wasn't like her mother, who had always taken pride in her flowers.

When no one answered her knock, Roni opened the door. "Mom," she said, walking through the kitchen to the living room. Even before reaching the living room she could hear the sobs. Her mother was lying on the couch

convulsing, saliva and mucus streaming from her mouth and nose, creating a wet spot where her head rested on the cushion. As she approached the couch, her mother started repeating, "It was my fault" over and over again, rocking from side to side each time she uttered the phrase. Unsure of what to think, but wanting to comfort her mother, Roni bent down and whispered that it wasn't, moving her hand to smooth her mother's hair. Sherry recoiled and looked up at her, wide-eyed, as though she were a stranger. As she tried to stand, wanting not to be comforted, she lost her balance and fell again, this time unable to ease herself down.

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Ironton General Hospital had been on the decline for years. The last time Roni had been there, for a broken arm, there had been flies in her room. She remembered seeing a hairy black one land on her water cup and watching it rub its feet together before sucking on a bead of condensation. The room the nurse led them to had heart disease posters on the wall. Roni tried her best to focus on a picture of the cardiovascular system while her mother screamed, still saying that it was her fault. In the ambulance, she had continued to tell her mother that it wasn't her fault, that Dad had probably gotten a cramp and sucked in a little water, making his throat close. Sherry couldn't swim, so there was nothing she could do. But this hadn't done any good, and now the whole hospital could hear.

Roni barely heard the doctor knock over her mother's howling. When he came in, she did her best to explain the situation. Her father had drowned, and her mother had stopped sleeping. When she went to check on her tonight, there

was a bottle of Seagram's on the counter, and her mother was wailing on the couch. She had passed out.

The doctor stood stationary by the door. He looked Sherry up and down, as if trying to process what was happening while she continued to scream that it was her fault. "What makes you say that," he finally said, conversationally.

Hearing this, Sherry stopped screaming. She thought for a moment about keeping the answer to herself, but was too afraid of what could happen. She looked at Veronica. "They think there was nothing I could've done, but it's not true. I could've used the paddle boat to get to him," she said, sucking snot back up her nose. "I thought about it and ran the other way."

Roni looked down, afraid of what this might mean. Was it murder if she didn't stop it from happening? Could this doctor say something to the police? When she was younger, she was sure that her father hit her mother during arguments, though she never actually saw it happen—he was smart about it—and she certainly didn't have any proof. She had always wished her mother would leave her father, but didn't believe her mother had the confidence to do so. Sherry hadn't ever learned to swim, not because she was unable to learn, but because she was terrified of water and had convinced herself that she couldn't. After her father died, Roni had to teach her mother how to use the gas pump. Now this same woman was claiming to have let her husband drown.

"Ah, I see," the doctor said, walking towards Sherry. "You mustn't say these things to yourself." He lowered his face to meet Sherry's. "When you have those thoughts you must say 'Devil be gone!'"

Sherry immediately knew that this man had been sent to her. She had been pleading with God to make the spirits stop, and her prayers had finally been answered. This man knew the exactly what was happening to her, and how to make it end. She nodded her head and repeated the words aloud.

Roni felt as though she had stepped out of her body and was floating above the room. The nurse hadn't taken her mother's pulse or temperature, and now this so-called medical doctor was telling her mother that the devil was after her. She wanted to be angry at the entire situation, to grab her mother and march out of the hospital, away from this madness. However, no matter how much she stoked it, her anger was smothered by confusion. Her mother let her father die.

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Sherry stayed calm during the car ride home. Her head rested on the passenger seat headrest, and she kept her hands folded in her lap. After giving her mom fluids, the doctor sent Roni home with a cocktail of drugs to help Sherry relax and sleep. Roni ran her thumb over the container as she drove to the farm.

"Do you remember the burned lady?" Sherry said, looking out of the passenger window.

"Yeah," Roni said, "what about her? Didn't her husband do that?" Roni remembered seeing the woman once at the Dollar Store. She was still in elementary school, and was standing in the card aisle by herself, looking for the perfect birthday card. When she glanced up from a card and saw the lady's face, she let out a scream and ran from the aisle. When she told her mother what

she'd seen, Sherry scolded her for being rude to someone who had already been through such a tough time.

"Yeah, he did" Sherry said. "You know, I ran into her once at the Quik Shop. She was wearing the same beige turtleneck that I used to wear all of the time."

Roni could feel her stomach lifting. Was her mother finally going to talk about the abuse? Had she worn the turtleneck to cover her own wounds?

"It's just that," Sherry continued, "even in the face of a tragedy like this one, you have to remember some people have it worse."

After parking in the drive, Roni helped Sherry out of the car and in to the house. She began unscrewing the cap of the cocktail, and asked her mother if she wanted a cup of water to take with the medicine. "You're finally going to get some sleep," she said.

"There's no way I'm taking that," Sherry said, staring at the container. "If I take that, the devil could come to me in my sleep, and I might not be able to wake up. You don't want to lose me, do you?" Sherry looked at her daughter.

"I don't," Roni said, putting the medicine away. She understood that sometimes, believing is necessary.

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