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TRINITY PART ONE: FOOD OF THE GODS

By

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B.A. Southeast Missouri State University, 2001
B.A./B.S. Indiana University Southeast, 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

TRINITY PART ONE: FOOD OF THE GODS

Thomas Edward Olges

November 13, 2017

A novel of supernatural horror, *Trinity* begins in the wake of a catastrophe. A young woman, divinely pregnant, has lost both her life and her son in the process of delivery. Three people dear to her—her fiancé, her brother, and a close friend—have found themselves irreparably altered by the experience. Their bodies changed and reality warping around them, the three set off across the country in an attempt to prevent other incursions of the miraculous into our reality.

This thesis includes the novel's introductory scene and its first principle section, "Food of the Gods."

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TRINITY

The guestroom window was thrown wide open, and cool air from the back yard was pulled steadily through. That cool air was a blessing: it mitigated the heat from the burning candles and the exertion, fought back the funk of the room (sweat, blood, vanilla spice candle scent) with the sharp bleach tang of blooming chestnut trees. It was supposed to be cold tonight—a projected low of 47 degrees—probably the last cold night of the spring.

Lyn was beginning to wail. She'd been moaning throughout the delivery, but this was different; her pitch kept rising and her volume increasing—a drunk's impression of an air raid siren. Joey was still trying to soothe her. He held her hand, he pulled lank strands of wet hair from her forehead, he whispered words that must have been swallowed by her own sounds. Paul thumbed through the natural childbirth manual he'd been consulting throughout her delivery. It was a book none of them remembered buying; they'd just...found it...piled in the downstairs hallway with a bunch of similar guides.

What bothered Dee was that the hard part should have been over. Lyn's baby was cradled in Dee's arms even now, swaddled snug in a bath towel that would probably never be white again. She knelt at the foot of the guest bed, tethered in an awkward forward crouch by the uncut umbilical cord. It was messy down here, but under all the

blood and mucus the baby seemed fine. He was crying, and he had all of his fingers and toes, and he had thick black hair and smooth dark skin like his father.

No, she corrected herself. Like Joey. No one really knows what the father looks like.

She wanted to tell Lyn how lucky they'd been. How 1 in 30 births are breech, or how nuchal cords have over a 30% presentation rate at birth, or how 1 in 250 babies have heads too big to fit through their mothers' cervixes. After the power had failed downstairs, after they hadn't been able to call out for an ambulance, after their car keys had disappeared—after it had become obvious that they couldn't reach a hospital, any number of tragedies could have befallen them during delivery. None of them had. The baby was out now.

And Lyn kept wailing. *But it's not a wail, Dee thought, it's too...flat. Not an ululation, either—I think that requires some pitch variation. Is it a keen? Can one keen?* She shook her head at no one in particular. It did not escape her that Lyn had been making that noise now for at least a minute without stopping to breathe.

The baby struggled against Dee's chest. He was jerking his little arms violently, kicking his legs with far more strength and coordination than a newborn should have possessed. She bounced him gently—reluctantly—against her chest, her mind a dim reel of mothers she'd seen calming their children. She tried to make cooing noises at him, but they were swallowed Lyn's wails and she couldn't tell if they were coming out right.

And then his cry...changed. The baby's voice lowered, in harmony or sympathy with the higher pitch of his mother. It became something deep and garbled, loud and alien: a distressed whale or a bass guitarist underwater. Paul dropped his copy of *The*

Mama Natural and started to mouth what might have been prayers. Joey closed his eyes against the sound. Rested his forehead on Lyn's cheek.

Dee tried to hold onto the baby, but it was becoming impossible. His movements were growing ever wilder, and her position gave her no leverage. She was reminded of bathing kittens in the bathtub, and the thought brought a smile to her face.

And she set him down. No one noticed: Lyn kept keening, Paul kept muttering, Joey remained still. The baby's arms and legs kept flailing, his strange warbling cry growing louder. Dee stood, wincing a little as the blood flowed back into her legs, and backed away from the bed. She went as far as she could—about a meter—until her back hit the dresser at the far wall and she could rest her weight against it.

A sigh shook loose from her lips, knots of tension easing in her shoulders. From her new position—which seemed so much further away than a meter—she could see that this ordeal was finally ending. Lyn was still making that strange, high-pitched noise, but she'd been doing it without cease for a few minutes now and Dee was confident that she was no longer breathing. Similarly, her son's violent agitation and weird bass cry couldn't be the actions of a healthy newborn. They must have finally gotten lucky. Whatever it was that had killed Lyn was taking her son along with her.

As if to confirm her hopes, the baby stopped flailing. His eyes fluttered open (even at this distance, even in this dim light, Dee would have sworn that the irises and pupils were an undifferentiated black) and rolled around in his head. His little hands twisted into claws and raked at the air.

On the nightstand, on the dresser, on the windowsill, the candles went out. Darkness seeped into the room, filling it up from the corners in, until the only place still

lit was the gore-streaked blue bedspread directly beneath the window. Paul's shadow fumbled in the corner, repeatedly making the sharp double-handshake motion that should have turned on his phone's flashlight. Dee might have told him not to bother.

The noise in the room intensified. Dee wasn't ready to say that it had gotten louder; between the height of Lyn's pitch and the depth of her baby's she doubted there was anywhere else for sound to go. But she could *feel* it now: a fundamental vibration in the pit of her stomach and the bones of her temples. Either her hands or the wood of the dresser hummed along. The shadows of small objects stuttered and jumped, marching across the surface of the nightstand like players in an old-timey electric football game.

And...something...was happening to Lyn's baby. Between him and his mother, the knotted grey coil of his umbilical cord jerked like a downed wire. His arm, where it waved through the room's little patch of moonlight, looked stiff and wooden. As Dee watched, a network of fine, jagged lines spread across the surface of the infant's skin. Red and minute, nearly invisible beneath the thin sheen of muck still clinging to him, they split and joined like tangling state routes on a road map.

As Dee watched, those cracks delineated a square of skin on the baby's arm no larger than a postage stamp. As soon as it was encircled it flaked away, lifting from his flesh and drifting into the air like a scrap of paper ash in the wind. Dee could see no muscle or tissue beneath it, only shadow, which seemed to leak like fluid from the edges of the wound.

Dee's heart raced in her chest. *If only Lyn could have seen this*, she thought. *It would have made her so happy...*

Even as Lyn's son dissolved, his strangled bass cry continued. With it, the deep vibration that thrummed through the room and its occupants intensified, until Dee could feel her teeth chattering. Within a minute, there was nothing left of Lyn's son but an indistinct pool of shadow wrapped up in a bloody towel—but everything was still shaking.

Except it all felt somehow further away. Dee couldn't put her finger on it, but the tenor and the strength of the vibration seemed to have decreased. She could still feel her teeth chattering and the wood vibrating beneath her fingers, but it was muffled—like everything had been coated in cotton. The room even seemed to be getting darker. *It's all shutting down*, she thought. *Maybe pretty soon this whole room will just wink out of existence.*

The thought did little to upset her. Given the last trimester of Lyn's pregnancy, this might be the best possible outcome. Still, she wondered dimly what would happen outside of Lyn's guest bedroom. Would the neighbors see the house collapse in on itself, *Poltergeist*-style? Would the whole building just stop existing? Would everyone have forgotten it by morning? *Or maybe*, she thought, *it won't stop with this bedroom at all. Maybe this whole town will shake itself apart and disappear, and then Kansas, and America, and the world...*

Dee pulled a frown, or tried to, though her face felt numb and thick by this point and she wasn't sure if she'd done it. What had happened to Lyn—to all of them—was a tragedy; it seemed grossly unfair that that tragedy befall anyone else. She cast around the room for any clue that the dissolution inside it was contained. She found none. Precious little light was leaking into the room, but through the window she could no longer make

out the details of the backyard. Whether that was her eyes failing or the yard, she had no idea.

There was movement then from her left, an indistinct blurring of the shadows at Lyn's bedside. Joey had moved to the foot of the bed, and as Dee watched he rummaged through the towel that had held Lyn's son. There was something assured in his movements, something that spoke of resolution, and Dee found herself rooting for him despite not understanding what he was doing. It only took him a few seconds to find what he was looking for, and he held it up triumphantly in the bedroom's fading light.

The boy's eyes: pristine, undamaged, resting on the palm of Joey's hand like a pair of tiny cherries.

1: FOOD OF THE GODS

Dee eased them off the road at the first gas station in town: a little green-roofed place called Family Express that looked like it was probably a local chain. The noonday sun had spent the morning divvying up the parking lot. Most of it was consigned to fry, blasted by light so bright that it drove out color contrast. A few patches near the building—the ice machine, the propane tanks, the small doors on the corner that might have been public restrooms—were swallowed by shadow. *Chiaroscuro*, she thought. *The Sun fancies itself an artist.*

She didn't care to focus on the shadows, choosing to gaze at the pumps instead. "Is this the right place?"

"Yeah. It is." Joey's voice sounded small, distant. Like he was sitting in the next car over. The next state.

Her eyes wandered through the parking lot. Visited a stop sign, a passing motorist, a heavy-set man in a red jersey pumping gas. It looked like anywhere—*everywhere*—else in America. "How do you know?" She shook her head. "How can we be *sure*?"

A sigh. An audible swallow. She finally turned—found Joey smashed down in the passenger's seat with his head crammed into the space between the headrest and the door. He'd slept like that or pretended to sleep like that for most of the morning. Now

his black hair was tousled and cowlicked, and the upholstery had impressed a speckled blush onto the cinnamon of his skin. He was wearing the same oversized tortoiseshell shades he'd had on for the last two weeks, and Dee wondered what his eyes looked like beneath them.

“We'll look around,” he offered. His voice didn't seem any closer now that she was looking at him. “If this is the right place—and I think it is—it'll be obvious.”

She nodded, fished her phone out of her hip pocket and thumbed it on. “I don't have any kind of service out here, though. What is this town even called?”

Joey smiled—or at least turned up the edges of his lips; without sight of his eyes it was hard to tell—“The last sign we passed said, ‘Ambrosia.’”

Dee's stomach turned over. Her right hand went to her chest, where she rubbed at the rough web of scar tissue over her breastbone. Her left hand pushed open the car door. “Jesus Christ. That's a little on-the-nose, isn't it?”

Joey didn't answer—or didn't answer quickly enough—so she pulled herself out of the car and shut the door. She was coming dangerously close to thinking about Lyn again: about the night of the 10th, and her labor, and the blood and the shadows and the screams. She shut her eyes against it without thinking, but found the blackness behind her eyelids filled with snapshots of Lyn's bedroom. Better to force them open. Fill them with sun-shined chrome and gleaming rubber.

That was half a month ago, she told herself. It's the...26th? She squinted at the sun's reflection. *No sense living in the past.*

Her stomach growled; it sounded indignant.

After four hours of air-conditioned rental car interior, the heat outside was oppressive. The air was still, stifling; she strove not to liken it to the stale, candle-lit exertion of Lyn's room. She breathed in, deep, overwrote the ghosts of sweat and vanilla-spice with the swoon of hot asphalt and gasoline fumes.

Her shirt (some black band tee from a concert she didn't remember) was already starting to stick at the small of her back, and she regretted not having a dress to wear. She hadn't packed one; hers were all too low-cut to wear in public now. Instead, she only had bum clothes: baggy jeans and big, shapeless t-shirts, stuff Jon had left in her apartment when they split up. *I should've thought ahead. It isn't even June yet; it's only going to get worse if we spend the next few weeks here in—*

She paused. Missouri? Arkansas? This morning they'd driven through what seemed like the entire Missouri bootheel, following a byzantine array of numbered state highways from one decaying town to another. First the stark isolation of endless soybean fields, next the bitter resignation of derelict houses sinking into soil. Pages from the world's worst promotional calendar.

Dee strained to hear the music piped out to the pumps: some pop-country pablum about farms or tractors or casual alcoholism. It didn't do much to help her figure out which state she was in. Hell, it was probably a satellite feed, playing right this minute at gas stations all over the heartland. Beneath it, she tried not to hear the keening wail of Lyn on the night of her labor.

Across the car, Joey unfolded himself from the passenger seat and stretched. He ran a hand through his hair, absently, and pushed his sunglasses up a bit on the bridge of his nose. Without a word to Dee, he turned toward the convenience store and strode off.

She watched him walk across the lot. For a time, she was only the sight of his back, the weight of the nozzle in her hands, the heat and the humidity and the mindless country music in the air.

Inside the store, a display of lottery tickets tipped Dee off to the fact that they'd entered Arkansas. She wasn't sure she would have noticed, otherwise. Joey had guided them here this morning, giving turn-by-turn instructions through the interchangeable highways of southeast Missouri. In the weeks since Lyn's labor—longer, maybe—he'd been the only one of them with any idea what to do. It had seemed a good enough reason to accompany him on his little road trip.

Dee joined him now in front of a rack of snacks, where he was swaying before the modest array of potato chips. She laid a hand gently on his elbow. "We're gassed up, Joey. You almost ready to move?"

He inclined his head, slowly, once. Very nearly nodded.

"You sure? You don't look super ready." She leaned in, lowered her voice. "You're sure this is the right place?"

He swiveled, populating the lenses of his glasses with her twinned reflection. "I'm not *sure*, no." He pursed his lips. "But I think it is, yeah."

Joey's voice still sounded distant. She watched herself cocking their heads in his glasses. They looked nervous. "You *think*? Well, did you...did you *see* it?"

His head wobbled back and forth. "I saw...something. It was probably this place." Her reflections raised the corners of their lips; if she didn't know them she would say they were sneering. Still, when Joey spoke again his voice was more animated.

Closer. “I’m not a crystal ball, Dee. But let’s say it is, okay? Just say I’m sure. I’ve been thinking that maybe there’s a way to verify it.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, you remember the last few months of Lyn’s pregnancy, right? The weird phone calls, the problems with the lights, all the shit that went missing—“

Dee remembered far more than that. She remembered unloading the same bag of groceries from her car six times one afternoon, because by the time she’d unloaded it all the items had somehow vanished from the cupboards and ended up back in her trunk. She remembered hearing muffled conversations from the next room and being positive that one of the voices involved was her own. She remembered waking up in Lyn’s guest bedroom one afternoon with no recollection of how she got there, then jerking and reeling her way through a dizzying kaleidoscope of the morning’s events in reverse order until she found herself standing in the street outside—

—She directed her attention to the row of snacks. Filled her eyes with bright colors and meaningless packaging language.

“There’ll be effects, if one of them is really coming. Ripples in reality. That’s how we’ll know we’re in the right place.” He grabbed a bag of tortilla chips from the shelf and strode over to the next aisle. He held his left hand out straight, his fingers just curled, angling it gently back and forth as if he were pouring salt from an invisible shaker. Over his shoulder he offered, “Check your phone.”

She did so as she moved, catching up with him in front of the charcoal briquettes. “Still no dice,” she offered, shaking her head. “Just an angry triangle.”

He scooped up a bag of charcoal and a couple bottles of lighter fluid, shaking his head. “You don’t think that’s a little odd? I mean, no 4G is one thing, but no service at all?”

He turned on his heel, would have walked away again, but she reached out and grabbed his shoulder with her left hand. She spun him around and pulled him close, a little shocked and scared at how easy it was. “Joey, stop. You really think this thing is fucking up cell reception? And wouldn’t everybody in town start complaining? That sort of disturbance would draw a lot of attention.”

He let out a slow, shaky breath. “That’s just it, Dee. I don’t think it’s happening to everyone in town. I think this thing is fucking up *your* cell service. Maybe mine. I don’t think these things follow *rules*. I think they follow *whim*.”

She chewed on her lip for a moment. “If that’s the case, how do we know that anything that happened to Lyn will happen here? I mean, I’ve just been assuming we’d be looking for another...I don’t know, not virgin birth, exactly...”

Joey laughed. “We *were* engaged, Dee. And for that matter, Lyn hadn’t been a virgin for years when I met her. I think you mean ‘immaculate conception.’”

“No, that’s the Virgin Mary—she was conceived without original sin. What we’re talking about is sort of...well, not parthenogenesis...I guess a spontaneous pregnancy? I think that might refer to something that actually happens, though, like with fertility treatments. Maybe there isn’t a word for what happened to Lyn—“

Joey cleared his throat, and Dee realized she was still holding him in place by the shoulder. She smiled an apology at him and loosened her grip. This time, he walked away sideways at a reasonable speed. “I think a...”—he waved one hand at the air—

“...a divine pregnancy is a good bet, but not a sure thing. There’s a lot of historical precedent, at least.” He started piling energy drinks in his arms, shaking his head the whole time. “Like I said, I don’t think there are rules. Just...instinct. Sympathy. Poetry.”

Dee thought of Lyn lying crumpled against the headboard of her cramped guest bedroom, her nightgown soaked with sweat and blood. She thought of the sound Lyn had made: that weird wail that she’d never really thought of the right word for. Her stomach turned over. She tasted copper. Her mouth started watering—she wondered if she would have already vomited if there’d been anything in her stomach.

“Poetry,” she repeated, chasing memory from her tongue with metaphor.

“Poetry.”

Joey had already reached the check-out when Dee caught up with him. The woman behind the counter could have been anywhere between 30 and 50: grey-streaked brunette ponytail, face cracked by sun or smoke at the corners of her eyes and mouth, muted lipstick presumably applied as a concession. Dee considered taking her hair down, wishing once again that she could wear a dress.

The checker mustered a wan smile, inclining her head toward the pile of miscellanea Joey carried. “You folks going to a barbecue?” Between one and three of the syllables in that last word had been over-emphasized; Dee couldn’t be sure which ones. “It’s a nice day for it.”

We don’t have time for bar-be-cues...we think a god is about to be born somewhere in your town, and we’ve come here to kill it. Dee grinned. Started to open her mouth.

Joey beat her to the punch. “Later, yeah. We’ve got a little time to kill.” He leaned in ever so slightly over the counter. “Is there a bar close by that’s already open?”

The checker’s smile turned genuine, and Dee’s died on her lips. She shifted her gaze to the floor. “There are two bars on Main Street: Jacks and the Red Tail. Both of ‘em open for ‘lunch.’”

Joey thanked the woman, and Dee followed him out into the parking lot. Once they were clear of the door, she spoke up. “We’re going to a bar, now?”

Joey nodded, crossed the lot to the car. He pulled his backpack out of the backseat, rifled through it for a handful of his shirts. These he tossed onto the floorboard; he filled the space they’d occupied with energy drinks and lighter fluid. The charcoal he dropped unceremoniously onto the backseat—Dee suspected that the rental people would find it in that exact position when they detailed the car.

When Joey emerged from the backseat, he was holding out something small and neon pink: a rabbit’s foot keychain. She took it from him; it was soft enough against her palm that she could almost imagine it was genuine. “I didn’t see you pick this up.”

He put one finger to his lips. “I swiped it. Thought it would be luckier that way.”

She tucked it into the hip pocket of her jeans and shook her head. “And you think a lucky charm will matter, here? Should we go looking for four-leaf clover?”

“Maybe. I think causality will be a little weaker in general.” His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again with a sideways wobble of his head. “The way it was when Lyn was pregnant. So maybe luck will be a thing, to the extent that we expect it.” He shrugged. His mouth fell flat and rigid. “Anyway, it can’t hurt. I worry that this one won’t be...stillborn.”

She could still see him: small and red-faced and streaked with gore. She could still hear the sound he'd made, so low and so loud that it threatened to shake the bones from her skin. She could still feel the ferocious struggle he'd put up when she held him.

Dee looked back to the street, where she made herself focus on the passing cars. "Perinatal mortality—not a stillbirth, technically." She shook her head. "As long as we're being technical, I think the term is 'antenatal mortality.'"

Joey was already climbing back into the passenger seat. Dee dropped her hand to her hip pocket and stroked her new rabbit's foot.

Main Street was a few miles away, and Dee kept her eyes on the side streets as she drove. *Joey said there would be signs, she thought, but what constitutes a sign?* About a block from the gas station they passed a side street wherein every car on the right side was light blue in color. *Is that unusual? The whole alley only had like 4 cars.*

One Sunday last November, Dee had found Lyn at her kitchen table with a field of ultrasound pictures spread out in front of her. Actually, that wasn't accurate—it was a field of *the same* ultrasound picture, which Lyn had printed out dozens of times. She swore that the baby's position in the picture had changed since she'd come home from the hospital, and she'd spent some indeterminate amount of time monitoring the prints for evidence of it happening again. Dee had talked her down, chalking the whole thing up to new-mother jitters.

Now, of course, she believed Lyn's story; her baby had almost assuredly been moving through his own ultrasound images. *But what else did I shrug off that was*

*actually a sign of something...holy? How do you separate coincidence from revelation?
How can you be sure?*

She cast a sideways glance at Joey. He was staring absently through the windshield (or probably was; his eyes might have been aimed anywhere—or closed—behind those sunglasses), his lips pursed and his breathing steady. As she watched, he retrieved his bag of tortilla chips from the floorboard and pulled it open. He fished out a single chip, deliberately, and crunched it down in one stuttering, graduated bite. He reached in again.

Dee felt her shoulders tighten. Her mouth was starting to water again. She suspected Joey of purposefully eating loudly, though she recognized that that might have been an overreaction. Maybe it was the hours in the car, maybe it was the days she'd been following him without a clear idea of their plan, maybe it was the week without eating anything to speak of. She cleared her throat.

Joey turned toward her; out of the corner of her eye she saw him cocking his head to one side. "Sorry," he mumbled, his voice small and flat and insincere. He held the bag of chips toward her. "Where are my manners?"

She made the "stop" sign with her right hand. "No problem. Not hungry."

Her stomach growled, cued by the smell of Joey's chips and her impeccable comic timing, loud enough that they could both hear it over the backdrop of engine noise and air conditioning. Joey pushed the chips closer, petted her right hand with the bag's edge.

She slapped it away. "Okay, so I *am* hungry. But it's...what do you call it, asymbolic? I feel it, but it doesn't bother me."

Joey chewed another chip, continued his half of the conversation around a mouth half-full. “But I haven’t seen you eat anything since I picked you up. I mean, you gotta *eat*.”

Look where that advice got us. She shook her head again. “You don’t know that. Look, I’ve been dealing with this for weeks now, since Lyn...since the 10th. I’ve actually *put on* a little weight in that time. I think I’m gaining muscle mass.” She flexed her right arm in the space between them, clenching her teeth in a mock growl that should have been a joke. The humor was undercut by the bulge of her bicep, thrown into sharp relief by the cling of t-shirt sleeve fabric.

Joey chewed another chip but didn’t say anything else. Instead, he turned his attention (or at least swiveled his head) back toward the front windshield. For the first time today, she was grateful for his distance.

On the street, a heavy-set man in a red jersey was emptying his mailbox; she realized with a start that it was the same guy she’d seen pumping gas. She wondered if it was a sign.

Main Street was close. Everything in Ambrosia was. Dee drove slowly down it; Joey sat slumped behind his shades in the passenger seat and watched through the window for something he wouldn’t disclose.

They drove past Jack’s first, but Joey didn’t say to stop—so she didn’t. The Red Tail was a mile further on—almost at the edge of town—sandwiched between a closed consignment shop and an empty corner storefront that looked like it might have once held

a grocery. An alley ran up one side of the bar, and when they reached it Joey sat up straight in his seat. “Okay. Pull in here.”

She did so, easing the car to a stop just short of a big green dumpster. “What are we looking for here? How worried should I be?”

Joey shook his head. From the movement of his forehead, she would have sworn his brows were knitting. “I can’t exactly say. Let’s go in to talk to the owner.”

She shrugged, pulled herself out of her seat. “I wish Paul were with us. I never know what to say to people.”

Joey dropped to his hands and knees on the passenger side of the car, scanning the ground. His voice came to her from beneath it. “The last time I saw Paul he was in no condition to talk to anybody.”

She leaned against the driver’s side door, addressed her words to the pavement at her feet. “Wait. When did you talk to Paul?”

Joey popped back into view, his mouth set in a determined little frown. “What? No, I’m...this was...I mean after Lyn’s...” He exhaled forcefully through his nose. “In the week before he disappeared. He was a wreck.”

This was all true; Paul had reacted to his sister’s death with a week-long bender followed by an abrupt disappearance. Not the most mature response, but Dee didn’t feel she was in any position to judge. She’d tried to call him a few times—as of a few days ago his number had been disconnected.

Still, there was something Joey wasn’t saying. She wanted to press him on the matter, but he was already walking toward the sidewalk. “Hey,” she called after him, “What’s the deal? Did you drop something? What’s going on?”

He shook his head and waved one hand over his shoulder—but didn't stop walking. "No, sorry. We can go inside now."

And she was left to follow once again. At the bar's entrance, they were nearly bowled over by a tall dark-haired man in a crumpled blue dress shirt. He stopped on the sidewalk just outside the bar, turned to them with his hands raised palms-up. His eyes were red-rimmed and watery, and he had about a day's growth of patchy salt-and-pepper stubble. He opened his mouth, presumably to apologize, instead merely gaping at them for a moment before shutting it again. He smiled wanly, then disappeared around the corner into the alley.

They stepped into the Red Tail; it was cramped and dark. A handful of deserted booths lined one wall, staring across a field of empty tables at an old, wooden bar. A paunchy, middle-aged man sat hunched over a red plastic basket at the bar, sharing his lunch and some inside joke with the bartender.

They caught only the last few words of his sentence: "...in the story, Padre—no room in the inn. He'll have to go see about buying drinks in a barn somewhere..." The two men stuttered out laughter; the sound seemed small and rough and fragile. When they saw Joey and Dee they stopped abruptly, the bartender absently dragging up the corners of his mouth.

Joey nodded once, quickly, then turned back to Dee. He put one hand on her shoulder, whispered, "That was our guy. Let's go."

He left her there to blink uselessly at the two men behind the bar. She shrugged, smiled, and breathed out something she hoped sounded like casual laughter. "Sorry," she offered, shrugging again. "Forgot our...wallets."

When Dee reached the mouth of the alley, the man from the bar was nowhere to be seen. Joey was creeping between the passenger door of their car and the wall of the bar, crouching low as he had just after hopping out. He caught Dee's eye before she could say anything, pressing one finger to his lips and waving further down the alley with his other hand.

She scanned the area he'd indicated. The alley wasn't a deep one; there were only a few buildings' worth of pavement between her and whatever road was parallel to Main Street. On the left, it fed almost immediately into the parking lot behind the old grocery. The stranger could have easily made it into the parking lot by this point—was probably walking across it right now. She wondered if Joey knew something about this guy, if he remembered him from a vision he'd seen of if he was just operating on a hunch.

Her brow furrowed. She wanted to find this guy strolling toward home, maybe chatting on his cell phone. Maybe Joey was wrong about Ambrosia, and they could get back on the road and go somewhere else. Hell, maybe he was wrong about everything. She rubbed absent-mindedly at her chest. Maybe.

The parking lot came into view as she walked past the dumpster; she registered that the lot was empty at about the same time she heard rustling behind her. She turned—or started to turn—but a lot of things happened at once and broke her concentration. She felt pressure in her lower back: a sharp, insistent warmth that rocked her on her feet and almost made her fall. A roar filled her ears, eclipsing the sounds around her so completely that the world seemed to fall silent. And there was a sudden wetness—a clinging moisture spreading from her t-shirt to the waistband of her jeans, sticking the sodden fabric to her skin.

She glanced down. A ragged hole had been torn in the fabric of her shirt, beneath which a strange flower was blooming from the flesh of her abdomen. She took a moment to marvel at the colors she'd been harboring inside her: streaks of angry crimson over patches of pale corpse-white, rivulets of something yellow intertwined with the ragged black threads of her shredded shirt, tiny splotches of what might have been light blue or purple. *I've been shot*, she thought, at which point the sharp odor of gunpowder reached her nostrils by way of confirmation. *It really doesn't hurt as much as I expected—*

Another wave of heat and sound and pressure passed through her; another exit wound blossomed a few inches to the right of the first. The pain reached her then: a dim, deep ache in the pit of her stomach and a sharp sting in her flesh. It still didn't really bother her as much as she would have expected. *Asymbolia*, she thought, hugging the word close to her. She turned around, a little shakily, leveling what she hoped was an icy stare at the man behind the dumpster.

He was crouched against the wall of the Red Tail, the stubble-chinned man in the blue dress shirt who'd almost spoken to them on their way into the bar. His eyes were wide, seemingly focused on some point several feet behind her, and his mouth was slack. She thought she could see his lips moving. His right hand was overshadowed by the squat revolver it was wrapped around; it roared to life again as she turned toward him, bucking and flashing at her in what struck her as a desperate plea for attention.

She lunged forward, grabbed the gunman by both shoulders, and pushed him back into the wall as hard as she could. His head hit the concrete of the building with what was probably an audible *crack*—after three gunshots she could only feel its reverberation in her arms and assume it would have been audible under other circumstances. His

mouth snapped shut, and some petty part of her mind still aware of the situation hoped that he'd bitten his tongue. He wavered before her, dazed. She plucked the pistol from his hand and tossed it onto the pavement behind her.

Unsure of what to do next, she stood for a moment and held the dazed gunman against the wall. The heat of the day had left her; her fingers and toes had turned to ice and her teeth chattered. She thought about ramming his head into the wall again but worried that she might kill or incapacitate him—Joey might want to question him. Her leg drew back, seemingly on its own, preparing to kick him in the balls. She called it off, deciding that that was kind of a childish response to being repeatedly shot.

She settled for spitting on him, even though she'd never been particularly good at spitting accurately. Still, he was only a few feet away, and she managed to land a fairly cohesive glob of saliva on his right cheek. The feel of it seemed to rouse him, and his eyes refocused. They immediately dropped to her stomach, where they widened considerably before meeting hers again. "How are you still standing?"

Glancing down, she noticed with no great surprise that her wounds were no longer visibly bleeding. The muted pain in her stomach was even starting to subside, though the wounds themselves still stung. She shrugged. "I guess I'm just blessed."

The gunman's eyes narrowed, and he sucked in a short, sharp breath. "You're them! Tiffani said you'd come. You're the communicants—"

She tasted blood. Felt her stomach churning below the muted steel song of the bullet wounds. Her mouth started watering again, and she thought for the second time today that she would have probably vomited if there'd been anything in her stomach.

Dee pushed the gunman against the wall again, hard. “That’s not what we are.” She wanted to scream, but her voice was low—constrained. She held the man against the wall with her left hand, punched him in the stomach with her right. The gasp of his breath being knocked out of him was extremely gratifying.

“That’s not why we did it.” She struck him again; this time a little rope of saliva sprung free from the crooked shelf of his lip. “He was trying to take us with him.” She shook her head and threw one last punch. She felt the man sag against the wall—he would have fallen without her holding him. “We just needed to get rid of him.”

She felt a hand on her arm and found that Joey had rejoined her. He’d picked up the discarded pistol and was training it casually on the man from the bar. “I think he’s subdued, Dee. You can stop punching him now.”

She un-balled her fist and went back to holding him with both hands. She laughed; it was strained and ugly. “Joey. Were you hiding behind the dumpster because you knew that this guy had a gun?”

Joey wobbled his head side to side. “Yeah. Basically.”

“Did you know I was going to get shot?”

An audible swallow. “Yeah.”

“Did you know I would survive it?”

Joey took his hand off of her arm. “I was pretty sure, yeah. I told you, I’m not a crystal ball, Dee.”

She chuckled, or started to—the sound broke off into a long, stuttering exhale. “Keep this guy here. I need to go change my clothes.”

Dee fished her backpack out of the trunk and headed back to the Red Tail's front door. She felt a vague sense of accomplishment; she supposed she was technically bullet-proof now. *Well, maybe not proof. I mean, I'm definitely bullet-resistant. At the very least, I think I can update the list of things that won't kill me. Starvation, asphyxiation, poison...now small arms fire, too.*

The two men from inside had abandoned their prior positions, the bartender having moved to the phone on the wall while the paunchy man had taken a place at the front window. They both turned blank stares on her when she walked through the front door; only Paunch managed to make a sentence. "Were those gunshots?" He dropped his gaze meaningfully to her abdomen. "Are you...okay?"

Dee followed his eyes. The bottom half of her t-shirt was ruined; the one entrance wound it bore was a tidy dime-sized hole, but the two exit wounds were ragged 2-inch rents. Spilled blood slicked her front, soaking her to the skin from her stomach to her thighs. She quickly considered what sort of lie she might tell to cover her appearance.

"Yes," she answered, deciding that there was no such lie. "Yes to both questions." The bartender's mouth was hanging open now, his right hand twitching as if tempted to lift the phone's receiver. She wrenched her lips into a smile, trying to think charming thoughts. "I'm okay, though." Dropping her backpack, she waved both hands over the expanse of her midsection, employing a stance and demeanor that she hoped was boat-model-esque. "This all *looks* worse than it is."

Neither of the men said anything, so she felt compelled to continue. She lifted up the hem of her t-shirt, careful not to pull it past her lowest rib, holding her free hand out

with her palm flat. “See?” Rubbing a few fingers through the gore on her stomach revealed the undamaged skin beneath. “I’m fine—just messy.”

The bartender’s hand dropped from the phone, though his mouth still hung open. Paunch, meanwhile, had screwed up his lips and narrowed his left eye. “Did Wilkins try to shoot you?”

“No,” she replied, perhaps a bit too forcefully. She tried to even out her tone when she spoke again. “No, that was all a big misunderstanding.” She licked her lips, furrowed her brow a little, and gave what she hoped was a conciliatory grimace. “I’m sorry, I know I’m not a customer—but can I use your bathroom?”

The bartender cleared his throat and nodded. He raised his right hand in a two-fingered point, indicating a dim hallway in the right rear corner of the bar. Dee smiled, and nodded, and bowed a little, then grabbed her bag and scampered down the hall to the bathroom. No sound followed from the men at the bar, who were watching in probable shock as she left.

No surprise, really. The lady’s room was a cramped, single-toilet closet with a cracked plastic sink and a flat frameless mirror on the wall. She locked the door behind her and heaved out a sigh. *A gunshot victim with no visible wounds just barged into the bar and asked to use the bathroom. I’m lucky they haven’t called the cops already.*

She fished the neon pink rabbit’s foot out of her pocket, grateful to see that only the corner of it had been tinted maroon by blood seepage. She rubbed it, quickly, careful not to bloody it anymore, then laid it down gently on the top of the toilet tank. *Okay then, little buddy. Time to see just how lucky you really are.*

The only other items in her pockets were a key to the rental car and her phone; the phone case had a few smears on it but the key was spotless. She thumbed the phone's power button just to make sure everything was in order—it came on immediately but still showed no service—before depositing both items next to her new charm. Closing her eyes, she blew out a long, shaky breath. Ready or not, it was time to face the mirror.

At a glance, Dee thought her reflection looked perfectly healthy. She was pale—to be fair, she'd always been pale—but her skin was clear. Despite not sleeping well for the past few weeks, her eyes weren't noticeably bloodshot or droopy. Her hair needed some attention: under the best circumstances she would have thought of it as flat brown, but after days of ponytails and neglect it was moving into the territory of words like “lank” and “dull.” Still, none of it had fallen out.

She bared her teeth at her reflection. They were white and even, her gums pink and ample. There was a fleck of blood on her chin, but none of it mixed with her saliva. Her eyes dropped to the collar of her shirt, and the first gentle arch of her clavicle peeking from below it. The flesh of her throat and shoulder appeared to be smooth. Unblemished.

She pulled her arms inside her t-shirt, tried to stretch it out from the inside and pull it over her head without getting too much blood on herself. She was largely unsuccessful: little, red snail-trails streaked up the rungs of her ribcage, arced along the curve of her breasts, traced the edge of her jaw. Still, beneath the blood she was lean, well-muscled. Fit.

I look better now than I did a decade ago, she thought, though her reflection started to frown at her. *Shit, better than that*—she flexed her bicep again in the mirror,

shaking her head at the muscle tone it brought into relief—*I wasn't even in this kind of shape in college.*

Except.

There was a patch of darkened skin in the center of her chest, cresting the grey fabric of her sports bra like a black sunrise. It was probably about as big around as the lid of a peanut butter jar—though far less regular—centered roughly on the rise of her left breast and reaching up to the lower edge of her second rib. The skin there was gnarled and rough; it looked like blackened, waterlogged cardboard but felt like tree bark to the touch.

And it was growing. She'd first noticed it on the morning of the 12th: a rough black spot on the inside of her left breast no larger than a mole. Given the circumstances of Lyn's labor, Dee had been in no position to worry about something as mundane and distant-seeming as skin cancer—so she'd ignored it. As she'd continued to ignore it for the next 2 weeks, it had gradually spread across the skin of her chest. Her strategy so far had been to alter her wardrobe so that she didn't have to think about it very often; sports bras had been an early line of defense, and over-sized t-shirts had followed.

There would come a time, she supposed, when it crossed over to the skin of her throat and she couldn't hide it at all. And at the rate it was spreading, that would probably come this June or July. *Not exactly scarf weather.* She frowned at herself in the mirror.

Her gaze settled on the left cup of her bra. She hadn't bothered showering this morning and hadn't changed her clothes since early yesterday—there was no telling what it looked like under there. Yesterday morning, the outer edge of the...corruption?...had

stopped an inch or so shy of her left areola. Her nipple might have been claimed since then, twisted into something small and stunted and black. She'd never felt unusually attached to her nipples, but the thought that she might have lost one struck a deep and anxious chord inside her. Her stomach turned over.

Her hands moved to her sides. Her fingertips slid under the fabric of her bra, tensed, ready to settle her curiosity with one easy motion. Then they froze. In the mirror, her frown flattened out. *My nipple might be perfectly normal under there*, she reasoned, *or it might be some twisted black wreck*. Her hands dropped to her sides. *And either way, there isn't anything I can do about it now*. She shook her head at her reflection. *Stop the second coming—or whichever ordinal numbered coming this is—and go see a cancer specialist after*.

Her reflection knitted her brows. It was clear she didn't believe her.

Dee ran the hottest water the Red Tail's sink was capable of producing and started wiping herself down. The blood was mostly still fresh, which made things easier, though the cramped conditions of the bathroom were a constant hindrance. She sloshed water on the floor. She splashed the mirror with little pink splatters. She couldn't find a better place for her ruined shirt and soiled jeans than "in a heap on the toilet seat."

Worse still, it seemed to be taking forever. Each time she turned to drop another sodden paper towel in the trash, she noticed a new blood splatter on her hip or the inside of her arm. Each time she went to scrub a new part of her body, the blood was older and drier and harder to clean. Her stomach had gone from nervous quivering to active anxious clenching. Beads of sweat beat brazen tracks down the small of her back.

Fuck it, she thought. *I'm clean enough*. She had only one spare pair of jeans; she could change out of her bloodied ones but would need to find a way to launder them. Her gunshot shirt she could just throw away—she didn't need the street cred badly enough to save it. She grabbed a replacement from her backpack. It was another black band shirt of Jon's, this one with the words "Joyless Orgasm" emblazoned on the front in blocky white type.

Can pleasure be asymbolic, too? She pulled her new shirt on, cocked her head at her reflection. It was something she'd need to Google, if and when her phone started working—

Dee's stomach clenched again, violently this time, and pain spiked through her abdomen. It was real pain this time—symbolic pain, immediate pain—and her knees buckled. She leaned drunkenly against the sink, watching her reflection's eyes widen in shock and fear. *Relax*, she told herself, *it's probably just post-gunshot jitters*.

Except it wasn't. The tension in her abdomen tightened, and she felt the hairs stand on the nape of her neck. She was going to have to evacuate her bowels.

On the 12th of May, the very same morning Dee had first noticed the little black spot on her breast, Dee had found blood in her stool. A cursory internet search had quelled her curiosity—a few drops of fresh blood in her stool might indicate nothing more than an anal fissure or other superficial injury. It wasn't a great way to start the morning, but in the light of what had happened with Lyn it didn't seem like an immediate concern.

So she'd waited—and seen. Soon she was passing darker streaks of blood: evidence, according to the internet, of partial digestion and probable bleeding in the

intestines. On a few occasions, she'd found little pink gobbets of indeterminate tissue. The whole affair had frightened her enough that she'd stopped eating entirely, ingesting nothing but liquids for at least the last eight days. As a strategy, it was the analog of hiding her skin disease under her clothing. Her symptoms were out of mind, and the underlying disease seemed far-off and inconsequential.

She kicked off her underwear and brushed her clothing off the toilet seat onto the floor, cramps nearly doubling her over. If she hadn't already been in a bathroom, she might have ended up shitting on herself. *Except I'm not shitting*, she reminded herself. *I guess I'm excreting, though maybe I'm not technically excreting excrement...*

And she wasn't. Even conspicuously keeping her eyes fixed forward, she could feel that she wasn't passing anything solid. It felt and flowed and sounded like water, or more accurately, like high-pulp orange juice. It *smelled* like nothing of the sort; the room was filling with an odor that was rich and rotten, meaty and metallic, close and warm and unsettling. In the foreground, just barely in the field of her vision, the inside of the toilet bowl was tinting a vibrant crimson.

She felt something solid moving through her sphincter, something hard and rough that plinked into the toilet bowl with a splash and a ring. It was followed by another gout of fluid, then a second and a third object just like the first. She shut her eyes against the sound of it. Tried not to think about the amount of blood she'd lost today, or which specific pieces of tissue she'd been voiding into the toilet. Or how her digestive tract would have to be wired to successfully shit out bullets.

A single tear squeezed out of one eye, and she thumbed it away with a snort. *It doesn't matter*, she told herself. *None of this matters. The cancer doctor can give me a colonoscopy; it'll save on doctor visits. Something else I'll take care of next month.*

She wiped as quickly as she could, trying to keep her gaze fixed on the opposite wall. The blood soaked almost immediately through the toilet paper, which shredded between her fingers and stuck to her hands.

Back at the bar, Paunch had resumed both his lunch and his conversation with the bartender. Dee waved, and smiled, and hoped she hadn't left any visible blood stains on her exposed skin. "Thanks," she offered, her voice only just cracking. "You'll probably need to mop in there. I got a little blood on the floor."

And apparently bullets don't flush, she thought, though she decided against saying it. They'd find out soon enough.

Paunch turned around on his stool, his eyes only momentarily dropping to the lettering of her new shirt. "Look," he offered, his own voice far from steady. "I don't know what you're doing out there, but if you're gonna deal with Ted Wilkins, you gotta understand—he's crazy."

She raised her eyebrows. "How so?"

Paunch shook his head. "Like, second-coming crazy. End-of-days crazy. Cult-leader crazy."

She nodded, absently pressing the heel of her palm against her chest. "Thanks," she said, not because it was appropriate but because she had nothing else to offer. And then, as a follow-up: "Thanks...for the warning."

Paunch nodded once, then turned back to his lunch.

In the alleyway, Joey and presumably Wilkins had climbed into the car. Wilkins was in the back, with Joey turned half around to face him from the passenger seat. At a glance, it looked like they were involved in a casual conversation; the utter stillness of their mouths and the pistol in Joey's hand were only visible on close examination.

Neither man said a word or turned to look at her when she climbed behind the wheel. She put the key in the ignition but didn't turn it. "What happens now, Joey? What's the plan?"

She watched Joey take in a long, slow breath; his body swelled, raised, and crested—a boat riding a low, gentle wave. When he answered, his words were clipped and flat. "We don't. We don't need...a plan, anymore."

His voice had gone hollow and small, like an old gramophone recording. She wanted to press him, to pull his attention back to the here and now and get him to engage, but she worried what that would look like in front of their prisoner. His pistol hand was already drooping; she didn't want to distract him enough that the man in the back seat could wrestle the gun away.

Turning her attention to the rearview mirror, she caught the gaze of the man in their backseat. "And you're called Wilkins? Ted Wilkins?"

The man in the backseat blinked. His eyes were pale blue, watery and bloodshot, framed by dark circles and drooping eyelids. He looked sleep-deprived, though not sleepy. After a moment, he nodded once. "What did Jim Harris say about me?"

"He said you were crazy. Cult-leader crazy."

The corner of Wilkins' mouth jerked up. "But you know I'm not."

“I do?”

“You both do.” He shook his head. “That’s what makes your apostasy so heartbreaking. You’ve come face to face with the divine, and you turn away from it.”

Wilkins voice was even and measured; he could have been talking to her about sports scores or banana bread recipes. He reminded her of a TV weatherman or a Sunday school teacher. She narrowed her eyes. “What do you know about us? About any of it?”

Wilkins grinned—it was not the grin of a man trying to demonstrate his sanity. “She has the gift of prophecy. Tiffani dreams, like Daniel dreamt, and in her dreams she sees the past and the future. She saw you. All three of you, and your *blasphemy*. She told us you were coming. Heretics. Apostates. Theovores.”

Dee rolled her eyes. “You’re mixing your roots. *Theophages*, maybe, or *deivores*—but neither of those is an actual word.” She shook her head, frowning. “Tiffani...she’s the one who’s...pregnant?”

Wilkins barked out a laugh. His voice pitched ever so slightly higher. Sped up. “We know why you’re here. We know what you came to Ambrosia to do. You can’t. You won’t. She will bear a son. Tonight.”

Tonight. Lyn wailing. Her baby crying. Blood and sweat and spreading darkness. Dee closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. *I thought we’d have more time*. “Look, Wilkins...if you know we can’t stop it, what’s the harm in telling us where she is?”

Wilkins leaned forward, his face wrinkled into a scowl. His eyes darted toward Joey, and he shook his head. “I’m going to. I’m going to take you to her.” He returned his gaze to Dee. “But I’m going to give you one more chance, first, to recant your

heresy. Take me to the site of Tiffani's Annunciation. See the traces of God's hand moving over our town. After that, if you still reject the Truth, you can take it up with Him in person."

In the passenger seat, Joey sat up straighter. When he spoke, his voice was clear and animated again. "It's a deal. Dee, start the car. We need to make sure this isn't all a hoax or a misunderstanding, anyway."

Dee cast a sidelong glance at Joey but did as he said. In the backseat, Wilkins relaxed, and when he spoke again his voice had evened out. "We have to go just outside of town. The old Geller farm. That's where God manifested Himself here on Earth."

The muscles across her shoulders and chest were tightening. As she backed out onto Main Street, she rolled her left shoulder around in its socket in an effort to loosen them.

The drive across town was all of ten minutes; it took them all the way down Main Street and through a cross section of the town. They started in what could generously be called Ambrosia's downtown: antique stores and bars interspersed with boarded up storefronts. Next, a handful of residential streets dominated by modest ranch houses from the '40s and '50s. Finally, a handful of tiny strip malls—no more than a quarter mile's worth of them—containing Ambrosia's entire supply of chain stores and franchise restaurants.

From the back seat, Wilkins kept a constant commentary on the town through which they passed. Here they passed the corner where the movie theater once stood. Here was a burned out house where he was sure he'd seen a woman's ghost as a child.

Here was the restaurant his wife's family owned; she'd grown up in the apartment above. To hear him talk, they could have been visiting cousins.

Except when they passed the Baptist church: a squat, columned building halfway down Main Street that looked like a converted bank. As they passed it, Wilkins shook his head and *tsked*. "We were raising money for a new activity center. New schoolroom, space for a daycare, field in the back for picnics or fairs or for the kids to play ball. It would have really been something. Almost a shame we won't need it anymore."

They crested a small hill just outside of town and followed a rut that might have once been a road to a regular clearing that might once have been a field. Dee parked next to a foundation that might once have supported a house. In the backseat, Wilkins sat up straighter. "This is the place—the old Geller farm. They lost their son in World War II and moved away. Squatters accidentally burned the place down when I was just a kid—this was in the '70s—and it's been empty ever since.

"When Tiffani was just a little girl, she lived with her grandparents on the next farm. Even after she moved to town, she liked to come out here to think." Wilkins looked out the window, his gaze settling on some indistinct point in the air above the field. "This is where He came to her. God walked the earth here, just as he did in Galilee." He looked back to the front seat, grinning at Dee through the rearview. "And you can still feel Him here now."

Joey ran one hand through his hair. "Mr. Wilkins, I need to step outside and have a word with Dee in private. If I point this gun somewhere else, can I trust you to behave yourself?"

Wilkins chuckled. “We’re all three of us right where we need to be. Take all the time you need.” He nodded at the dash. “Just leave the air conditioning on. It’s a hot one today.”

Joey nodded, and they did as the other man asked. Joey even turned on the radio for him, tuning it to an AM talk station at his request. They left Wilkins sitting comfortably in the back seat of their rental car, his eyes resting once more on the rough grass of the Geller field.

Outside the car, Dee was struck again by the heat of the day. The sun was almost directly overhead, and without any cloud cover it was mercilessly bright. Worse than the heat was the humidity; the air was thick and close. It clung to her skin, stuck in her lungs, pressed down on her from all sides like piled fabric. *But it’s not just the humidity,* she thought. *Something else is going on here.*

She opened her mouth to say as much but found totally different words coming out. “For the record, I’m not. But I doubt I ever will be.” Her head swam. Her mouth felt numb.

Joey had joined her at her side. “More or less, yeah.” He stepped in closer to her. Nodded and shrugged. “We can get started whenever you’re ready.”

She stared at him, blankly, tried to make sense of what he was saying. Her thoughts wouldn’t come into focus. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and tense. “So that much you *have* seen, then? You know that we’re just going to play into their hands?”

Joey’s voice was calm, his own face bland and expressionless. “You didn’t ask that, Dee. You asked what we do. So that’s what I told you.”

What? It was the most coherent thought she could muster. Meanwhile, alien words continued to spill from her lips. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Joey shrugged. “We go along with it. We kill some time out here in this field, and then Wilkins will take us to them.”

Dee narrowed her eyes, or thought she did. She didn’t entirely trust the feel of her own flesh. “So what do we do?”

Dee leaned in, until her face was only inches from Joey’s. At this distance, she could pick out individual pores on his skin. She watched a single bead of sweat wind its way down his forehead. The smile he wore looked thin. Brittle. Thawing ice over flowing water. He said, “Yeah. He’ll keep us out here for as long as he can, and that’ll be time they use to prepare for us. Go somewhere secure. Isolated. When he takes us to them, they’ll be armed and ready.”

She felt as if she was being drawn away from the conversation. Fleeing from her own voice, shrinking away somewhere inside. She listened with a sense of grim detachment as she spit whispered words into the space between them. “Are you fucking serious?” She leaned ever so slightly away from him.

Joey brushed one hand through the air. “Don’t worry about it. There’s something I *do* know, though; this was planned. It’s...a stalling technique, or something. Wilkins was expected to report back to his...flock, I guess...and when he didn’t, they knew that was because he’d found us.”

Dee sighed. Or maybe *a* Dee sighed. Certainly her body was sighing; within her own mind she felt detached from the act itself. And from the words that followed:

“Sorry. I didn’t realize.” Her gaze dropped to the ground, and she felt herself giving a little conciliatory head wobble.

When she looked back up, Joey was shaking his head. His voice was lower and deeper than it had been. Strained. “A lot, okay? I see a lot. But when it comes to you and Paul, it’s always fuzzy. I can never be sure exactly what I’m looking at. I think you, I don’t know, interfere with me somehow.” He took a step or two away from her, backing to a normal conversational distance.

Anger flared up inside her, though once again she felt removed from it. Dimly, distantly, she wondered if emotional asymbolia was a thing. “Well, that’s helpful. I could have told you that. You’re supposed to be a fucking clairvoyant, Joey. What do you *see*?”

He was shaking his head, and Dee had the distinct impression that his eyes were closed behind his sunglasses. “Yeah, okay, maybe. I think something bad is going to happen here.”

Dee felt her anger diminishing. Changing into something milder—frustration, maybe. She found herself throwing up her hands. “Joey, that doesn’t even make sense. Foreshadowing is a literary thing; it means that the reader gets a clue that the characters don’t. Do you mean that this place is foreboding?” She snorted.

Joey continued to shake his head. “I told you, it doesn’t work like that. But I have a sense about this place. Even the name, Geller, bothers me. It’s like...I don’t know...foreshadowing.”

Dee's distant anger was entirely gone, now, overwritten by the same mild unease she'd felt for most of the day. It seemed an appropriate emotional state. "You 'think' this is a trap? You can't see whether it is or not?"

Joey was nodding. He glanced toward Wilkins in the back seat of their car. "I think this is a trap."

Then Dee listened as she said the truest words she'd uttered through the whole exchange: "I don't like it. It doesn't feel right here."

There was a popping sound—or maybe there was a popping sensation—and the distance Dee felt between herself and her body suddenly vanished. Her knees wobbled; she might have fallen if she hadn't been close enough to the car to lean against it. She looked to Joey, and noted with some relief that she was once again in control of the words coming out of her mouth. "What the fuck was that?"

Joey was shaking his head. "I don't know." He turned toward Wilkins, then followed the man's eyeline to the center of the Geller field. "A sign from god, I guess."

They let Wilkins out of the car. If he'd been affected by whatever it was that scrambled their conversation, he made no mention of it. He merely launched back into his tour guide spiel, his voice steady and casual. "Tiffani used to come out and walk this field at night—to calm herself and clear her thoughts. You folks know how a labyrinth works?"

Dee nodded. "It's spiritual, or meditative, or whatever. You work your way toward the center, and in the process you gain enlightenment. Theoretically."

Wilkins smiled. He raised his hand, gestured broadly toward the overgrown field in front of them. “Well, that’s sort of what we have here. Work your way to the center of the field, and He’ll reveal Himself to you.”

Dee snorted. “One night I spent 45 minutes trapped in a bathroom because the knobs in the house had all switched functions. Every time I tried to turn the doorknob it opened or closed the taps in the kitchen sink. I only got out because Lyn tried to turn on a halogen lamp in the living room and it slipped the door latch. I might have had my fill of revelation. Joey?”

Joey was nodding. “Lyn and I had a cat called Casper. He died during her sixth month of pregnancy; he was 16, so that wasn’t a huge surprise. We found his body curled up on the foot of our bed one morning, then had a nice little service and buried him in the backyard. The next morning we found his body on our bed again. Then the morning after that. Ten days in a row we had to find and bury Casper’s body. There was a little row of cat graves by the back fence; the neighbors must have thought we were psychopaths.”

Dee cocked her head at Wilkins and raised her eyebrows. “It’s not that we don’t *believe*, Mr. Wilkins. That isn’t why we’re trying to stop this.”

Wilkins’ smile was gone; now his mouth was set in a grim little line. “You think Lazarus got up the day after his resurrection and just went back to work? You think the people who witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes weren’t *terrified* to take a bite? The adjective is ‘God-fearing’ for a reason.”

Wilkins shook his head. “But it doesn’t matter. The terms are set. You walk the field, you get one more chance to recant your heresy. If you accept it, I take you before

Tiffani as witnesses to the birth of the Lord. If you don't, I take you there to be judged. Either way, you walk the field."

Dee sighed. *I guess we're doing what he says regardless. I'm predestined to walk my ass through an abandoned field in the hot sun. Probably not what John Calvin had in mind.*

She turned back toward Joey, still clinging to the hope that he might have a way out to offer. He'd taken out his phone and was holding it up, casting about for a reception. "Do you have service?" She asked, pulling her own phone out of her pocket.

"No," he replied, confirming what her device was telling her.

Wilkins swayed off through the tall grass of the Geller field, mumbling something rhythmic to himself that Dee just assumed was a prayer. She watched him go, shook her head, and turned back to Joey. He seemed to be paying no attention to Wilkins at all; he was still staring at his phone display. "Jesus, Joey. What, are you expecting a call?"

There was a long pause, and Dee was about to repeat her question when Joey replied. "Maybe."

His voice put her on edge; he sounded like he was talking to her over a string-and-can telephone. She swallowed hard. "Maybe? What does that mean?"

Another long pause. Joey continued to stare at his phone. "Today's probably too soon. Tomorrow is more likely."

She was reminded of Joey's evasive behavior outside of the Red Tail. "Wait, who's calling you? Is it Paul? Have you been talking to Paul?"

Joey stuttered out a short, abortive laugh. "Tea leaves would've never tracked you down. Besides, I told you—it's you and Dee. You guys block me somehow."

At the mention of her name, the hairs on the back of Dee's neck stood up. A shiver ran through her, defying the heat of the Gellers' field. *He's hallucinating. Or prophesying. Either way, he's not here.* "Joey, whom do you think you're talking to right now? What's going on?"

Joey held his hands up in front of him, cocked his head to one side. "Intelligence gathering. It requires a lot of patience."

She couldn't be sure for his sunglasses, but she would have sworn that he wasn't looking in her direction. She looked out over the field; Wilkins was only 20 yards or so away, but even further out of line with Joey's probable view. She scoffed. Whatever was happening to Joey, she wasn't a part of it. "Well, maybe I'm just not cut out for intelligence gathering, then. Good luck with your phone."

She turned and started off. After a few steps, she heard Joey absently addressing the air: "Just a sandwich is fine. I'm not picky."

She walked without any particular path in mind; she wanted to put some distance between herself and Joey's disconnected conversation, but she also wanted to keep away from Wilkins if at all possible. The easiest path away from both led directly through the center of the field. *Not exactly in the spirit of the labyrinth.*

With nothing to distract her, Dee became rapidly aware of how miserable it was outside. The temperature had to be in the 90s; between the humidity and the lack of shade it felt much hotter than that. Even worse, the air was utterly still—the stand of trees on the far side of the field might as well have been a matte painting. By the time she was a few yards from Joey she was already dripping sweat again, her t-shirt and jeans plastered to the skin of her back and thighs.

She trudged off through grass high and thick enough that she could feel it whipping at her legs through the denim of her jeans. There was little enough to look at: a smudge of brown for the trees, smears of green for their leaves and the grass, a field of watery blue over all of it. All of it washed out by the sunlight, until any of those colors might have been plausibly switched for another. The field was also nearly quiet; they were far enough from the highway that there were no traffic noises. All she heard was Wilkins' mumbled prayers woven over the low droning of unseen insects. *This is the most boring religious experience ever.*

Her stomach growled; she ignored it.

In the distance, there was a break in the monotony of her field of vision. Something red flashed between the trees at the field's edge, something too bright to be a natural part of the forest. She glanced back across the field to Joey; he was still holding his phone above his head. Even if he had been paying attention, he might not have noticed a flash of color at that distance. Wilkins was closer; he was winding his way clockwise around the outside edge of the field in what Dee just assumed was a spiral. Still, his eyes were alternating between the sky and the earth at his feet. It was unlikely that anyone had seen it but her.

She licked salt from her lips and shook her head. It did not escape her that she was nearly at the center of the Geller field; if she was hunting a sign from god it might well be waiting for her among the trees. *Is that what I'm doing here, though? Do I want another sign from god?* She squinted against the sunlight, shading her brow with her hand. It might have happened again: a possible flash of bright red a few yards back from the tree line, as if someone in a red shirt were walking through the wood.

She set off for the trees. Joey had as much as said that they were going to play along with Wilkins' plans—she might as well embrace it. *Plus, it'll be a lot more pleasant to look for god in the shade.*

The far side of the Geller field was thickly wooded. The ground sloped away here; presumably the incline was too steep to work the land and it had never been developed. The copse she was approaching was surprisingly deep, covering at least as much ground as the Geller farm proper. She stopped at the edge of the wood and looked back in Joey's direction. He was sitting on the edge of the bare foundation, phone in hand. At this distance, Wilkins was little more than a messy dot, blurring and jaggging through the grass of the field.

She considered Joey's safety, but only for a moment. *He's carrying a gun and he's psychic, she told herself. If anything bad happens to him, he deserves it.*

It was like walking into a different world. In the shade the temperature dropped at least 10 degrees. Without the direct sunlight blasting everything, the colors of the environment stood out in sharp relief: rich brown against vibrant greens, shot through with streaks of gold. It even *smelled* more in here; the field had seemed still and stale, but here there was something deep and earthy and alive on the air. An undercurrent of something sweet and spicy wafted on the breeze—there must be wildflowers blooming somewhere—and it almost reminded her of Christmas.

She decided that she would walk straight through. It would take her 15 minutes at most to cross to the next field; if she didn't find anything in that time she could come straight back. So far there was no sign of the red figure she'd seen from the field.

From her hip pocket, she felt her phone vibrate. She pulled it out as much from habit as conscious thought; she was already thumbing it on when she realized with some glee that she must finally have a signal again. Maybe Joey had found one, too.

A smile had been springing to her face; it spoiled on her lips. According to her phone, she had a missed call and a voicemail. The voicemail was from the morning of September 24th. The call was from Lyn.

She pressed “play” and put the phone to her ear. “Hey, Dee, it’s Lyn. Soooooooooo...it’s really really early and nothing’s definite or anything, buuuuuut...I think I might be pregnant. And I know you don’t like to get out of bed this early, but I really really really don’t want to have this conversation with your voicemail. So get up and come over. I wanna talk. Okay. Do it. Now. Bye. Do it.”

Dee let the message replay. It was Lyn’s voice: light and casual and just the tiniest bit squeaky. Her throat hitched at the sound of it. She recognized the message, of course—Lyn had left it for her eight months ago after her first positive test result. At this end of things, after everything that had happened, it was shocking to hear Lyn talk about her pregnancy with anything other than mistrust and dread. Dee felt her eyes tear up and closed them.

In her ear, Lyn’s plea from last fall continued to repeat. “So get up and come over. I wanna talk. Okay. Do it. Now. Bye. Do it.”

Even with her eyes closed, she felt the change as it passed over her. The temperature dropped once again, and the closeness of the air abated. That deep, forest-y smell fell away, and in its place she smelled paper and candle-scent and...tea? A new

sound reached her ears: a low-key hum, like a refrigerator or an air conditioner running at a distance. She lifted one cautious eyelid.

She was standing in the front hallway of Lyn and Joey's house. She slipped her phone back into her pocket and turned in a slow circle. The pile of shoes by the front door, the plain wooden key hanger on the wall, Lyn's overfilled bookcase under the clock—all of it was familiar. The lights in the house were off, but everything was covered in soft, cool, grey. *Early morning? Mid-day through cloud cover?* The clock on the wall said 9:45, but she hadn't trusted that clock for almost 4 months now.

Am I hallucinating? She reached out with her left hand, laid it gently against the wall. Smooth plaster, cool and indifferent. *If I'm hallucinating, I'm really going all out. But how the fuck did I end up back in Kansas?*

There was a rustling noise from the kitchen; Dee had just enough time to consider ducking into the living room when Lyn stepped into the doorway. Her eyes widened and she rocked her head back, coming as close as humanly possible to a cartoon double-take. "Dee? What are you doing here? I didn't even hear the door open."

Lyn was dressed in sweats and a blue t-shirt, her blond hair piled up on her head in a loose bun. She was dressed for a weekend morning. *Is it the weekend?* She'd lost track of which day it was. *Except Lyn isn't showing, she realized, so it would have to be a weekend sometime before November.*

Lyn took a few steps closer, her eyes moving up and down Dee's body. "Why are you dressed like that? Are those Jon's clothes?" She wrinkled up her nose. "And why are you so sweaty? Did you run over here?"

Dee finally found her tongue. “No!” Her voice sounded too brusque, so she forced a smile to her lips and tried again. “No. Look, I’m sorry I came in without knocking.” She shook her head. “I just...I had a really rough morning.”

Lyn’s eyebrows stayed raised, but she pursed her lips and nodded. “I know the feeling. Come on. Let’s go have a seat. I wanted to talk to you, anyway.”

Lyn lead the way back into the kitchen, and Dee followed. She took each step slowly, worried that at any moment the illusion would break and she’d walk into the bole of a tree. She reached the kitchen without incident. Lyn was seating herself at the head of the kitchen table, where her place was already set with a mug of tea, a wall calendar, and her open laptop.

Lyn had folded herself into her seat, her legs pulled up beneath her and her hands folded in her lap. Lyn was a petite woman, and short (she was a good 6 inches shorter than Dee), with features that were delicate to the point of seeming pinched. When she sat like this, she still looked like she was 12 years old. Not that she didn’t know this, of course—it was a pose she adopted whenever she had to tell Dee something unpleasant.

“So,” she started, sucking in breath and gesturing to one of the empty chairs. “I guess you got my message?”

That message was from September, she thought, seating herself. *Is this September?* She looked around the kitchen. “Where’s Joey?”

Lyn shook her head. “He’s at work. He’s on Saturdays this month.” She grimaced. “I haven’t told him yet. Haven’t told anybody but you.”

Dee nodded. She wracked her brain, trying to remember the conversation in which Lyn had told her she was pregnant. She remembered getting the voicemail, but for

some reason she hadn't actually noticed it until that night. She would have sworn that Joey and Lyn had broken the news to her together. "So, how far along are you?" If memory served, that was the first question she'd asked then, too.

Lyn was shaking her head again. "It's like, *super*-early. Like, I haven't even gone to see a doctor yet. So...maybe 7 weeks?" She shrugged. "I just freaked out a little and wanted to talk to somebody."

Dee smiled. She hoped it was encouraging. "So, you aren't even pregnant for sure." *Is there a word for this? Pretending to be optimistic about a situation when you already know the outcome?* She would have to look it up later. Since she wasn't even sure if this was all hallucinatory, it seemed like a moot point.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood. *Supposing this isn't a hallucination...supposing I'm really back in Kansas and really back in September...* "Lyn...assuming you *are* pregnant. What are you going to do? I mean, are you going to keep it?"

Lyn looked down at her lap, breathing out a sigh. "I don't know. I've been thinking about it all morning. I mean, we definitely weren't planning on having a baby until we were married. And we definitely weren't trying for one. Like, we were extra-super trying not to."

A flush of excitement washed over Dee's face. "You know...at this stage...it would be really easy to...end it. I mean, I don't know where you'd have to go, but I can look it up for you." *This is what should have happened in the first Terminator*, she reflected. *They should have sent a robot back in time to convince an unwed Sarah Connor to get an abortion.* "I'd be happy to drive."

Lyn laughed, pressed her hands to the bridge of her nose. “Thanks, Dee. That’s really sweet of you.” Her eyes were shining. “I don’t think I’m ready for that, though. That seems...extreme.” Lyn shrugged.

Dee’s spirits fell, but she wasn’t ready to give up. “I just want you to keep your options open. You still have control of the situation, you know.”

Lyn smiled. “Thanks, Dee. But Joey and I were going to have a kid at some point, anyway. If not this year, then next year after the wedding.” She unfolded her legs and leaned over the table. “Joey is making decent money right now, and his insurance is good enough—we won’t starve.” She flipped forward a few pages in the calendar and laid it down on the table in front of Dee. “And I did the math; I should be due in early May. If I’m lucky, my classes for the semester will be over by then.”

Dee glanced down at the calendar; Lyn had circled the tenth of May with a red sharpie and drawn a big question mark in one corner of the date box. She remembered all of this: the careful planning and the obsessive details and that red-circled date looming on the calendar. Worse still, she remembered the enthusiasm; Lyn had been genuinely excited at the prospect of being a mother. It had taken at least six months of paranormal phenomena to turn that joy into dread.

Of course, this is what would have happened in the first Terminator, too. That movie was all about how the past was set and you couldn’t change it. All of which made her question the purpose of this little episode. Whether it was a trip to the past or a complex hallucination, it was all for naught. Lyn was still going to carry her baby, and suffer and die for it, and then Joey and Paul and Dee were going to be left to pick up the pieces.

She looked up from the calendar; Lyn was staring at her expectantly. She was framed by the window behind her, softly lit by the grey light of a spent September morning. Her head was cocked to one side, her eyes narrowed, her lips bent into a thin, earnest smile. Dee's breath hitched and her eyes teared up. It had been a long time since she'd seen that smile.

Dee stood, openly crying now, and crossed the short distance between them. "I love you, Lyn." The words burst out in a sob. "I'm here for you, whatever you need." She put her arms around her friend, burying her face against her shoulder. Dee leaned there for what seemed like minutes, breathing in the scents of shampoo and fabric softener, drying her tears on Lyn's shirt. *I miss you*, she thought. "I love you," she repeated.

When Lyn responded, her voice had broken as well. "I love you too, honey." She gave Dee a squeeze. "This is gonna be great; you'll see." She laughed, the sound of it tear-tinted. "I'm gonna be a terrible fucking mother."

Dee chuckled and pulled back from their embrace. She brushed tears from her eyes with the heel of her hand. "And I will be almost totally useless as an aunt." She smiled. "Useless, but ubiquitous. Seriously, whatever you need, just ask."

Lyn got up from the table to pull a paper towel from the roll. She offered it to do Dee. "No, thanks." Dee shook her head. "I think I need a minute in the bathroom. I'm kind of a mess."

A strange smile had settled over Lyn's face; it was small and composed and curious. She nodded, her eyes narrowed. "Yeah, go nuts. I'll be here."

Dee nodded, ducking out of the kitchen before she started crying again. There was a limit to how many tears were justified in this situation; she didn't want to upset Lyn. She sobbed as quietly as possible on her way to the bathroom, her mouth an open wound.

She splashed cold water on her face, sparing just a minute to consider her reflection in the mirror. Lyn must have really been preoccupied; otherwise, she would have noticed how much thinner Dee was. *She probably thinks I'm strung out*, she thought. *I'll have to come up with some kind of excuse for it before we talk again.*

Her reflection raised an eyebrow at her. *What am I planning here? How long am I gonna hang out here in the past, palling around with my dead friend?*

She shook her head at herself. *That's a stupid question. I'm gonna stay here as long as I can.*

As she walked out of the bathroom, however, she realized that something had changed. The lighting in the house was brighter; as if the clouds had broken or the sun had risen or both. She took a few cautious steps down the hallway toward the kitchen, and was on the verge of calling out—

When she heard voices from the kitchen, the first of which was her own.

“I'm honestly a little worried about you. I think you're hallucinating.”

She heard Lyn snort from the next room. “Fuck you, Dee. I'm telling you, he *moved.*”

November, then. The day Lyn thought her baby had moved in his ultrasound pictures. And I'm in the kitchen with her, trying to convince her that she's wrong. She sucked air in through her teeth, let it out in a long, stuttering exhale. What happens if I go

in there now? What if I show up and argue against myself? Could I convince Lyn to go get an abortion?

She tried to picture the scene; every scenario she imagined ended with a lot of shouting and freaking out and probably just the cops coming to haul off one to three of them. *Besides, if this really is the past, I know that I won't go in there and talk to them. If I had done so, I'd remember it, right?*

In the kitchen, Lyn was still talking. "I'm telling you, Dee, I think something's wrong. I hear people moving around in the house when no one else is home. I lose things and then they turn up in the weirdest places—"

"Lyn, you're under a lot of stress. It's perfectly natural for you to be a bit scatterbrained or anxious." Past Dee was talking in her lowest, calmest voice, but from the hallway Present Dee thought she sounded like an asshole.

"I'm not just being scatterbrained, Dee. I lost my keys last week. Tore the whole house apart looking for them. Do you know where I found them? In the microwave, when I stopped searching to make myself lunch. Last night I lay awake listening to a conversation coming from the living room; it was a conversation Joey and I had had earlier that night."

"Did Joey hear it?"

"He was asleep. I didn't want to wake him up...I was afraid he wouldn't hear anything."

"Look, Lyn...I know you're scared. That's perfectly normal. But your hormones are all screwed up, and you're under a lot of pressure. There's no reason to think that this is anything serious."

Lyn squawked at that; she was somewhere between sobbing and scoffing. “And if it is ‘anything serious?’”

There was a scraping of chairs on linoleum, Past Dee had gone to comfort Lyn. “Well, a lot of serious mental illness usually presents around your age. And the internet says that upwards of 20% of women experience some sort of maternal mental illness. Usually that’s postpartum, but there are exceptions...”

In the hallway, Dee pushed her palms against her eyes. She was apparently a terrible comforter. She shook her head. She didn’t need to hear this again; there was nothing she could do and reliving it was making her feel like a bad person. *Another minute of this and I’m just going to run into the kitchen. The space-time continuum can fuck itself.*

All sound ceased. When she opened her eyes again, the hallway was dark. Dark and *different*; she realized with a start that she was no longer in Joey and Lyn’s house. She was back in her own apartment. A sliver of blue light was spilling from beneath her bedroom door: the television set she left on while she went to sleep. She took a cautious step toward it.

Am I asleep in there? Another step. *And when is this?* She glanced around the hallway for a clue, but of course there were none. There was a wall calendar in her pantry (a promotional gift from her local take-out Chinese place), but it was from 2014. Another step.

It was warm in her apartment. Not as warm as it had been in the Geller field, but warmer than either stop at Joey and Lyn’s house. Neither her heater nor her air

conditioning was running; she'd reached that sweet spot in the spring when the weather didn't justify either. *It could be anytime in the past month or so.*

Her stomach turned over. She hadn't slept much in the past month. In the past two weeks, she hadn't really been sleeping at all—it was another thing she didn't seem to need anymore. *There's really only one night in the recent past that I got any sleep to speak of...*

She pushed open the door to her bedroom, sure as she did so of what she would find. Inside, she was sprawled out on her bed, oblivious to the frozen Netflix screen that mutely asked her if she was still watching *The Office*. An empty pill bottle sat out on the nightstand: some hydrocodone painkiller she'd been prescribed after ankle surgery a year and a half ago. She'd taken two or three during her recovery and the rest of the bottle before going to bed. From this distance, she did not appear to be breathing.

So this is, what—four days ago? Another step toward herself confirmed that she was not breathing. *I wonder how long I was like this?* She remembered waking up the next morning, well-rested but far from dead, and the long, unpleasant trip to the bathroom she'd made to shit out whatever metabolized pill residue was left in her system.

Maybe I should leave a note, she thought, watching herself lying still on the bedspread. *I could just write, "Hanging won't work and is very unpleasant—Love, Dee" in lipstick on the bathroom mirror.* She smiled. It felt thin.

Or I could do myself a solid. Go to the kitchen, grab a knife, and cut my own head off while I'm asleep. She frowned. *Could I do that? I mean, all the paradoxes aside, could I bring myself to do that to me?* It would save a lot of trouble.

Dee shook her head. She couldn't. If she'd learned anything from seeing moments from her recent past, it was that they had passed and she wasn't up to changing them. "Fuck this," she spat, a little surprised to hear her voice in the still of the bedroom. "This is a waste of time." She turned on her heel, leaving herself to lie overdosed and insensate in her bed.

If this is my sign from god, he could have saved the effort. If all he's going to give me is shitty moments from my past, I'll just stick with my shitty present. She dropped her left hand to her hip pocket and ran a finger over her rabbit's foot. She would have clicked her heels together, but she feared that that sort of behavior would just keep her in Kansas.

The heat of the Arkansas countryside hit her first, then the smell of trees and earth, then the jangled crush of sun-streaked greens and browns. She was back on Geller land, back in Ambrosia, and back in the present. *Except it doesn't look like this afternoon anymore.* She raised an eyebrow and scanned the wood. The sunlight through the trees was still strong, but redder; from the looks of it it was nearly twilight.

I was on my vision quest or whatever for like 15 minutes...but at least 7 hours must have passed while I was gone. Dee shook her head. Wilkins had said that Tiffani was going to give birth tonight, and Joey had called this whole trip to the farm a stalling tactic. "Is that your play, then, god?" She glared at one silent tree, then the next. "Distract me with bullshit from my past so your hick girlfriend has time to dilate?"

As if in response, Dee heard a rustling from the undergrowth nearby. She took a few cautious steps forward, her hands held out at her sides like a tightrope walker. A pair

of grey squirrels tumbled forth onto the ground at her feet, locked in the throes of some epic squirrel wrestling match. She scoffed. *Just a coincidence*, she chided herself, *I have to try to relax*.

The sunlight glinted off a patch of something dull and red, and Dee realized that the squirrels in front of her weren't just wrestling. Each was trying to bite *into* the other, stubbornly working at each other's flesh with teeth evolved for contrary tasks. One had gnawed most of the way through the other's hind leg, so that its left foot hung by a ragged thread of cartilage and fur. The other was slowly widening a hole it had made in its opponent's abdomen; Dee could just make out the pulsing red-grey mass of its exposed viscera. Other than the rattling of small plants in their passing, the two animals made no sound.

Dee shook her head. *Okay, not a coincidence. What, then? A sign? A threat? Just some senseless, self-destructive bullshit?* She raised her eyes from the struggle at her feet, shaking her head at the trees. "Fuck you."

She left the trees and the squirrels behind her. The return trip was short; within a minute she was back in view of the Geller farm. There was no sign of Wilkins, but she could just make out Joey. He was sitting on the foundation slab, legs folded beneath him, cutting the distant silhouette of a Buddhist monk in meditation.

Far from meditating, Joey proved to be sitting in front of a game of solitaire. He shuffled and flipped the cards in his hands steadily, mechanically, only pausing briefly to give Dee a salutatory nod. His nonchalance proved infectious, and Dee found herself asking a trivial question first. "Where did you get those cards? You pick 'em up at the gas station?"

Joey turned one of the cards over in his hands—for inspection or display—the back showed a pair of red horseshoes, and one of the corners had been shaved off. He shook his head. “No, I’ve had these for a while. They help pass the time.”

“Yeah, but...isn’t solitaire kind of a waste? I mean, can’t you predict whether you’re going to win or lose?”

Joey shrugged. “It’s not about winning or losing, Dee. It’s about keeping my hands busy.”

She frowned. “Whatever. Where’s Mr. Wilkins? Did he bolt?”

“Nah. He’s taking a nap.” Joey hooked a thumb over his shoulder. A handful of large trees towered over what would have once been the Gellers’ backyard; now that she was closer she could make out Wilkins lying at the base of one of them.

Joey resumed his game. “He spent about an hour stumbling around the field; when he came back up to the ‘house’ he was really sweaty and pale.” He angled his head toward his backpack, which was sitting open on the slab next to him. “I offered him a Monster, but he declined. Said he needed to get some sleep. He’s been there since.”

Dee shook her head. “I hope he didn’t die of heat stroke.” She wasn’t sure if that was actually true. “Wait, how long is ‘since?’ How long was I gone?”

He shrugged. “Hours. I didn’t keep track.”

“And you didn’t think to come and look for me? Joey, we blew the whole fucking day out here!”

Joey was frowning. “We didn’t blow anything, Dee. I knew to expect you near dark. That we wouldn’t leave here until then.”

Dee scoffed. “You know, you’re not very much fun to talk to anymore.”

Joey sighed. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry.” He lifted his head from his cards, offered her a smile. “What did you see out there? Anything noteworthy?”

Dee frowned. “I don’t think so.” A thought occurred to her. “Joey...was I the first person Lyn told about her pregnancy? Do you remember?”

Joey sucked at his bottom lip. “Mmm...yeah, actually, I think you were. I was at the shop when Lyn took her test; she told me she called you about it and you came over to see her.” He laughed once; the sound shattered against the concrete at his feet. “She told me you totally freaked out on her and ran off almost as soon as you came. Why do you ask?”

Dee’s stomach wobbled. *So I was actually there. In the past. But why?* She shook her head. “Just wondering. Had some weird flashbacks or something in the woods. I might have time travelled a little.” She waved her hand in the air. “I think it was all bullshit. How about you? You have any big revelations?”

“No, nothing like that.” His game ended. He shuffled his cards and started fresh. “But I had a...I don’t know, realization.” He squeezed a sigh through pursed lips. “I really think you should eat something, Dee.”

Dee thought back to her time in the Red Tail’s bathroom and scoffed. “Joey—“
“No, hear me out. We’ve seen a lot of weird shit since Lyn got pregnant. Shit that *couldn’t* happen, shit that didn’t make any sense. I mean, that’s why you came with me, right? To prevent more of that weird shit from happening here in Ambrosia?”

She thought of Lyn, screaming or wailing or whatever long after she’d stopped breathing. “Yeah, basically.”

Joey opened his hands in front of him. “What’s weirder than a woman who doesn’t have to eat food to survive?”

“A woman who shrugs off bullet wounds. A man who can see the future.”

Joey nodded. “Yeah, well, that’s exactly my point. I’m worried about our impact on reality, Dee. I’m afraid that since...Lyn’s delivery...we’ve become a part of the problem.”

Dee’s hand went to her chest again. “Yeah, but Joey...there are other factors in play here. Even if I start eating food right now, I’ll still be...what, nigh invulnerable? Preternaturally resilient? The eating part of it is just superficial. It would be an act.”

Joey’s lips split into a grin. “Again, that’s my point. I think we need to be careful about how we act. If we want to preserve the world as we know it, I think we need to be mindful about keeping up appearances.”

Dee’s stomach warbled, collateral damage in the war between her anxiety and her hunger. “I don’t know, Joey.”

“You don’t have to know. Just think about it.” He gestured to his backpack. “I have candy bars and stuff if you want one. Just keep it in mind.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll do that.” She looked back to Wilkins, who still appeared to be asleep. “Should I go wake up Mr. Wilkins? The sun is going to be setting before long.”

Joey nodded. “Yeah, go ahead. I just need another few minutes here; I want to get some pictures of the field with the sun...on the cusp, or whatever.”

Dee frowned. “Gloaming. You want *gloaming* shots of the field. Why?”

“Mementos.”

She wrinkled her brow. “What, when all of this is over, you’re going to make a scrapbook?”

Joey pulled out his phone; before he answered he turned it on its side and started lining up a shot of the field. “Of course not. I just want to remember. *Exactly* what it looks like.”

Dee couldn’t think of any more ways to express her incredulity, so she shrugged and crossed the yard to Wilkins. She roused him with the toe of her tennis shoe; he snorted, and gasped, and snapped his eyes open. His skin was blotchy and his eyes wild. He jumped to his feet and pushed his back against the tree trunk, as if her shoe had been a venomous snake.

“Okay, Mr. Wilkins. We ‘walked the field.’ Are you ready to take us to Tiffani?”

His eyes only settled on hers after a double sweep of the field. He narrowed them, and for a moment she was sure that he was going to shake his head. She was opening her mouth to argue when he gave a shaky nod.

“Good.” She jerked her head in the direction of the foundation slab. “Joey’s almost ready.”

He nodded again. More confidently this time.

Joey joined them then, his photography complete. He held Wilkins’ pistol in his right hand, keeping the gun trained on the other man. He waved it back and forth. “Mr. Wilkins, we don’t really need this, do we? I mean, we’re doing what you wanted us to do, right? I can put this away and we can pretend to be civilized?”

Wilkins raised his eyebrows and peeled up the corner of his lip, wavering between shock and smarm. “There’s no more need for that, now; no. Whatever happens next is

up to God.” His voice was thinner and weaker than it had been, cracking with the weight of his words. He nodded toward the backpack in Joey’s hand. “I think I’ll take one of those energy drinks now.”

Joey set the bag down and fished a can out for Wilkins. He thumbed the revolver’s safety on, then tucked it into the pack atop his wadded clothes and gas station snacks. Before closing the zipper, he rocked the bag in Dee’s direction. “Dee? Snack?”

She shook her head and returned to the car.

Wilkins directed them away from the Geller farm monosyllabically, often only barking out “left” or “right” when they reached an intersection. Gone were his friendly tone and town history lessons. To complicate matters, the roads they drove and the farms they passed were all effectively identical; in the fading light and with such minimal directions Dee had no idea where they were. *We could be going in a big fucking circle; I’d never know the difference.* She glanced at Joey, who sat as serenely as ever in the passenger seat. *But Joey would say something if we were, right?*

Before her anxiety could run away with her, Wilkins leaned forward and pointed through the windshield. “Okay. In about a quarter-mile you’re going to see a gravel drive on your right; take it. That’s where Tiffani is.”

She glanced down at the dash; it was 8:37 pm. Only 7 minutes on the road between the Geller farm and here. *It felt like it took way longer than that—is that just my nerves?* None of the clocks had worked in Lyn’s house by the night of her delivery; there’d been one in the hallway that Paul had sworn was just mixed up—minute hand keeping seconds, second hand keeping hours, hour hand keeping minutes—but none of

them had been functional in the traditional sense. Could that be happening to their car, a quarter-mile away from Tiffani's house?

Her shoulders tensed. She shook her head at the clock and blew out a sigh.

Doesn't matter what time it is. Doesn't matter why. We're almost there. Her stomach growled; it sounded plaintive.

Dee stopped the car just short of the drive; it led about 100 yards up a slight incline to an old farmhouse. A muted yellow glow was just visible through the first floor windows, but the shades were drawn and she couldn't tell what was happening inside. "So, what's the plan?" She scanned the yard but saw no movement. "Park on the road, try to sneak in on foot?"

Wilkins chuckled. "The plan is: you take us up the driveway and we go in through the front door." He shook his head. "We're not 'sneaking' anywhere."

She looked to Joey for support, but he only shrugged. *Right, she thought, because we'd only sneak to gain the element of surprise. And I'm apparently the only one here who's going to be surprised by any of this.* "Okay, fine." She narrowed her eyes at Joey. "But for the record, I think knowing the future is a shitty substitute for making a plan."

Wilkins sighed. "Our plans are meaningless. Now we trust in His plan."

Dee tried to turn into the drive reluctantly; she wasn't sure that it was obvious, so she groaned a little for good measure. There were two other vehicles parked at the farmhouse: a light blue Honda hatchback and a red pick-up that was old enough for its wheel wells to start rusting. She parked behind the hatchback. Hopefully she'd be leaving first.

Wilkins was out of his seat almost immediately, the car dinging angrily at him for opening the door with the engine running. Joey was close on his heels, his backpack clasped in his right hand. Dee was left with little option but to follow.

She heard moaning as soon as she was out of the car. It was low, strained, pained—Tiffani in labor, just inside the house. The sound made Dee’s skin crawl. Something garbled ran below it: something that barely warbled its way through the front door. Muffled conversation, by the sound of it. She paused for just a moment with her foot on the front porch step, wondering how many people were inside waiting for them.

Wilkins threw open the front door without knocking, and Joey followed on his heel. Dee shook her head and scoffed. And went inside.

It was hot and close, though not as suffocating as Lyn’s delivery room had been. The tang of sweat and blood was also less noticeable here—this was a larger, more open room than Lyn’s guestroom. Candles flickered on most of the flat surfaces. They were squat, thick, white things—working candles, not just the decorative scented mishmash they’d cobbled together when Lyn went into labor. *These people were better prepared than we were.*

A man of about 20 stood just inside the front door; he wore a blue ball cap and a greenish pallor. He pulled his lips from nauseous purse to hopeful grimace when he saw Wilkins, dropped them into a grim line when he noticed Joey and Dee. “These them?”

Dee noticed Joey raising his hands before she saw the shotgun levelled at them. It was blocky and black—more at home in a police station than a farmhouse. She rolled her

eyes and raised her own hands. “This is why we needed a plan,” she muttered, but Joey didn’t respond.

“They are.” Wilkins nodded to the backpack Joey held. “He took my gun earlier; it’s in his backpack.” The younger man grabbed Joey’s pack and dropped it at his feet. He fumbled the zipper open with one hand, keeping the shotgun trained on them by nesting it in the crook of his other arm.

I could rush him; he’d probably only get off one or two shots. She frowned and balled her fists. *Except he’s like two feet away from Joey. There’s no guarantee this guy will shoot at me.* She sighed and watched the other man retrieve Wilkins’ revolver. He tucked it into his waistband and left the backpack open on the floor.

A sofa sat against the side wall, folded out into a sleeper for a blonde woman—or more accurately a girl, because she looked like she was still in high school. This was Tiffani, then, sweating and heaving and moaning atop a pile of couch cushions. A man who was probably in his forties knelt at her side, holding her hand and mumbling. A woman of about the same age stood at the foot of the sleeper, one hand resting on the girl’s knee. There was definitely a gun tucked into the woman’s waistband; Dee assumed the man was armed as well.

Wilkins moved into the living room, exchanging low words with the woman at Tiffani’s feet. They were drowned by the girl’s moans; when the younger man addressed Wilkins he nearly had to shout. “What do we do with them, Ted?” His voice cracked over the word “what.”

Wilkins raised his hands in the air and shook his head. “We do nothing, Ben. It’s out of our hands, now.” He chuckled; the sound was angular and heavy. “Their fate is up to the Lord.”

Tiffani switched from a moan to a pant; in the lull Dee could finally pick out other sounds in the room. The older man at her side was making his way through “The Lord’s Prayer,” and was just forgiving those who’d trespassed against him. The woman at Tiffani’s feet was cooing encouragements in a gentle twang; Dee thought she sounded like an elementary school art teacher. “Oh, honey, you’re doing sooooo good. Keep it up, now, you can do it.”

And then: “Okay, Tiff, here we go—I can see the head!”

Curiosity and dread fought a brief tug-of-war in Dee’s stomach; she found herself wondering if she could make a run for the front door without getting Joey shot. *Still, this is why I’m here, isn’t it? I mean, I’m supposed to be stopping this, surely I should at least take a look...*

She forced a slow step forward, then another. Ben cleared his throat at her, but she waved a hand at him and took another step. He didn’t shoot, which she took for tacit approval.

The baby was crowning. Dee could see the dome of its head, slicked with mucus and smeared with blood, topped with a spray of light blond hair just like its mother. She thought back to the first moments of Lyn’s delivery, when that normal-looking baby had slid into the world. When they’d dared to hope they’d been wrong about everything.

But we could be wrong about everything, she told herself. We weren't here for the pregnancy—Wilkins might just be a crazy person. If Joey's right, the shit I saw in the Geller field could be our fault. Hope stuttered alight in the pit of her stomach.

Dee looked back to the mantle, filled with the candles they were using instead of electric lights. She noticed for the first time that there was a grandfather clock in the corner, its face covered with a draped blanket. She shook her head. The light inside her guttered.

In front of her, the birth coach was still at it. Her voice had become almost syrupy. “Oh, Tiff, you're almost there, hon! Just keep pushing, the hard part is almost o—“

Her last syllable was overwritten by a little squeak of surprise. Dee saw the reason for it; the baby's head was all but out, but something other than its shoulder was following. A rounded nodule the size of a golf ball, smooth and white as bone, had squeezed into view next to the baby's cheek. To the birth coach's credit, she recovered her composure quickly, her voice picking up only a slight tremor. “Just keep pushing, Tiff. Your baby's almost here...”

Another nodule sprang into view, opposite the first. A third emerged, more or less halfway in between. Tiffani's groaning had lowered in pitch; all its traces of effort had been subsumed by pain. She was bleeding freely now; a steady stream of it collecting in the bedding below her. The birth coach stopped talking.

There was a sound, wet and sharp and rough, somewhere between tearing fabric and slicing tomatoes. Tiffani's perineum split violently, her flesh bursting outward with a fresh spray of blood. Another nodule made its appearance, cresting the breach of its

DIY episiotomy, except now that it had more space to *unfurl* it was clear that “nodule” wasn’t the right word for it.

It was a knuckle, or maybe a knee, but some joint of long, slender limb that unfolded itself from the cramped confines of Tiffani’s cervix. It reached out to a length of at least 18 inches, all white or yellowish-white beneath the red that streaked it, terminating in a single pointed talon. It stretched, rubbing its claw against the bedspread, curling and uncurling on a series of at least four such joints.

A bead of sweat clambered down the ladder of Dee’s vertebrae. She could taste the air: rich and raw in the back of her throat, with a hint of something sweet-hot at its edges.

The birth mother, splashed with blood from the emergence of Tiffani’s baby, had fallen silent. She dropped to her knees at the foot of the bed, shaking her head at the spectacle before her. The man at Tiffani’s side began to pray more loudly, though his words were all but drowned out by the girl’s sobs. Her baby continued to extract itself from its mother, its head soon framed with a symmetrical ring of seven jointed limbs. The second and third ripped free with the same blood and fanfare of the first; the rest slipped out without a sound.

For a moment, nothing happened. Tiffani screamed and the man next to her prayed, but no one moved. The baby merely sat there, its arms curling and uncurling, an anemone in silhouette against the bedspread. *Maybe it’ll die*, Dee thought, *just like Lyn’s*. She dipped one finger into her hip pocket and stroked the edge of her rabbit’s foot.

Then it started moving. Each of its limbs shot out and curled down, pecking at its surroundings like a finger reaching across a keyboard. Except that the point of each finger came back with *something* attached to it: a gobbet of flesh from Tiffani's leg, a thread from her nightgown, a scrap of fabric torn from the sheets. Each of these prizes was pulled back to the baby's center, tucked out of sight in the sheltered space between Tiffani's legs.

And it was *fast*. Each finger stroke was a messy blur, cutting the air with an audible *swoosh*. Each impact landed with a miniature bomb blast of fabric dust, blood droplets or both.

Before Dee's eyes, Tiffani's baby started *swelling*. Its finger-span was increasing by the second, visible from the concentric circles of broken skin and ruined fabric expanding all around it. What's more, the baby was rising in the air, lifting slowly but steadily away from its mother and the bed below them. A trunk or stem was growing beneath it, tethering the baby's head and crown of fingers to the raw red ruin of Tiffani's vagina. It was a multi-colored patchwork: shreds of fabric and bits of flesh sewn into each other with nightgown threads and human hairs.

Joey scoffed. "Weaver," he muttered, barely loud enough for Dee to hear. "Weaving itself into the world."

Dee nodded, then pantomimed juggling with her hands. "Well, weaving is something you do with a loom. Maybe this is more like knitting or crochet or something—"

"Goddamnit, Dee!"

She held her hands up and nodded over her shoulder. Ben was standing stock-still, not having moved since they came in. His lips were set in a bloodless little line—he was either close to or in the process of throwing up in his mouth. She caught his eyes; they were wide, watery, and unfocused.

Dee raised her eyebrows at him, but he merely stared. She gestured toward Tiffani's baby, baring her teeth in something that was probably close to a smile. When he still didn't respond, she scoffed. "*Fucking. Shoot. It.*"

The young man raised his shotgun, but Wilkins stepped between him and Tiffani's baby. He held up one hand, palm flat, and shook his head. "Wait!" he shouted. "Just...wait."

The room seemed to quiet on his command. The birth coach had crawled away from the sleeper sofa, joining the older man to cower in the corner. Tiffani had stopped making any noises at all, having either died or lost consciousness from loss of blood. Even her baby stopped its manic crafting, swaying on the bed at the end of a trunk that was already three feet long. Its fingers curled and uncurled through the empty air, anxious to get back to work.

Uneasy with the silence, the birth coach and her cowering partner started to pray in unison. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name..."

Wilkins approached the bed. "My God," he started, but shook his head at the words. "God," he corrected himself, "tell us Your will. What would You have us do?"

The baby bent forward on its trunk, angling its head toward him. Its head *looked* remarkably normal, though its tiny eyes were still closed and its face was upside down

relative to Wilkins. Its mouth cracked open, barely, and for a moment Dee felt sure it would speak.

Tiffani's baby cried. High-pitched and strained, it was so stereotypically normal that it could have been a stock sound from a movie soundtrack. Wilkins chuckled. Dee didn't see the humor.

The baby went back to work. It straightened its body back up, its arms flashing into motion. The front three stitched a ragged line up Wilkins' front as it resumed its posture. Most of the impacts seemed superficial, pulling fabric out of his pants and shirt or bits of skin off of his arms.

As it finished straightening up, however, one of its arms made contact with Wilkins' eye. Dee saw it burst in its socket, the bulk of its tunic pulled out at the tip of the baby's talon while the rest ran down his cheek. Wilkins fell back against the mantle, hands clasped to his face, his own screams joining the baby's cries.

Soon the baby's trunk was as thick as a telephone pole, swaying four feet in the air above the bed. Its arms seemed to keep growing in proportion to the rest of its body; now they were long enough to reach the furniture nearest the sofa bed. Chunks of end table wood, fragments of clock-face glass, plastic and rubber from remote controls—all of it was scooped up and sculpted into the growing body of Tiffani's baby. *When does it stop? Dee wondered. Or does it stop? And how do we stop it, once its body is mostly made out of concrete or steel or bedrock?*

Fortunately for them, Ben had finally recovered from his shock. He took a step forward, dropped to one knee, and fired at Tiffani's baby. Dee was only a few feet away

from the discharge, and the noise was deafening. Wilkins and the baby were drowned out by a sustained, high-pitched ringing.

Deaf or no, the sight of the gunshot wound brought a smile to her face. The shot had hit the baby in its trunk, blowing out a piece of it about the size of a saucer. Its internal structure was a mess of twisted fabric and loose flesh, but it bled openly from the wound. Encouraged, Ben fired again; Dee felt this report more than she heard it. Another ragged hole appeared in the baby's trunk.

The baby's arms stopped their frantic motion, their knuckles bending backward so they could fold in over its head. They clamped down tightly—a flower blooming in reverse—forming a cage of flesh over the baby's face. Ben took this as a challenge, aiming his next shot at the bud over the baby's head.

The shot went wide, knocking a hole in the wall above the couch. Ben stood and took a step forward; his next shot found its mark. The baby's fingers were far more resilient than its trunk. Bits of them flew free under the hail of shot, but the damage seemed largely superficial. The gunman took another step and two more shots, finally severing one of the baby's fingers. It tumbled to the bed and writhed on the sheets like a serpent.

Dee watched Ben's face, which was set and determined for all of its greenish hue. The young man set aside his shotgun (which she presumed was empty) and pulled Wilkins' revolver. He stepped into the middle of the room, just in front of the mantle and Wilkins' prone form, and lined up to fire on Tiffani's baby.

After the shotgun blasts, Dee could only just hear the sound of the pistol. It sounded like New Years' confetti poppers. Still, she watched each dumb shot with

increasing satisfaction. *Pop!* A piece of finger flew free, and part of the flower bud leaned crookedly outward. *Pop!* Another knuckle exploded, and another fingertip fell tumbled to the bed. *Pop!* A bullet found the baby's face, and there was a spray of bright red blood from the heart of the clenched fingers.

The thing's trunk writhed, shaking Tiffani's body and the bed beneath them. Dee could feel the vibrations through the floor. *That guy's a good shot*, she reflected. *I'm glad I didn't try and wrestle him for that shotgun.*

She was still too deaf to hear the hammer fall on an empty cylinder, but she saw the frown that creased Ben's face the next time he pulled the trigger. *Blame Wilkins for that one*, she thought. *If he hadn't bothered shooting me, we'd have more bullets for Tiffani's kid.* She saw the shooter drop his hands to his pockets, feeling around for spare bullets. Saw his eyes go to the shotgun at his feet.

And she saw Tiffani's baby spring back into action. It lurched forward, dragging Tiffani across the sleeper sofa with it, its arms unfolding as it bent toward Ben. Only five of its fingers were still intact, but it drove one of them down into the young man's shoulder. It pierced flesh and bone, burying itself at least six inches and anchoring him to the spot. His mouth dropped open into what Dee just assumed was a scream.

Two of the baby's other fingers went to work, skittering over the surface of the gunman's hand and arms. She saw sparks fly as one of the talons made contact with the revolver, pulling steel from the barrel and wood from the handle and—if her eyes didn't deceive her—the hammer completely free of its cradle. Blood flew from the surface of the gunman's right arm; the baby pulled away so much of it so fast that a red mist formed in the air.

As she watched, the baby set about repairing one of its severed fingers, building it back up with pieces of gunman and gun alike. Its two back fingers couldn't really reach the man; they started pulling up pieces of Tiffani and the sleeper sofa to fill the holes in its trunk. *How quickly can it rebuild?* She looked around the room for a weapon—another gun, or an axe, or something. *How quickly can we destroy it?*

She realized then that her hearing was returning; some part of the high-pitched whine in her ears was Ben screaming and not just her stereocilia misfiring. She heard Joey shouting her name, too, and turned to find him crouching on the floor with his hands over his ears. *I should have done that, too,* she thought. *He could have warned me.*

Once Joey had her attention, he nodded toward Tiffani's baby. "Grab it. Hold it still."

Dee laughed; she was deaf enough that she felt it as much as heard it. "Fuck you, Joey. You hold it."

Joey frowned, shook her head. "Goddamnit, Dee, I'm not strong enough. Grab it now, while it's still wounded!"

She turned back to the baby. Its fingers were still stripping flesh from Ben's arm; there were places where she could see through layers of exposed muscle to the bone beneath. His eyes had gone glassy and his mouth fallen slack; he probably would have collapsed if the baby weren't holding him up. One of the thing's broken fingers was almost halfway rebuilt. It flexed experimentally.

It's now or never, she thought, shaking her head. *This is what I came here to do, anyway.* She thought of her time in the bathroom this afternoon, and the black mass that was spreading across her chest. *What do I have to look forward to, anyway? What am I*

really risking? She thought of her visit with Lyn: how bright and enthusiastic and frail she'd been at the beginning of her pregnancy.

Her stomach growled; it sounded angry. Dee shook her head. "Not this time."

Dee didn't know if there was a specific stance she should use, so she just launched herself at Tiffani's baby. She grabbed the finger it had buried in the gunman's shoulder with her left hand; since it wasn't moving it seemed like the easy place to start. The baby seemed to be taken by surprise—its limbs froze up, and she was able to snatch another of its fingers with her right hand.

The baby thrashed in her arms, bucking and writhing so hard that the end of the sofa bed banged against the floor. It was inhumanly strong, but not surprisingly so—she remembered how hard Lyn's baby had struggled, and he'd been the size of an *actual* baby. Still, Tiffani's child wasn't the only one that was inhumanly strong. Try as it might, it couldn't get its fingers out of her hands.

Ben slid off of the baby's talon and slumped to the ground. It was done with him now; anyway, having turned its only functional finger on that side on Dee. It struck at her shoulder and upper arm, stripping the fabric from her sleeve before starting in on her skin and muscle. It hurt, but quite a lot less than being shot. It was not unlike being poked with a needle repeatedly. *This must be what getting tattooed is like*, she thought, then watched as a few globs of her flesh were incorporated into the structure of the baby's injured finger. *Or not.*

She was inches away from its face, close enough that she could feel its breath on her face. It was sweet and strange, with a spicy tinge that she couldn't quite place. *Peppermint? Ginger?* Most of its skin was smooth and ruddy, as soft and flawless as

any newborn's—except the crater Ben's gunshot had left in one cheek. The inside of its skull was a darkened maze of dull bone and glistening meat. As she watched, one clawed fingertip bent over the wound, stitching sheet fibers and table splinters into the edges of the infant's jaw.

Quite a race. I can hold it all day, but how quickly I can grow back what I'm losing? And what happens when it gets that broken finger back on line? She glanced back over her shoulder at Joey, who was rifling through his backpack. "I hope you have a plan," she offered. "I can't keep this up forever."

As if on cue, Joey's hands emerged from his backpack, each holding a bottle of lighter fluid from the gas station. She scoffed, and shook her head, and turned her attention to the corner of the room. The birth coach and the praying man were still there, either still praying or just gibbering. "Hey!" They didn't respond. "Hey, you two! Can you hear me?"

The praying man seemed insensate, but the birth coach raised her face. It was slick with tears and snot, and her eyes seemed to take forever to lock onto Dee's. As soon as they did, Dee nodded to the doorway behind them. "You need to leave. Wherever the back door is, you need to use it."

The woman gaped at her. Dee was worried she'd lost her senses, but when Joey stumbled into view with his bottles of lighter fluid, something clicked. Her eyes widened, but her mouth shut, and she dragged the praying man to his feet. They disappeared through the doorway.

Joey aimed his first spritz of lighter fluid at one of the end tables. It was covered with candles that exploded into flames when doused. The resulting fire was small,

spreading only to the fabric of a lampshade and a doily. The second shot of fluid connected that fire to the bed, where it eagerly ate into the pillows and sheets. The third spray led the fire to Tiffani's body; the fourth stitched a hungry bright-orange trail all the way to the trunk of her baby.

Tiffani's baby struggled in her arms. It had given up trying to rebuild itself; now its fingers flailed manically at the air. She'd gained the upper hand in their little wrestling match, forcing it slowly into the bank of flames spreading across the sofa bed. Its trunk proved highly flammable—probably because of all the fabric sewn into it—and the fire took root in it quickly.

Behind her, she could hear the occasional squirt of Joey's lighter fluid as he moved around the room. He was being methodical, moving from open flame to open flame, making sure that the whole house burned around them. "You're doing great, Dee. Just keep holding it."

The room was filling with smoke, so Dee shut her eyes against it. She could still smell it, acrid and sharp in her nostrils, so she stopped breathing. It was hot, too, of course, but she'd been hot all day and she could ignore it. All that left was the *whoosh* of the fire as it spread through the living room, building to a roar under Joey's guiding hand. It was soon joined by the blaring of a smoke detector.

The heat at Dee's back continued to build; she realized with some distant sense of surprise that she must have caught fire. In her arms, Tiffani's baby continued to struggle, though its fingers had noticeably weakened. It was still crying, too, though by now its voice was barely audible.

She kept holding it.

Sound reached her first. Distant words: muffled and indistinct, like they were being spoken through a pillow. She thought she could make out her name amidst the noise.

Still, the sound seemed irrelevant in the face of the pain. She was cloaked in it; every part of her body was on fire. *Well, that's only appropriate*, she reasoned. *I was burned alive*. Still, this pain was different from any she'd ever known—especially in the past few weeks. It was deeper somehow. More immediate. The shield of her asymbolia had slipped.

“Dee?” This time, she was sure it was her name. She moved, or tried to move; she couldn't tell where she was or exactly what position she was in. She could feel grass beneath her legs, but her upper body was numb to everything but a dull pressure against her back. She assumed she was lying on the ground somewhere. Through the thrumming of the pain in her nerve endings, it was hard to be sure.

She opened her eyes. Well, eye—only her left responded. Blackness swam in front of her, and she worried briefly that she was blind. Slowly, the pin-pricks of stars stood out against the sky, and the dim silhouettes of darkened tree branches formed above her. She swiveled her eye in its socket. At one extreme edge of her field of vision, she could just make out a distant, orange glow.

“Dee, can you hear me?” Joey's head glided into view. There were black marks on his face—ash, presumably—but he appeared unharmed. He was frowning, his brow furrowed, and he shook his head when he caught her eye. “Jesus, Dee, are you conscious?”

Something about his appearance was off, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She hurt too much to think about it. "Yeah, Joey, I'm conscious. Where am I?" Her voice was low and raspy. The words stung her throat, as if each one were barbed.

Joey shook his head. "You're about a hundred yards away from the farmhouse. You dragged yourself out of the fire and crawled all this way."

She groaned. She aimed for economy to spare her throat. "Baby?"

A smile broke over Joey's face. "No, not anymore. I stayed on the scene until the side of the house fell in but I didn't see any sign of it. I still haven't heard any sirens, but the fire department is on its way. They won't bother putting it out at this point. They'll just make sure it doesn't spread and wait for it to burn out."

She closed her eye and tried to smile. Both actions stung, and she wasn't sure she succeeded at the second.

"Dee, listen." Joey's voice was low, his words even.

She opened her eye again, and this time she realized what looked so different about him. He'd taken off his sunglasses; his eyes were clear and brimming with tears. Surprisingly, his pupils were the same dark hazel they'd always been. She'd just assumed he wore a mark on his eyes the way she carried one over her heart.

"Remember earlier, when I said that I thought we were part of the problem?" She nodded at him, or tried to nod—in either case he nodded back. "Well, I think, maybe...you should stop." His voice broke on the last word, and he sniffled. "I mean, you look...bad, Dee. I don't know how you're still moving."

She considered glancing down at herself, but dismissed the proposition. Given how she felt, she didn't need to see. Besides, moving hurt too much. She'd just take Joey's word for it.

He wiped a tear from his eye and shook his head. "Maybe you could get away from this. Maybe you could heal. I don't know." He sniffled. "But if anything is going to kill you, this would be it."

She lay in the grass and considered his words. "How?"

He swallowed audibly; she saw the action in his Adam's apple. "Well, I'm not sure. Maybe you just have to...let go? Give up. Just...stop."

She considered the proposition. It *would* be nice not to hurt like this anymore. "You?"

He shook his head again. "It isn't as hard for me." He laughed. "I'm not bullet-proof, remember?" He sucked in a long, shaky breath. "I think this really might be best for the world, Dee. Best for reality. After what happened to Paul, I'll be the only one left."

He did see Paul! She wanted to follow up on that, but she was too tired and she hurt too much. Instead, she reached down with her left hand, slowly maneuvering fingers that felt like blocks of wood. She could still feel denim around her hips and thighs; her jeans might have melted to her skin a little but they seemed largely intact. After a few attempts, she got two fingers into her hip pocket and dragged out her rabbit's foot keychain.

She glanced down at it without thinking. The keychain itself was in decent shape; some of the fur on one side was singed but it was still identifiably a rabbit's foot. *Pretty*

lucky, she thought. Her arm had not fared so well: her skin was a gnarled mass of charred black, except where it had flaked off to reveal the bright red flesh below. She thought she could just make out the dull white of her wrist bone gleaming in the moonlight. Her stomach churned.

She tossed the rabbit's foot away from herself. "For you," she rasped.

Joey stooped over to pick it up. "Thanks, Dee. I appreciate it." He wiped his eyes. "Look, Dee, I know that before I came to pick you up...I know what you did. Or what you tried to do." He shook his head. "And I knew about all of this..." He waved a hand over his shoulder in the direction of the fire, then waved that same hand over her. "I knew how this would end up. But you gotta understand, Dee. Just because I knew this would happen, that doesn't mean I'm not sad. It doesn't mean I'm not going to miss you."

She tried to smile at him again; this time she was pretty confident she managed it. "Miss you too. Love you, Joey."

He smiled down on her. "I love you too, Dee." He put his sunglasses back on and stood, leaving her field of vision. When he spoke again, his voice was already disappearing. "I'm going. I still have enough time to leave the driveway before the fire department shows up."

And then he was gone. Without Joey there was nothing to look at, so Dee closed her eye. She realized that she was afraid; now that she came to it, she didn't really *want* to die. She'd been ready to do it a few days ago, but that was before Joey came to her door and told her that they needed to go on a road trip and save reality. *I mean, I did just save the world, right? Or at least Arkansas? Isn't that worth something?*

On the other hand, Joey might be right. As long as they carried even a piece (or three pieces) of Lyn's baby with them, they were a part of the problem. Maybe it would be best for the world if they just disappeared from it. And it would be nice not to hurt like this anymore.

She tried to frown. It was too much to think about right now, and she'd had a long day. Maybe she would just go to sleep out here in this field and see where the winds blew her. Maybe she'd wake up in the morning as good as new. Maybe coyotes would find her in the night and take the decision out of her hands.

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“Already Seen,” “Auto-da-fe,”
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IUS Review, 2011

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