


Made It Way Up

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This is a work of fiction. Any circumstances or characters resembling real events or persons are the results of coincidence.

*With thanks,
Don, Jerry*

Bernard

I am a man of my failures. I don't mind saying it. I didn't mind, when the rivet gun stopped echoing, saying it to Lane. He gave me this look, more *You're a man?* than *What failures?*

Then he went back to work, pounding metal into metal with a sound like teacher's fist through the chalkboard. Before long it was Do you know what Essa said and we knocked off for the funny little squares of bread with too much peanut butter that Kell made for us.

Kinda watched Lane as he ate, slopping down the thick sandwiches with a mug of milk. He told me once that when he was a kid he forgot how to swallow. Anything he tried to put down got stuck halfway in his craw. Grilled cheese sandwiches were the worst, he said. All those slimy strings crowded against the wall of

his esophagus, stretching, he felt, straight into his lungs. So now he can't have a meal without something to drink with.

Kell was hanging on my elbow, digging her fingers through my denim.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Nothing." She loosened up a click or two. "What do you want for dinner, Daddy?"

I laughed and switched off an impulse to tug her onto my lap. She was getting too heavy for that.

"I think I'll take care of it, sweetie."

She gave me both eyes loaded with buck shot.

"Sweetie is a candy." If anyone should know that, Dad, it's you. What's your problem. Are you going deaf again. I kissed her, caught her thin brown hairs between my lips.

"All right then. Smartie. You take a bath today?"

"Yes Daddy."

"You use soap?"

"Nope." She grinned at me, gap-toothed and perfect. She's gonna write songs when she grows up. She's gonna grow a garden to keep her busy while she's waiting for her inspiration, while the soil is loose. I don't make these things up. She heard me listening to Nick Drake as he sang about things he knew and she told me right then what she was gonna do when she grew up.

It was a few things, actually. She got it down to two, despite my laughing. Thought I was laughing with her. But she got it down to two. She's gonna write songs or she's gonna draw comic books.

So I bought her some coloring books the next time I was down in Tonasket. Got her a *Kermit on the Moon* and an old sun-bleached *My Little Pony*. She colored all the ponies green.

Gives her something to do until I buy her a piano, which should be any decade now. Lane caught me looking at a Yamaha flyer one morning.

"They don't sell liquid oxygen," he said.

"I know. I'm looking for something for Kelly."

"Her birthday's coming up already? Man, that kid grows like a weed."

"I do not!" she yelled from the living room. My kid's got the most sensitive ears. Lane gave me a cup of coffee from my own machine and kicked at my boots under the table.

"Cuhmon, man. We're getting there."

With a piano, you can make, from a few small sounds, a sort of pillar. You can keep building on it until you make it too high up to breathe from. Try to make it as high as God, because try as He might, He can't bring down music. That's His own invention, and if He doesn't like it: tough.

He, or his buddies, also made fire. Can't forget fire. And I wonder if God really does work through people, through our leaders and our feeders and our administrative bull hogs. Because if He does, then He's trying to take fire away from us. I don't think there's anybody here who wants that. I don't think there's anybody here who notices.

I followed Lane out to the barn. It's funny how a smell will only trigger memory when you smell it. A picture hangs itself inside your brain and you can think you're looking at it every day, but a smell can't be revisited like that. I have to open the doors, have to smell the old hay before I remember splinters and diesel smoke, wide roads of corn and wheat and speckled animals. A lot happens in a life to bury childhood. Growing up is like a slowed down avalanche that you can breathe through.

It felt good. I ain't a quick moving guy; I'm stuck in time. I'm only one place any second. And when I'm back there with my simple dirty growing up and my nights with a flashlight reading my daddy's old Heinleins under the covers, I don't even want to be anywhere else.

Lane and I did rock paper scissors for the arc-welder and he won with rock crushes scissors. He grinned at me to tell me something was wrong between him and Essa again. It happens. Stuck the grin behind the blacker cup of the face plate and lit up the welder without waiting for me to turn away.

I took the rivet gun and went to work marrying permanent metal to metal, making the shell. My first drawings, back before Lane and Essa ever moved out here, always looked a bit like the paintings on the front of old editions of *The Stars My Destination* or *The Rolling Stones*. The old impracticals that ought to soar just sitting still. Kelly liked them, but she was only two or three then and liked anything I touched. I put them up on my fridge with little magnets in the shapes of colored letters. The *H* held up a profile. From the

P dangled an overhead view with the long sweeping dorsal fin chasing the hull down into Buck Rogers territory.

Lane had laughed and really meant it. And Essa, well, she has those eyes of hers. Vanity eyes, mood eyes, whatever. She's never let me in on the secret. They were smooth brown, then, almost plastic. I still don't know what that meant.

A *biss, pop*, "Shit," from Lane. I shielded my eyes and looked over. The welder was out. I almost said, Ran out of gas? but stopped myself just in time.

"Generator died again," he said. "When are you going to get something, you know, reliable?"

"When Patty wins her first case."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll take care of it." He slipped out into the afternoon. Kell would be yelling at the TV, telling it to come back on over and over until she gave up and started inventing dialogue for the dim gray reflections on its face. Did you hear what the refrigerator said? No, no, I didn't. What did the refrigerator said?

He said that no one could survive without him.

He's full of it. Meat and mustard and peanut butter. She does little voices for each one and there's just something about listening to her try to be deep and scary. It rattles her tiny teeth and puts a giggle in her eye. Reminds me of Patty's own set of voices. One for cute, one for serious, one for distance. Moving her thin mouth like a ventriloquist.

Lane came back on the sound of generator hum. We worked the rest of the afternoon not really talking. Won't be long

now until we can start on the innards, on the propulsion. We've got a good system worked out with the models. Should be able to carry that over to something larger. The launch site is rotted with old eggs that fell out of the payload bays when we were testing. It's kind of funny, the rockets making fun of us. Just takes time, then we can thumb our noses back at Earth along with them.

When it started getting dark, Lane took off the mask and blinked his gummy eyes. He clapped me on the shoulder and announced he couldn't see a thing. We sat on the dirt floor, a lantern hanging unlit from one of the rafters, until his night vision showed up. He said a couple things like, Full shift tomorrow, and other stuff about work that I didn't really care about. Then he limped on home.

I shut the barn door behind myself, rested my palms just on the tips of the rough wood slivers and watched the sun fall off. There are a million, billion stars; I just want one.

Kelly

This is my pet poem. I give it things like things, like Essa told me to. Not like I give Nine. Nine bit me and made me bleed so she had to carrots with blood on them. I gave those words to my poem but I had to imagine it making its own face and I had to use mine. Mine didn't work so well.

I don't think I'll give it to dad. He doesn't understand a lot of things on the TV and what Essa said was, If it's yours, you understand it. And this is mine and I can take care of it.

You don't know it but you had a bigger brother. Or a sister and she got written over. Because it was dark and dad just had one of his ideas. I heard his light go on but didn't see it with the blankets over my head and my flashlight on anyways. He banged his knee or something on the side of the door. That's why he said what he said. Those words bring a poem down, Essa. Maybe he was a

little blind because of going night to day to night again. He didn't look at what he grabbed. So he wrote over your brother or sister with a red crayon.

When I gave him a sausage and an egg I made myself for breakfast in the morning, he was staring and his eyes were all colored with crayon. He didn't understand what he covered up with. He was holding it in one hand and he crumpled it up with one hand, opening and closing his fist like a mouth, gobble gobble, until I had to make you.

I'm thinking maybe what I made got mixed up with what he made and turned them both into scribbles like the ones I used to make that don't mean anything.

Then he called mommy and they sounded just like yesterday so I went to Essa's house. She was on the porch in her bathrobe and writing and smelling like coffee breath. She gave me a hug with one arm. She was all warm from rubbing herself too hard with the towel. She does that to get all the cold water off.

I said, "I'm going to play in the forest today."

She said, "With all your little friends, huh?" and licked the tip of her pen to get the ink wet and turn her tongue black.

"That's right," I said. "Fawns and beavers."

"What's that? Prawns and lemurs?" She wrote it down. Hey, I said. That's mine; that goes in my poem. Too late, she said. It's mine now. And she tickled me with one hand which is more than enough.

Lane came outside. He forgot to close the door.

"Ready for school, kid?" he asked me. He was looking right at the sun. I made a face. Poems don't need school. They need words. He wouldn't have seen me anyway because of the big green-orange splotch on his eyes right where the sun used to be. Essa let her robe slip to grab up as much of a sun beam as she could.

She said, "Today we're going to learn about geology."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Rocks."

"Just rocks?"

"We'll go skipping stones."

"Have fun with that," said Lane. He took his coffee out to the barn to get in an hour of playing before it was time for him to get in Laddy and go down the hill. Essa played a few thumb wars with me and I let her win. She needed to. Dad went out and paused before he slid the barn door open. He looked over at us and gave me a little wave. Essa waved back. I won that one.

Today we're going to learn about her super powers. How she makes everything all green just by looking at it. Except for the No Kell Zone, which is where I don't have any words for at all. I asked her why she doesn't work there and all she said was that she tried and couldn't pay attention. You can't do anything if you can't pay attention.

That's why Nine bit me. He forgot I was me because he wasn't paying attention, so he bit me. Right on the finger where I hold my pencil. That's why he just sits in his cage all day with his

nose going up and down. His eyes don't go if his head doesn't. He never just sits still and watches the TV.

Sometimes I try to watch it in the black bits of his eyes but he always moves too much and I can't remember if it was the guy with the wavy hair or the girl with the purple suit who said that the president was waving and was very happy for us.

Essa helped me feed him after dad had been in there for a few away and Laddy choked away with Lane. She asked me, without look at me, if I had smelled anything weird around Lane in the morning. I said, No, just coffee breath, like yours. She laughed a little out of her nose and had me pick up a rock so she could tell me about it. She did it like reading the future in tea leaves or my palm squiggles, only she did it backwards. She told me where the rock had been and what it had seen and what it had lived through. It lived through a lot of fire, I remember, and it saw a dinosaur, but I don't remember much else. It was just a rock. It wasn't even pretty. Just made me want to wash my hands. I licked them clean for then. It made my teeth all crunchy and I guess I was making more faces because Essa kept laughing. She said Lane had had a dream last night and I asked her what kind but she wouldn't tell me.

She used her super power to make me a vase of flowers that I took into our house. I put them on the table and made some sandwiches for dad when he remembered to get hungry.

Bernard

He's a rat bastard for it, but I can't fault him, I guess. He doesn't move so fast anymore, and he hasn't dropped those nine hundred bucks to get Laddy's carburetor fixed, either. It's kinda funny sometimes to watch him wobble out to their driveway and climb up into the cab and drive off no faster than walking speed. It's funny when it isn't for the firewood, the food, and the parts we need.

The mill started rolling belly up last year; it's taking it a while. It's sad. Everybody knows where this is going, but there's nothing to do but watch. It's like watching a whale bleed to death. So now they don't have enough money coming in to pay every paycheck every week. They give them all out, anyway, because somebody would squawk if they didn't, Lane says. They need to start pushing the checks back until around quitting time, Lane says;

they hand them out at nine in the morning so everybody's eyeing each other all day long, praying for accidents to happen to their friends, but not really because workers comp has to come out before salaries.

Quitting time's a mad dash for the time cards and the parking lot and there have been speeding tickets on the way to the bank. Lane says it's usually the last dozen or so that get nothing, but last week it was fifteen, and this week he said he had no chance at all.

One guy, Lenny or something, has a wife and a kid and both of them are sick. So he had a talk with the bosses and now they let him off an hour early every day, Because, they say, he's got a long commute. That's fine in the winter, but these days it's nothing. Doesn't even get dark until ten.

Lane came back empty handed and Essa didn't even say anything to him. She just opened the door, saw him by himself, and shut the door again. Got to get a move on, my friend. I could fault him for it. I didn't throw a wrench at him, once, but I meant to. He just swings his arms when he walks, as though he doesn't have a care in the world.

Sorta true. All his real cares are up and out there, I guess. But I still got mad at him. He came out to the barn after he had Essa's leftovers and sat on a bale of hay. Neither of us have horses, but we keep the hay around the insulate the parts. I was working on number two.

"Didn't get it, again," he said.

"I figured."

"What are we gonna do, man? Ain't gonna be that long until winter. Can't do much then, can we."

"Not much."

He took a piece of straw in his fingers and split it in halves, fourths lengthwise.

"You fire off any today?"

"Just the one. Forty-eight, or whatever it was. Got it written down on the sheet."

"Yeah. Good." He dropped the straw. "What'd we get?"

"I dunno. I haven't done the math yet. It's over there." I bobbed my head at the manger and the three ring binder lying open on it. He got up and took a pencil from the jar we keep on one of the low rafters. He bent over the papers, flipping them back and forth; I listened to the rustle and measured what I could of two's propulsion chambers.

"Didj bring any of the stuff back?" I said.

"Couldn't. But I talked to that guy at the hospital."

"Cal."

"Yeah, Cal. How'd you meet him, anyways?"

"Saw him at the theater."

"Well, he said he'd do what he can. They're not exactly swimming in patients down there. Hell, the mill probably gives them half what they get. So they've got some extra oxygen. He seemed like a nice enough guy."

"Yeah," I said. "Nice enough." I stood up and just about broke my back. Sitting too long with a file in one hand and one of those jeweler's things crammed into my eye. "How does it look?" I asked.

"Pretty good, actually. Solid velocity. Scaled up, got a payload of about two hundred pounds."

"Well, that'd be you," I said and grinned. I could feel my stiff beard and mustache trying to hold it back. I clapped him on the shoulder and I think he felt it. "I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

He followed me out. Even in August, our breath was steaming. The one halogen bulb we hung above the barn door buzzed its light right through us, gave us faint shadows. He looked up, right into it, and flexed his jaw. He whispered something like, God.

I told him not to trip over anything on his way back to the house. He nodded and laughed out of his nose at me, like Essa does. I wonder if he learned it from her or she from him. Or maybe they both invented it. That's gotta happen sometimes. All these wide thoughtful people in the wide shrinking world; there's gotta be overlap.

It's hard to be angry at him for long when it's his world up here. He's where he wants to be when he comes home, and that's a bit contagious. When I moved here with Kelly, we didn't know if we'd be able to last. And we have. Whatever happens next is after everything.

Patty called and woke Kell up.

"Go back to bed, honey," I said loud enough for the phone to hear me. It was something about a lawyer, something about a conference call. The lawyer wanted to tell me a few good stories about how to behave, but I didn't feel like listening and, besides, my phone's almost ten years old and doesn't have the guts to handle that kind of technology.

I got so quiet she told me to yell at her. God damn it, I had to yell at something. And Lane and Essa were over there behind their green curtains. I could see their shadows tilting and twisting and her hair draped back over her head like a flag. I put the phone down and blanked out a couple of million years with my hands. I did it, and then Patty wondered what the hell was wrong, so I told her, I'm living in the wilderness, now. I don't know of this *conference call* you speak so fluently of.

She got real bitchy after that. Made it easier to go to sleep.

Essa

I found out the worst thing about myself. It came along at the end of a string of worst things. I heard my voice crack during our nightly argument, when I was stating the most important of all my positions. I reasoned carefully with him about economics and responsibility and right on supply and demand, my voice gave up and I ended up saying, You son *of a beep of a bitch*. I inhaled and tried it again, there, and I'm pretty confident he got the hint both times.

He got quiet after a while, which gave me that much more room to be loud. There are laws of conservation for just everything. He walked into the bedroom and shut the door softly enough that I didn't hear the click and walked right into it, thinking I could push it open. That's not the worst thing, finding out that you've grown up into the teenage klutz you missed out on being the first time around, but it's pretty close.

I went ahead and slept on the couch. It's older, more comfortable than the bed. The television woke me up with some morning show that he had turned on before he went out to play in the barn. I don't know what it is they do out there all day. I mean, I know what it is they do, but I don't see how it could take that long. Like I don't see why it takes so long to make a movie. An entire afternoon for eight seconds of data, an entire morning for a few microns; it doesn't fit with my opinion of what a day is.

Lately, a day is not getting paid to teach Kelly the same things over and over again with different words. The kid doesn't notice, though, so it's okay; and I guess she's fun to be around. I would have liked to have had the chance to meet her mother, though. But, even when he's drunk, Bernard won't say a thing.

I woke up after dreaming about rescuing Merry and Pippin from a squadron of B-52 bombers and thought I heard the announcer telling me to get up, my house is on fire, and someone has murdered everything dear to me. Turned out it was some family in Kentucky that had lost their house in a fire they started themselves to cover up the accidental death of their babysitter. She fried herself in the toaster.

"Should have unplugged the thing," I said to the television. Even after our centuries under buzzing wires, there are still some people that haven't gotten it figured out. Our behavior around electronics hasn't found its way into instinct, yet. Another story came on quickly to wash out the funny bitter taste of stupidity. Seems that the union had just officially pardoned its first ever black

bear, thanks to the president's intervention. The bear, called *Lubba* by the zoo that was holding it, back in the part the visitors don't see, had terrorized the students at Western. First kid that saw it was working in an all night coffee shop. The bear pulled up to the drive through. They didn't say what he ordered.

Harmless and basically good, said the president. "Yeah, just don't open your mouth when my Lane gets back," I told the television. And that's when I got it. A quiet house, my husband hiding in the barn with his tools and potential energy, my only friend a six year old who stutters over little concepts but can still get me on the big ones, and I was talking to the television.

It wasn't so bad -- hell, it wasn't bad at all when he was teaching in Tacoma. We had a nice little place with a lawn that was at least green. I got all my credits paid for because he was faculty. Tuesday nights, Starbucks with the girls in my sociology program. Thursday nights, poker which only last a few hands before I was grinning my way into an argument with one of his colleagues. Saturday nights, home and the same couch, a bottle of wine and a little more. That was good for me. All of it was. There was always something to look forward to, at least. Something specific. Not these vague dreams of one day being paid. Way to set your sights on the mountains, Don Quixote.

That night, I started things off a little different, with the echoes of *Congratulations*, *Lubba* keeping me from going too far off course.

"I want to ride into town with you tomorrow," I said.

"Why?" He smelled like metal, or burnt wires; I'm no good at telling between the two.

"I want to find a job."

I knew he'd take it badly and silently. You're a cripple, I was saying. You can't be trusted to care for your family. *But you're my only family.* That's right; you can't take care of me. You need to let me help. I need to go to bed, that's what I need. But go back a few thoughts. I'm not your only family. You're taking care of Bernard, and his daughter, too, indirectly. I had run myself ragged with all our conversation before he answered.

"Okay," he said. "I don't get off until four-thirty. You might want to bring a book." He leaned back and chewed on the fish fillets I had microwaved for him. "Slim pickings, though. Lots of people are leaving the area, you know."

"I know. I read the paper, too."

"Every week."

"Yeah."

"You could probably try the library. They're usually looking for somebody part time."

"I know."

I thought we had a bottle of wine leftover from all we got when we were first married. I poked around in the root cellar he had dug into the hillside, but I didn't find anything there. A few dusty jars of homemade pickle relish we were saving for the next time his mother came and visited. A few glass containers of fruit, slowly spoiling in their sweet fermenting mess.

Kelly

You don't get very hungry. I get hungry all the time. That's why we've got so much peanut butter and so many dirty spoons. And there's a bunch of stains on the window that I can't get off with water and daddy's old socks. One smudge makes a little frown over Essa's front door and sometimes I trap her under it. I whisper at the top of my lungs so she'll hear me screaming for her to move and then I move my head to squish her. Just for fun in the mornings.

She was wearing something over her bathrobe this morning. She was showing her back to me so all I saw was that it was something dark blue and probably cold, then Lane came out the door without his head on. I moved and gave it to him. He walked in front and she came behind him, tapping her fingers on the air. She didn't say anything. She didn't even look over my way. I went out

the front door to ask her if I had to do anything but I only got to say, Ess-- before Laddy's doors slammed at the same time.

Slamming's the only way to get them to stay on.

I made some more smudges and waited for daddy to tell me to get my pants on. He was out in the barn. I could tell even though I couldn't hear him yelling or making a sound like a jet flying over real low. My arms went to sleep while I was staring at his sand box and trying to have a super power too. I watched TV but I didn't learn anything. Then I heard Laddy bouncing over the lip in the driveway that we share but don't use. I went out on the front porch in my bare feet, jumping over the splinters, because Essa should have been back to take me around on school. It was Lane. He gave me a wave with both hands, twisting his wrists like the people in black and white trying to scare away a tiger. He looks all the time like something off of TV. I think it's the mustache, even though he fidgets with it and it doesn't hang straight. I don't even know if they have a TV. I've only been to her house once. Really to it. I know the outside of it because the outside is part of mine, but the insides are probably all weird.

They made us dinner the first Christmas we were here. Daddy thought it was a good idea and he still thinks so. So we ate mushrooms and they drank wine and dad gave me a taste. He told me it was sweet.

Essa laughed a lot while I was trying to go to sleep. That's when she said she was a school teacher and I saw Lane scowl at her. They thought I had gone to sleep but I was watching them. Their

house smelled too different for me to go all the way to sleep. So I had my eyes most of the way closed and I remember wondering why my eyelashes look black to me but yellow to everyone else.

I followed Lane out to the barn, making his tracks in the dust look like three or four people before the wind came up and I had to plug my nose to keep the dirt from getting all inside me. Lane slid aside the big doors. He asked me to help push. I did with my finger tips. I had to but I had to watch out for splinters.

"Hey, Barnyard," he said. I stood in the corner, out of the way.

"Hey, Lane," dad said back. "Is it New Year's or something?" Lane was reaching up on a shelf for something to hit with.

"What do you mean?"

"You're home early."

"Yeah. Don't tell Essa. I got let go." Dad didn't say anything, so I guess Lane thought it was safe to say, "God. It's a beautiful day out there."

Daddy made a mousey sound of metal scratching something else metal. He held up one of the small ones and grinned. "Want to poke at it?"

"Let's do." They carried it together, dad at the front and Lane at the back. It was really bright when the sun got to it. In that one line straight down the front like a zipper. That one bit that's too hot to touch, even reflected, like Essa said the moon is. Too hot to touch sounds stupid.

"Watch out," I said. Dad was stepping in all the fried eggs splotching on the ring of dirt in the middle of the green field. I sat down far enough away that I was in the grass. I could feel tiny spiders crawling on the blades of grass, dipping and twisting them against my legs.

Daddy and Lane sometimes slap each other and sometimes hug each other with one arm. They were kinda doing both, doing things in between where they would butt heads and laugh or punch each other in the chest with the same idea as tugging on dad's shirt cuffs. I could smell them over here, both like Essa in the morning, the smell of their house. They stuck wires to the metal and Lane spent a while getting angry because his fingers were so thick. Then they backed up. Lane pulled a scrap of paper from his back pocket and scribbled something down on it. Dad took my arms and spun me up into the air, the thing like the TV remote pressing into my armpit.

"Oof. Gotta take a few giant steps back, kid," he said. This is the part that Essa made okay. I don't think they trust her very much to keep them safe. I hung around daddy's neck and tried to move my thumbs so I wouldn't choke him. Lane started counting down and getting slower between each number. Finally, halfway through *one*, daddy hit the button on the remote and I thought about cartoons suddenly turning wavy brown hair and talking quickly over the music.

The little one pushed itself off with smoke and headed straight for the sun. The moon was out, too, on a summer day it

couldn't help it. I told daddy not to worry. He was laughing. So was Lane. I watched the smoke fall apart. Why doesn't it fall out of the sky.

I kicked away from daddy and ran back to the house, looking for Essa. The TV was on with *Calamitous Cat* so I got a jar of peanut butter. A caterpillar crawled out onto my knees. He must have hidden in me from the grass. I fed him to Nine.

So now you shouldn't be hungry for a while.

Bernard

Kelly was watching *The Muppet Movie*, but not even that could get me down. Another launch like this afternoon's, and I'd feel confident enough to shoot my friend into the stratosphere. He was already confident, but he'd been thinking about it longer than I.

I'm going to go back there some day...

She looked awfully cute with her short legs splayed out around the set and her shoulders hunched and her face way too close to the cathodes. I cleared my throat to see if that would do it. It didn't. I left it there. Made myself a cup of cocoa and took it out on the porch.

A bit after he finished whooping over the calculations, Lane had gotten back into Laddy and headed into town. He wanted to take Essa out on their one remaining credit card and I couldn't talk him out of it. Wasn't twenty yards down the road when the radiator

overheated. Jealous of the rockets, I guess. I came out with a gallon of tap water and we got it down.

"You guys doing all right?" I asked him through the cloud of steam.

"She's just not as keen on sacrifice," he said. "It's funny, but when we moved here, she made me think that it was perfect for her. She painted and she cooked and she even tried doing a garden. This was a couple of years before you came up." He shrugged. "What can you do? Got a dream and a few breaths of time to find it in. We'll do good."

"Damn straight," I said. "Two hundred and twenty-five pounds of good."

"That's gonna be enough for me and a few bags of Doritos," he said. "I may just not come back down." He got back into the cab and stuttered off down the road. I could hear the suspension rattling over all the little ridges formed by rainfall and sun.

It was still early, so I thought I'd go in and read for a while before dinner. Kelly was still watching Kermit and the gang fight for fame and fortune. Some fight. They walk into the office and, simply by dint of tenacity, they have success dropped on them.

Bad sign. I was arguing with fate over the resolution of a children's movie.

"Want to turn that off, sweetie?" I asked. "Daddy's going to read a book."

"Will you read it to me?" she asked back.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It's your book." She still hadn't turned from or turned off the movie. And now the credits were starting and the music was happy and it only took them two hours. Still, I thought. Gonzo never made it back there. Still a bad sign, Bernie.

To compensate, I got Alex Haley's *Roots* down from the shelf. It was a copy that had belonged to my dad, back in Kentucky. I had picked it out of a box of things mom was getting ready to donate to charity after he died. I didn't think that charity would want it. Not that it's a bad book; I've got a few fond memories of dad leaning back in his tweed recliner, smoking his pipe and letting the curls sink into Haley's prose. It was a paperback, and the cover was so torn and bent that it could barely be read.

"Ale Ha Ro," I said.

"Not again," said Kelly, making a face I could see reflected on the screen in the black space around the scrolling names. She stopped the tape anyway and got up.

"Rewind," I reminded. She bent over to push the button. When she crawled up into my lap and put her head sideways on my chest, I said, "Forget to put your panties on this morning?" She gave me a glare very much like one of her mother's and explained,

"It's summer." She stuck her nose into the breast pocket of my flannel shirt and inhaled. "You smell like smoke," she said.

I carefully split the book open and started reading out loud, trying to move my mouth as slowly as possible so my tongue would not dry out before she got tired of listening.

I could smell her blonde hair making room for itself in the summer air, thick as it was with the scents of other things more potent, far more beautiful. She got nothing of my pitch black color; everything from her mother.

Patty called again last night. She was being sick and nice. Nice for her. Telling me that she just wanted to see us and asking, Would you like to meet for dinner some night. I said that would be an awfully expensive dinner. Three hundred miles of dinner. She said we could meet halfway and I said, What, at the summit of Steven's Pass? Yeah sure. The ski resort's got great food. I heard her cough a few times, deeply. There had to be someone else in the room with her, because I heard a voice say, That's all right, but it sure wasn't hers. Hers doesn't say things like that. And isn't male, anyways.

I told her she may as well just send me last month's check, and the one from two months ago, and we could pretend we had all met for dinner. If she dips her fingers into cold water and then slaps it on her cheek, it'll be just as if Kell had given her a kiss. For all she knows.

After Patty, some girl named Claritin rang. Said she was part of some recruiting committee back at Boeing and wanted to know if I'd be willing to come in for an interview. I told her, No, but thanks. Apparently they've been doing well for themselves since the Chinese started buying exclusively from the 797 line. That was the last thing I did when I was there. Some piece of the wing that you

wouldn't notice unless it fell off. Let the Chinese have em. They're thinking too laterally and it won't get them anywhere but here.

"Daddy?" Kelly said. Her little nose was flared. She does that just for fun. Got it from the rabbits we had.

"Yes'm?" I said.

"You stopped reading. Thought you'd gone to sleep. You can't sleep yet."

"Why not?"

"It's too early to go to sleep."

"Says you, smartie."

"Says me."

I read some more, going back a few paragraphs to see if she'd notice. She didn't, which made me smile. It was nice to hear myself talk about the swaying of a cruel ship and glance outside at the mountains, not cruel, not moving, just heartless and real. It made everything else seem a little less so.

I put one hand to her ear and stroked my thumb along the trails of her hair. She was asleep before Essa and Lane got back.

Kelly

I wanted a pack of grape bubble gum and an ice cream waffle and a coloring book and a pair of Lubba slippers and something I've never seen before. Lane gave daddy the keys and said, Fill im up. And dad kinda smiled, kinda nodded, and said, Sure. Then Lane went back inside and slammed the door without touching it somehow.

Dad listened to me tell him things all the way from the driveway to the church to the store. But we didn't stop when we got there. We pulled into the bank and I told him not to do the drive through. There's a funny smell that comes out of those boxes that hiss and send the money around on what daddy said are called nomatics. I told him not to but he did anyway. That's okay, because the real reason is that I don't get to choose what flavor of sucker I want when we use the nomatics. I didn't really feel like a sucker this

time. Not with grape bubble gum and maybe a chocolate chip mint ice cream waffle.

Laddy almost ran over another car when he went out into the road. It was a woman and she pressed on her horn and then stopped and scowled at her finger. Then she gave us her finger. Daddy laughed and gave it back. Then he said,

"Don't you learn from me, now, smartie pants. That works in the city, but not here. Here people know you."

"Who was that?" I said.

"Pastor Chuck's wife." He laughed then and drove right on past the store. I was squirming in my seat, trying not to get too much dust on my legs and the green stripes on my dress.

"Aren't we going to the store?" I asked.

"In a minute, honey. We need to check on something else, first."

"Something for you and Lane?"

"Yup."

"I want a present," I said. I felt the two balls of hot water underneath my eyes and the thick snot in my throat, then I started to cry.

"Aw," said dad, letting Laddy drive. "Someone put a bucket on that lip." He went back to keeping his eyes on the road. We pulled into a parking lot that we barely fit into. It was in front of a red brick building that had two rows of darker red running across the wall under the windows.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"This is the hospital," he said.

"Was I born here?"

"No," he said, stomping on the click brake.

"Were you born here?"

"Nope. I was born in Virginia. Remember?"

"Where's Virginia?"

"Dead and buried, little lady. Want to come in with me?" I slid across the dust. I lost one of my flip flops. It bounced under Laddy and dad had to reach under to get it out while I stood on one leg like the guy who brought the rain to Kapiti plain and waved at the police man.

I put my hand in daddy's, even though his was all dry and dirty. I'd wash my hands before I ate the ice cream. Unless it looked really good. Then I'd just eat it. The sliding door didn't open until I stuck my tongue out to lick at it. Daddy laughed and said,

"I guess it wouldn't hurt much here."

We went to a little moon desk. A woman sat behind it with her eyes glued on the door. She had blonde hair. She had curls so deep that they were black at the center. And not yellow black. Just black.

"Can I help you?" she said just perfect.

"I'm lookin for Cal," said dad.

"Just a sec," the woman said. Dad smiled at her while she poked something that was hiding under the lip of the desk. She talked in the phone and her voice echoed around me. It got me from both sides, kinda like a hug I couldn't run away from.

"Cal, please come to the front desk. Cal to the front desk, please." She said things twice in case I was too scared the first time to pay attention. I couldn't help but think it was a good idea. Maybe I'll use it. To start a new favorite word, I have to say to myself a few times before I go to sleep, while I'm under the covers. It doesn't work if I do it before my prayers for some reason. So I say, God be a little closer, and then sneak under the blanket and say, Laddy buck Laddy buck. The next day, it's all mine.

Dad leaned forward on the counter and called the lady some name. It was probably hers. He asked her how she was doing. She blew out all her air and made her eyes go all froggy. She said she was doing fine.

"Sure," daddy said.

She giggled. A big guy with not much hair came around a corner. He put out a big hand and spoke in a funny small voice that I could make mine sound like if I wanted to.

"Hey there. Bernard, right?"

"That's me."

"Why don't you come on around to my office." Daddy tugged on me and I just about jumped on his leg to make him carry me. Just about.

We went outside and around the side of the building. I put my fingers on one of the dark red stripes and followed it through the flower beds where I could blame the line if I stepped on something precious. There was an alleyway that the big man got to first. It was gravelly and I got a sharp one caught under my big toe.

I didn't notice until I stepped down on it. I took off my flip flop to get whatever it was out in case it was a bug.

The big man was looking at me when I stood up. I stared back and picked my nose. He shook his head, grinning and not blinking. Then he slapped his hand across daddy's shoulders and said,

"Lane tell yuh what I'm askin?"

"Hundred, yeah?"

"That'll do it."

Dad took a lot of money out of his pocket and handed it away. The big man took it, fanned his face with the bills, and then he blinked.

"Be right back." He took a stack of jangly keys from his pocket and opened a gray ugly door behind him. He kept the door propped open with his foot. The door closed and I could see he was wheeling a big green pipe with some kind of crown on top, only it wasn't a good crown because it was silver.

"I better bring the truck around," said dad.

"Good plan, son," said the big man. Daddy patted me on the shoulder as he went by, saying,

"Stay put, hon."

I sat down and pretended to get more rocks stuck in my toes. The sun was getting me and my cheeks were fighting back and I think they were winning. The big man was looking at me again. He started to say something, but Laddy growled and came up around behind him. He shrugged a little at his shoes and then

wheeled the pipe around to Laddy's butt. Daddy didn't even look at me when he got out to help.

"I don't even want to know what you guys need this for," said the big man when the pipe was stuck between a couple of tires and was done squeaking over Laddy's metal back.

Dad grinned and nodded.

"What do you need this for?" the big man asked.

I yelled at him and I threw the sharpest rocks and I got him I got him. Daddy bent down and said some things and then the little voice said, It's a good thing we're where we are, ain't it?

Voices

"Are you sure about this, man?"

"Hey. Which one of us is the rocket scientist?"

"Which one of us is an ass?"

"Who should we ask: your daughter or my wife?"

"I don't think Kell could figure out the question."

"Sure she could. Essa taught her."

"What now?"

"That's what they do when they go waltzing around the mountain or work in the garden. Kelly calls it her school."

"Couldn't ask for a finer one."

"No, sir. I couldn't. She could, but I couldn't."

"Kelly loves it here."

"Yeah; she doesn't know any better. Or worse. Or something."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Saw you guys going at it the other day."

"You like that? I call it *shadow boxing*. Keeps me in good hammering shape."

"Not many of those days left, now."

"Are you kidding? This is just the beginning. The tip of the bullet."

"Hollow-point? No, wait, I've got it: buck shot."

"Go straight to hell; do not pass *Go*, do not collect two hundred bucks. We're going to have our own fleet by the time we get dragged ass upwards to heaven. A thousand burnished demigods of the sky."

"Cut it out, man."

"Sorry. But yeah. So Essa's got her job, now."

"Yeah, but you don't."

"I'm going to file a lawsuit. Place shouldn't be able to fire me just for being crippled."

"Help, help, I can't reach the *on* switch and it's your fault."

"Bastard. I mean I would file a lawsuit if I thought it would do any good, which it won't. And if I thought they had the money, which they don't."

"And it would mean you'd have to tell her, anyway."

"How do you know I haven't told her already?"

"You're acting all optimistic. You only do that when she's pissed at you."

"So says mister Psychology professor?"

"Not everyone's an intellectual. Some people actually spent their time reading instead. And you obviously didn't have much of an education in economics."

"Why do you say that?"

"Had to spend everything to get the oxygen from Cal. That was my whole check. So it's peanut-butter and bread. Good thing she likes it."

"That shit. He told me a hundred bucks even."

"That's what it was. At first. I guess he didn't take quite such a liking to me."

"What's going on, Bern? Stuff with Patty?"

"Just money stuff, I guess. I told you how when I was a kid I used to have a terrible time spending my Christmas money. I knew I could only spend it once, and that made it feel like everything I wanted was just made of fireworks. Buy em, then use em up and they're gone forever."

"You're the kid who walked around the parties on the Fourth with just a sparkler and a vague look of apprehension, aren't you?"

"That's my dim, dark past. Like three years ago. So. Essa."

"What about her."

"You haven't told you got fired."

"*Let go.* With compensation."

"Really?"

"Yeah. A good reference."

"Shit."

"Perfect timing, I say. Look at this: we've got a barn full of damn fine work. I'm just itching to get it up there and really open er up."

"Figure of speech."

"Sure."

"I guess it's okay, considering what we're working with."

"Two drunken slobs with girl troubles and pasts shut far away, embarking on short, flaming adventures in the heathen sky."

"I didn't hear you. I started getting indignant when you said *drunken* and stopped listening."

"Sometimes I want to shoot you with a rivet gun."

"We could have gotten this things to run on alcohol. Would have ended up cheaper in the long run."

"Nope."

"There's your economics schooling coming into play again. She's been teaching Kelly?"

"Yeah."

"What sorts of things?"

"She used to be a school teacher; did you know that?"

"Had no idea. Must have been a bitch to have."

"Hey now. That's the woman I love."

"No really: she's like the one that makes the whole class learn that poem about Paul Revere and won't let anybody out the door to recess until he's finished everything on his lunch tray."

"Actually . . . no. Nevermind. I think she just talks to Kelly, actually."

"What; coherently?"

"I guess so."

"That must get boring after a while."

"It's just about time for me to go get her."

"You going to tell her?"

"She's mad enough about this."

"And waiting will make her less mad?"

"I can't believe we've gotten this far."

"Anger? Flames? Makeup melting; heat pouring off of face."

"What was it Yeats thought. Every two thousand years?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Some literature thing, right?"

"Right."

"Damn you and your . . . damn you."

"Right. I think it was two thousand years. He thought the world died and was reborn, or something like that. That history repeats itself in a sort of spiral."

"I think he missed."

"I think he had his sights set a bit too wide. This is all we've got. Now."

"While you're consumed with zeal, may I have your wife?"

"Take her. But you've got to go pick her up."

"You don't want that. Hey, she'll say. What are you doing here? Where's my hunk of a husband? There will be a gleam in her

eye, inextinguishable. I'll be forced to tell her that you are licking your wounds at home, trying to flash fry your insecurities with liquid fuel. She'll be forced to settle with the best and let me have my way with her right there."

"I won't pay, you know."

"I can handle that."

"Bet you can."

"Hey, man. Just joking."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"I know. You just got quiet."

"I do that from time to time."

"Losing that optimism?"

"I'll catch you after dinner."

"Yeah, all right."

Essa

The first real pay check I ever got was from a Starbucks in Renton. For two weeks, I burned my fingers, smelled like milk, and flirted with the addicts. Then, on a Friday that I had woken up on convinced that it would be a good day to quit and just lie in bed in someone else's shirt, I found the envelope with my name on it in the file behind the counter. I ripped it open, stuffed the tags with the tax information in the millimeter pocket of my black jeans, and saw numbers of my own. Five little numbers that I told everyone from then on were my lucky numbers. Six five one one nine. Even though they lost every time in Vegas on our honeymoon.

I spent most of that check on music and makeup. I remember that night, painting myself up like a whore and putting on the clothes that I had convinced my parents to buy for me as a joke gift. Filling up a playlist with *Mineral* MP3s and dancing in the

proscenium arch of my mirror. The hairs on my bare arms and legs stood up and pulled away from me, tugging my skin in all directions, promising me that, if I let them escape, they would find whatever made me feel the closest to contentment, and there I would coalesce.

It was damn cold that night, after I crawled out of my window. A couple of my friends said I looked hot; a couple others kept their mouths shut. I wasn't a new woman. They knew I'd still kick them in the teeth if they pissed me off or made me cry.

What made me so different at home that I had to stay in my room made me painted background at the party. I felt like an extra on a movie set, and took to asking some of the potheads when we were getting our ten bucks for the day, just to see their reaction. One guy pulled ten bucks out of a black leather wallet and started to lead me to a back room. That was pretty funny.

Now that I think about it, he looked a bit like Lane; people say *right around the eyes* but I think what they mean by that is the way that person's face makes it to you through his eyes. It's the way something extra shows through his pupils, some line of code that tells your brain to *remember this*.

He was a pseudo-geek. Thought he had a lot to say about computers, but it all came out of his brother's old issues of *2600*. He had a chin that sank when it moved, a mouth that must have forced its own birth, and skin the shade of mine under ultra violet. Years afterward, I kept imagining I saw him in movies. I'd ask my friends, Where have I seen that actor before? And they'd all say, Oh

he starred in Such and Such, and I'd say, No that's not it. Absolutely certain that, even though I didn't know the answer, I knew that wasn't it.

So, damn it, I can understand. I could understand. If he was a teenager, I could understand. But he's not. He's a former sailing captain who has abandoned his post to play with toy boats in the bathtub. He's a lapsed Catholic putting on robes and asking me if I have any sins to confess in our bed. Fuck him, the bastard.

He was born in Los Angeles. I was born in Issaquah, a little south of the good stuff in Washington state. He told me it's because my first friend was a mountain that I miss the people. I told him that he didn't understand me because he never had a daddy. It takes a little away from me to not be able to call him names in hate. I try, but hit with accuracy instead.

I spent all of this first pay check on food that we could store for a while; enough for the winter, for when our crop of potatoes runs out. He was pretty quiet on the drive back up from town. A cow wandered out onto the road at one point and he didn't even honk the horn. He just shifted his hand to six, brought the truck down a couple gears, and waited while the beast tried to turn us into food with her dumb forgettable eyes. She gave up and moseyed off the road in the same direction she had come from.

Then when we get home, he helped me with the bags, taking the frozen stuff first so it wouldn't thaw any more. It was when we were on to the cans of soup and broth that he, arms

round from all that pounding, finally said what he had been waiting to.

"I lost my job."

I knew. I could see that the truck was using twice as much fuel as it should have been. I thought he was going to ask for a divorce.

"How did it happen?"

He stared at me with the look that tried to say, You know the answer so say it yourself. Up against my stubbornness, he dropped his gaze to his legs.

"I don't care," I said and went back to moving bags across the room.

A few minutes later, I was standing at the kitchen window, holding the green curtain back with the fist I had pressed into my forehead. The day was turning deep and blue. He couldn't just leave it. He was out there with Bernard, getting ready to burn the forest down. Make it all smoke and ash and bright orange and red. I could handle that.

Kelly

Essa said I could have his computer while he's gone. She laughed when she said it. As long as I get to push my fingers on the screen and make waves that look like the places the deer sleep, I said. Okay, she said and laughed more. He came in then and asked what was so funny.

"Essa says I can have your computer when you're gone," I said. He went red and I could see his heart pumping in his throat. He had to squeeze out his words in between beats.

"Oh . . . well . . . be careful" he said.

"Don't worry, honey," said Essa and he didn't have a chance. She was using her super powers on him, her green eyes on him, and the computer was mine.

"I've got some sensitive--" he started to say. Then Essa said, "I know," and he went from green to red.

"Your daddy wants you, Kelly," he said instead of anything she didn't want him to say. I took off before either of them could change her mind. I learned a long time ago that when daddy gives the answer you want, don't give him time to sigh. When Lane goes up, he has to give me his computer.

Dad was in the kitchen, making me a peanut butter sandwich. I ate inside the crust and asked,

"How long is Lane going to be gone?"

Daddy had his cheeks folded back to grin. It made,

"We figure forty miles or a little further," sound like a frog said it. I tried to tell him that I'd get Lane's computer but it didn't work. I thought the words, made the sounds in my head, but they didn't go anywhere. That must be writer's block that Essa talks about. Something in your brain, *clang clang*, a wood wedge in the middle. She said it gives her headaches. I must not have one.

I thought about how daddy listens to people, today. He blinks and opens his eyes when they say something he likes. When he spells *ice cream* out loud. He pulls on his jaw and makes his ears move when he wants her to shut up and let him go to bed. He leans forward when she wants him to shut up and go to bed, his eyes still wide and I think ready to listen.

I didn't notice it was really windy until daddy pointed at the window and said, Look at the trees. They were swaying all over the place like someone had stuck a finger into the middle of them just to make waves. I thought I had invented it.

It was okay, though. Daddy didn't listen to me when his eyes were wide and listening to the trees. And he had his hand on his jaw. I pulled on his pockets and started to hang from his belt when he said, Ow, honey, that hurts daddy. I asked him to make me another sandwich. The phone rang and he answered it right away. It was Essa, asking if it was okay for Lane to invite us over for a little party. He had to hold the phone a foot away from his ear. He said, Shoot, I was going to suggest it, and, I'll bring the beer. Right off the bat, he said that.

Poem, I'm glad that it's Lane going away. The first thing I can remember is from my third birthday, when they fired off the third one. She was there. She wasn't there in the couple pictures in the red album, but she was. She lights all the fires. It's how she makes things green. One time, daddy made me only watch PBS, and I saw a show about trees and forests and how mad frantic all the little firemen bugs were running back and forth across the screen in the black and the brown, outrunning the flames that looked green around the place where dad showed me what a magnet can do. The voice on the show was saying how some scientists say lots of things. About how to fix a fire and things like that. And how if you just let it go, it's a good thing except for the houses and the people and the animals that get in the way. And at the end I watched the credits because they were showing a mountain in our own valley and how green it is and it must have burned to the dirt just before I was born.

That's how she does it. She burns under the rockets and makes everything up. There's that ring around the spot where nothing grows, but that's because they spend so much time there. Like the barn. All full of just straw and splinters and nothing green at all.

Daddy brought me over to their house for dinner and put me to bed when they got out dessert. He walked me across the yard, picking me up onto his shoulders when I told him I was afraid of the thistles. He put me under the covers and kissed me on the forehead and I must have whispered because he bent down and said,

"Hmm?"

And I said,

"I'm glad you're my daddy." He was, too. He laughed his head straight up. I could see his shadow. It stretched out an arm and pulled the blanket up tighter around my neck.

"Go to sleep, smartie," he said.

She burns up and I never see the rockets again. They're gone to make it green. I told all of this to her in different words and she laughed more than I did. Maybe I needed a better word than *burn*. Maybe I needed to hold her hand so she'd know I was there when I opened my mouth.

He didn't even stay to watch me sleep.

Essa

I knocked on the door just to see the look on his face. The only light in the room came from his machine's monitor; he always looks better in those flesh drenched photons than in real day light. He clicked a few times, replacing the warm glow with the dull black of his wallpaper, before putting on a yawn and turning to me.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Getting late. I'm going to lock up. Just making sure you weren't planning on going out again tonight."

"Nope. Not tonight."

"Kay."

"You going to bed soon?"

"In a bit. I was going to talk to Perch if she's home."

"I'll be done here in a while."

"Take your time," I said, closing the door. He left it open so I wouldn't get suspicious. I could feel my lips curve into devil horns. The door made a heavy click; everything in this tired old house is connected to everything else. Close the oven and the toilet flushes; knock on the door and the smoke detector goes off -- or would if there were batteries in it. Lean too far back in your chair and the windows break. When I shut the door, the soft light behind it came on again.

It was just too cute.

I left the kitchen light on as I locked the front and back doors. I posed in the reflections, standing in the windows in nothing but my bath robe. I let it slip open so the sides of the V were balancing on my breasts. When I slid the chain across the front door, my nose inches from its mate, I caught my nail in the catch. It didn't break but hurt like hell. I pressed it tight into my palm to suffocate the ghosted pain.

Things were getting pretty cold outside. Windows don't keep much of that out; I felt a breeze passing through the molecules and hitting my cheek, passing through my cheek and out the other side.

First time I tried Perch's number it was busy. Second time, she answered laughing, fighting her own giggles to say, Hello.

"Hey, giggle butt. It's me."

"Essie!" I could hear other people in the background, shouting for ale and whores.

"Got a party going on?"

"Just the usual crew." I could almost make out a guy's voice rising. "That was Todd," Perch explained. "He says, Hi."

"Tell him he's a bastard." She did. There was familiar laughter and it hurt. They were having fun, talking about Derrida or Dorcas, pushing their brains over beer and party games of their own devising. "Bad time?" I asked her.

"No no, it's fine. Just let me escape here." The din faded to a susurraton, then to the isolated slam of a door. "So," she said. "Tell me about stuff."

"Not much to tell. Lane finally got his boat built."

"Is he still on that kick?"

"As zealous as ever. Thanks to his efforts, humanity will once again be afraid of bursting all their capillaries in the inky blackness of" I couldn't keep it up. I needed air and more words. Perch was laughing enough already, anyway.

"I thought he'd be over it by now," she said.

"Not a chance. Read anything good lately?" I asked, eager to change the subject. I was tired of thinking about my husband and his obsessions, even if they made hearts lighter from one end of the state to the other.

"Have I ever! Todd got me hooked on this fantasist that I think you'd really like. His name is--"

"Don't bother."

"Don't have time to read?"

"No. Well, sort of. I just don't have a brain for names."

She sniffed, then laughed. "That's right. The flash cards." She was thinking about our room mate days, when she'd come home late from a party and find me stopping up a bloody nose with tissues and bending over a desk full of white papers, names on one side and definitions on the other. She was thinking about whatever it was Todd had just said to make Ruth do her witch cackle so loudly.

I didn't want to be bitter. But now that bitterness was in sight, there was no avoiding some awkward flailing descent into its grasp. Either I would ignore it, so baldly obvious in the attempt that Perch would try to be comforting, or I would give in to it, *la dee da*.

I made plans to come and visit the next time I had a chance. I lied and said that Lane was thinking about coming back to the teaching business, so we might move back to the coast. She said that was wonderful news. I fidgeted with a pen and stabbed it into her beautiful baby blue eye because they were heading out to the Thump later that evening and she still had the tiny camisole and skirt combo I let her wear to our last homecoming as undergrads. She even had it dry cleaned.

As I was saying bye, Lane came out of his study. He had on his dirty flannel and jeans from the day. Copper shavings clung to his knees. He stopped with a hand on the catch and stared at me. I crossed my legs and felt a fresh stab of memory pain in my finger nail. I hung up the phone.

"Wear a coat," I said.

"It's not that cold," he said.

"It will be."

He went outside and the phone rang. It was Kelly.

"Hi, Essa. Can I have a drink of water?"

"Where's your dad? Can't he do it for you?"

Voices

"Can't sleep either, huh?"

"No fucking way. I read they made the astronauts stay awake seventy-two hours before launch."

"No. It took seventy-two hours to get the shuttle from the assembly building to the launch site. But they didn't have to be on it that whole time."

"Oh. I bow to your superior knowledge."

"It happens."

"Do you think we're rushing into this?"

"It's been three years."

"NASA took decades."

"God bless em, but they had committees. We're light. Nimble. Agile."

"Cold."

"Yeah. Here."

"Thanks."

"Neh."

"Did you ever finish anything this big?"

"We're not even getting out of the atmosphere."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Lost all my optimism. Figure that one out."

"Oh shucks. Guess you'd better let me go up, then."

"I'd rather send a monkey."

"How about Kelly?"

"Are you serious?"

"No. No, I'm just joking."

"Jesus. Yeah, to answer your question; I have finished things this big before. My dissertation was three years. There was a novel that I had published; I had been working on that for five years."

"That's right. I forget that you had another life, sometimes."

"Not me. But I don't regret it, you know. I got so sick of academics and pretension. The students were almost as bad as my colleagues. You're much better company."

"That . . . actually means a lot to me, man."

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

"Yeah."

"This is the biggest thing I've ever done. And I'm not even going up."

"Scissors beat rock. Get over it."

"Go soak your good natured head. Bastard."

"You know what? We've celebrated your birthday every year since you moved up here, and I don't actually know how old you are."

"Yeah, you do. I tell you every year, but you forget. I'm thirty years older than Kelly."

"You guys were thirty when she was born?"

"I was. Patty was forty."

"It's funny how those opposites come together."

"Forty isn't opposite thirty. I mean, I know you only taught composition, but--"

"I meant how I married Essa when she was eighteen, and I was forty-five. And now we just slot together, the guy who likes older women and the guy who likes em young."

"Except that it's two guys who are both thirty years or so older than their women."

"Speaking of the little oyster: what's that she's been writing in so much lately?"

"She calls it her poem. She won't let me read it, though. Says she's afraid of Aha! sneaking into it."

"Aha?"

"Alex Haley. In joke."

"I hope she grows up quick."

"She's a little survivor. I think even if I were to get mauled by a bear, you guys wouldn't even notice I was gone; the house

would stay clean, the chores would get done and, somehow, the groceries would get bought."

"That's why rock beats scissors."

"Say what? Are you getting all obtuse and poetic on me again?"

"Sorry. Be serious for a second, kid."

"What is it?"

"All I've got in the world is Essa. You've got Kell. If anything goes wrong tomorrow--"

"Oh. Not poetic; just maudlin."

"Could you please stop making fun of me? Tomorrow owns a lot of danger. We'd be stupid to ignore that. I'm not stupid."

"I'm sorry."

"I want you to know that it's best that I'm going up."

"I know."

"That doesn't mean I just want to *tell* you that; I want you to *know* that."

"Hey, it's not that big a deal. It's not like this will be our only chance. God, that's what we're gunning for anyway, isn't it? To make a thousand chances?"

"I feel as if we're running on a clock, that we're just going to get out there tomorrow and then our time will be up, that Yellowstone will blow or something and then there goes humanity. And because of the grand fucking stupidity of our leaders, who spent all their money on bombs and coliseums, we won't have any humans left."

"That's not going to happen."

"And Saint Helens will never go off again."

"Yeah, but Yellowstone?"

"You know that the caldera is just one big lake of magma."

"I didn't know that."

"It has been inflating steadily over the last century. The elevation has risen almost a meter since fifty years ago."

"Wow. You learn something depressing every day."

A light hits the cracked brown wall. It must be a UFO. The old coot further up the road who goes to the casino every Friday.

"Do you miss the city?"

"No. Essa still on your case about it?"

"Not really on my case. She doesn't let me forget it. By being silent, she gives me plenty of room to think. She hasn't smiled for about two weeks."

"Well, she's nearing her sexual peak--"

"Don't talk like that."

"Sorry."

"Please. That grin makes me want to punch your teeth in."

"Yeah, I know."

"Take care of her if anything happens?"

"She won't need it."

"We would take care of Kelly."

"I know. That's why I picked scissors."

Lane

I knew it; you knew it.

"All right, fuckaroo," he said. He had his arm around my wife.

No children but a legacy. I leave behind the Earth and her desperate whorish ways for the bright expanding hydrogen and oxygen, liquid and solid and gas, all pulling apart, all free.

We planned for chaos. Interrupted by a scream of metal. I leave behind the Earth, the dirt; it's on my fingers, yet.

And for this reason, the Good Book says, a young man will leave his mother and never look back. He will perch atop his plans, miles in the air, and watch as his future descends, black, through space, bleeding all its warmth into the void until there is nothing left for him.

She has been a growling bitch. Interrupted by a scream of metal. She was not for me. Keep her; keep all her history.

I don't scream fight breathe blink pant struggle fumble slip burn care.

Barnyard

Why does your stomach go cold. *I don't know.*

"Where did you meet him?"

"He taught my Bible as lit class."

"Great Christ on a cracker!"

Why did I ever like fireworks. Did I ever like fireworks. *I don't know.*

I was driving underneath and getting left in the dust. He didn't kick it up. It was just the wind biting past on its way into town, beating up the road. He was going to have a three hour wait, at least, if he got all the way to Chesaw. Such primitive land bound transportation. Leave it all in the dust, under the wind, in a hole.

What did we do wrong. *I don't know.*

I told you not to *no I can't pretend it wasn't my* told you not to kick the shit out of the *if it wasn't mine then whose* don't even go a

second breath without admitting *what am I going to tell her* watch the sky watch the stars watch the sky *watch the stars* a new one *he's so much older than you will ever be* dead is not an older *we made something of ourselves* I made something *an expanding ball of gas* up.

And then I came home. There was no one there. I went over to his house. Kelly usually comes out running when she hears Laddy give up, but she was hard into a book on Essa's lap. A battered old copy of *The Way Things Work*. She said, Hi, daddy. I meant to wave but nothing was getting across from my brain to spinal cord. Everything on automatic pilot. Essa looked up and she knew it. She lifted Kell off her lap. She said, Can you go get me a drink of water, and Kell said, I can and will.

Essa came over to me and said, What happened. I had to tell her I didn't know. She kissed me long enough to lose a lungful of air through his nose. I breathed it in and smelled thick something. She backed away and looked at me. Kelly brought her glass of water. We all drank from it.

The first time I saw him, he was frowning. It's the look he got when he was concentrating on anything. He was chopping wood and trying hard not to hit his leg. He missed the block and caught his foot. I always felt it was my fault because it was right then that I had called, Hello. Even though he must have heard the truck. I left Kell with the Essa she had never met and drove back into town with a bleeding professor in my passenger seat. He talked down to me, but I didn't really hold it against him, since I never

made it through my freshman year. He asked me what books I like and that was the start of the snowball.

I went outside when Kell's head fell over onto Essa's shoulder. It was a backdrop night. I couldn't move either of their faces in my head; they floated there and wouldn't sink or fly. There wasn't anything to do. I opened up the barn. We made a good start on the second capsule, in case something went wrong with the first one. I asked him if he had ever been skydiving. No, he said. It wouldn't be much fun to come back down.

The lights were all on in his house. Essa was standing by the kitchen window with the phone in her shoulder. She was washing the dishes. I stared at her. She had one thin braid sliding down the side of her face, just touching at the corner of her eye. It was the imperfection that drew my attention. I couldn't make out what she was saying, didn't know who she'd be calling. The police in Chesaw; the ambulance. For more light and screaming. Oiled metal hinges.

I got in the truck and drove off. Three hours plus pulling over the side. The wind was getting harder. Even more in the dust. I drove hard, imagining that it was my heart in the pistons, shattering over and over in the surging exploding never sleeping power. The trees bent the beams from my headlights around their branches. In the future, all our greens will be more vivid. And you won't be able to see it. Not with naked eyes, not without consumer surgery. Just an old kid from Virginia, nothing got back to me. I couldn't see.

It would have right if I had flipped and crushed my spine, severing my brain from body. Would never be able to put their faces further than the bridge between my thoughts. But it was nothing flashy. I just hit a drainage ditch and heard something scrape and tear out from the bottom of the truck. There was a flashlight in the glove box. I took it out and peered under the chassis. Nothing I couldn't fix in the barn. But not out here. I didn't know how long I had been driving. Long enough to take me all night to walk home.

I kept my eyes up the whole time, thinking maybe his light would echo back to me, and maybe this second time I could be happy. The second time it would be warm light, not incineratingly hot. But the god damned universe is unresponsive; you say, Hello, and you can wait forever for the sound to make it back to you. But if it does, it won't be in response. It will come up behind you, take you by surprise, tear the fucking ears right off your head. Didn't know you had it in you, did you.

We'll all be long dead by the time he makes it back. Not even mistress moon bothered to reply. She just sat there in the cold sky, pulling at the tides. My heartbeat slowed to the rhythm of my steps. I made it home in time for breakfast. No one was awake. I mustered a little enthusiasm, like before, and killed myself straight to sleep.

Kelly

I'll feed you more when he turns the light out for me. He does when he goes out.

They made me go to bed. Not just dad, like sometimes. Go to bed, Kell. No, it was both of them, one after the other. Because it was nine.

Nine died, too. I didn't look at him enough and now I really don't want to. I buried him out back. He didn't get a cross or nothing. I didn't want to have to look at it. I'll forget where I buried him. I even asked Essa to make the grass grow over him. She wouldn't do it. And she wouldn't teach me how. She just looked at me funny and told me to go to bed. Not then, but after.

I'm tired of going to bed. I don't get sleepy. My blankets get all hot when I lie still for too long so then when I really am ready to

go to sleep I'm too uncomfortable to do it. Then I need a drink of water.

Last night, I went into daddy's room to ask if it was all right. He wasn't there, but that's a so what. I called over to Essa's house to ask if it was all right. I let it ring fifteen times. And when she answered, she said, May I already be a winner, and dad laughed in the background.

He shouldn't turn off all the lights when he goes over. It's hard to find our place in the dark. There's the hill back near somewhere where Nine got buried and it looks black at night and our house looks invisible in front of it. I tripped over the porch last night and it got me with a splinter. Not one of the ones that sticks straight up and down that you can grab. Going to sleep didn't help that, either. Like they think it will.

What did I learn about today? She didn't take me to school, now. I learned that when you bend grass over it doesn't break. I learned that spiders can tell you're not a fly when you play with their webs. I learned that there is a pink moon. Dad left his music out. I didn't spend that much time outside. I sat real hard around the launch site and concentrated just on one little piece of dirt but it didn't even turn a little green. I let my eyes go crossed and tried not to blink until the colors in my eyes were jumping around and dancing and things started to disappear and I thought, This is what it feels like, but still nothing happened. So I went back inside to listen to daddy's music. He was with her.

They want me to go to sleep, always. Because I'm not supposed to cry when I get a sliver. That's a lie. I saw daddy crying. It made me stop.

He called me smartie. I hate that. I hate that he touches my hair when he says it. I hate that the blankets smell like heat and make me cough and it's all my fault. I could run away. I tried that once. I didn't get very far. It took the whole day. The house was invisible when we finally got back. I woke up just enough to pull my nose out of his flannel and see that I couldn't see it. That morning he started out calling me princess and ended up calling me sweetie. Oh he doesn't give a damn about me. I think I'd better go to sleep. Besides, I'm having to write smaller now. You're getting full, my pet poem, and I think it's just about time to put you away. Where every word means something, she said.

It's not that bad tonight. Kinda cold. And the blankets smell like it. I'm going to go to sleep, and sleep like I did when he carried me home. They can't tell me to fuck off when I already am.

Bernard

I never get the chance to just lie there and enjoy the morning. Some bastard was honking his horn. It wasn't one of the cracked, gargling horns that you get on all the old cars in the valley; it was one of the ones that you used to hear from school buses and, as it turned out, fire engines. The ones with the cord you can hang yourself on.

I went to the front door. Essa was in her robe, her nose in a mug of coffee. She didn't look up when I passed through and she smiled when I said, Good morning.

It wasn't one of the full-length fire engines, but it was sure red enough. A big man was standing next to the driver's side door, leaning in the window and tugging on the horn cord. As I got closer, I could smell the stale electric smell of the compressed air the horn used to make its noise.

"You wanna cut that out?" I said in between its breaths. The big man turned around. He had on a navy blue jacket that couldn't button across his chest if he tried. It had a badge on the left breast.

"You the owner?" he asked me. He had a voice that echoed over gruffness but never quite settled in, and I could tell he was trying to be quiet for some dumb reason. I bet he hadn't brushed his teeth yet.

"Sure."

"Had some reports a couple nights ago of fireworks. Did you launch fireworks?"

"No, sir."

"Which of these houses is yours?" He had parked on the drive in between Lane's and my lots. I had to point over the tall hood of the engine.

"That one."

"Can I speak to the other owner, please?" He was being as polite as I could expect, after being dragged forty miles from home on an unseasonably cold morning. Population eight hundred and I didn't know the fire chief. I thought about offering him a cup of coffee, but I wasn't completely sure that I wanted to know the fire chief. If he ever raised his voice.

"The owner is recently deceased," I said, though I struggled to find the word *deceased* and make my voice sound intellectual, professorial. "But his wife still lives there. She has a pot of coffee on."

I was turning to walk with him when Kelly came out the front door, stabbing a chunk of eye booger out of the corner of one eye. She had started down the porch steps before she saw me.

"Morning, princess," I said behind the back of Chief I-Don't-Know.

She looked up. "Mom's on the phone. I'm going back to bed."

Her voice was a little off. A little lower. Maybe she turned seven when I wasn't looking.

The Chief didn't notice that I wasn't following, so I just walked off to my front door. Kelly had left the door open. I closed it behind me, noticing as I did that she had forgotten to unlock it. Good thing she left it open for me; I didn't take my keys with me when I went to Essa's last night.

"Yeah, Patty. What do you want," I said as a greeting.

"Kelly told me," she said.

"What did Kelly told you."

"About your friend."

"It's past." She started to say quite a few things and never got more than a couple of syllables into any of them. I said, What do you want, again. She said, quiet like a stream,

"You get the check, yet?"

"Got it a while ago."

"You agreed to call me after. So we could talk about what to do."

"I wasn't going to."

"Good thing you've got our daughter around, then."

I paced back and forth in the kitchen, turning each word I wanted to say into a sharp heel on the peeling linoleum. She said, We'll talk more later. Then, so we wouldn't, I said we'd come and visit her next month. That made her kind of happy. Her lawyer said to show a good presence, because I still had all the papers with me. I kicked my foot against the cabinet they were stored in. I said, Talk to you later. I hung up and went to find Kelly.

She was on her hands and knees in her room, peering under her bed.

"Hey, Kell. What are you looking for?"

"A box to bury Nine in."

"Honey?" She did that yesterday, when Essa was sitting silent on her porch, still in her clothes from the night before, drinking a cup of cold coffee.

"Just kidding," Kelly said. She pulled out a dusty shoebox and sat back. She crossed her legs and placed the box at the point where her ankles intersected. Then she opened it. I leaned on the door to watch.

"What time is it?" she asked, fingering the pages of the few of my old *Asimov's* and *Analog* magazines she had uncovered so carefully.

"Two hairs past a freckle," I said, bringing my bare wrist up in front of my nose as though it had a watch on it.

"That's what you always say."

The magazines were yellowing and missing corners. She pushed the box off her legs and shoved it across the floor to my feet.

"You want these back?"

"I didn't even know they were gone."

"I snuck them."

"Did you call mom?"

She breathed in before grinning at me. "Yeah."

"Can burn em for all I care," I said, tapping a foot against the thin cardboard shell.

"Okay," she said. Maybe she turned eight. She stood up, dusted off her palms, bent over for the box, and marched out of the room. I stood there for a moment, staring at all the puffy cloud crayon drawings taped to her walls. The wind came up and rattled her cheap single pane window. I felt like everyone was leaving me in the dust. I stood there long enough to see my daughter heading toward the hill with a box of kitchen matches balanced on top of the shoebox of stories.

I went to join her, rushing because, really, I was afraid to let her play with the fire by herself. Stubbed my toe on the damn filing cabinet. The one with all the stuff Patty didn't want me to have. Some people have the right idea, cutting the past into stone or diamond or whatever. It makes a lot more sense to stick what has already happened on a big ass chunk of rock; things you can't change. Right then, it made a lot of sense to me to have the future written down on paper. And I got frustrated, sure, at the smart in

my toe. And at her for being such a bitch and not even lying about it. It's been a long time since I felt like the kid that killed Goliath, since I got down on paper the things she did at the office with other people's money. I don't understand a single black digit, but that's the thing about power that got me: didn't need to understand it to use it.

I was a stupid kid from backwater Virginia, screwing like jackrabbits every night with Patty because she'd come home not drunk but just a touch peppered and ready for it. But damn it, there was nothing big about any of it. She had Kelly and let me take care of all the changing and feeding. Seemed like a pretty even trade to me. I didn't even expect to eat those first couple years away from home. Always liked seafood, which is why I moved to Seattle. She would have let me get away with lobster every evening if I wanted. And then she'd go off to a meet and greet and I'd stand with Kelly in my arms, jumping her up and down and forgetting, only once in a while, to keep her head steady, and I'd stare at the space needle all lit up and dwarfed by the other scrapers.

Never figured on being anything big. Didn't get a degree; didn't go to college; didn't even graduate high school. Letting all the authors down, yeah, but didn't feel too bad about it. Not like Bradbury's going to come around after dark with a shotgun, or Asimov's going to rise out of his second grave to introduce me to *the boys*.

That's how I became a father. By not doing much. Kinda makes me want to hallelujah. I didn't fall in love until I brought

Lane back from the hospital and saw her sipping her coffee and heard her sarcasm bite out like a blade.

But but but me no buts, man. None of it was that big. Not like these half-bald hills and mountains in the distance. I gave up the gruesome life, after I'd learned a thing or two. Like where she kept all the stuff she used to blackmail her shark friends.

I yanked open the drawer. Damn near took my finger nail off, and it reminded me of how it damn near broke my back carrying that shit from the truck and back, however many times I had to move it. Just one more. I picked it all up, felt a paper cut crawl across my palm.

She got the fire lit on the first try. I never taught her how to make the log cabin that lets the air through, but she had it perfect anyway. A few twigs as a foundation and then a couple late nineties issues as starter. By the time I got there, the names of the authors were all but carbon. I set Patty's papers down.

She looked up at me.

"What time is it, daddy?"

"I dunno, princess," I said. She nodded and turned her eyes back to her creation. It was getting going pretty good. She fed it a couple more issues and then sat back on her grasshopper haunches. "Something happening later?" I asked.

"No. That's not it," she said. "Where's your pocket watch?"

"Um." I had always wanted a nice silver pocket watch, but never had the spare money to pick one up. I put a hand on her head

and felt a shiver slip across her body. She turned it into the toss of another magazine onto the pyre.

"I thought" she started to say. Then she shrugged and put her hands under her chin. "Pretty," she concluded, hunching her shoulders into the blossoming warmth.

It was as good a time as any. I stooped and shoveled the last of Seattle onto a spiky orange tongue. The fire bit down and it wasn't long before I was dodging huge chunks of white ash, buzzing with orange along their edges. I got this funny picture in my head of little people guiding those sparks straight at me, hurling invisible spears and screaming, Forget the Alamo! at the top of their lungs. Tops of lungs higher up than mine.

Kell threw the rest of my magazines on now that the flames were hungry enough. Then she put her hand in mine and said, without looking at me,

"Wanna read to me?"

I put my arm around her. She was burning up.

"Sure," I said.

We left it alight.

Essa

I played the grieving widow. He played the man who didn't have to take a huge morning piss. I offered him coffee.

Bernard

We curled up like beetles on the old green couch. She picked *Roots* and asked me to do the voices.

"What voices?" I asked.

"You know. Sydney's and Mister Dresser's and all those guys."

She smiled like smoke. I mean she smelled like smoke and smiled. I had no idea what she was talking about.

I was only a couple paragraphs in on Chicken George when Essa knocked on the door. I shuffled Kell off my lap, yelled, Come on in.

"Hey," Essa said. "Fire chief wants to talk to you."

"Where is he?"

"He's out there. Beating down your fire." She grinned.

"Thanks for the diversion. He was trying to be friendly. I hate that."

Ever seen somebody get distracted doing something important, like driving? I hate it when people listen to music in the car when I'm a passenger. Everyone I know likes to sing along. They get real into it, closing their eyes and just busting it out all over the windshield. As if that wasn't bad enough, when the album's over, they go digging for a new one. And I just want to reach up and grab their shoulder and yell at them to watch the road; I would if I wasn't sure that I'd be worse than the music.

So I didn't say anything to Essa about Lane. Not then.

The weather was coming up, sweeping black clouds overtop us. I pulled on a windbreaker and jammed my hands into my pockets. The fire chief was stamping on a few small flames that were tunneling around him through the dry grass.

"Can I help you?" I called.

"What the hell'd you think you were doing out here?" He was breathing hard. I came up next to him and stepped on a couple of tongues to show willing. It wasn't bad. I looked up at him. He breathed with his mouth open. I could see tar stains on his teeth. Poor wife.

"Getting rid of some trash," I said.

"Ain't you got a burn barrel, son?"

"No, sir."

"What about those'nth I saw behind the barn?" He pointed. I followed his finger slowly out and back, giving him time to notice the hazard stickers plastered all over the barrels in question. When I

got back to his eyes, they were still angry and no more intelligent than before.

"Sure. We can use those ones."

"Jesus! I'm going to have to take you into town, mister."

"What for?"

"For launching a big fucking rocket that could have burned the whole foretht down." When he got agitated, a lisp snuck into the corner of his mouth. Not married, then. This man would go home tonight and be satisfied with a beer and network television. He would fall asleep in his recliner and, during the night, would never go further than the bathroom.

"My best friend died in that rocket," I said, not quite sure what I was expecting from the chief. Mostly I think I just had never been able to say that before. Never even been able to say the first four words. The look on his face put me in mind of a pig trying to wrap its thoughts around theories of hydrodynamics. Of course my best friend died, his small black eyes said. You are amateurs. You can tell by the way you almost burned the goddamn forest down.

But he was a professional, my knuckles said. And he knew what he was doing, my left foot said. I am a man of my failures; I made him a memory of same, said my other foot. I felt his nose bone crunch back but thought at the moment it might have been only his skull sinking into the soil.

Essa, green eyes, stared at me from her porch. Violence doesn't solve anything. It's the wounds that do the work. If there

was some way we could get straight to the bruise without the interfering fist fight.

The chief was trying hard to gain his feet. Essa was walking with a measured pace. I spit at the chief's shoes. He mumbled something bloody and ran to his truck, hunched like a pregnant woman protecting her baby. Essa timed her hand on my arm to coincide with the state's door slamming shut. Soon after, the engine gunned and the truck spun out backwards.

Then I noticed Kelly, hiding in Essa's skirts.

"Get in the house, girl," I said.

"I am grown up, daddy. I grew up last night--"

"I said get in the house."

"No!" She knew right where to go for. Her tiny bullet fist caught me where it hurts a guy the most. I doubled over, grabbing for her wrists. I caught a good scratch across my cheek before I got her under control. I looked up at Essa, while Kelly struggled like a fish in my arms, and realized I had tears in my eyes. Everything was blurry; I couldn't see at which of us she was looking.

"Take her inside, would you?"

"Which house?" she asked, bending down to take Kelly out of my grip. When my hands were free, I wiped my eyes clear. Kell had her face buried in Essa's hair and fists knotted between Essa's breasts.

"Just put her to bed. God." Some of the blood on my hands was mine. Chief must have had a face chiseled out of obsidian.

Essa took Kelly inside, patting her on the back. I sat down hard next to the remains of our fire. Smoke follows beauty. I watched it coil around the house, tap on the windows, sneak down the chimney, and then blow away on the breeze.

Essa

He makes me laugh. He tries, but he swings his arms with such conviction it just proves he isn't in on the joke. That's not what's important, but it's kind of sweet.

I'm six months older than him. It shows.

I'm in on the joke, which is probably why I don't laugh. Heard it too many times. He tried with his fists, and then he brought over a bottle of something that smelled horrible. I joined him in it. He was trying to forget. Picked the wrong company.

It's obvious he doesn't understand and that he's just not cut out to be a father. I've got a list of observations that I could confront him with, watch the blush creep over his knuckles. Just a few friendly hints for home improvement, Bernie.

First step is to take the person and to put him into words. I've done that. Not here, but I've done it. I picked some good ones.

Step two is to forget the words. Not strike them from your vocabulary -- otherwise I wouldn't be able to say some damn fine words -- but to just gradually forget the order that you put them in. You know how quotes from your favorite movie fade, until it's the crowd yelling, We are all individuals, and then one guy going, I'm not, and your memory says that's the way it's always been but it's not right. Then, before you know it, you've watched another, better movie and the whole litany or list is up and gone.

He just doesn't get it. But that's enough words wasted.

We drank until about eleven last night. He kept trying to touch my hand. He has big power plant hands, always pumping out heat. It's so hard to get comfortable around him. I always feel like I want to open a window. About ten-thirty, I let his palm fall over my wrist. It seemed better than fighting. He looked so lost, so lost he looked unfamiliar. A smart guy; Lane wouldn't have fostered their friendship otherwise. Smart and easily cuckolded, if I can believe the stories. But I never really saw anything else in him. Good luck that's enough to build a life on.

He started to squeeze. I felt as though his fingers were branding me. Desperate pulses of such hot blood through such small capillaries. I let him talk about Lane for half an hour. He barely stopped to breathe. As he ran out of things to say, I realized I was crying. It happens; it even happens during shitty, manipulative movies. He finished up by saying, He made me learn a lot, which is no good way to end a life, unless the life in question was that of a teacher.

I led him by his hand into my bedroom. He wanted to burrow in the covers, but I wouldn't have been able to breathe. I laid him on his back, stilled his heart, and took him quietly. He was asleep almost before it was over.

The windows in the kitchen were like mirrors. I stood naked between two of them. They didn't make it to infinity. The dim light wasn't enough to reach that far, and most of it was spilled onto the lawn anyway.

I went back into my room to get my robe and watching him as he slept on his back, a snore just beginning to form in the corners of his breath, I had plenty of fodder for the next few minutes. It was cold outside, but not cold enough. I felt the air wicking away the last of his heat and starting into my own. I smiled and shook my head at him. What would Kelly say when she woke up and he wasn't there.

That's crazy. She wouldn't say anything. She's too observant to bother making comments. The girl creeps me out; more now than ever. She watches me, and she's absolutely certain I can make grass grow just by thinking it.

I shuddered. It felt like time to leave, right then, barefoot in the field, a couple hundred yards from the launch pad. The feeling would lessen between then and the morning, but, unlike most things I think of in the night, it would still be there.

I had never heard the wolves that Lane always insisted were out there. Occasionally, on evenings with the TV low, I could hear the stunted laughing of a coyote, and always the dogs from however

many miles down the road, but never a wolf. I stood there, taking root, just waiting for the long sad sound that my internal dramatist said should be the soundtrack of my life. I was getting tired, and awfully close to firing him.

It was time to leave. I wanted to hear a wolf snarl tangling through the trees, hear the strangled yelp of a fawn between its jaws. The fawn would be losing its dusting of white. The wolf would be silver, with a pair of eyes the shade of green you get from new shoots in a bed of ashes. There's the perfect world, the one that doesn't happen.

I got so sad that I didn't hear a baby deer's death rattle. Made me laugh, wiggle my toes and laugh. If I cried, it was my own damn fault.

Kelly

She was trying to hide. Black skin and black eyes and green fingers like tree branches. She was standing like a tree. Just two feet away from me. (A poem is not supposed to rhyme.) She didn't see me, but I watched her. I was scared she would feel my heart beating through my back, into the ground, and up her legs.

It started when she didn't bring them cider anymore. When she decided that it was more comfortable in front of the TV, even though they scream so much in there. When she started wearing shoes again. When I had to sit there in her place and hide my eyes because they were spitting lightning. When she stopped trying to be the green lady. I hate her. She taught me how to make words.

As I lay there, trying not to sleep, I heard her muttering. Nothing was words. After a few minutes, when my heart was nearly

still again, she turned and scraped away. I opened my eyes and didn't notice much of a difference. Just the stars.

I wondered, Why are they so important. Not why are they so important but why are they so important to see close up. Back here I guess they're beautiful. But in a book I read that up close they're terrifying. It's stupid to go chasing after them. I dreamed about the train and it going off a cliff and I was screaming, How stupid, at the engineer, but that didn't even feel like a baby of me ripping at the grass and wanting to throw it at dad.

I'm way further than they are. She wants to turn around and he wants to sleep and I want to move on. The constellations change when you move. So people in Africa are shooting at completely different stars. I got up and started walking toward the trees. A completely different sky. And a ceiling.

I had to walk slowly. There was nothing to see, so I closed my eyes. They were getting tired. One afternoon, a few months ago, I had come out here when Essa was done with me. I found the stream and started to follow it down. There was a falls I couldn't crawl down, so I stuck out both my arms straight and held one still and turned until they were together and then walked off after them. I was way out of the pictures, now. I knew even the little plants closer to home. I didn't give them names, but I knew which ones not to feed Nine. I found some of the same ones, but they had different shoots, leaves at different angles. There was devil's poison club which dad said would give me a rash. I had never had a rash

before. I picked it and rubbed it on my arms. My skin tingled and that was it.

I smelled like dirt, or I smelled dirt. Then the trees stopped. I took one step on thick moss and then another step on flat dust. It was still the hillside, just emptier. There were stumps in a few places, but mostly holes. Holes I could fit inside. I got on my hands and knees and peered down into one, hoping to surprise a family of foxes or a baby deer at least. Just more dirt. I like dirt, but it's better when there's water, too.

I made little explosions when I walked. There was a twisted stump crouching at the bump of a little hill. If it had been lifted up, it would have left a hole big enough for a truck to slip into. It was sideways instead of up and down. I saw a mouth and a fin and the way the grain waved made it look as if it was swimming.

Knots and crosses made good foot holds. There were splinters sticking everywhere out of my hands, but they only hurt if you ignore them, and they feel better if you press real hard.

I built a city out of clods and sticks. It was a port town, built high into the cliff side on a planet with muddy oceans. To get their supplies from the harbor, they would let down miles of green vines, twisted together until they turned brown. Then the ship masters could attach pallets of food and barrels of water and the people of the city would haul at the lines to bring it all into reach. The sailors never saw the people they were selling to. The ocean was more interesting than the city. I traced mudwhales and mudsharks and

mudmaids and had to take off my shoes and walk on tip toes so I wouldn't squish anyone.

While I was playing, it got cloudy, then it got dark. I couldn't see the forest, or where it ended. I ran in the only direction I could see, which was into the middle of the desert. And I didn't scream that much. I had my eyes closed, like last night, because it didn't matter if they were open or not. Then Essa told me to open them, and I did, and she was carrying me through green.

She said I had an allergic reaction to something and my hands were all swollen. I couldn't make a fist, but that just happens.

Last night, I didn't go near so far. I got to the stream -- its bubbling got louder with every step and I wondered when I'd find the loudest step or if it would just keep roaring on forever more urgent -- and I stopped there. I didn't turn around, I didn't look up. I put my fingers in the water and pretended my super power was clear. Then I remembered that all of that is silly, anyway. That she isn't a hero. That power doesn't make you a hero, whether it's green or bright orange. It makes you dead or it makes you scared or it makes you run out of things to say. She ran out of things to say. She was muttering. I doubt she could even understand herself.

I found my way back to the house and slept until dad came home.

Bernard

I swore I wouldn't lift another box again. Moving my life to Seattle was bad enough; it came across the country in two trips, though I only made one. Coming out here, I had to do it all in one, because there aren't a whole lot of airports in the area. The nearest one is down in Tonasket, and that one is just barely wide enough for a man wearing styrofoam wings. I threw my back out twice between Patty and here. Books in the box, box down the stairs, box in the truck, truck down the flat freeway, cheap highway, sandblasted path, and home. Home which is supposed to be the end. Well, the end kinda keeps going on for a while. Nothing written down the says the end has to stop. Revelation is that at the end of the world Jesus comes back and starts it all over again. Except this time everybody gets to stay happy, because if they don't,

Jesus is gonna bat them in the nose. There's the Bible stories I told my kid. No wonder she turned out weird as she did.

Home is where I took the boxes down again, threw my back number two, tripped on the lick of a porch step, and never dropped a thing.

Kept a lot of the things in the boxes they came in. Not because I was too lazy to unpack. Lazy for two whole years. You know when you keep an action figure in its original box its worth a lot more. So, in case anyone wants to buy my history, it's all there in boxes.

And now Essa says she's getting ready to move, which goes to show that plans are really better left unformed. She wants to go back to the big city, bright lights, short bridges. Too wide; she'll get lost. Too bright; two things are. Too short. Well. I could have kept it up.

The bruised rising clouds made it look as though bits of sky were on fire. I was chopping wood because Essa said she'd have to start packing, and I said we'd still be here a few more days. I asked her, probably erring on the side of angry, what she expected us to drive out of here. The truck was still in the ditch and miles away. If she had asked me to push it back here, I would have, and that's why I came out to chop wood.

Kelly came outside to help me, to pick up the splinters of bark that would go bulleting off to either side when the maul came down wrong. She scuttled in the dirt while my arms were raised

over my head, and was gone when the axe came down. She didn't say anything, so I did.

"Yesterday, kid."

"Don't worry about it, dad. I saw what you did."

"Daddy lost his temper." Crash went the axe, and, sneaking under it as though it was a drawbridge, scuttle went my daughter.

"When are we moving," she asked. It was like a cough in the middle of a death scene.

"It won't be for a while. I have to get Laddy out of the ditch. Um. How did you hear about that?"

"You told me."

I set the maul down carefully; couldn't cut my toes off -- it's far too dull -- but I could squash them to crap and back.

"No I didn't, honey."

"Yes you did. Yes you did. You made it very very. On the teevee."

She was crouched on her toes, leaning forward, scuffed jean knees not quite adding to the balance. She had arranged the slivers of bark in front of her to form a three point semi-circle. She had angled smaller twigs beneath the circle, aiming toward her.

"What's that?" I asked, shouldering the maul again and feeling the weighted bruise where the head rested on my shoulder. And not just that.

"It's the sun, dad," she said. Then, with her head falling over to the right, "Why are we leaving?"

Down off the shoulder again. "Honey. We can't stay here."

"Why not?"

"Don't you miss Lane?"

"No. I don't. Does Essa"

I caught myself right on the edge of laughing. She was so simple. She didn't know how to lie. All the books I read to her, and she didn't have one pulse of someone else's thought fluttering in her brain. She looked up at me with green eyes. I know children change their colors as they grow up. But weren't they brown. A bunch of things that don't matter. I put my hand against my forehead, finding it uncomfortably sweaty, to shade out the sun just as it slipped behind a column of smokey cloud.

"She does," I said.

"Then why doesn't she stay here?"

"Because she misses Lane, sweetie."

"She's moving to the city."

I didn't know how long she'd had to make sense of the whole thing, but the city must have felt like a fairy land to her. She was too young to remember much when we moved out here. I bet she mainly remembers the car ride; she was yelling her head off at me for most of the time because Patty had promised to take her to the zoo that day. Or maybe kids don't remember what they yell through.

"It's going to be very nice there," I said. "Essa has lots of friends." And they all love children. "There are a million things to do." Reduced rates for kids eight and under. "We could even try to

get an apartment near the forests." Hell, we could get the landscapers to come by and flash grow a new forest just for you.

"She misses the city," said Kelly.

"Yeah, she does," I said. She stared at me until I did something else. I lifted the maul and let it drop, using its own splintering weight to carry the head through the soft tamarack fiber. Twice more, each time I was afraid that Kelly would dart out at the wrong time and I'd catch her neck. It wouldn't cut; it'd crush. I turned to tell her to go play somewhere safer, but she was gone.

I had gotten through most of a cord before Essa came out to check on me and to bring me a glass of water.

"You know what your daughter just told me?" she asked as I drank. I shook my head, spilling a few drops around the corners. "She said that now she's going to live on the moon."

I smiled my thin smile and handed the glass back to her.

"I read to her too much," I said.

"Yeah. I called her a lunatic. She got it."

"Really?"

"Yup." She was smoothing the glass between her palms. She bit her lower lip, on purpose at first, then she swore and dabbed it with a finger.

"She's a smart one. I've done a pretty god job if I say so myself."

"You don't need to," said Essa, lowering her hand. "Listen, Bern. I appreciate helping me move and all that, but you guys don't

have to move back to the city. It's dark and messy and the only shared dream you'll find is for stimulants in the morning."

"Yeah, I know. I lived there too, remember?"

"So why do you want to go back? It's not like this place. This is peaceful, a retreat from the world every day, and that never gets old."

I shouldered the axe, wincing as a sort of plugging my ears against my collarbone's protest, and started for the barn to put it away. Essa followed.

"Besides," she said, no less hesitant but a good deal quieter. "Doesn't Patty still live there?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It'll be bad. It'll be horrible. I'll keep running into her at art shows and dream theaters. Only the more expensive ones, of course. The ones where they put whisky in the champagne."

"I'm trying to help, Bern. You love it here. Kelly loves it here."

"She wants to live on the moon."

"So do you." She didn't do much else. Neither did I. "I don't want you to come."

"Well, it's not like we'd be living in your house," I said. I was a little hurt, as from a needle digging at a splinter. Except that simile loses cohesion when you think about who is the needle, who is the splinter, and who is digging. That's three parts for a two part harmony.

"Sit. Stay," she said with a smile.

"Essa," I said, as though to a small child. "I don't want to live here anymore. It's too much to wake up in the morning and have this dry, brown thing sitting in my face." The barn. I was listing toward its wall. It was the smallest excuse, but the most coherent.

And she nodded, and she smiled with her head still down, and she went away to pack. I left the maul against what was left of prototype two. So I wasn't going to haul any more boxes, but it's not as though I remembered that until just now.

Essa

I'm so proud to be an American. Here freedom starts the stampede for everything, a huge expanding field of hearts and hair pushing outward but never dissipating. If you're at the center, if you're sheltered, there is nothing left unconsumed. The stars, if they could see us, would think us just another ambitious nebula. But we are far too small, and far too dim, and much too far away.

I can't even get a good jab in on Bernie. He's done all the work for me. You'd think he would grow out of himself, with everything that has happened.

I just can't help thinking that some night in the city, he'll come stumbling into my living room. He'll be drunk and smell of it. Greg or Joan will be over, and we'll be talking about everything in that bright blood buzz that settles on you when you want never to stop talking. And Bernie won't recognize the dissonance in the air.

He won't recognize good bye, or laughter, or, You fucking killed your friend.

I just know it's going to happen and, short of lighting a fire under his bed, there's not much I can do about it.

That's all I was thinking as I started packing up, making little figures out of spoons and Blistex, and acting out the grand tragedy. Oops, little Bernie got his head twisted off, and now there's this clearish paste bulging from his neck. Don't grow out of things like this.

I put the Blistex in my pocket. I had a few small piles obscuring the kitchen table before I remembered all our moving boxes were folded up and stuffed in the crawlspace. Cardboard works well as insulation, and saves money for liquid oxygen which, when ignited, keeps you pretty warm too.

I had forgotten how hot it was above the ceiling. Even during the snowless winter that we moved here, it was toasty up under the rafters. There hung all our conversations, all our sweat and my little panting breaths, all of it caught and held from heaven. Much longer here and the house would lift off like a hot air balloon.

I fussed about up there, careful not to step on the yellow clouds of insulation for fear of the million invisible splinters I would gain. I wiped my forehead with both wrists, alternating to keep the level of grime consistent. When I slithered down the ladder, I could feel drops of brown sweat clinging to my cheeks and the plain summer air hit me like a whisky buzz. My shirt was filthy. I took it off and went out on the porch.

It felt light to be naked outside. I let a breeze hit my belly without shriveling my skin. The tiny hairs tagging my ribcage went from invisible to gold dust.

Kelly

I looked up poem in the dictionary.

Essa

I was watching my hands leave trails of goosebumps and trying to decide if my hands were warmer than my skin or was it the other way around. When I looked up, Kelly was staring at me from her bedroom window. I waved. She stuck her tongue out at me.

Kelly

It's not that simple. It takes so many nanoseconds from the thought to the motion. Too many and dad will laugh and say, Time's up. Too few and you're blurting out the first thing that comes to mind.

Nine.

Boston.

Wake.

She waved at me without thinking about it. She had big nipples. There is a picture of me in my baby book of mom curled up in bed, reading a stack of papers. Dad's next to her, reading something he forgot. I'm in her lap, with my fists bunched up and into her skin, sucking at her milk. She is laughing. Dad is trying to ignore the man behind the camera.

I was getting grease on the window from my nose and my eyes. I licked it off.

Essa

I sat down in my rocking chair, clutching at my breasts. Those blubber globes weren't doing what they were designed to do: keep me warm.

I can stay with Anyone for a while, I thought. Just long enough to get a place of my own.

Kelly was still staring at me. It was starting to creep me out, same as mannequins and life sized cardboard cutouts do. When I looked away, there was still this half-pint presence putting weight on my senses. It felt as though she was coming closer, ghostly through the yard to me. I snapped my head up to fix her back in place.

Kelly

Her legs were in the sun. A shadow for the rest. I heard a scream; it was dad's purple toe scream. She moved her black arm to her eyes, which was stupid. She turned back when dad didn't say anything more.

Then there was this sound like a giant eggbeater. Essa used her other arm. I stared so hard she disappeared and I made her put her arm down.

Then she fought and put up her hand with the wrong L shape. Supposed to use your pointer finger and your thumb. She was just pointing up.

Essa

It's every day you see a thing like this. I wanted to go home so badly, to find a little normalcy. The piercings and brandings, the late night brandy war rooms, the rain. I would miss being able to walk outside naked, but, hell, I wouldn't really.

I felt caught between two pincers in a way I had never felt caught when Lane was around. Kelly with her demanding need to be, if not a woman, then a man. Bernard with a similar sort of thing. Sometimes I think, I ought to leave a lot of this for him to read when I am gone. You have to do some things so that you can move on. You can't just selectively ignore the opportunities to fail; you have to fall into them with the full, misguided intent to succeed and then eat your pie alone. And then go home.

I had never thought of Lane as my protector, before. Now he wasn't.

Kelly's head was still Mona Lisa fixed on me. I couldn't tell if her eyes were open or not.

I realized I had been listening to the low metallic purr of a car for quite some time. And now it was overshadowed by the less penetrating chink of pebbles on fenders as an old green and white sedan turned into the mouth of our shared driveway. It was the sheriff. I pushed myself up with the railing and went inside before the man behind the wheel got a good eyeful.

It took me ten minutes to find the packing tape I had set out in the open. By that time, someone was pounding on my door.

Kelly

I went outside to take a walk. A man who didn't fit the landscape kept saying, Little girl, little girl, but I didn't listen to him. I went barefoot to the green. Even in the middle of the hottest day in the world, the grass is still soft and cool; it was thick and shaded and there was dew trapped in the roots.

A little girl said, We can pay for you to go to school.

A little girl said, You may wear whatever you like. You may wear nothing.

A little boy said, This car is for me and no other. This car is for me and no other. This car is mine.

I said, This car doesn't need to hear its name so often and fine you can have it it smells of you anyway.

It's hard to remember a dream, completely. I would try to write it down, but it went hazy and -- now I know -- poetic, and I

knew that while I write along straight lines, it wanted to be told round a globe or something worse.

We were driving to somewhere from right here. There were red walls. The red walls may have been where we were going. On a train to reach an arm stretch out. Daddy was invisible. Black invisible, like Essa. Coal. He drove from the back. I'm tired of writing in straight lines. The letters look so tired. Just like that guy in the big black hat I saw so many times on TV. He had a strap around his chin that wouldn't keep his hat on but he didn't seem to mind. He was slouching, and a guy with a big grin kept saying, The great British empire, over and over again.

I needed dirt to my ankles, dirt in my fingers. Roots snapped like strands of hair as I dug and twirled. I got paper cuts from green blades. Dandelions bled their white insides. I closed my eyes, not to sleep. The sun burned orange in the corner of my eyes. I turned my head away. Dancing blue faced molecules with eyebrows floating over their heads. Take off the eyebrows and they can't look angry. Scribbling over them makes it worse.

Every piece of me was moving angry.

Bernard

"Now, son. It ain't that big a deal. You can drive self down, if it'll make you feel better."

I was sitting on the couch and, since there were no other chairs in the room, the sheriff was sitting next to me. He was pressing himself deep into the corner, twisted around so he could tell himself he looked me square in the eye. He came pretty close.

"He assaulted me first, sheriff."

"Well, he also filed charges first." I didn't respond. He started letting his gaze rove around my living room. I could see his distaste for undusted corners, hanging rafters, dark wood, slapdash molding, bare light bulbs. He didn't make any effort to mask the expressions on his face. No weight at the corner of his mouth to keep the smiles down, or fish hook muscles to keep a grin in place. His eyes settled on my face and I could see he didn't believe me,

about any of it. Not that I was just rearranging the hay bales in my barn. Not that the chief had threatened Essa with a lawsuit. Not that I had built this house with my own two hands. Not that Kelly was my daughter.

Seems like a lot to lie about in just twenty minutes. But lies are easy enough to tell and don't come back on you if your audience is lazy. Sheriff Tomkins looked like he just wanted to get me back to town so he could make his poker game on time.

"Let me talk to my wife for a few minutes?"

"Sure thing, podnur." He didn't believe that, either.

I knocked three times, waited, then three times more. I tried the handle; it was locked and cold. I turned to the sheriff and shrugged. He shrugged back, along with,

"Ain't you got a key?"

I cupped my hands against wood of the door and yelled into them, Make sure Kelly's all right, and, I'll be back.

"Maybe she's takin a quick nap. Oh, no, you can sit up front here." I had pulled open one of the rear prisoner doors. "Seems awful funny, you all being up here without a vehicle. You got a farm down in that valley there?"

It was starting to be fun. "Sure do. Work it myself, along with my daughter's help where she can."

"Well good," said Sheriff Tomkins. The radio came on when he twisted the ignition. The reception was pretty bad this far out from the towers. Through a half haze of static, Nick Drake sang about things he knows, and the sheriff sang along.

Essa

I pulled back the curtain from my bedroom window same as skin from a paper cut. The tail lights jittered between the grids of ash trees lining the stream track. Then they were gone. It would cost a couple hundred bucks extra to get the moving truck up here. But Laddy was in the ditch, anyway, so what difference.

On my back, in my bed, under covers, I turned the world around. Closing my eyes, I imagined the room given a shake and rotated until my floor was the ceiling. I opened my eyes, delighted in the vertigo. Something I do a lot when I'm bored. Nothing could keep me all the way to Earth. I was being sucked up against the thin sheet rock, the cloudy insulation, the knotted roof above.

Lane had been ready to give it all up. Burdens, cares, and me, to make him light enough for fuel efficiency. What it must feel like to be weightless. Worried that your next step will be too hard,

and there you'll go beyond the reach of gravity, and sink above the folding waves of radiation.

Greg answered on the second try. He knew someone with a stolen U-Haul.

Kelly

I measured it. It took a hundred and thirty-eight steps to get to the green from our warped front porch. The barn is half way. I walked back to the barn and it took me almost two hundred steps. The sun was down and I was walking slowly but my legs are still as long. I've decided home is running away from me.

I pushed hard on the barn door but it has always been too heavy for me. So I did what I always do: I climbed. Plenty of places for my feet on the cracked surface of the old wood. The second story hay loft has a wide window for feeding cows or throwing paper airplanes. I pulled myself up into it. I thought about hiding here, but it would be the first place she looked. I could throw things at her. There was a shovel up there with me. But she'd know where I was.

I climbed down the ladder on the inside. There was hay everywhere, just like after a big wind, when daddy and Lane would run out with the tarps from our roofs and cover the rockets, weighting the corners with heavy rocks. There was a big space where the first rocket had been. The second rocket was only half finished. It didn't have fins or a nose. It was just a middle unattached, a tube.

It was warm inside and still. I picked a few pieces of straw from where they had stuck in the cracks under rivets. My feet fit all the way inside. It smelled of metal, like lightning. I fell asleep.

I dreamed -- no I didn't I'm making this up -- that Nine had his teeth in my ear and he didn't care. He didn't care about my blood or about me saying, 'That's enough now, Nine. He said he didn't like the taste or someone else did. We were on the moon, chasing stones. He told me which ones to go for and he said some of the same jokes as Lane always did, but not with the same voice, and not at all funny.

Later, he was off my ear, he hopped for the first time. He went as high as my head, laughing. He said, Look what I can do. I tried staring at him. I tried the turning him green. But I didn't even have Essa's super powers in my dream. Look what I can do, he laughed and bounced. But I felt like a slug. I had to bend over to walk. I had to put all four feet on the ground. I howled.

Essa

I was chatting with Simone when Bern wasted his one phone call. I really wanted to ignore the drill bit beeping that signaled the other line, but I couldn't. It was ruining a great story, anyway, so I apologized to Simone and switched over.

"Hey. It's me. Is Kelly all right?"

"I don't know. I haven't checked on her yet."

"Essie," he started to whine.

"You shut up, Bernard," I said. "Now it's justifiable for me to say that I have had enough of you. I've had enough of your clumsy attempts to bed me, and of your successes, and of your clammy hand comforts. I've had enough of your hope and of your overuse of the word." I screwed up royally getting my words out. I stuttered, I flinched, and everything I had ever prepared kind of

dribbled out the corner of my mouth. I was suddenly sick and disgusted at myself.

"Lane knew," he said.

"Lane knew a lot of things," I said.

"Lane knew a lot," he agreed for no reason. "Will you check on Kelly for me?"

"No. I mean yes." I didn't mean to say, No.

"Drop her off in town on your way home?"

There was something in his voice that made me wonder why we ever called capitulation *being cowed*; cows murmur and hum with the workings of their organs. Bern was putting me in mind of Laurence Olivier's eyes. Back then, they may have been emotive, but now they're dead, lifeless, but still sickly warm.

"Going home," he said.

"What's prison like?" I countered.

"It's" he went completely silent. I just about switched back to Simone. "Different," he finished.

"Yeah, well, I've got someone on the other line."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I'll bring her by."

"Thanks, Essa."

Everything else was unnecessary.

I wrapped things up with Simone, ending with a, See you tomorrow.

It was fully dark outside and starting to cloud up.

Kelly wasn't in her bed, or even in her house.

I had to slice open a box to dig out my flash light.

The launch site was ghostly, picked out in my small circle of white.

The barn, still darker than the sky, was empty. I shined up through the slats of the hay loft.

The stream chattered so I had to yell louder than I wanted. I almost missed the deer's gurgling and fearful reply. And the call of the hunt. I thought for a moment I had stepped into the stream. My calves went colder than old bone.

I ran.

Her bed was still empty.

I lost one of my shoes on their stupid front porch and went back for it so fast I broke a nail. Night beat on me without a dream. I yelled.

Damn it girl, *I'll tan your hide.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Donnell Arbuckle was born in Omak, Washington, USA. His father once built a cabin, in the woods, out of plywood and unsplit rounds. The cabin is still standing today, and is older than Ian. Ian was educated at Whitworth College; the cabin was not.

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