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Editor's Note

After a long hiatus, I'm excited to bring back BPQ. You might not know this: back in the dark ages of the Internet, BPQ was born as one of the earliest online-only magazines focused exclusively on literary work. It published erratically from 1994 to 2006, until I had kids and a full-time job and way too many things to juggle well.

But it's time we do more good things. With digital readers going mainstream, commercial publishing focusing ever more on celebrity and readymade bestsellers, and more writers than ever publishing online, I'll argue there's room for one small electronic journal to sidle up to the bar, order a bourbon, and tell a really great story.

I wrote in the first issue of BPQ that I'd chosen the name for the magazine after an experiment I'd wanted to try – painting a hundred pennies blue, scattering them around the small city I called home, and seeing where they turned up again. That tradition remains: BPQ is free, and free to distribute, and I encourage you to email it to everyone you know who might enjoy it.

And join us, won't you? Whether you're a reader or a writer, we'd like to stay in touch. You can subscribe for free via the website, find us on Facebook, and follow us on Twitter. Let us know what you think of the issue, and consider letting us read some of your work, too.

– Doug.
Although Madeline had qualms about traveling to India, a place where brides were burned, poverty was rampant, and corruption ruled, where the water was undrinkable and the food suspect, Bob wanted her to go with him, so she agreed. He had built a partnership with Indian engineers involving water desalination, and so Madeline saw it as an opportunity to get away with him and relax a bit. After all, she wasn’t working at the moment, and they were practically newlyweds; two weeks would be a long time to be apart. Maybe too she’d be distracted from the thoughts of cutting herself that had lately resurfaced after years of lying dormant.

The trip was unbearable — three flights, thirty hours — but she grabbed some sleep in the Frankfurt airport, her head on Bob’s lap, legs pulled up fetally, while he stroked her hair and read his notes. When they finally arrived in Goa, she was drunk with fatigue, her joints kinked and stiff, and a spike of pain stabbed behind one eye. Bob’s thick hair was mussed, and whiskers peppered his chin, but he still managed to look as if he’d slept soundly. He hit the tarmac at a brisk walk, and she struggled to keep up as they zigzagged around families pushing luggage carts.
burdened by towers of enormous suitcases. The humid air made her feel as if she were breathing through a mask.

Their driver, a young man named Bhanu, beefy and handsome except for a dead front tooth, held a sign aloft with Bob’s last name, WARREN, and tossed their bags into the back of a small van. Madeline had braced herself for the assault of poverty and, once they began driving, she saw beggars lying on curbs, mothers breast-feeding babies, and cows eating garbage thrown in the street.

Bob questioned Bhanu about his childhood, his family, his politics, while Madeline concentrated on not getting carsick as she drifted in and out of sleep in the hot, stuffy vehicle. The air freshener hanging from the mirror coated the air with a gardenia scent that stuck in the back of her throat. Bob wasn’t suffering any obvious signs of jet lag. He was jazzed, voluble, as if this were a home to which he was returning. She envied his ability to adapt so quickly to his surroundings.

Leaving behind the city of Panjim and the sea coast with its hotels and crowded beaches, they headed into the country, on roads lined with cashew trees and tall grasses. Bob had rolled up his sleeves and the open window blew his hair into an unruly bush. Bhanu dropped them off at the lush, quiet resort where Bob had rented a bungalow. Bougainvillea and palm trees lined the paths of stucco bungalows with clay-tiled roofs, shaded by red-flowered vines.

As Bob unlocked the front door, he pointed to the pool. “See? You can swim and take walks and amuse yourself while I’m off working.”

“Yes, it’s beautiful, but right now, I have to lie down.” She took off her sandals and stretched out on the hard bed for a nap.

“You can’t sleep now,” Bob said. “You’ll never get on the time zone. You have to resist it,” he said, attaching the adapter plug to his laptop cord. They were going to the house of his hostess, Saraswati, for dinner with a group of engineers.

“I have to get some sleep,” Madeline said.

“Have some tea, and you’ll be okay.”

“No, Bob. Tea won’t do it. I need to sleep.”

“Okay. Suit yourself,” he said, returning to his computer as Madeline bit back tears.

“Is it absolutely necessary that I go tonight? No one knows me. I won’t be missed.”

“I want you to be there. And I told them you’d be coming. It would be rude.”

“You could say I’m sick.”

“I’m not doing that. I’m tired too, but I can’t just bag out. This is my work. But take a nap if you have to.”

As soon as she lay down, Bob started to unpack his bag, loudly shuffling the hangers on which he put his shirts and pants. So she got up, lugged her bag onto the bed, and
unzipped it. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, and a tension knot was forming at the back of her neck. As soon as she hung up a few outfits, she took her book into the living room, her head throbbing.

Maybe if she took a walk, she could shake off her lethargy, but five steps outside the bungalow, the afternoon sun bore down so fiercely that she hurried back inside. Her sleeves stuck to her skin, so she pushed them up, pressing the white silvered scars on her arms, which faded, then reappeared. Grabbing her book, she sat by the living room window, nodding off a she tried to read. By then, Bob was happily pecking away at his laptop at the dining room table, wearing shorts and a tee-shirt, his hair damp and combed back, his glasses replaced by contacts.

Madeline was nervous about making conversation with people she didn’t know, particularly when she was exhausted. She was tired of explaining that her job in advertising had ended through no fault of her own. It just made her sound defensive.

At the airport, Bob had bought a bottle of Feni, a local cashew liqueur, to take to Saraswati and her husband, but Madeline was afraid it might not be what the locals drank, like bringing Minute Maid to Floridians.

She undressed and stepped into the shower, hoping to wash away the layers of grime, but the smells from the trip stayed in her nose — urine and feces, incense, car exhaust, body odor. After a minute, the hot water petered out.

The scars on her arms and legs had turned violet under the cold water, like invisible ink appearing on white paper to reveal the message of her secret distress. But no, she told herself, she was done with that.

At 6:30, she ironed her dress, a long black jumper, and dropped the dress over her head, smoothing the front.

“You should cover up more. Sleeveless isn’t appropriate. Don’t you have a blouse you can wear with that?”

“But I’ll be so hot.”

“Indian women wear layers and they’re fine. Cotton breathes.”

She yanked off her dress and grabbed a blouse and buttoned it up, her hands shaking, the fabric clinging to her damp arms. When she dropped the dress over her head again, she asked, “Okay?”

He took her sleeve and tugged it a bit, as if to make it longer. “Yes, you look very nice.”

“Do you want to check my arms? Is that what this is all about?”

“Of course not. Come on. Let’s have a nice evening. You look great, sleeves or no sleeves.”

“Yeah, right.” Her watch said 6:50. “Shouldn’t we get going? We don’t want to keep Bhanu waiting.”

“He’ll wait for us. He’s probably not even there yet. Indian time.” He placed his palms in a simmer-down motion. “You’ve gotta slow down here. What’s your hurry? You’ve got nothing to do.”
“Thanks, Bob. I needed that reminder.”

“Oh, come on. This’ll be fun. Remember, don’t eat any salad and don’t eat with your left hand.”

“I know, I know. You already told me. Don’t worry; I won’t embarrass you.”

The sun had dropped in the sky, and the air was starting to cool off. They walked up the path toward the large hand-painted sign for the resort, announcing itself in both English and Hindi. After a couple of minutes, the resort van barreled around the corner and screeched to a half. Bhanu hopped out, smiling. “Hello, Mr. Bob. Mum.”

“Please call me Madeline.”

Bob touched her arm and shook his head.

They buckled themselves into their seats and Bhanu accelerated, sending the van bouncing over the dirt road, weaving in and out of lines of cars and around the cows that ambled along, unfazed by the traffic. Madeline was frightened to look straight ahead at what was hurtling toward them, so she focused on the side of the road, the men talking and smoking out front of low huts, the women sweeping the dirt with brooms made of palm fronds, barefoot children scrambling after a soccer ball. At intervals, mixed among the huts, vacation homes for rich Indians and Europeans emerged from welters of weeds.

Bob smiled at Madeline and said, “I’m sure you’ll get a second wind. That’s how it works with me.”

Bhanu pulled up in front of a tall house of dark wood beams connected by white-washed stucco. They rang the bell, and Saraswati, a short, heavy woman with thick black hair, wearing a green tunic and pants, invited them in. She accepted the Feni with a formal nod, then disappeared into the kitchen. Had they arrived too early?

Inside, photos hung above eye level at a precarious angle which threatened to pitch them onto the heads of the people below. Saraswati introduced them to her husband, Vijay, also an engineer, a tall, handsome man with a full grey beard, and their shy, bespectacled teenage son, Samir, who lingered politely before retreating behind a curtain to his room. Vijay’s elderly parents were visiting, and after they tottered over to meet the Americans, Madeline offered to help with dinner.

“Oh, no. You are the guest. It has all been arranged,” Saraswati said. Behind a curtain, Madeline caught a glimpse of a young Indian woman in a sari and realized, of course, that as a middle-class family, they’d have a regular cook. Madeline was hungry. Bob had said that Saraswati would probably steer clear of dicey food, given that they were foreigners, but Madeline was worried anyway.

Bob launched into an animated conversation with Saraswati about their water treatment project. The older parents seemed to have been invited to take care of Madeline. The mother-in-law was a tiny woman in black slacks and a sleeveless embroidered white shirt. Irritated by Bob’s insistence that she cover up when it clearly wasn’t necessary, Madeline itched to roll up her sleeves. She stroked her stomach, trying to stifle its loud gurgle. Her legs were wobbly, and she longed to sit down, but everyone else was standing.

The other guests arrived nearly an hour later — Father John
Fernandes, a native Goan who was the local priest and teacher at the school, and an ex-pat German couple, Reiner and Anna, and their adopted Indian son, Niko. Reiner pigeonholed Vijay into a discussion of local politics, which Madeline couldn’t follow. Saraswati beckoned them to the table and placed Madeline at one corner and Bob down at the other end.

The food looked safe except for the salad, which she avoided. She took dollops of various curries — green, orange, brown — and a piece of puffy bread. Bob was enthusiastically involved in a talk about something called the BJP with Reiner, who had vulpine features and blond hair and managed to incorporate the snobbism of both Europe and Asia. “Actually, no one who doesn’t live in India can possibly understand Rushdie and how he is generally dismissed by Indians.” He never looked at or directed any talk to Madeline. His wife, Anna, was pretty except for a receding chin, a flaw which Madeline found somehow touching.

Madeline’s back hurt from sitting on a bench, and the meal dragged on with no sign of ending. To keep herself awake, she studied the photos hung on the dining room wall. Most of them featured stern, sepia-tinted ancestors interspersed with portraits of Saraswati’s children, Samir and an older girl.

“It’s time for dessert,” Saraswati said. “I have some bright yellow potatoes, sprinkled with fresh parsley.”

As he raised his sword again, the tip grazed her forearm, leaving a long scratch.

She declined, blushing, then closed her eyes for a moment and felt her head droop forward. It snapped up, and she took a deep breath to revive herself. When Bob glanced her way, she widened her eyes to signal that she wanted to leave. He acted as if he hadn’t seen her. She looked at her watch. It was nearly ten.

Her attention wandered to Niko, a boy of about six, with a gorgeous face, bottomless-pit black eyes and spiky hair. He was rolling tiny cars along the floors and striking them with a homemade wooden dagger as he jabbered to himself in German. Madeline ached to run her hand along the velvet skin of his arms, but she didn’t want to crowd him, so she smiled and nodded. He grabbed her hand and said, “Spiel mit mir,” clacked the truck with his sword, then pushed the soft pad of his hand into hers. She looked up to see the adults were consumed in conversations, so she leaned over and took a car and ran it around Niko’s truck. When her back kinked, she lowered herself to the floor. Niko clearly had a scenario in mind, so she pretended to understand and followed his lead. Every few feet, he’d clank his sword on the tiles, yell, “Halt!” and give her a menacing look.

Madeline reached over and touched his arm. “Be careful.” As he raised his sword again, the tip grazed her forearm, leaving a long scratch. “Ow!” She shook her head to caution him.

“Madeline?” Bob asked. The rest of the guests had stopped talking and were staring at her sitting on the floor.

“Niko wanted me to play.” Her voice came out tinny and forced, and she covered the stinging scratch with her hand.
Saraswati was frowning, and Bob gave her a disapproving stare. Her face flushed, and she lumbered to her feet and sat on the bench, biting her lip. What do you want from me? she wanted to ask. She pressed her fingernails into the meat of her palms to keep from crying.

“Excuse me. Where is your bathroom?” she asked Saraswati, who pointed down the hall. Madeline was relieved to find they had a European toilet instead of a hole in the floor and a bucket of water. She sat and laid her head on the cool porcelain sink to steady herself. When she was finished peeing, she rose shakily and splashed some water on her face. Looking at herself in the mirror, she rubbed some concealer over her eye bags and wished she didn’t have to face those people again. To stall a bit, she opened a drawer and found a comb, a cone of incense, and a double-edged razor. The welt on her arm itched to be deepened, to be more than a scratch — a clean cut. She took the blade out, turned it over in her hands, touched the edge to her arm, and then dropped it back into the drawer, her hands trembling.

When she returned to the table, no one seemed to have noted her absence. She wanted to shock them all by letting out a long, anguished scream, but instead, she sat, hands entwined firmly on the table in front of her, heart beating raggedly.

Finally, Bob tapped his watch and gave her a nod, and they thanked Saraswati and Vijay. “That was fun,” Bob said, as he placed his hand on the small of her back and steered her out the door. As soon as they were out of sight, she shoved his hand away. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“But don’t touch me,” she said through clenched teeth.

Bhanu was waiting for them out front so she couldn’t melt down in front of him. She pinched her arm as hard as she could, fantasizing that it was Bob she was pinching.

When they let themselves into the bungalow, she turned to him. “Don’t do that to me again.”

“What?”

“You know. When I was sitting on the floor with that boy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please.” A mosquito bit her and she slapped it. Blood met her hand. But part of her welcomed the sting, allowing all her pain to be localized into one sharp pinprick where she could find and savor it.

Madeline remembered how the x-acto knife would tickle the skin on her forearms before the thrilling pinch as it broke the surface, drops of blood pearling behind the blade like rubies. It had been year since her last cutting, and the scars were fainter now, but when she ran her hand down the inside of her arm, the edgy numbness made her shiver.

A few weeks after Bob and Madeline started sleeping together, he asked, “Why do you always keep the lights off?” She had moved to Chicago after college and was wary of finding someone who would accept her, damaged as she felt.

He pushed, and she pretended it was shyness, but she knew he didn’t believe her and might lose his patience and
leave her. So one night, when she burst into tears and he insisted knowing what was wrong, she unfolded her arms and held them out straight. White lines ran across her wrists like scratches on a table top. “They’ve faded,” she said. “I don’t do it anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Bob, don’t kid about this.”

He leaned over, cradling her arm in both of his, and ran his hand over the skin gently, barely touching it. “Those? I can barely see them. What happened?”

She confessed about the cutting. He listened. All he said was, “Promise you won’t hurt yourself again.” And he kissed the scars.

She decided that any man that sweet was worth hanging onto. So they were married, and she was fine, but after the loss of her job, the urge to cut returned. She confided to him that she was afraid of backsliding, and he gave her a pep talk, but then she noticed that he would run his hand along her arms, as if he were caressing them, but lingering a moment and stealing a peek. It was nothing overt, but she could tell he didn’t trust her.

Bob was scheduled to spend the bulk of each day in Goa with local engineers, leaving her alone at the bungalow. At night, he sat up going over his plans while she went to bed. So much for great vacation sex. He was less available than at home. Every morning after he left, she read one of the novels she’d brought until her eyes blurred. She tried watching TV, but the power was intermittent, and she could only stand to watch so my Bollywood music videos.

At ten o’clock each day, when the cleaning crew came to freshen up the bungalow, she would follow a path around the pool, through the gardens. At that time of the morning, the guests there for Ayurvedic training would be carrying their yoga mats back to their bungalows and a lone swimmer would be doing laps. She couldn’t muster the energy to go swimming or join a yoga class. So she read some more and waited for Bob to come back.

On the morning of the sixth day, Madeline lay in bed as Bob scurried around, dressing for a meeting. “What are you going to do today?” he asked, as he had every morning so far.

“I don’t know.” She was half asleep.

“You should go see some of the sights. Bhanu could take you. That’s his job.”

“Does it matter to you if I stay here or go out? You’ll be busy all day. I can amuse myself.”

“Oh, I know that.”

She hauled herself up. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know it’s not healthy for you to spend all your time alone. Frankly, that worries me.” He grabbed his briefcase. “But I can’t hold your hand all the time.”

“I never asked you to hold my hand.”

He shut his eyes and sighed.

“You know, if I really wanted to cut myself, I could do it
while you’re at work. Without your knowing. But I’m not doing it, okay?”

He stood for a moment, staring at her, then left. When she heard the door shut, she flopped back onto the pillow. But she couldn’t fall asleep, so she got up, uselessly flipped the switch for hot water, and climbed into a cold shower. Then she put on a dress and heated some water for tea. Her arms were covered with mosquito bites, and she clawed at them, leaving faint white trails of dry skin.

She walked up to the office to check her email. The receptionist was standing out front, talking to Bhanu, and it was clear from the tone of their voices and body language that they were flirting. The young woman ducked her head and smiled and readjusted her long, lavender scarf over her shoulder. She was young and voluptuous and she seemed to move on oiled joints. Bhanu was leaning against a wooden beam, smiling, not shy about his brown tooth, and Madeline wondered if they were a couple and if they had been promised to each other by their families.

"Hello, Mum," Bhanu said. She greeted them and asked the receptionist if she could use the computer for the Internet. The young woman tilted her head from side to side like a metronome. Yes or no? Madeline wasn’t sure. Did the woman even understand? Bhanu told her to go ahead, the computer was free, so Madeline walked into the dark office. As she sat behind the monitor waiting for the machine to boot up, her thighs stuck to the chair, and she fanned herself with a paperback. After waiting a full half-hour, she wrote, then lost, a letter to her friend, Christine. Frustrated, she logged off and trudged back to the bungalow.

She didn’t want to eat lunch alone in the dining room again but had not yet managed to introduce herself to the group of German and British visitors.

She swigged a bottle of water and opened a package of cookies. A coat of numbness surrounded her. Teetering on the brink of sleep, she couldn’t drop off, nor could she stay awake. Her book held no interest, and she found herself reading the same lines over and over.

After taking another shower, she plugged in the adaptor for her hair dryer, and sparks spurted from the outlet, zapping a shock up her hand. She dropped the dryer and flopped down on the bed, massaging her tingling fingers. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she pressed the palms of her hands against her wet cheeks. Then she stumbled over to Bob’s travel pouch and dug through it until she found some nail clippers, the kind with a tiny file on a screw. She swiveled the file out and ran the blade along her arm, pressing, waiting for the skin to give way. Just one cut. That’s all she’d allow herself. She held her breath and pressed.

“No!” She hurled the clippers across the room, stood up, and paced, kneading her upper arms. Riffling through the pile of brochures for activities at the resort, she found one for Ayurvedic massages.

A few minutes later, she arrived at the Ayurvedic doctor’s office. He took her blood pressure, and she paid him 500 rupees. Then two young women in saris arrived with twinkling nose jewelry, each with a jewel glued over the third eye. One
of them held a dented metal cup. They walked ahead of Madeline down the stairs, talking and laughing. Madeline wondered if they were making fun of her. They were young, beautiful, dark-skinned, their thick black hair oiled and braided to their waists. Squinting under the hot sun, Madeline watched the braids sway as she followed them across a path and up a stone staircase into a room with a wide-open window. A palm tree fanned the air outside. One of the women handed Madeline a folded piece of muslin with dangling strings and told her, in halting English, to put it on, but Madeline had no idea what to do with it. She had hoped for a gown — even the paper variety she wore at the gynecologist’s — but she stripped naked, glancing nervously at the window, and stood, flat-footed, shrugging as she fumbled with the cloth. The masseuse leaned over and tied it around Madeline like a string bikini bottom, then she put a step next to the table, which was hollowed out like a cutting board. Madeline climbed up and lay down in the curve of the wood, then sat up again, crossing her arms over her bare breasts. Calm down, she told herself.

The other woman, whom Madeline decided was the assistant, motioned for her to remove her wedding rings. She hesitated, then obeyed. The assistant lit a flame under a tin bowl and poured oil from the cup into the bowl and picked up a cheese-cloth-covered bundle of herbs.

“Your skin is bright,” said the assistant as she ran her hand along Madeline’s shin. She felt herself blush,
ashamed of her dry skin, the tracery of blue veins, her silvery scars.

The masseuse motioned to Madeline to lie down again, and she felt her vertebrae settle into the hard wood. Her belly sank, and her hip bones jutted upward.

“Is this the herbal massage?” Madeline asked. They nodded, again with the metronome head bobble, so Madeline wasn’t sure if they had understood her. As they stirred, they talked like women sharing confidences. Lifting the bundle of herbs from the oil, the masseuse pounded it against the soles of Madeline’s feet. She flinched. The masseuse ran her hand along Madeline’s arm to calm her. After dipping the bundle again, the woman briskly patted it along Madeline’s skin while the assistant massaged the oil into her legs. Four arms worked in concert, rubbing up and down. Eyes shut, Madeline pictured the blue of the Arabian Sea and the vibrant colors of Panjim and fantasized about smuggling home a blanket of marigolds.

Covered with oil, she slipped back and forth on the table. They rolled her onto her side and arranged her arms and legs, then continued to rub, dip, and pat. The breeze wafted in through the window, and her joints softened, her muscles loosened. She imagined a phantom lover, a four-handed dark god, juicing her up for a marathon of lovemaking. Only as an afterthought did she think of her husband.

A touch on her shoulder signaled the end of the massage. Madeline blinked, surprised to find herself in the massage room. The women helped her sit up. Shaky as a newborn, covered in an afterbirth of oil, she dangled her legs over the side of the table. The masseuse motioned for her to climb down, and she did, on wobbly legs. She peeled off the sodden muslin thong and handed it to the assistant, who threw it on the floor, then took clean towels to wipe her down, a goddess anointed with sacramental oils. Her skin was singing, her Western clothes — pants and a shirt — hung like limp sacks on her new body. The masseuse took a plate containing red powder and ran her finger through it, reaching into Madeline’s hair, tracing a straight line along her part. Madeline bowed, then left the women, floating down the stairs, back to their bungalow, where she fell into bed and slept deeply for two hours.

She awoke tingly with energy, pleased that she had done something healthy for herself instead of cutting. But she couldn’t tell Bob because she didn’t want to let on how close she had come to relapsing. To reward herself, she called Bhanu and asked him to drive her to Panjim. When he picked her up, he handed her a tourist’s guide to Portuguese churches and Hindu temples. “I can show you anything you want, Mum.”

“What I really want is to go shopping. Can you take me to some good clothing stores?”

He turned and smiled at her. “As you wish, Mum.”

She sat back in her seat and opened the window a crack, letting the breeze blow over her face.

When they reached the business district of Panjim, and traffic slowed to a crawl, Bhanu offered to wait for her, but she told him to go enjoy himself for a couple of hours, that she’d be fine. Pulling the car into a parking space, he pointed out a row of narrow store fronts with gaudy signs and black silhouettes of
curvy women.

Madeline wandered into a shop and tried on outfits, finally settling on a salwar kameez, a dark red tunic and pants with a blue scarf. Then she found earrings and a necklace of pounded silver. She stuffed her own pants and blouse into the bag, paid, and went to a restaurant. She ordered tea masala, then sat, watching the people and soaking up the street scenes. Scooters whizzed by, some driven by old women in saris, others with families of four perched on top. Madeline wondered how Bob would react to seeing her out in a strange city, able to get around without him. She finished the strong tea, her head spinning. Across the street, she spotted a sign for mehndi tattoos. Looking at her pale hands and scarred arms, she felt the sudden urge to cloak herself in a new skin, to try something different. Bob would hate it, would tell her she was foolish to sabotage her chances of getting a new job. But he wasn’t there, and she wasn’t thinking about a job at this moment.

Madeline entered the shop through a curtain of beads. On the walls hung embroidered cloth with embedded mirrors that sparkled. An acrid smell filled her nose and made her eyes water. She blinked to clear them. A woman approached. Dark brown tattoo swirls laced her fingers and joined in a whorl on the back of her hands. Her liquid black eyes were deeply lined in kohl, and she wore a dark green sari with silver trim. “May I help you, Mum?”

“I’m thinking of getting one of the temporary tattoos. For my hands?”

“Is this for a wedding?” she asked. A thick line of grey roots spliced her dyed hair, but her skin was smooth and unlined.

Madeline shook her head. The woman took Madeline’s arm, rotated it, and ran her hand over the silvery-white lines on the inside of her wrists. Madeline blushed. “My skin is very sensitive. I scar easily. Will there be a problem with the dye?”

“Nothing more than a slight irritation, and only when the mehndi is still on your hands. Have you decided which designs you want?”

Madeline flipped through books of photos and saw hands joined like wings, feet with heels together, toes pointed out. The twirling vines appealed to her, but maybe a mandala on the back of her hand would be interesting. “What’s this?” She pointed to some squiggles in one of the pictures that she knew was the kind of writing she had seen on signs around town.

“That’s a name, Alok, hidden in a design. For a bride. If the man can’t find his own name in the mehndi, then the woman will control the marriage.”

Madeline wondered if Bob’s name were too American to fit into the delicate pattern. Still, the idea of gaining some Looking at her pale hands and scarred arms, she felt the sudden urge to cloak herself in a new skin, to try something different.
control in her marriage appealed to her. She decided on a mandala in the center of her palm with a series of vines that looked like fresh thyme running up each finger and a scallop at the wrist with dots and squiggles, like lace gloves her great-great grandmother would have worn out in the sun.

“Can this be extended further?” She pointed to the wrist design in the picture, then traced a curvy line down the inside of her arm, over her scars.

The woman examined Madeline’s arm, and, head lowered, said, “Whatever you desire, Mum.”

“Okay. And can you put the name Bob in there also?”

When she paid and left the shop, her arms rigid at her sides, Bhanu was waiting for her by the car, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigarette. At first, he didn’t seem to register who she was. Then he smiled broadly and nodded approvingly. “Well, Mum, you certainly made good uses of your time in Panjim.”

“I hope I don’t look silly,” she said, settling into the back seat of the van. But she knew she looked wonderful.

Back at the bungalow, she found a note from Bob, written in caps: WHERE ARE YOU? I WAITED BUT DECIDED TO GO AHEAD TO THE RESTAURANT.

She hurried to the bathroom and rinsed the paste from her arms. The coffee-colored dye had set, and the tattoos contrasted beautifully with her fair skin, like sinuous snakes running up her arms, concealing her scars completely. Striking poses in the mirror, she danced around, weaving her hands like the bejeweled women in Bollywood music videos.

In the restaurant, Bob sat at a table, studying a sheaf of papers. She adjusted her tunic, threw the scarf over her shoulder, and floated toward him. When she stopped in front of him, she held her hands up, daring him to discern his name nestled inside the mandalas on her palms. He looked at her, puzzled, then asked, “Madeline, what have you done to yourself?” She smiled. “That’s not permanent, is it? Come on, Madeline. Tell me.”

She stood there, her head wobbling from side to side, yes no, yes no, enjoying her husband’s confusion.
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She’s at work on a novel-in-stories about the relationship between a woman and her adopted daughter.
unkle straightened the skirt and reassessed himself in the bedroom mirror. Damned respectable. When he was younger he had hated this nearly hairless body. He'd felt he should apologize for it in locker rooms, at swimming pools. But a scoop-neck top was another thing altogether, and in this context it was the jutting jaw and the broadish shoulders that fucked up the effect. Or maybe not — some guys went for that.

He remembered Sandy at work from years ago. She'd been a swimmer and had a back like a trucker. And yet Runkle could have told you where she was at any given moment of the office day. He'd followed her around like a retriever.

Lipstick. Apply, pucker, blot. He wouldn't bother with the eyeliner. Looked great, but was a bitch to get off. With Janet back in a couple of hours at most, he'd spend as much time getting the shit off his face as he would enjoying it. He wiped some lipstick from his front-right tooth. That pissed him off. That only happened to old women. He wasn't going to be one of those over-rouged old hags either. Better to go with less.

Janet had been waiting in the driveway when he pulled in. She gave him a hard stare for forgetting her Audi was in the shop and now she'd be late for
her hair appointment. “Don’t expect me to rush home,” she’d said. “I may do some shopping after.” Like she was punishing him.

In the two years Jack had been at college, the entire order of the house, the calculus of Runkle’s marriage, had changed. This threat of Janet’s not coming right home was a relic of those eighteen years of Jack. It used to mean she was leaving him, Runkle, to deal with the household, with anything that came up, with Jack — taking him where he needed to be, picking him up, taking the call from the disapproving headmaster. But for the last two years, he’d only had to deal with himself, Runkle, in a three bedroom in Oakton.

From the gym bag on the bed he took out a pendant necklace with the kind of clasp Janet was never able to manage. It wasn’t rocket science. The gold plate gently rode his collarbones to their meeting point, where the little heart rested. The wig was sandy blonde, and once he had it on he was all there. Not bad.

Jack had known every inch of this house, had spent too many days cooped up here with too little to do. Janet had said not to worry, that he was just a shy boy. So against all of Runkle’s best judgment, they left him to read his books, play his video games, while outside normal kids pedaled their bikes and threw a football.

Jack’s senior year at high school, they’d argued at the dinner table about gun control. Jack was writing a paper. Suddenly Jack outs with how as a nine-year-old he’d found Runkle’s .38 at the back of a high shelf in a bathroom closet. Jack described for him and Janet how he’d laid out the weapon and the box of ammo on their made bed until he’d gotten bored and put it away. All these years later. Janet cried. Runkle wanted to slug the kid. For the violation. For keeping his mouth shut all this time. For not keeping it shut longer.

But now it was different. The house was theirs again and Janet could stay away as long as she liked. He stayed out of her stuff and she stayed out of his. The shop in the basement was his stuff, and the gym bag stayed behind the bench saw until she was out and about and he felt like bringing out the gear.

Runkle took a couple of steps back from the mirror and turned his lower half so one stockinged knee bent gently in front of the other. He pushed inward on the outer edges of the padded cups beneath his top, hard enough to pucker the skin on his chest into something like cleavage.

“I’m up here, Mr. Runkle,” he said. Whenever he was in the gear, his voice sounded so different in his head. He plumped his lips suggestively.

The next moments were bent into a shape other than the one to which Runkle’s temporal life generally conformed. There was first the semi-familiar image of himself, the sultry blonde object of an unnamed observer’s desire: voluptuous and with a sexual generosity that increased in precise variance to that anonymous lust. The time Runkle spent in this transaction stood entirely outside the more mundane and yet complex hours of work and Janet. And since Jack’s moving away these divisions had become more clearly partitioned,
removing the capricious and unknown quantity that was his son. Work and Janet. Steady, predictable. And then the implied comparison of life with Jack. The tensing sensual pucker of Runkle’s cherry red lips turning into a thoughtful pursing, the outward sign of a desire to spend some energy resolving the question of Jack.

And then Jack himself, reflected framed in the bedroom doorway, absolutely incontrovertible and real.

“Holy shit, Dad.”

Runkle turned slowly from the mirror. Jack still had, at nineteen, many of the qualities Runkle remembered from those first months after they had brought him home. That scattered sprinkling of his and Janet’s respective physical traits — the peculiarly aggressive line of Runkle’s jaw, Janet’s expression of struggle to understand — like the one Jack wore now — that too closely resembled simpering worry. They were not the traits the two of them would have chosen to pass on, and because of that Jack had always felt a little like an outward betrayal of parts of themselves they’d just as soon have kept private. Conversely, from the day they’d brought Jack home from the hospital, he’d been like a stranger in their house, watching them.

“There he is,” Runkle said. “Bet you’re wondering what the old man’s up to this time.”

Jack looked him up and down, from wig to pumps. He looked to Runkle like he wanted to laugh, but held in the back of his mind the suspicion that to do so would be disastrous in some way he was not yet able to understand.

Runkle moved over toward him, precariously on his heels. He clapped Jack on the shoulder. “It’s a party, Jack, a silly gag for a work party.”

Jack pushed the hair back from his eyes.

“I’m leaving in a minute. What the hell brings you home, kid? Your mother didn’t say anything.”

Jack’s eyes stayed riveted on him. Runkle kicked off the heels and lumbered back to the dresser. The contact of his nylon-sheathed thighs, usually so delicious, made his face go cold.

“There’s a fraternity thing downtown tonight. I just stopped off to do some laundry, say hi to Mom.”

Runkle slipped into his Topsiders and pulled off his wig. In the mirror he looked like one of the sad old ladies at church.

“Sure, use us like a hotel,” he said with false cheer, “we don’t mind.”

He carried the pumps with the wig on top, like the remains of a melted witch, past Jack and into the upstairs hall.

“I didn’t think anyone was home. Where’s your car?”

“Your mother has it. Hers is in the shop.”

Runkle heard Jack’s silence behind him on the stairs.
When he turned he saw the pursed lips so like his own (without the lipstick) trying to resolve another question.

“So how exactly were you planning on getting to this party?”

Runkle framed a reply in the time it took him to draw a long deep breath and exhale it in a sigh that suggested he was exerting a great deal of patience in taking the time to answer such a question.

“I’m going to take a taxi, for God’s sake.”

Jack rocked on his heels, his hands in the pocket of his cargo pants. “That should give the cabbie a laugh.”

Runkle descended the rest of the stairs with dread collecting around him. There was no way Janet wouldn’t find out as soon as she got home. This thin invention of a party in mid-March would take him no farther than this initial encounter with Jack. Already it was falling away.

“You know what, Dad? I’ll take you. Let me give you a ride.” Jack had followed Runkle into the kitchen, where Runkle opened the refrigerator and removed the kalamata olives he liked to snack on. He considered Jack as he sucked the brine off his fingers.

The little shit was challenging him. He had Runkle at a disadvantage and he was using it to settle some score. Runkle didn’t know if it was something Jack was consciously aware of, or if he only felt it, felt where the pleasure and release lay in this situation.

“You’re ruining your lipstick, Dad.”

And Runkle just stared, his right thumb and forefinger in his mouth.

“You’ve got your fraternity thing. You’ve got stuff to do.”

“That’s not till nine. Where is it?”

“Ed Stimson’s.” An office name Jack wouldn’t recognize.

“It wouldn’t be any problem at all.”

“Haven’t even told you where he lives. You’re offering a ride and it could be in Maryland for all you know.”

“That’s just the kind of son I am.”

Runkle thought. And Jack watched him think.

“I didn’t say when the party was either.”

Jack reached into the refrigerator for some bottled water.

“You got ready early?”

Runkle shook his head. “I’ll just get your mother to—”

That wouldn’t work.

For another suspended moment Jack watched him. Runkle returned the lid to the olives, the olives to the refrigerator, each moment insuring the inevitability of the one at which Runkle squared his shoulders, nodded to his son and said, “Okay. Let’s roll.”

With Jack following, he took a light overcoat from the hall closet and proceeded through the front door to the flagstone walk.
He had escaped the indecisiveness of the early spring evening not half an hour ago, longing for the charged sensuality of his time with the gear. But now he was back out in it, and in his mind this scene anticipated the day he, Runkle, would be led from this house, out of his head, draped, old and escorted by Jack toward some reckoning of a hospital, old age home, or court of law.

Fortunately none of the neighbors was out and around as the climbed into Jack's Cherokee.

“How’s this thing running?”
“Okay, I guess.”
“You keeping an eye on the oil?”
Jack threw an arm across the back of Runkle’s seat and reversed into the cul-de-sac. “When I remember.”
“When you remember? It only takes one time running dry and you’re out a car.”

Jack had opened his window. The air was a weak effort at winter and an even weaker one at spring, as though the weather machine had run down. It filled Runkle with melancholy.

“So?” Jack said.
“So what?”
“So where does Ed Stimson live?”
Runkle drew a heavy breath. “Falls Church. Just take 66.” Runkle had no idea where Ed Stimson lived and hoped it wasn’t Falls Church.
Neither spoke until they waited at the Chain Bridge intersection.

“This is pretty crazy for you, Dad. I nearly had a heart attack when I walked in there.”

Runkle nodded abstractedly. “It’s Stimson and his whole crazy crew. Everything has to be outrageous, whether it’s his new oversight initiatives or this party, it’s all outrageous and ‘outside the box.’”

“Doesn’t sound like you like Ed Stimson very much.”

Runkle twisted strands from the wig around his finger. “I like him fine, I guess. What can I say? He’s the new golden boy. Hey, easy. Where’s the fire?”

“I’m going, like, 35.”

Runkle pulled his overcoat up to cover his stockinged knees. “Your mother called you on Tuesday. You never called her back.”

“I knew I’d be seeing her tonight.”

“Was she supposed to know that?”

Jack looked away from the road for a moment. Runkle raised his head to challenge Jack to defy him in this ridiculous get-up.

“Take a left on Lawton,” Runkle said, “it’s a couple of blocks up.”

Get him to let you out at the intersection, Runkle thought. Walk around Falls Church in a skirt until you can get a cab.

“You can just let me out at the light up here.”

Jack put on his turn signal. “It’s no problem.”

“Just let me off at the light. I’m not kidding, dammit.”

But Jack looked resolute. “You’re a tough guy to be nice to.”

Either of two things was happening here: Either Jack believed him and was trying to be a decent kid, or he was toying with Runkle and having a damn good time at it. Looking at the heels and wig in his lap Runkle had to wonder if he shouldn’t at least know his son well enough to apprehend which of the two it was.

“You said a couple of blocks. Which house?”

Runkle drew in a long breath and felt a knotting anxiety in his chest. To choose from one of the indistinct suburban homes — to choose which one would be the scene of the shaming to come — seemed too great a choice to be made lightly. But by what standard could he pick?

“That one: Second in from the corner on the right.”

Jack slowed the car. “Shouldn’t there be other cars? It doesn’t look very festive.”

“Son of a gun, I don’t know. I couldn’t have gotten the time wrong, could I?”
Jack answered with an abstracted shrug. “You going to go and check?”

Runkle looked at his son, hoping to make some sense of his intentions. His stare lit on the tiny gold hoop in the boy’s left ear. He checked his reflexive annoyance. Runkle kicked off the Topsiders and put on the heels. He found the handle of the door and slid down from his seat onto the curb in front of a home he’d never seen. He looked back once at Jack before teetering up the walk. It was nearly dark. Runkle saw a light turn on in the second floor of the house. Ahead of him, the flagstone walk turned abruptly around a bed of plantings. Had this slow approach told Jack everything he needed to know? Runkle felt that as soon as he turned the bend in the walk, his course was set. He would try to talk his way in. If whoever answered the door said yes, he would wave Jack on. He would tell him later that he’d had the time wrong, so he’d been the first to arrive. Maybe he could escape with some of the respect Jack had for him. Two parallel thoughts ran through his head: What if they didn’t let him in, looking like some drag queen and desperately pleading for sanctuary? What if they turned him away? And yet alongside those thoughts the idea of returning to Jack’s car, a forty-eight-year-old man dressed as a woman, a repudiation of everything he’d taught Jack to believe he stood for. To lay himself before his son in this way, to admit by example that even so simple a nature as his, Runkle’s, could not be encompassed by the slogans and imprecations he had raised the boy on.

He stopped short of the flower bed. He rushed unsteadily to the car, not yet having thought of what to say.

Jack lowered the passenger window. “So?” Runkle opened the door and took a deep breath to answer as he began to push himself up into the Cherokee. The sole under the pointed toe of his high-heeled shoe slipped against the flooring. His other heel hit the curb unevenly and he felt something barely flexible hit the absolute end of its give. He let out a shameful cry of pain and fell to the grass. Jack was over him almost instantly.

“Mother fucker,” Runkle bleated. “Mother fucker. Shit, fuck, piss.”

“Can you get up?” Jack said. He crouched down and supported Runkle as he tried to stand.

“Goddamned ankle,” Runkle said. Everything below his right knee effused pain.

From the house, someone was crossing the yard. An older man, maybe ten years Runkle’s senior. He’d set an assured course toward them.

“Maybe we should ask this guy for help,” Jack said.

“Just get me in the car, dammit. Just get me in the car.”

The man had reached the curb by the time Jack had helped Runkle into the car and closed the door. He couldn’t hear
what Jack said to him, but the man stepped back and nodded a hesitant assent.

“It’s your old man,” Runkle said once Jack was back in the car. Runkle signaled for him to pull away from the curb.

“What do you mean?”

“Go, go. Let’s move. I must be losing my mind. Ed Stimson moved more than a year ago.” He employed the barking snap he’d used to discipline Jack as a child, now turned on himself. “How could I be so fucking stupid?”

“Easy, Dad,” Jack said. He pulled into the street.

“Fucking amazing,” Runkle said.

Jack returned them to the intersection, looked at Runkle, and when he said nothing, turned back to where they came from.

They were back on 7 before Jack asked where it was that Ed Stimson lived now.

“Holy Jesus,” Runkle said, “I don’t know.”

Outside it was dark. The rush-hour traffic backed up the lights. They watched one two car-lengths ahead change from red to green to yellow and again while no one moved. Runkle wondered if the ankle was broken.

“You forgot he moved?” Jack said, breaking a long silence.

“It happens, Jack. You get older and it happens.”

The expression Jack answered this with was infuriatingly sympathetic. The same simpering smile with which Janet indulged him.


Jack silently moved them through the evening traffic. Runkle tried to distract himself from the fluorescent pain in his leg. He scratched his chin, where the whiskers were already growing out from the morning shave. He felt the cool pendant at the base of his throat and idly turned it with his fingers. He was suddenly aware of Jack watching him.

“You keep this car like a sty,” Runkle said. “Would it kill you to clean out the trash?”

“You’re right,” Jack said, “I should clean it out.”

“That’s a boy.” The traffic surged forward from a full stop. “That’s a boy.”

Runkle felt an uncomfortable binding in his crotch. There was a reason men didn’t wear pantyhose for long stretches of time.

“And while we’re on it, we might talk about your appearance.”

Jack turned to him quickly, a smile pulling at his lips.

“Nobody likes a wiseass, Jack. You come home to visit your mother looking like…” A small voice in Runkle’s head whispered, You’re getting colder. And certainly taking this line with Jack was nothing new. Even Jack looked only half interested, eyeing Runkle like he would the soap operas on the Spanish-language channel.

“When I was your age…” He let this second try die away.

“Where do I go, Dad?” Jack said as they approached the
toll road. “Do you remember where in Reston?”
Runkle didn’t respond, so Jack guided them to the exit. He
slowed for the toll booth, looked to Runkle who offered
his open hands to say he didn’t have any change. Jack
straightened his leg awkwardly to reach into his pocket.

The man in the booth looked across at Runkle’s skirted lap
and bulbous knees and gave a small snort of a laugh as Jack
pulled away.

When they were up to speed, Runkle said, “There is no
party, Jack.”

He thought maybe Jack had not heard. Runkle wondered
if he’d even spoken out loud. Jack pressed on, not taking his
eyes from the road.

“There isn’t —”

“We’re just a little ways from Reston. We’ll find it.”

“I have no idea where Ed Stimson lives. I made it up.
Take us home, Jack.”

Runkle’s ankle continued to throb with spongy pain.
Beneath the pantyhose it had swollen. And in the strobic
illumination of the toll road lights, it looked like a generous
kielbasa wrapped in plastic. He tried to move the leg and let
out an inadvertent whimper.

Jack did not respond.

At a high school graduation party Runkle had given a
toast to his son. He’d been a little lit, sure, but not so much
that he’d said anything stupid. But Runkle had forever
remembered Jack’s face, the absolute mortification it
expressed, the desire to be anywhere but in that family room
hearing his father’s maudlin reflections. At the time, Runkle
had wanted to clock the little shit, wanted to take back every
word.

He was staring at the same face now in profile. And from
this angle and in this light he considered what he hadn’t
considered those few years ago. It wasn’t an embarrassment
at what Runkle did that Jack felt. Not the childhood anecdote
or the skirt and the blouse. Rather it was an embarrassment
at finding himself, Jack, in such close proximity to his father
as he really was.

Jack took the next exit, crossed the overpass, and set them
back in the opposite direction. Nothing more than Runkle’s
shifting his weight in the seat brought his ankle alive with
pain again.

“Are you going to be all right?” Jack said.

Runkle answered with a brusque nod. He felt he would find
new ways to talk to Jack, but for now still only had the old
ones to use.

A few minutes later, when they were back on 66, Runkle
took the wig whose curls his fingers had been worrying over
since his fall, leaned himself forward into the shock of pain,
and put it on his crown. The motion distracted Jack, who
regained the road after weaving onto the shoulder. Runkle
lowered the visor flap to check himself in the mirror, raised
himself in the seat with as much poise as he could muster, and
let his son ferry him home.

Runkle could see the porch light he had not left on from
the bottom of the street.

Jack turned to him after he’d cut the ignition in the driveway.

“I’m going to need your help,” Runkle said. Jack bit a corner of his lip, then brought himself to with a firm nod, climbed from his seat and came around to the passenger’s side. Jack opened Runkle’s door, stooped down, and helped Runkle out of the heels and into the Topsiders.

“Jesus, it hurts, Jack.”

Jack helped him down onto the driveway. Runkle raised his head to see Janet look out the bedroom window. Jack drew Runkle’s arm over his shoulder. Runkle could feel the force Jack was exerting to support him. So this is what Jack used to face the world each day. Runkle hadn’t credited it with being so assured.

“It’s all right, Dad. We’re almost there.”

Runkle stumbled again on one of the flagstones and tasted the tang of pain. He had broken a sweat and felt the cold pendant necklace fall and drop against his chest as his stockinged feet slid in his Topsiders.

Janet was in the doorway now, framed by the light of the front hall. She had expected more surprise from her. She watched Jack help him up the walk.

When they reached the threshold, Runkle steadied himself in the doorway. He could smell the lilac in the last breathy warmth of the evening. Jack lowered him into a chair next to the door. When he started to move away, Runkle clasped his arm and held onto him. Janet knelt to examine the ankle, testing it with the tips of her fingers before she looked up at him. She made to speak, but Runkle gently put a finger to her lips. She pressed her eyes shut and lowered her forehead to his knee. Runkle brushed one of the wig’s errant curls from his face and said, “Daddy’s home.”
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Jeffery Archer Presents: New Wife
http://www.amazon.com/Jeffrey-Archer-Presents-Wife-ebook/dp/B004EPYWME
Girls invaded our school two months into sixth grade. We watched from the window of Mr. Harding’s second floor classroom as they marched off a bus, serpentining between parked cars toward the entrance of our school. When the last one passed out of sight, all the boys ran to the door, waiting to see what appeared at the top of the stairs.

“How long are they staying?” my best friend Dave asked. All we had been told was that they were from our sister school across town and that there had been some kind of water main leak. Most of us didn’t even know we had a sister school.

“I heard they’re going to be here a couple months,” my friend Max, the perennial exaggerator, said. “Maybe all year.”

“That’s okay with me,” Alan Oates said with a smirk. Alan was the classroom Casanova. He wore his blazer with the sleeves pushed to his elbows and his tie dangling loosely around his collar. Rumor was that he had made it to first base with a girl and got thrown out stretching it into a double, but most of us weren’t even sure what that meant.

by John Fried
“Boys!” Mr. Harding, our homeroom teacher, shouted. “Back to your seats, toute suite!” Mr. Harding was also the middle school language teacher, English teacher, and math teacher, a compact man who wore oversized corduroy blazers and had a long beard that made his mouth vanish when he wasn’t speaking.

We ran back to our seats, mine the last in the back row, a choice spot if you wanted to keep a low profile. Mr. Harding shuffled to the door, his topsiders slapping against the linoleum floor. From the hallway, we could hear a woman’s voice shouting out names, sending the girls to different rooms, including our own. When they appeared, Mr. Harding opened the door with a grand flourish, and said, “Bienvenue! Wilkomen! Benevenuto!” The girls filed in, gathering by the blackboard. Like us, they were in matching uniforms — white dress shirts and plaid jumpers — but they all looked very different from one another, some as tall as Mr. Harding while others were as small as lower school kids. The boys in my class all looked the same, small and childlike, our hair cut neatly close to our heads, our skin untouched by acne. It was hard to believe we shared anything in common with these girls.

Mr. Harding asked the girls to introduce themselves and they gave typical girls names. When they were done, he was about to say something when another girl came running into the room. Boys started to laugh, whispering to one other. This girl had bright red hair and a face full of freckles, but that wasn’t what had set them off. It was the wire mouth gear circling her face from ear to ear and strapped around her head like a catcher’s mask. I recognized it immediately. I had worn one last year every night while I slept. I hated the way it had dug into my mouth. Wearing it during the day seemed like torture. Everyone continued to laugh, even me.

“Silencio!!” Mr. Harding shouted. He turned back to the new girl and said, “Welcome, my dear. What’s your name?” She said, “Alice Jakantowitz.” Her name sounded as jumbled as the tangle of metal in her mouth.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Jakantowitz. Now boys,” he said, returning to us, “it’s your turn for introductions. And please offer these young ladies more than your name, rank, and serial number. An interesting fact about yourself perhaps.”

Daniel Ashford started, announcing that his cat’s name was Itchy. That set the trend. Peter Barson had a rabbit named Ruben. Alan Oates had a pair of guinea pigs named Peanut Butter and Jelly. Dave had a dog named Zipper. I didn’t have a pet.

“I’m Marty,” I said, when it was my turn. “Martin Kelso.” “What else, Martin?” Mr. Harding’s tone was impatient. “Why don’t you tell our guests something about our fine school?”

All I could think about was food. Lunch was less than an hour away. “Today’s lunch is meatloaf,” I said. Mr. Harding pressed me with his eyes. “This means tomorrow’s lunch will be hamburgers because no one eats the meatloaf. Which means the next day’s lunch will be sloppy joes because they have to finish the meat. They’re good. The sloppy joes.” I was rolling. “The next day it’ll be something different because
they can't do much with sloppy joes, although someone once said the chili dogs are just hot dogs with sloppy joe on them. Basically a hot dog with meatloaf on it” I paused. “Stay away from them. The chili dogs, I mean.”

The boys around me nodded their heads. The girls looked bewildered. “Fascinating,” Mr. Harding said, tugging on his beard. We finished introductions and then Mr. Harding said he would find places for the girls to sit. He looked around the room and pointed at the girl with the mouth gear. “Miss…” he said. “Miss…”

“Brace face,” I whispered to myself, but evidently it was loud enough for everyone to hear. I couldn't believe I had said it. I was just thinking about what I had been called when I first got braces, the way I had been teased for weeks until two other boys came in with braces and it became normal. When I said it, all the boys started to laugh again, even some of the girls.

“Mr. Kelso,” my teacher said. “Your first demerit. Que buona fortuna.”

Demerits were these bright yellow note cards teachers handed out when kids did something wrong. Max got them for talking in class. Alan Oates collected them for wearing his shirt untucked. Even Dave, who never got in trouble, got one once for picking his nose in the middle of class. They really didn’t mean anything unless you got three and then you had to get the demerit signed by your parents. I hadn’t gotten any so far this year. In fact, I had never gotten one. But the day the girls arrived, I got my first. I was convinced it was their fault.

I didn’t want to look at Brace Face and she clearly didn’t want to look at me, but as she walked to her seat, our eyes met. She didn’t look defeated or upset. Her expression was determined, almost fierce, as if she were prepared to attack. I turned away quickly and tried my best not to look at her again the whole class.

Girls were invading my life at home as well. My mom's sister Beth was visiting for a few days with her daughter Evie. Aunt Beth lived in upstate New York, but she was thinking about moving to the City and had pulled Evie out of school so they could look at apartments. They were sleeping in the guest room, which shared the bath off my room. I spent every trip to the bathroom holding the door closed with my foot.

When I walked into our apartment that afternoon, I found my mom and Aunt Beth in a smoky kitchen talking above the sound of the fire alarm. Evie was sitting at the kitchen table, turning pages of a magazine, as if nothing was going on around her.

“What's that smell?” I said.

“It's cassoulet,” my mom said, climbing on a chair to get to the alarm. Aunt Beth was stirring a large pot on the stove. “It's been cooking since this morning,” she said.

Ever since Uncle Karl died, Aunt Beth was always into something new. Two visits ago it was hair styling and when she left, my dad and I both had crooked haircuts. The last time she visited, it was palm reading. One evening she looked
at my hand and told me I needed to stay away from alcohol and drugs and that she saw a career in either watercoloring or gynecology.

The alarm finally stopped. “It’s French,” my mom added, battery in hand. I nodded and turned to leave.

“Marty,” my mom called. “You didn’t say hello to your cousin.”

I turned and looked at Evie, still focused on her magazine. For years our families had gone on vacation together every summer to Cape Cod. Evie and I had been inseparable. She was three years older than me and had ordered me around, but I didn’t mind. She taught me how to snorkel and catch tadpoles in the tidal pool. Every night we would play hide-and-seek or monopoly until bedtime. Once a week, we would make our parents order pizza. Evie told me that the proper way to eat pizza was to rip off the crust first, then dab it over the surface to collect the oil. I followed her dutifully.

After her dad died, we didn’t take the Cape trip again. We only saw them on visits or holidays. It didn’t matter because Evie seemed to have changed, growing sullen and quiet. I knew that his death had shaken her up, but it was also clear that she wanted nothing to do with me anymore. The difference in our age became insurmountable. It only confirmed my theory that girls were creatures from an alien planet. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” Evie said, her expression blank, as if she barely knew me.

The next day, the girls were back at school. It had rained all morning and the hooks where we normally hung our dark blue school ponchos were covered with red and yellow and pink raincoats, the floor beneath them lined with matching boots. Mr. Harding rearranged the classroom alphabetically, which meant I was in the second row, way too close to the action. Brace Face sat in front of me. I stared at the back of her head, the strap of the brace warping around her head. Her red hair, fiery in the fluorescent light, spilled over the back of the chair. I was about to reach out and touch it, when I realized Mr. Harding was calling my name.

“Attencion, Mr. Kelso?”

“Yeah?” I said. “I mean, yes?”

Mr. Harding walked over to my desk, his beard hanging over me. “Can you tell me what a homonym is?”

“A homo-what?” I said.

Several boys snickered. Mr. Harding cleared his throat. “A homonym.”

We had started a lesson about homonyms the day before the girls had gotten there, but I didn’t remember any of it. My stomach gurgled, still digesting what little of the cassoulet I had managed to get down. “I don’t know.”

“You may not know,” he said, with added emphasis, “but you just used one.”

“I did?”

“Does anyone know,” he said, pausing dramatically, “what homonym Mr. Kelso just used?” Again, silence. Brace Face’s hand shot up.
“Ms. Jakantowitz,” Mr. Harding said.

“Homonyms are words that sound the same, but are spelled different. I mean, differently. Know, K-N-O-W, and no, N-O.”

“Excellent,” he said.

“We did that last year,” she added and all the girls around her nodded. Dave looked over at me and crossed his eyes.

In the afternoon, we had music class with Mrs. Ablethorpe. Usually she had us listening to music from different cultures and marching around the room shaking tambourines and gourds, but with the girls visiting Mrs. Ablethorpe wanted us to sing. “It’ll be so nice to have the different pitches, the tonal variations,” she said, her hands folded in front of her with delight. She read our names, arranging us alphabetically in a tight semi-circle, shoulder to shoulder. “Alice Jakantowicz?” she called out.

“Coming,” Brace Face said, as she stuffed something into her book bag. When she stood up and took her place, I almost didn’t recognize her. She wasn’t wearing her mouth gear. Her face was immediately rounder, almost softer, as if the brace had been contorting it into odd shapes. I hadn’t noticed her eyes before, but now I couldn’t stop looking at them—a bright, translucent candy green. Mrs. Ablethorpe called my name and I went to stand next to her.

“Hey,” I said, but she ignored me.

We started out singing “De Colores,” a Mexican folk song we had butchered all through fourth grade. Today wasn’t much better. Alan Oates was on one side of me, booming out verse after verse, his voice as flat as the floor. It didn’t matter. I was listening to Brace Face. It wasn’t that her voice was so good, but rather that as she sang, I could not only hear her voice, but feel it resonating through our touching shoulders into my body. It was a little unnerving at first, this closeness with Brace Face, but after a few verses I started to enjoy it. I stopped singing just to feel her voice inside me. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. When the song ended and she stopped singing, I felt immediately empty, as if I had been given something wonderful and then had it abruptly taken away. Brace Face turned to me and said, “You’re not singing.”

“Yes, I am,” I said.

“No,” she said. “You’re moving your mouth, but nothing is coming out.”

I didn’t know what to say. “Shut up, Brace Face.”

Her hand shot up.


“Martin isn’t singing,” she said.

“Martin, is this true?” Mrs. Ablethorpe said, her expression grave.

“I’m singing,” I said.

Mrs. Ablethorpe raised an eyebrow. “I hope so.”

We started a new song, rounds of “The Erie Canal.” Again, I mouthed the words, letting the sound of Brace Face’s voice pour through me. I closed my eyes, losing myself in the sensation. Halfway through the song, I heard a cough in front
of me and when I opened my eyes, there was Mrs. Ablethorpe, still conducting with one hand and waving a yellow note card with the other. A demerit. Next to me, Brace Face scooted away. Even with the space between us, I could still feel the heat from her shoulder on mine.

That afternoon, Dave came over to my house to watch “Destroy All Monsters,” one of our favorite afternoon monster movies. In the movie, a band of alien moon women used mind-control to get the monsters to destroy major cities around the world. We had seen it dozens of times, but it never got old. Our favorite part was when the newscaster yelled, “Godzilla is now in New York City! The city is being invaded by Godzilla!” People ran through the streets, screaming in terror. We would say the line and stomp around the living room carrying old toy trucks and police cars I never played with anymore, bashing down pretend buildings like a pair of Godzillas invading our own city. Afterwards, we sat in my room running through monster fights we never got to see. Kumonga versus Rodan. Mothra versus Gigan. Finally I said, “Who would win in a battle between Godzilla and Brace Face?”

“She’d be toast,” Dave said. “He’d fry her with his atomic breath.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Brace Face might bite through him with her grill.”

I got up and pretended to be a crazed monster, marching through the room. “I have to take a leak,” I said, heading for the bathroom. As I opened the door, I saw my cousin Evie sitting on the toilet, bringing a wad of toilet paper from between her legs. Our eyes met, her expression as startled as mine. My gaze slipped to the shadowy space between her legs and she snapped her thighs together, covering herself with her hands. I stepped back into my room and shut the door.

Dave’s head snapped up. “That was fast.”

I didn’t move, my hand still on the doorknob. “I just saw my cousin on the toilet.”

Dave looked at me, awestruck. “Did you see anything?”

“I think I saw her fucking vagina.”

There was a pause as he considered this information and then he said, “You mean her bush? What’d it look like?”

I hadn’t really seen anything, just a flash of thigh, but I’d put it out there. “Like Mothra when it gets really angry.” Dave nodded, as if it all made sense.

At dinner that night, I avoided eye contact with Evie. Aunt Beth had made something called borscht, which looked like the blood of one of the monsters from the movie. She and my parents were talking about neighborhoods and school districts. Evie was pushing a potato through her soup, not eating any of it. Finally, Aunt Beth took a sip of her soup and said, “This needs pepper.” She looked at me. “Don’t you think, Marty? Pepper might give it a kick in the pants.”

I shrugged.

And then, out of nowhere, Evie said, “This tastes like shit.” It was true, but I couldn’t believe she said it.
“Evie!” Aunt Beth said. “Watch your language!”

“This is awful, Mom,” she said throwing down her spoon. Evie had suddenly sprung to life like a monster lying dormant for millions of years. I hadn’t been able to look at her all evening and now I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Her face turned red, her lips clenched in anger. “I don’t even know why you try,” she added.

“That’s enough,” Aunt Beth said. “If you can’t be civil, you can go to our room.”

Evie got up and marched out of the dining room. Aunt Beth looked at my mom and dad. “I’m sorry,” she said, getting up and walking to the kitchen. My mom and dad followed her and suddenly I was alone.

At school the next day, Mr. Harding spent the morning reviewing homonyms for a quiz, but I couldn’t get Evie’s explosion out of my head. I wondered if it was all because I had walked in on her in the bathroom. Part of me wanted to tell her that I hadn’t seen anything, but that would have meant talking to her and I wasn’t going to do that. At lunch, I sat with a bunch of my friends while the girls in our class clustered together at another table. It was sloppy joe day, the heavy smell of meat sauce all around us. I stared at Brace Face. She wasn’t wearing her mouth gear and seemed to smile more without it. Someone at my table dared Alan Oates to go sit with them. He pushed up his collar and walked to their table. I couldn’t hear what he said, but a few moments later all the girls cleared out. “They said they were done,” he told us. “Their loss.”

I watched the girls place their trays along the cleaning station and then hurry out the door. Alan started boasting about some girl he had met from another school who taught him how to French kiss. I got up and took my tray over to the cleaning station.

That’s when I saw it.

Nestled on a tray between a half-eaten sloppy joe and a crushed milk carton was Alice Jakantowicz’s retainer box. You couldn’t miss it, this round, bright blue container practically glowing in the pile of trash on her tray. In the cafeteria light, I could just make out the outline of the retainer sitting inside, like a creature resting in its cave. There was no one behind me, so I quickly grabbed the container and stuffed it into my jacket. Outside in the hallway, I jammed the box into my book bag just before Brace Face reappeared, running toward the cafeteria. She looked at me for a moment, her expression worried, and then darted inside.

It took no time for news about the missing retainer to make it around our grade. Max came into the library and found Dave and me doing our search assignment, trying to find a book on giraffes using the card catalogue. “Guys,” Max said, “Brace Face lost her grill.”

I tried to look surprised.

“She’s down at the dumpsters searching for it,” he added.

I thought about telling them. They were my best friends. Still, I decided against it. Max was incapable of keeping a secret and I wasn’t ready to tell Dave. Not yet. For some reason, I
didn’t want anyone to know. This was just between me and Brace Face.

Back in class, we were working on a math lesson, subtracting six digit numbers. Brad Yost raised his hand to ask how that would ever be useful and Mr. Harding immediately handed him a demerit. Fifteen minutes later, Brace Face returned to the room. Her hair was a tangled mess, her jumper and white shirt covered in stains. Her eyes were puffy and red, as if she had been crying. The boys in the class started giggling and Mr. Harding was having a difficult time quieting them down. Finally, he whispered something in her ear and she turned to leave. She looked devastated. I knew the feeling. I had lost several retainers myself exactly the same way and had spent a few afternoons rummaging through dumpsters behind the school only to come up empty handed. I wanted to tell her I understood, but I just smiled at her, thoroughly delighted, not because I had the retainer, not because she was a mess, but because there was a connection between us that hadn’t been there before. She looked back at me, her eyes suspicious, as if I alone was responsible for her losing it.

That night at dinner, I couldn’t wait to be excused. Aunt Beth had made moussaka, which looked a lot like lasagna, but tasted nothing like it. Evie evidently wasn’t feeling well so she stayed in her room. My mom and Aunt Beth seemed oddly chipper, telling stories about when they were younger, one after the other. The time Aunt Beth stuck an acorn up her nose. The time my mom crashed her dad’s car. They kept telling the stories, laughing all the way through, even though they hardly seemed like the kinds of things you wanted to remember.

After dinner, I shut my door and sat on my bed, the blue case sitting on a pillow in front of me. The rain was still coming down, the clouds so low you could barely see out the window. I snapped open the box and a familiar mint scent drifted to my nose. And then I opened the box completely and there it was, a flimsy piece of pink plastic with a silver wire, the black strap balled up beside it. The whole thing looked exactly like the one I had worn last year, only smaller, more fragile.

I lay down on my back and held the retainer to the light, dragging my finger along the plastic. One side was smooth, but the other was covered with bumps and ridges, a mold of the top of Brace Face’s mouth. It was strange to feel the terrain of the retainer as if I were touching the inside of her mouth. For a moment I wondered if maybe she could feel it too.

I sat up and tried to fit the strap around my head. It was too small for me, barely reaching all the way from one ear to the next, but I was able to stretch the strap, attaching each end to the retainer, and fitting it into my mouth. I knew the drill. The retainer itself was small and didn’t sit right, but I moved it with my thumb, forcing it into place. The rough side of the plastic tore into the flesh on the top of my mouth, but I didn’t care. I rolled over onto my stomach and started to move my hips, rubbing against the bed. The plastic continued to give me trouble, catching the inside of my mouth on its rough finish. Outside, the rain fell, hammering my air conditioner like a drum roll. I didn’t hear the door open.
“What the hell are you doing?” Evie said, startling me.

I turned and saw her standing in the doorway.

“What are you wearing?” she said and started to laugh. Her eyes drifted down to my pants, tented at my hips. “Oh my god!”

I turned away from her. “Evie!” I shouted. “Get out!”

“Oh, I see. It’s okay if you walk in on me, but not the other way around?”


She didn’t say anything for a moment and then I heard the door close. I quickly took off the brace, stuffed it into its box, and buried it in the deepest corner of my closet.

The next day, Mr. Harding gave us our homonym quiz. He wrote a series of words on the board. Dear/Deer. Pail/Pale. Bear/Bare. Know/No. Tail/Tale. Each person had to go up and write a sentence or two, which used both words. Dave got the first and wrote, Dear Diary, I shot a deer today with my rifle.

“Very creative, Mr. Pearson,” Mr. Harding said. “The NRA would be proud. Next why don’t we have Mademoiselle Papoochis.”

This girl we called “Pooch” stood and wrote, The pail was filled with pale water.

“Excellent,” Mr. Harding said. “Almost poetic.” He searched the room. “How about Mr. Kelso?”

I walked up to the board and looked at my words. Bear/

Bare. For some reason, I couldn’t focus, as if the words weren’t English. The incident with Evie lingered in my head. I brought the chalk to the board to write something, but stopped short.

Mr. Harding said, “In this lifetime, Mr. Kelso.”

Finally, I wrote I saw a bear in the woods. I knew this was right, but I couldn’t think of anything to do with “bare.” I suddenly didn’t even know what it meant.

“While Mr. Kelso is brooding, let’s have someone else,” Harding said. He searched the room. “Ms. Jakantowicz?”

Brace Face took her position next to me. Know/No. Those were her words. It seemed completely unfair as that was the homonym she had used earlier in the week. She could just write the same thing if she wanted. But when she got up to the board, she didn’t do anything, just stared at me as if I was the problem she had to solve. Mr. Harding cleared his throat and said, “Ms. Jakantowicz? Is there something wrong?”

She continued to stare. I turned and looked at her. She was cleaned up, no food stains, no retainer. She looked pretty. “What’s your problem?” I said.

Finally, she turned and wrote something on the board. People started whispering. I turned to see what she had written: I know Martin stole my retainer. He can’t say no.

The noise in the classroom got louder. Brace Face walked closer to me, saying, “I know it was you. I know it was you.” Mr. Harding stood and walked toward us. “Now see here, Ms. Jakantowicz. We don’t just go making uninformed accusations…”
But Brace Face kept repeating the words, “I know it was you. I know it was you.” Tears began to stream down her cheeks, but she kept saying, “I know it was you,” as if she could actually prove it. She was glorious, like one of the monsters in the movie ransacking the city, knocking down buildings with pure delight.

If I had stayed quiet, the whole thing might have passed over. She would have gotten in trouble and I might not have needed to finish the quiz. But she was accusing me, the anger in her eyes like the look Evie had given her mother at dinner the other night. I said the first thing that came to my head.

“Godzilla is now in New York City! The city is being invaded by Godzilla!”

Students started laughing uncontrollably. I kept repeating the words. Harding was shouting at us to be quiet in multiple languages, but even he couldn't stop it. Finally, he picked up a ruler and slapped it across the blackboard. “Take your seats!” he yelled. “Everyone pull out a sheet of paper and write new sentences for each of these homonyms. Absolutely no talking.”

There was a general moan before he slapped the blackboard again, shouting, “Enough!”

I walked to my chair, my mind racing. I couldn't figure out how she knew. Had she seen me put it in my bag? Why didn't she stop me? Had Evie told her? How could she know Evie? Did all girls know each other? My thoughts swirled. In front of me, Brace Face slipped into her seat, her back heaving with sobs. Harding walked the aisle, handing her a demerit. She took it without a word. He was about to walk away when he turned and handed me one as well.

“She started it!” I said. “That's not fair!”

Mr. Harding turned, his weary eyes searching the room, before he caught himself and looked back at me, this time with a familiar intensity. “Life,” he said, “Mr. Kelso, is not fair. I believe this is your third demerit.” He walked toward the front of the room, but not before adding, “Have your parents sign it.”

I took the yellow note card, staring at the line where my parents would have to sign, my heart beating so intensely I could feel my whole chair shake.

That night, I wasn’t hungry, despite the fact that Evie and Aunt Beth were out looking at apartments and my mom had made dinner. “You love spaghetti,” she said.

“Is something wrong, Marty?” my dad said.

“No,” I said. I did love spaghetti, but I couldn't eat a bite. The demerit was in my pocket.

“Is it about Evie?” my mom said. It wasn’t, but I couldn't tell them. I nodded. My mom reached over and took my hand. “She's going through a tough time. She doesn't want to move.”

I pushed the noodles around the plate. “Can I be excused?”

My mom turned to my dad. “Sure,” my dad said.

“And honey,” my mom added, “if you want to talk, we're here, ok?”

“I know,” I said, and headed to my room.
I sat in bed trying to think of what to do. I had never really gotten in trouble and at that moment everything seemed to be coming down around me. I had a stolen retainer sitting at the bottom of my closet. I had to get my parents’ signature on a demerit. Alice Jakantowicz hated me. My cousin hated me. I couldn’t do anything right.

I woke the next morning with a plan of how to fix at least one thing. I decided I would bring the retainer back to school and tell Harding I had found it by the garbage. Alice Jakantowicz would have her grill back. I would be the hero and we would be friends. Maybe Harding would let me forget the last demerit. Maybe all three of them.

The moment I got to school that day, I knew this wouldn’t happen. Everything had changed. The extra chairs had been removed. A row of dark blue ponchos lined the coat racks. My seat was back in the last row.

The girls were gone.

“Where’d they go?” Alan Oates asked.

“The water main was repaired,” Mr. Harding said.

“They’re back at their own school. Perhaps now we can get back to some degree of normalcy.”

The room was quiet, as if we all were waiting for something else to happen. No one said a word. When the girls had been there, I had wanted them to leave. Now the classroom felt smaller without them.

When I got home that afternoon, no one was there. I watched television for a while, because the afternoon special was a replay of Destroy All Monsters. I tried to get into it, but for the first time, I actually felt sorry for the monsters, as if they were the ones who suffered, getting ordered around by the moon women and attacked by armies. It wasn’t their fault.

Finally, I turned it off and went to my room. I jammed one shoe under the door and another under my bathroom door. No one was getting in. I pulled the retainer out of my bag and set it on the floor. My whole body tensed as I looked at it. This sad little piece of plastic and metal wire had caused me nothing but problems. I picked up a big toy truck Dave and I sometimes played with and started hitting the retainer, gently at first, just tapping at it. When it didn’t break, I put all my strength into it, smashing the truck against the retainer and the floor. I was making a ton of noise. It didn’t break at first, although the wire started to bend and the plastic flattened out. I would probably never see Alice Jakantowicz again, but at that moment, I wanted to destroy any trace of her. The pink plastic started to give, large cracks veining across its surface until the whole thing shattered, scattering across the floor.
There was a knock at the door and I leapt up. “What are you doing?” Evie said, pushing the door open enough to get her head in.

“Just playing,” I said, out of breath.

“Uh huh,” she said, her eyes searching the room. “Look, our parents went out to dinner. They left me money for pizza.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “I already ordered it. I’m going to eat in the kitchen. Come in if you want some.”

I cleaned up the broken pieces of the retainer and threw everything — shattered retainer, strap, case — down the garbage chute. I walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table with Evie, who was once again reading some magazine. We sat there a while in silence until Evie looked up and said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” I said.

She smirked and said, “Is it a girl?”

“No,” I said, sinking into my chair.

Evie went back to her magazine. “You look heart broken.”

“I’m not,” I said, but at that moment I knew that wasn’t true. I hadn’t been able to destroy the memory of Alice Jakantowicz. I could feel it, this heaviness, like I was still wearing my backpack. Truth was, I didn’t know if I wanted the feeling to disappear.

Finally I said, “I’m in trouble.”

She sighed, not looking up from her magazine. “Like you know what trouble is.”

I didn’t say a thing. After a few moments, she put down the magazine and looked across the table at me. “OK. What happened?”

I pulled out the demerit form and laid it on the table. Evie picked it up and read it. “This is it? A teacher’s slip?”

I nodded. “I’ve got to get it signed by a parent. They’re going to kill me.”

Evie laughed. “You got a pen?”

“Why?” I said. I couldn’t imagine she would do it.

“Give me a pen,” Evie said. I took one of out the kitchen drawer and handed it to her. She sat straight up in her chair and signed the note card like there was nothing to it.

“You can’t do that,” I said.

“I just did,” she said.

I looked at the demerit. There it was: Sarah Kelso. My mom’s name. The problem seemed to be solved.

The doorbell rang.

“Let’s eat,” she said. I stuffed the signed note card back into my pocket. Evie got us sodas and paper plates and plastic silverware. She handed me a slice of pizza and set one down in front herself.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” she said, and I understood she needed to believe this as much as I did. She ripped off a piece of crust and dipped it into the grease on top of the cheese. I did the same, following her lead, though I couldn’t remember why I had ever liked it better that way.
John Fried began his writing and editing career by proofreading pesticide labels for a chemical and pharmaceutical encyclopedia. He later received his MFA in fiction from Warren Wilson College and now teaches creative writing at Duquesne University, where he is an assistant professor in the English Department. His fiction has appeared in various journals, including The Gettysburg Review, Minnesota Review, North American Review, and Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art, where his story “Birthday Season” won the 2007 fiction contest. He lives in Pittsburgh and is finishing a novel.
Fitz Tyndall crawls forward on a gigantic rectangular pillow floating on the surface of the lake, peering across the expanse of red, white and blue rubberized nylon billowing beneath him. All of the campers in all four tribes of Camp Sandy Plover encircle the milky-green lake on which floats the Blob and on which Fitz, wearing nothing but an orange Birdwell bathing suit, tries to position himself as he prepares for Rollo, the fattest counselor of them all, to leap onto the Blob’s landward end. A voice blaring through a bullhorn somewhere on shore tells him to stop crawling. The voice, belonging to Coach Boonie, is the loudest sound among a general murmur of voices, all of them drifting over from the shore not a hundred feet away.

Fitz is seated about two-thirds down the pillow, a large, soap-shaped peninsula jutting into the perfectly circular manmade body of water that, Fitz considers anxiously, would be better described as a pond. Definitely a pond, he thinks, rolling his hands together, his knuckles crackling, not even close to a lake. It is possible, entirely possible, that he could hit the sharp edge...
of the pond, encircled by jagged blue rocks, or, worse, land in the gravel drive encircling the pond, upon being ejected from the pillow of the Blob... The Blob’s other end, the end that Fitz does not sit on, is tethered by nylon rope to the base of a wooden tower built onto the boat dock and the tower, like the dock, is made out of pressure-treated lumber. From his vantage point at the now-depressed end of the pillow the tower looms above him, tall and rickety as one of those towers he’s seen on PBS where those naked black guys with leaves over their privates tie the vines on to their ankles and clamber up to the top and jump off, for what insane reason Fitz cannot even begin to guess, surely something to do with their strange and demanding gods.

Now Rollo prepares to mount the ladder aside the tower as Fitz watches from below. Wearing a Speedo bathing suit and a bathing cap, his pendulous, mole-flecked thighs and monstrous manboobs a bloodless shade that cannot even be called white, Rollo’s slow progress up the groaning ladder causes something deep in Fitz’s being to question the wisdom of being Blobbed.

As he looks up at the tower silhouetted against a gray, exhausted summer sky a wet salty wind blows in from the Chesapeake Bay whose shore is not a hundred yards from the edge of the lake. Fitz is where he is because he is the lightest—not the smallest, he wrote home when it was announced that he’d been chosen to be Blobbed by Rollo—but the lightest of those in Tribe Two eligible to qualify for the honor. Having just turned ten the first week of camp (and having shared the care package of two big bags of Nacho Cheese Doritos and Double-Stuf Oreos with his Teepee-braves, succeeding at saving his tears of homesickness until after dark) and coming in well under the minimum weight requirement of seventy pounds, Fitzgerald watched in awe and increasing joy as one by one his heavier fellow braves were denied the privilege of advancing past the first and second rounds.

On the night the three finalists for being Blobbed by Rollo were announced to the rest of the camp Coach Boonie had paraded each of the candidates towards a feed scale he’d set up on the dais in the chow hall. Each of the finalists were robed in pleather gowns with fake fur collars sewed by one of the nurses, and as the lights flashed and Thus Spake Zarathustra boomed over the camp’s PA system, Boonie grabbed each of the skinny boys by the fur collars and shoved them to the lip of the stage: First was Khan, a doctor’s son from Baltimore who’d recently immigrated from Pakistan, a mask of nearly catatonic fear on his frozen face as Boonie lifted him bodily up and offered him to now the manic crowd of campers before setting him daintily on the feed scale; then Charlie, a wan, sunken-chested kid from Philadelphia who, rumor had it, had not yet taken a shit in the two weeks they’d been at
camp, and, last, Fitz. Each took their turn upon the scale. When it was Fitz’s turn to climb on the scale the huge needle barely moved, whereas with Khan and Charlie it had at least swung with some initial purpose.

“Oh my goodness,” Boonie yelled. “It’s not even a contest! In this corner, from Richmond, Virginia, weighing in at a measly fifty-two pounds, is our winner, Shrimp-Tits Tyndall!”

Fitzgerald, wearing only the pleather gown and a pair of jockey briefs, had leapt off of the scale and tried to do a quick jig reminiscent of Muhammad Ali, but the clammy folds of the too-big naugahyde robe were stiff where they buckled against the floor. Mid-jig, he’d found himself shuffling forward towards the edge of the dais as if being pushed from behind, and directly he was falling forward onto the linoleum floor a couple of feet below. In all the excitement and clamor of the weigh-ins and falling off the dais Fitz hadn’t heard the nick-name “Shrimp Tits” and only later when his teepee-mates started calling him Shrimp Tits did he learn that that’s what Boonie had called him just before he fell (a fact confirmed by his counselor Ronnie, an effeminate sailing instructor also from Baltimore who was deaf in one ear, who appeared pained upon telling Fitz the truth, a pain Fitz did not then countenance: Doesn’t everyone want to be called a nickname by Coach Boonie, even if it’s Shrimp Tits?).

Later, his elbows and knees bruised green from the spill from the dais, Fitz couldn’t believe he’d won the contest. While lying in his bunk with a penlight reading
his Richie Rich comics and waiting for sleep to arrive
Fitzgerald knew beyond any question that he was himself
a different person now. Outside a thunder storm tumbled
in from the Bay and flashes of lightning illuminated the
tall pines along the shore. In one night Fitzgerald’s life
was granted a sort of purpose heretofore denied and the
night passed in the weird afterglow of victory, of a newly
impassioned involvement with the world and the creatures
within it. When he wrote his daily postcard home, the
penlight held in his teeth, lightning flashing more regularly
now, it was hard to put how excited he was into words, but he
did write that being chosen to be blobbed by Rollo was the
best thing that had ever happened to him. No one had ever
been blobbed by Rollo before. No one. It was a first for Camp
Sandy Plover, maybe a first nationwide.

It is, he notes sitting there on the Blob as Rollo climbs the
rickety ladder, the first time in his life any crowd has gathered
to watch him do anything.

“Show us your muscles, Shrimp Tits!” Coach Boonie yells
from the shore. The entire camp begins chanting Muscles, Shrimp Tits, mus-cles!

Fitz wobbles to his knees—it’s hard to balance on the
pillow, which is now making odd squooshing noises—and
lifts his arms up, bending his elbows and flexing his biceps.
He’s seen his older brother Ogden doing this before but when
Ogden does it there is actually some movement beneath
his skin, as if small round-shaped animals live under there,
whereas when Fitz looks from side to side at the limbs
protruding from his trunk he recognizes that his arms are
pretty much the same exact shape as the bones within them.
If it weren’t for his elbow joints his arms would be no thicker
than paper towel tubes. He knows now that Boonie is teasing
him.

The crowd roars.

Fitz leans back again on his arms but the Blob’s rubbery
surface is slippery from the hose some senior counselor is
spraying towards him now from below the tower and the
water coming out of it is cold, so instead he tucks crosslegged
as the big pillow reaches up and surrounds him and hugs
himself. Coach Boonie is still yammering into a megaphone,
his muscular neck bigger than his perfectly white bullet-
shaped head, and as Fitz again maneuvers his body in order
to more fully allow the crowd on shore to see him he spies
Camp Sandy Plover’s founder King Chief being chauffeured up
in his golf cart, his tanned wattles visible from where Fitz sits
and even now oscillating in the dim summer sunlight as his
tobacco-colored head wobbles to and fro.

A raft of silver clouds moves across the sun. The sky is
gray now. A chill breeze blows in from the Bay. Rollo is
conferring with the counselor spraying the hose down on Fitz,
and it appears that Rollo may be having second thoughts;
his eyes appear bloodshot even though he’s a good thirty
feet away, and there’s a stiffness in his otherwise jiggly and
unhealthily roseated cheeks that denotes discomfort. The
possibility that he will not be Blobbed by Rollo causes Fitz
to retract into a moment of pure reflection as he waits on the
Blob. Camp, frankly, had been bad this summer. Real bad. And it wasn’t just a matter of the fake eggs being poured out of a giant cardboard carton or of the cream chipped beef tasting like white salty jello, none of which Fitz eats anyhow, sticking pretty exclusively to peanut butter and Wonder bread. It wasn’t the bad camp songs they had to sing about the Titanic or America, nor was it the sociopath Gordon in Fitz’s teepee who read magazines his mother sent him about electrical circuits and who already had suppurating acne and an everpresent bitterness about his ridiculous honking voice, nor did it have to do with the obnoxious Asian kid Phillip who never slept and who Fitz caught jacking off behind the riflery backstop only yesterday, nor did it have to do with the juvenile delinquent named Rusty who was able to reach down into his own ass and remove little dimples of turd and fling them at his fellow braves with amazing accuracy. And it wasn’t that Vittles the monkey had gotten loose from the cage behind the nature center, bit a few campers and escaped into the woods, even though Fitz fully admitted to himself that he liked spending time with the monkey, poking sticks in there and letting Vittles grab them with his remarkably human-appearing hands, squatting and chattering among his bruised fruits and next to his fetid little pond in which circled a plump carp, and that he missed Vittles, missed him far more than he’d miss Gordon, Philip or Rusty if they left.

No, camp head been bearable up until yesterday, when his mother had called the camp to inform him that his older brother Ogden’s eye would have to be removed. That’s exactly what she said: Your brother’s eye will have to be removed. She said he’d come walking in the front door with his hand over his eye almost as if nothing at all was wrong. But then she told Fitz that actually Ogden’s eye had never healed correctly since Fitz had shot it with the bb gun two weeks before his departure for camp.

“You mean he’s blind?”

“Well in one eye, yes. You can’t rightly see out of an eye that isn’t there, can you?” She tried to laugh.

No, Fitz supposed not.

“Why are you telling me this now? I’m at camp.”

“That’s a good question. It was your brother’s idea.”

“You’re angry,” Fitz said.

“Absolutely not. No reason to be angry at that which we cannot change. This is a thing that happened. Whether or not you find out now or in a week matters not a whit.”

Ogden and Fitz were in the front yard of the farmhouse July 4th weekend armed with bb guns, scattered across the lawn that sloped down to the shore of the James, wearing down coats, dodging, hiding and firing from behind the ancient boxwoods that grew in clusters in the yard. Ogden had cornered Fitzgerald against the ruins of a stone wall that once encircled the property and peppered him until his coat was hemorrhaging feathers, meanwhile Fitz noted that his shots were all flying high or wide. As he sited down the Daisy he could see his bb’s pitching up or to the side when they exited the barrel, so soon after he yelled Uncle and as Ogden turned and ran, a cry of glee in his honking pubescent voice, Fitz rose from the base of the wall, pumped the handle of the
Daisy once, and chased his brother to a nearby willow oak. Fitz aimed at the base of the oak Ogden now hid behind, and squeezed the trigger. The single shot from the Daisy arced from the end of the barrel up towards the tree at the exact moment Ogden's face appeared from behind the trunk.

They went to the hospital in Richmond and Ogden came back later with a huge bandage wrapped around his head, which he was still wearing when Fitz left for camp. The bb had entered Ogden's eye socket from the side and had only nicked the ball and Ogden would only have to wear the bandage for two weeks at the most while the cut in the corner of his eye healed. The doctor had pulled the bb from behind Ogden's eyeball. No nerve damage, probably would have a scar in the corner of his eye, was lucky not to be blinded. Fitzgerald had not given the event another thought until he heard his brother's voice coming out of the phone.

“Hello,” Ogden yawned.

“Mom tells me your eye's gone.”

“That’s the long and short of it. Got infected and since it was near my brain, you know. Then, later,” Ogden added sleepily, “I felt liquid streaming down my chin.”

His brother waited a beat. “Turns out it was pus.”

Standing there in the freezing camp office, his body covered by goosebumps, Fitz recognized he was upset about his brother’s losing the eye but equally upset at his brother’s stoical refusal to acknowledge pain, weakness or fear. Even anger would do. It could be that he was angry that his brother’s loss of the eye would give people yet another reason to pay more attention to his older brother than they did to Fitz, what with Ogden’s broad shoulders and perfect grades, and with Fitz’s horsey lips, his teeth that appeared too large for his mouth, his stiff black hair and the fact that he was kept back in third grade.

“Well, it sucks to have only one eye,” he said. Was he happy to have shot his brother’s eye out? Was that it?

“Not really,” Ogden yawned. “I can’t say it’s all that different. I could see out of two eyes and now I see out of one. It’s basically the same thing minus a few finer details. I got kind of used to the bandage.”

“Apropos of me,” Fitz said, “I was chosen from all the campers to be blobbed by this fat guy named Rollo.”

“Blobbed?” Ogden said. “What the hell is blobbed?”

When Fitz explained to Ogden about being chosen to be blobbed and what a Blob was Ogden said nothing, did not even make a sound, doing that thing where he remained silent and waited for Fitz to say something stupid, which Fitz obliged: “It’s the highest honor in the camp,” Fitz said breathlessly.

“I had pus coming out of my eyehole.”

“Well,” Fitz said, “I could easily die.”
Last night in his bunk, staring up at the honeycomb pattern of the latticed web holding the mattress on which Carl the Asthmatic Barfer lay, Fitz wished he could take those words back into his mouth. He couldn't get the image of Ogden staring at him, an empty black hole where his eye had been, waiting, waiting, waiting for his little brother to say something stupid. I could easily die.

A

t night Fitz fell asleep after Taps and during a sequence of fitful dreams where he became aware of being entangled in his sheet, he woke abruptly and the first notion he had was that his feet were wet. He thought he'd peed his bed. But he became aware of being vertical, looked down and noted there were pieces of cut grass like innumerable black worms crawling over both feet. He was in his pajamas. The moon was barely visible through the woods. Pine trees hissed at him, the night flashing with heat lightning. There was a period of time, five seconds or so, when Fitz stood there reasonably as if waiting for something, someone to whisk him back to his cabin, perhaps. That was exactly it: he was waiting for some reasonable vehicle to lift him bodily, as Boonie had lifted Khan, and carry him back to his cabin, peel back his sheet, and tuck him in, maybe scratch his back lightly until he fell asleep.

Fitz heard a noise and turned around; the teepees were not in sight. A dark low shed lay in the shadows. It was one of the buildings where they kept tractors. He recognized he was on the far edge of the camp, as far as he'd ever been from his cabin. The trail leading to the girls’ camp was nearby, and as

Fitz stood there in a state of what he later considered was full-wakefullness he heard a sound in the woods and before he knew even that he would speak a single word came from his lips: Vittles. Of course it was the little monkey! Some dream power had lead him out here into the woods, some powerful force between Fitz and the monkey, and he would the one to deliver Vittles heroically back to the camp.

He stepped towards the noise, calling Vittles’ name, then watched as a movement in the woods became form: Vittles was coming out of the shadows towards him, loping towards him on his dainty little monkey knuckles. He was flooded with relief. But as he stepped closer to what he thought was Vittles a form materialized deep within the pine grove, a mass of what appeared to be mist or shadow, but a shadow with an intelligence or purpose inside of which began to glow a single pupil of light. It was not Vittles there in the woods but something larger. Or nothing at all. A shadow, perhaps, a distant car’s headlight reflecting off of an equally distant wall of fog and scattering the light particles through the woods.

He was still dreaming, then. A little ball of shadow no bigger than a fist dancing just above the bed of pine needles. No shape, no form, an idea of a shape rather than a shape itself. A shadow of some invisible object. Then the shadow began to rise out there amidst the hissing pines, now glowing from the inside and gathering up into a mass, now as tall, then taller, then much larger than Fitz himself, until it rose up and obscured the trees farther back in the pine grove, growing erect on what appeared now to be hind legs. Never was Fitz scared, the roiling mass having not threatened him,
and suspended in that state Fitz could tell himself, again very reasonably, that he was dreaming and that at any moment he would wake up in his bed at Camp Sandy Plover, and surely Gordon would share some opinion in his fruity voice on what the dream meant, and Philip would again clutch his little tan wang, and Rusty would fling his turds, Fitz would be Blobbed and be a hero and all would be right at Camp Sandy Plover.

At the same time the grass on his feet was real—he reached down and pushed a few of the blades away with his hand, and now he was shivering—and he smelled the gasoline and sweetgrass smell of the tractors in the shed. The wind mussing his hair, his bangs tickling his forehead: These were real, he was sure, as was the flash of lightning and the distant sound of tumbling pool balls shaking the ground.

And there, suspended as if in a photograph framed by the split-second flash of lightning was another very real thing: Not ten feet away lay the lean tan body of Vittles, stretched out as if asleep. He was not asleep, Fitz noted immediately, but dead, rain now hammering down on his lean and eyeless body, his belly already caved in from where something had been eating it, his lips drawn back across his teeth.

The other counselor is now spraying Rollo’s gigantic body with the hose and Rollo is throwing one arm up in front of him like an elephant’s trunk, scattering the water over his back, making a moaning sound that Fitz supposes is meant to sound like an elephant but which instead sounds like an animal struggling to breathe, a cow perhaps, something panicked and sensing that death is near, as Rollo staggers around on the top of the tower.

Sitting on the Blob and watching Rollo still doing stretches and now making Sumo poses up there on the top of the tower to the delight of the entire camp, Rollo’s body now contorted into grotesque positions, a wobbly flank of speckled buttock shivering out from beneath the Speedo, Fitz is filled not by excitement or happiness but a dread that makes the bottoms of his feet go ticklish. He knows that being Blobbed will not signal a change in the summer’s experience nor will it change him in the least but will instead be a continuation of its weirdness. Fitz knows that he will screw it up somehow, do something wrong or make a mistake that may even hurt Rollo, now backlit by the thin sun, a massive outlined shadow shape doing lunges, jumping jacks…

Fitz calls up to Rollo.

“I changed my mind!” he says, scrambling to the edge of the Blob. His voice is thin and birdy. “Coach Rollo! I changed my mind!”

Fitz tries to climb out of the deep hole of the pillow but can’t make purchase on the rubbery nylon. Each attempt
to right himself only causes him to tumble forward more spastically. He calls out again, his heart thumping.

“Rollo!”

Rollo hears him, he can tell, but has by now decided that he can’t chicken out either, and so he stares out across the river, his hands on either hip, still acting like he is stretching his groin, doing Jack LaLanne lunges from side to side. The counselor with the hose is now spraying it directly at Fitz’s mouth as Fitz again falls backwards.

“Are you ready?” Boonie yells through the megaphone. Rollo holds his arms up and bellows. The kids go wild on shore. Fitz tries to raise his hand to signal to Boonie that he needs to climb off the Blob but as he raises one arm the other slips and he falls forward into the soft recesses of the pillow. He is able to twist and to roll onto his back and to prepare for the final burst of energy that will propel him upwards and away from the Blob but in a moment all energy leaves him in a single exhalation. For a brief moment all Fitz sees, looking up, is the perfect circle of the sun filtered by a giant sheet of billowing white fabric further enveloping his body. The Blob sighs below him.

Boonie’s voice is counting backwards now, echoed by the sound of three hundred prepubescent male voices. Fitz sits up. Both his arms are raised, waving at the shore. Another shadow passes over his heart; it is too late and he is crying. Rollo doesn’t leap but instead steps off the tower and falls towards the end of the Blob a lot more quickly than Fitz thinks possible; again, the natural order—that of gravity—appears to be perverted.

Within the span of time it takes the thought to cross his mind again he has shot up breathless into the gray sky as if leaving a silent cannon, the hundreds of little faces below staring up and pointing, now drawn into fractals of t-shirt red, black and blond hair, summer-tanned skin, long dyed lines of color and sound spreading out beneath him. His arms are wind-milling to keep him from tumbling over and he screams out with a force and volume that surprises even him. Wind roaring in his ears, the Chesapeake Bay right there beyond the stand of pines along the shore, Fitz has time at the apex of his flight to laugh. Less a sensation than a palpable physical presence wells up inside him as if a new organ is ballooning into place somewhere near his liver, a feeling entirely disconnected from the antigravitational joy of being shot skyward by the fattest counselor in camp. The new organ is replacing the fretting, somehow, replacing the taint and ruin of the summer. This sense of ecstasy is disconnected from the cheers he hears below him and the knowledge that within minutes, if he lives, he’ll be one of those campers everyone knows, who may even win best camper at the end of the summer, who everyone will want to befriend, who everyone will look upon as blessed with some special insight into the world.

Suspended there forty feet or so above the lake, he recognizes that, impossibly, he’s still rising. 👑
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