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Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species [Short Stories]

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KINGDOM, PHYLUM, CLASS, ORDER, FAMILY, GENUS, SPECIES

by

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B.S.E. May 1979, Purdue University

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ABSTRACT

KINGDOM, PHYLUM, CLASS, ORDER, FAMILY, GENUS, SPECIES

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Old Dominion University, 2016
Director: Prof. Janet Peery

The stories in this compilation, some in a realistic vein and others set in alternate realities, explore themes of loss by examining various “world gone wrong” scenarios where the main characters lose some form of control. By classifying the stories according to Taxonomic nomenclature (Kingdom, Phylum, etc.,) the stories slot into categories that both hint at the content of the story and imply a universality of human experience. Throughout the compilation, protagonists, attempting to understand their loss, must work out how to proceed—either in concert with or against—the ethical framework created within the story.

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This thesis is dedicated to the person whose constant love and patience helped me to complete it:
my husband, Lee Entsminger.

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KINGDOM:

THE BRIEF SECOND LIFE OF WINSTON WHITHER'S WIFE

Winston was lying in postcoital bliss when his bed spoke for the first time with the voice of his dead wife.

“You asshole,” it said.

Winston might have taken that moment to be shocked and amazed, but in his sleep-and sex-fogged mind he merely supposed it was his well-endowed next-door neighbor, Renee, as he still lay sprawled across her body, his ear pressed into her lips.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, assuming she was complaining about his weight. He rolled to the side, and Renee flopped onto her belly, grunting something that sounded vaguely like “Marmalade.”

It was almost six thirty. The alarm would be beeping in a half hour. He sighed, shut his eyes, and heard “Winston” rising from directly underneath his pillow.

He sat up and leaned over Renee, who kicked a bit, emitting a series of soft snores. Winston picked up his pillow, flipping it and looking inside the case. He prodded the mattress a few times with his index finger, pulling up the sheet to look beneath. Finally he whispered into the still room, “Hello?” The heater came on, causing the drapes to flutter as warm air moved hairs already standing up on his arms.

“Winston. It’s me.”

The voice held a creaky, husky quality that reminded him of two branches rubbing together in high wind. Still, there was something familiar in it. “Chloris?” On the last syllable of his dead wife’s name, his voice cracked, and he crouched on all fours on the bed.

“Yes, Winston.”

“Chloris! Chloris, you’re here, you’re here! Wait—you’re here?”

Renee was stirring. Winston’s ears buzzed, irritatingly, and he wiped them with one hand. Little black dots appeared, and he tried in vain to blink them away. Winston reached up toward his head, a lifelong habitual gesture he employed when flustered. With the same shock he felt perhaps once a day, he realized belatedly there was no hair there to ruffle: He’d gone bald as a turnip after Chloris died. This time that jolt, compounded by the confusion of hearing Chloris’s voice, caused what little blood was left in his brain to drain, and he fell back against the warm bulk of Renee.

Some time later, Winston awoke to find Renee sitting on the bed next to him patting his forehead with a cold wet washcloth. “Hey,” she said. “You okay?”

“Chloris is *talking* to me.” Winston took her hand and pulled her closer to whisper, “Chloris is in the bed.”

Renee set down the washcloth on the bedside table. Her expression did not change. “Well,” she said, “it’s obvious. She must have taken out a contract.”

“What? No.”

“Winston, that’s the only way this could be happening.” Renee nodded toward the bed. “Maybe you should . . . ?”

Winston sighed. He didn’t really want to ask in front of Renee. He had a premonition that no matter what he did, this was going to get ugly. Winston rolled and put his mouth close to the mattress. “Chloris?”

“You don’t have to shout. I’m right here.”

“Chloris, I think—” Winston glanced at Renee. “—I know you took out a contract.”

The bed was silent.

Renee crossed her arms. “What did she say?”

“Nothing so far.”

Chloris spoke. “Maybe I did. Maybe I thought you’d miss me. That was, until I arrived to find you boinking our next-door neighbor.”

Winston’s face grew hot, and the buzzing started again. “How’d you know?”

“Oh, please, you think I can’t feel the vibrations? Or smell that crappy perfume she douses herself with?”

“Chloris, you’ve been dead for a long time.”

“How long? A month? Two?”

“You’ve been gone two years.” It felt longer to Winston. He had watched Chloris disappear inch-by-inch as her illness claimed her.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Renee interrupted: “Ask for the details of the contract.”

“Tell that woman I don’t remember.” In Chloris’s voice Winston heard steely flint plus a healthy dose of belligerence. “Besides, I am not going to have a conversation with you if Renee is in the room listening in.”

Winston remembered that when Chloris had been alive she’d never taken to Renee, though Winston always thought their neighbor seemed nice and harmless enough. Renee had been a widow for a while when they met her and seemed to be perfectly content with life. Through passing conversation, Winston and Chloris found out Renee and her deceased husband, Clark, had only been able to afford a two-year haunting. When Renee spoke of Clark, it was with a wistful, loving tone.

Over the years Renee made some friendly overtures—she went to the movies with them once—but Chloris complained of Renee’s possible motive. “Single women only want one thing,” she’d said to Winston, leaving him pondering what that was for a day and a half. He’d finally worked it out, feeling stupid he hadn’t come to his conclusion earlier, but he didn’t think it applied to Renee at all. She was just a nice person.

While sick, Chloris had eaten the soups that Renee brought her, finding the energy to write a polite note back, but never anything beyond that. Winston hadn’t given Renee much thought until she showed up after the funeral with a pan of lasagna.

“I don’t think Renee can hear you.” He looked over at her, and she nodded.

“It doesn’t matter if she can’t hear me,” Chloris said. “She can hear your side of the conversation.”

“Okay, Chloris.” Winston stood up. “Renee, I’m sorry. She doesn’t want you in the room.”

Renee nodded and went about picking up her clothes before heading downstairs.

The bed had taken on a defiant aura. The old quilt Chloris had stitched when they first married seemed a little more garish—the reds appeared harsher—and the grain of the antique oak headboard stood out distinctly, in small precise lines.

Winston sighed and stretched out on the bed, holding both sides with his arms until the colors in the quilt returned to normal. He murmured the same words of love he had whispered to her during their marriage, telling her of his misery when she died, his loneliness and longing. Chloris cried, or at least it sounded like the bed was crying. After an hour, he told her he would call in sick to work, check out her contract, and come back to talk. She agreed it was the right thing to do.

Winston showered, dressed, and went downstairs in the snug redbrick home he and Chloris had shared for twenty-three congenial years. They'd both been in their mid-thirties when they married, and he sometimes worried that she'd wed him out of a hushed desperation, though she never once uttered that, even in some of their infrequent fights. Children were never an option as Chloris had suffered an emergency hysterectomy some years before he met her. He never regretted that fact, and instead they hosted a succession of pets until it became too hard on them both to eventually say good-bye to the puppy or kitten that grew up finally, becoming frail and slow.

Winston reached the kitchen, and Renee, dressed now, handed him a steaming cup of coffee. He felt a mixture of surprise and gladness to see her, thinking she would have gone home.

"Well," she said.

"Well," he replied.

They both sat down at the table, where a pile of toast sat high on a yellow china plate. Renee must have heard the shower. Winston, who had always gathered comfort through keeping the kitchen exactly as it had been when Chloris was alive, gazed at the bright yellow walls decorated with framed prints of abnormally large-eyed squirrels juggling acorns. It seemed wrong to look at Renee.

"I figure you're going to have to go over to one of the Churches and get a copy of her contract."

"Yeah," said Winston. He smeared some butter over a piece of toast, the sound of the knife a dry scraping. "Where's the nearest one?"

"On Forty-first. That's probably the one she went to, but all their records are connected."

"I'll call and make an appointment for today."

Renee smiled, reached over and squeezed his hand.

Winston regarded her hand holding his, than continued his study of the prints. Renee pulled back and stood up. “What else would you like for breakfast?”

The Church of Inanimate Possession had branches everywhere. It was an old religion and kept its secrets well, meaning they kept excellent records. In fact, of all the churches that sponsored hauntings, its reputation was exceptional. People could depend on them for up-to-date methods and the most varied pricing. Senses (hearing, touch, taste, smell) for the haunter were mostly included (sight cost extra), and the hauntee could be guaranteed counseling sessions with certified therapists if he or she wished. Winston knew that their contracts were ironclad. No lawyer had ever succeeded in breaking one. The Church of Inanimate Possession had thought of every loophole before one could be created. Winston was positive they had a bank of lawyers working on both sides, passing information back and forth. Idly, he wondered how they got paid after death?

The clearing of a throat brought him back to where he sat, in the fastidious business office of the Head of Contracts. A Mr. Lante sat behind a gleaming mahogany desk and wore, not only a snappy pinstriped suit, but also a full head of lustrous hair. Winston fought the urge to touch his own head. Glossy framed photos of celebrities, large white teeth in wide smiles, lined the wall behind the desk. In each photo, an object was held lovingly. Winston licked his teeth and wished he’d scrubbed his hands harder. As a copy-machine repairman, he never really got all the toner out from under his fingernails, but he’d never felt so aware of it before.

Mr. Lante shuffled through a large packet of papers, “Yes, yes I see.” He set the packet down and laid his mother-of-pearl glasses on the desk. “Your wife bought one of our medium-

size packages. Very nice. A five- year haunting with an option for more if desired.” He tapped the top page, “Yes. It also appears she purchased most of the senses—she has smell, touch, hearing, but no taste and only limited vision. She must have been trying to cut some of the expense. Shame. So—” He placed his manicured fingertips together under his chin. “—what inanimate object is your loved one occupying currently?”

“The bed.”

“Hmmm. That may need to change. It’s better if they occupy something smaller. It makes for a better transition if they are portable.”

“Well, there’s also the fact that I’m currently in a relationship. . . .”

“With someone living? Have you remarried so soon?”

“Well, yes—I mean no. I haven’t remarried, but she’s alive, and we use the bed, so to speak.”

Mr. Lante looked at his desk and pinched his nose between his long fingers. “Mr. Whithers, we discourage relationships with the living while working out a haunting. I will admit that two years is a long time after departing to begin a haunting, but there are precedents. Time is, shall we say, different to the dead.”

“How do people, *living* people, take care of their—” Winston flushed. “—needs?”

The man fitted his glasses back onto his nose. He pressed a button on his phone. “We expect you not to have any.” The phone chimed out a tinny “Yes?” and Mr. Lante spoke into the receiver: “Margaret, please escort Mr. Whithers to the front.” A smartly dressed woman entered, immediately gesturing to the door. Mr. Lante glanced up but did not stand. “Good day, Mr. Whithers.”

Winston obediently followed Margaret out across heavy carpet. It was odd that he was there. His parents hadn't believed in hauntings; they felt that everything one needed to do or say should be done in life and that hauntings were a form of cheating. He'd always supported their point of view, and upon marriage to Chloris he just assumed she felt as he did.

It was quiet as they walked down the immense long hall. Antsy, Winston broke the hush. "Doesn't this bother you? The silence—the death?"

Margaret stopped; her face assumed the glowing aspect of a zealot. "What we do here is sacred. *Sacred*, Mr. Whithers. We allow for closure and peace." She patted the top of the coffee grinder she had strapped to her waist.

Winston tried to figure out how could anybody find closure carrying around a coffee grinder. Or being a coffee grinder, for that matter. He also thought the grinder looked a little dispirited. Its surface was dull, and the slight odor of coffee smelled a bit rancid.

They entered the giant main hall where intake windows lined one side. It reminded Winston of a busy bank.

"Here you are," said Margaret. "I believe you are seeing Tammy— third window from the left."

The thick carpet ended as Winston walked out into a two-story chamber floored with a light tan terrazzo that reflected light from huge stained-glass windows. He peered up at the windows, where a medieval knight was bowing before the ghost of an equally medieval woman. A huge banner across the far wall riffled slightly. Winston read the beautiful large letters: *We help you to work out what you should have worked out while your loved one was alive.*

Tammy turned out to be a bright and chipper dreadlocked blonde wearing a pink cardigan and orange lipstick. She grinned at Winston when he appeared at her window, holding up a folder stamped with CIP in gold leaf.

“Mr. Whithers? I have your pamphlets right here! So *exciting* that your wife has come back. Did you know it’s very rare for a pre-purchased haunting to occur this late in a death? It does happen, though I think your wife might have set a record—the whole church is aflutter!” Tammy clapped her fingertips with fervor. She then opened the folder and commenced pulling out colorful brochures. “This first one—” she held up a pamphlet that had a photo of a woman and man gazing lovingly at the front of the church, “—is for the newly haunted. It explains the terms and what you can and cannot do.”

“Cannot do?”

Tammy winked. “Sure! Such as, if you try to throw out the haunted item or remove it from your abode, the haunter gets an *unlimited* number of items to haunt. It’s all spelled out under the terms of the contract. Didn’t you read it when your wife signed up?”

Winston shuffled his feet, looking to his right and his left, “I wasn’t aware that a haunting had been paid for.”

Tammy gave him a knowing nod and leaned toward him. “Well, I admit that’s a little irregular, but it does happen, and I’m sorry to tell you this, there is nothing we can do about it once the haunting has begun.” She pulled the rest of the brochures out of the folder. “These will give you all the information you need. Now, I suggest you go down that hall—” She pointed to Winston’s right. “—and make an appointment for counseling. The sooner the better!”

Winston took the folder and headed past the line of windows into another long hall lined by doors hung with bright posters. Winston stopped to read the first one, which pictured a

woman in a field of daisies, photographed midspin. Her skirts swirled out as she held a blender in front of her, her expression of someone deeply happy and in love. The caption read *Still together, plus now he can really make you margaritas!*

Winston rolled his eyes, continuing on. A door down the hall was ajar, and hearing music, Winston paused. A sign taped to the door read *Shhh. Group Therapy in Session*. Winston peeked in from the side and saw a man playing a lively tune on a violin, tapping his foot while standing in the middle of a circle of seated people all holding musical instruments. The man finished with a flourish of the bow then held the violin in front of him, scowling. “Are you satisfied now, Iris? You happy? You made me play it. Not Vivaldi, not Mozart, but some down-home hillbilly trash.” A woman—the moderator, thought Winston—got up and patted him on the shoulder. Another woman clutching an oboe looked positively stricken. Winston moved on.

He found the waiting room at the end of the hall. A basket marked *Take a Number* held a roll of perforated tickets. Winston broke off number 356 and noted the sign over the receptionist’s desk blinking 340 in red lights.

Sighing, Winston sat down in a shiny Naugahyde chair next to a man reading a magazine. An older-model vacuum occupied the chair on the man’s other side.

A few minutes passed while Winston chipped away at his number with his fingernails, then he asked the man, “Do I have to wait if I just want to make an appointment?”

The man set down his magazine. “Yes,” he said. “You have to wait for everything.”

Winston inclined his head slightly at the vacuum and raised his eyebrows.

“My wife,” said the man. “She suffered from allergies her whole life and died four years ago of an asthma attack.” He leaned closer and held his hand up to hide his mouth: “Sometimes I vacuum the porch with her.”

Winston paused, not sure what to say. Fortunately the receptionist walked up behind them and addressed the man with the vacuum. “Hello, Mr. Shabib! You’re next in line for the counselor. And how is Mrs. Shabib today?”

Mr. Shabib stood and grasped the handle of the vacuum. “She says she’s fine except for the weather. The pollen is high today.” As he walked away he turned and gave Winston a nasty, vulpine smile.

Winston left after making an appointment for Tuesday next, and as he drove home, he reflected. Why was Mr. Shabib there if he didn’t like his wife that much? Who bought the contract? He resolved to try and do his best for Chloris. He owed her that much for the stability and happiness they’d shared.

As he pulled into the driveway he spotted Renee out watering her roses. She stopped and gave him a lovely smile. He waved briefly before he pulled into the garage, knowing he’d have to say something to her. It was going to be difficult. He felt a great sadness as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom, but as he approached the bed an overwhelming curiosity and excitement prevailed.

Winston sat on the edge and smoothed the quilt. “We’re alone, Chloris. I went to the Church today and got a copy of your contract. They said to check and make sure you had the senses you paid for. Can you see me?”

“Not really. I can feel the light from the window plus sort of sense misty shapes as they move around. Is that correct?”

“Yes, according to the pamphlets and the contract. What else can you sense?”

“I can hear, obviously.” This said with just a touch of spite. “I can’t taste, thank God. I can feel, so I guess I have the sense of touch. . . . Oh, I can smell you. That toilet water Renee wears almost choked me all day.”

The doorbell chimed. “Gee, I wonder who that could be?” Chloris said.

When Winston opened the door, there stood Renee, holding a casserole dish from which wafted the aroma of cheese and a heavily spiced tomato sauce. Winston loved Renee’s lasagna. She had brought it to him quite often after Chloris passed. The first time he’d squinted at the pan with a surprised air, but she’d hastened to tell him that this pan wasn’t Clark—that pan had been put away, never to be used again.

“I thought you might need dinner since I imagine you have quite a bit of talking to do,” Renee said.

“Thanks,” said Winston feeling lame and putting his hands in his pockets.

“Winston, I—” Renee started.

At the same time Winston said, “Renee, I—”

They both gave an uneasy laugh, and Renee started again. “Winston, I know you have work to do. I am not going to get in the way, but don’t forget I’m here. Just next door.”

“I won’t,” said Winston, taking the dish from her. Good solid Renee.

Back upstairs; he spread the pamphlets on the bed. “At the Church they also said the first thing you need to do is move to something smaller. I think it’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Well, number one, you never did like my snoring, and number two, if you’re smaller I can take you places like the movies and out to dinner and—” He hesitated. “—to counseling.”

“Did the Church recommend that too?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. How do I move?”

“I’ll read you through it. It’s in the second pamphlet.” Winston looked at his hands and realized he had been plucking at the quilt so much he had ripped a piece of fabric. He wondered if Chloris felt him doing that?

Instead of scolding him though, she asked, “This will be sort of nice, won’t it?”

Winston searched his heart, and in spite of his desire for Renee, thought, yes. “I love you, Chloris.”

The bed glowed.

An hour later, Winston sat in the kitchen with the toaster in front of him on the kitchen table. It had changed. The dent where one of their cats had knocked it off the counter was gone, and it was definitely shinier. It had taken a few tries. The pamphlet had given vague instructions to find the object with “the most vibrations,” which confused both of them, until Chloris had concentrated and had gotten the hang of it.

“Are you ready?” Winston asked.

“I think so. Remember how we used to laugh at the people carrying things around?”

Smiling, Winston said, “Like that woman with the vibrator in the movie theater?”

“Yeah, what a thing for someone to pick! And the guy who always had the drill next to him on the park bench? Now, you’ll be the guy with the toaster.” She paused, and Winston could hear Renee out mowing her yard. “Do you think . . . would you mind if instead of going to counseling we could just do things together for a while? Sort of get to know one another again?”

“I think that’s a fine idea. I’ll cancel the appointment.” Winston did not want to turn into Mr. Shabib. “It’ll be okay, Chloris. Let’s go out.”

The toaster felt more solid to him, heavier, when he hefted it and wrapped the cord around the base. They went to the park and sat on a bench. Dogs barked and children shrieked as they played on the playground. A bike rider rang his bell on the pathway.

“Winston?”

“Yes, Chloris?”

“I never really listened to these sounds before. There was always so much to do.”

They sat on the bench until the sun set.

When their friends heard Chloris was back, they came by in the evenings to say hello and catch up. Life became quite busy for Winston and Chloris. Occasionally Winston would see Renee outside and lift his hand. Renee always smiled.

One time, after a nice dinner of toasted cheese sandwiches, Winston asked Chloris, “What was death like?”

Her voice replied evenly, “Well, technically, I’m still dead.”

Winston put his hand to his forehead and rubbed at it. “Oh. Well, yeah, of course. I know you’re not *alive* alive, it’s just—it’s just been so nice to hear your voice again. I missed you so much, Chloris.”

“Really? How long was I dead before you took up with Renee, huh?”

“Chloris, honey, you’d been dead two years.”

There was a long sigh. “I know. I’ve been thinking about that since I got here. It didn’t feel that long to me.”

“Tell me about it.”

“At first, it was like falling backward into a river. I was so peaceful, floating and staring up at the bluest sky. I wasn’t scared, and I think—I sort of bumped against a bank and climbed out. It’s hard to remember. I walked for a while, and then I remember seeing the most wonderful shopping mall. It just glowed with light! I entered and *there they were*—all the stores I wanted to shop at my whole life and all just filled with wonderful things and I could have anything I wanted!

Winston winced at that statement, having never made much money. His wasn’t the type of work where you could bring in extra cash. Chloris had always made do, but he knew when she would sit down with a pile of catalogs that there was something she desired. She would gaze around their tiny house holding a home-and-garden magazine out in front of her, and he could tell she was imagining what it would be like to live in a place she could decorate. She sometimes cut glossy photos out of fashion magazines, and he tried, one Christmas, to give her a fancy lamp like the one she’d snipped out, but she returned it saying it was much too expensive.

“Plus,” Chloris continued, “the salespeople were so helpful. At first.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, after a while, since the merchandise never changed, it got a little boring, and, well, the *ambiance* wasn’t as inviting. I kept wandering from store to store, and all the bags got so heavy. I’d just set them down and go and get some new ones. That’s when I realized they were starting to disappear.”

“What, the bags disappeared?”

“No. The salespeople did. Until, finally, there was no one there. I didn’t really notice right away because I was so busy walking around? But whenever I tried to talk to someone, they

just . . . well, they just turned away and never came back. It was like they wanted me to *leave!*
After a time I got lonely.”

“Then what happened?”

“Everything went black, and I got scared, and then I was in a strange place where I could hear groaning and . . .”

Winston tried to ruffle his hair once more. “Don’t go on. I think I know what’s next.”
They were both silent, and then he carried her into the den to watch TV.

About a week later, something occurred to Winston as he was washing dishes. Chloris was on the countertop humming along with the radio.

“Chloris,” he said. “Why did you buy a contract?”

“I thought you would need me. I was sure that you would be despondent.”

Winston thought she rolled the syllables around like they were hard candy, and he felt a bit irritated. “I was. I’m still sad when I think about that time.” Winston remembered staying in the den for months, unable to sleep in his bed. Living in a stupor, he’d answered the door and eaten Renee’s lasagna. Finally, one day, he heard someone mowing his yard and was ashamed to find it was Renee. She had done so much for him, and he hadn’t even thanked her. He started to work outdoors, letting the fresh air and sun revive his spirits. He began to look forward to chance meetings with Renee.

“But, now I’m back, Winston,” Chloris said. “We’re together again.” The last word trailed off.

Winston, curiously, discovered he had mixed feelings about this, but held his tongue.

They fell into their old habits, the only exception being that each evening he carried Chloris into the park so she could hear life around her. In the morning, Winston left Chloris on the kitchen counter so she could hear the radio. When he came home, he ate dinner and told her about his day. After an evening of game shows, he took her upstairs to bed and tucked her in. At first, he'd wanted to snuggle, but Chloris didn't like it, saying he left fingerprints on her. Lately, he'd caught himself fondly reminiscing more and more of Renee on that side of the bed and of the comfort of being with a living person. Good solid Renee.

One sundown, when he asked, "What do you miss most about having a body?" she answered so promptly he imagined she must have been already thinking about it.

"I think I miss wiggling my toes in the grass and having bubble baths." There was a long sigh. "Plus reading a book or eating a good meal."

Winston was surprised. She hadn't even mentioned the obvious. "What about sex?"

"Oops," said Chloris. "You got me there. Really, Winston, I'm not going to lie. I don't miss it at all."

Winston was so shocked he couldn't speak.

Chloris continued, "And even if you don't like the truth, I'm going to tell you . . . I faked it a lot."

Winston's mind swirled. "Faked it? Didn't like it?"

"I'm not saying I didn't like it, Winston. It just mattered a whole lot more to you."

"Why didn't you ever say no?"

"Because it made you so happy."

"I thought it made you happy too."

"Well, Winston, frankly, I thought about redecorating a lot while it was going on."

Winston sat on the bench, cogitating. If Chloris didn't like it, did that mean Renee didn't like it either? Why would Renee bring him all that lasagna and mow his lawn? It was a lot to ponder.

As time went on, Chloris seemed more and more determined to be brutally honest. Winston learned she despised his taste in clothing and music, thought he was a boring conversationalist and that he walked funny. He was bewildered every time she pointed out something new, because it was like watching her through her illness, except this time it wasn't her body but his conception of their happiness together that was disappearing moment by moment. He realized that they had never gone to counseling and wondered what Chloris would say if he brought it up again.

After about eight months, their friends stopped visiting because Winston, now self-conscious about translating Chloris's comments, would sit dully, repeating her words without inflection. It became awkward. Chloris also complained that there was no way to have "girl talk" because it couldn't be one on one, and she also got mad when Winston didn't relay her words exactly as she said them.

She became sullen and started to burn his toast. Her exterior took on a dullness that Winston didn't like. He felt inadequate.

A black truck began appearing in Renee's driveway in the afternoons. Winston, fearing eventually finding the truck there in the morning, began to have flashes of temper toward Chloris, purposefully putting greasy fingerprints on her and buying oversized bagels.

One morning after she had burned his toast, he snapped at her, asking, "Chloris, what do you *want*?"

"I thought there would be more to this," she said. "Being a toaster is so limiting."

“Do you think it’s finally time to go to the counselor?” He’d been asking her this for a few weeks now.

Chloris sighed. “Winston, I don’t think that’s necessary.”

Winston was disappointed. Whatever she wanted, he didn’t seem able to provide it. He sat with a cup of lukewarm coffee, tapping his finger on the table until he remembered it irritated her.

Chloris said, “You asked me a while ago why I came back. Remember how I told you I thought you would be miserable without me?”

Winston said nothing.

“Well, sitting on a counter all day with nothing to do but think has a way of changing your perspective. I see now that I came back because I thought I would be miserable without *you*. The truth is that even though that mall was weird and sort of lonely and I thought I missed you, I realize now that it wasn’t you I missed, just people in general. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so,” Winston said.

“Oh, Winston. I’m already so tired of being here. It’s like returning to a boring old routine, and frankly, I think you’ll be happier with Renee.” Chloris was silent for a moment. “I was jealous at first, but I think . . . well, I think it’s for the best. I don’t know what’s ahead if I go back, but if I return to that mall, I think I’ll drop all those bags of stuff and just go outside. I’m not interested in ‘stuff’ anymore. Being a toaster has broken me of that desire. All I really want is to be able to walk and run and talk like a person again. I’m ready to go on.”

“So soon?” Winston almost felt panicked. “But you paid for five years.”

“Yes, and *what* a mistake that was. I’m sorry, Winston, but I need you to get those pamphlets out. I am resolved.”

“Chloris, once you go, I don’t think you can come back.”

“Sweetie, I don’t *want* to come back. I want a fresh start; and Winston, you’re not just a little tedious. I see that now, and I don’t need to stay any longer or have a counselor tell me the same thing. I’m ready.”

Not sure whether to feel hurt, sad, or elated, Winston stood and fetched the pamphlet from the back of the folder. It was titled, *Moving on up* . . . He read the instructions to Chloris.

The sides of the toaster began to shine. He heard her voice: “It’s been instructive, Winston. I release my contract.”

The words “No, Chloris, I can’t lose you again,” hurled themselves out of Winston’s mouth.

“You’re not losing me again. I wasn’t really here. I was a toaster, for Pete’s sake. There’s no way to make love to a toaster, unless—” She laughed, and it came out a silvery tinkle that had a bit of the toaster *ding* in it. “—you want to be really perverted.”

The toaster grew still shinier and began throwing off light in sparkles and flecks that spattered the ceiling and walls with brilliance.

“Good-bye, Winston.”

“Good-bye, Chloris,” he called.

The light became brighter until Winston had to squeeze his eyes shut, putting his hands over them too. He could feel a sort of heat, and then it vanished. When he opened his eyes the toaster sat on the table, dented once more.

Winston stood there for a while, then took the toaster, wrapping the cord gently around it, and put it on the mantel. He couldn’t imagine plugging it in again. He stepped back, then stepped forward again to brush a crumb off the top.

Outside he could hear a pair of hedge clippers. Their cadence, the monotony of the clip, clip, clip, was soothing. He raised his hand to his head and rubbed the bare surface. It felt good. He went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, but instead took a deep breath, walked over and gently removed the prints of the squirrels from the wall, laying them on the kitchen table. He tapped his fingers on them, a soft tap, tap, tap.

The kitchen counter felt emptier, larger now. Winston resolved to go and buy a new toaster.

Soon.

PHYLUM:
FAIR IS FAIR

Ruth folded her thin arms in front of her. “If Lars Johanssen wins first prize again I will smack him upside the head. No one deserves to win three times in a row.”

“No you won’t, now hush.” Old Vick whispered back, taking the opportunity to give Ruth a sturdy pinch.

Ruth grinned. Seven o’clock in the morning; end of summer heat building as the two women stood side by side at the entrance to a huge canvas tent. Ruth, the taller, rubbed her hands briskly with nervous energy, while Old Vick, shorter but much wider, looked around, eyes wide and anxious. Above them hung a banner declaring “Mishawaka County Fair ’86.” A smaller sign taped crookedly beneath announced in thick black marker: “Tomato Judging, 11 AM.”

They walked through, each dragging a dolly. Ahead, a smattering of fellow contestants surrounded two long parallel tables already draped in white plastic. “Do you see him?” Ruth asked her friend as they adjusted their eyes to the dimmer light. Ruth craned her neck, scanning.

Old Vick obliged Ruth, turning her head this way and that. “I told you he’d be done by now—he gets here at the crack of dawn. We’re never going to catch him setting up if we don’t get here earlier.”

“Well, I can’t leave Sadie until the dog sitter gets there, can I?”

“You treat that dog like your own child, Ruth.” Old Vick started for the tables. “Let’s see if we can find our spots.”

Ruth found her index card at the far end of the first table and Old Vick was at the beginning of the other. Once the display was built they were to tape the same index card face

down in front of their entry for visible names might affect the judging. In Ruth's case it was a very good thing—she and the main judge, Candace Greely, were not on good terms and hadn't been for a few years. Ruth got busy on her display.

Just that morning, Ruth had snipped eight of her most sturdy bright pink zinnias; now she laid them in a crisscross pattern on the table. Into this she wove tall yellow cosmos, then green romaine, finishing with dark orange marigolds. For height, she stood asparagus fronds in a semi circle and, in the center, laid three of her plumpest Cherokee Purples. The contrast of the dark green and purple-red tomato with the bright flowers was charming. She added three black Ananas Noires and as a finale she dotted each crisscross with a combination of fiery red and bright orange cherry tomatoes. Rubbing her back, satisfied, she went to find Old Vick.

The smaller woman was on the backside of the other table. Old Vick had threaded seven of her prized white dahlias onto heavy electricians wire to create a cascading tower. Among the dahlias she inserted stout mesh holders for tomatoes and when Ruth found her she had just finished balancing the last Beefsteak tomato near the top. She then laid dark green ferns around the base and wiped her hands on a towel.

"It looks stunning," said Ruth, a little jealous of the simplicity and elegance of the display but smug in the fact that Beefsteak was a common tomato. "We've got two hours. Let's see if we can figure out which display is Lars's and then go get an elephant ear. Nothing better than fried dough with sugar sprinkled all over."

They walked to the front table while a melody from the carousel floated in, evoking a memory of her daughter riding the wooden horses with her best friend, Young Vick. A cow lowed, the sound accompanied by sharp chopped syllables of an auctioneer. Sunlight filtered

through joins in the canvas, and sawdust kicked up by the crowd, danced. A breeze fanned the odor of manure.

Ruth breathed deeply. The ritual of the fair accompanied her favorite season, fall, and as much as she loved her summer garden, she also loved the culmination. It was a time of fullness, of harvest, and, of course, the chance to be admired and revered for her expertise.

The two women meandered along the length of the tables, admiring brilliant tomato collections. Some reclined on beds of flowers, some balanced on wire frames adorned with frilled kale or endive, and in one garish display, a butternut squash, carved to look like a swan, trailed little golden yellow pear tomatoes. Ruth, upon seeing it, broke out in a fit of giggles claiming that the yellow ones appeared to be a series of turds that the swan was leaving behind. Old Vick said she thought they must be seen as the little cygnets. “Use your imagination, Ruth.”

“I thought I was,” Ruth replied.

People milled around, finishing their displays, talking in small groups. Ruth and Old Vick tried to be nonchalant as they wandered—it was considered to be bad form to stare at any one display before the judging. You might be stealing last minute ideas.

Old Vick touched Ruth’s arm and tilted her head. Near the end of the second table was an entry that had to belong to Lars—Ruth knew it just as if she’d put it together herself. She had watched those tomatoes grow all through the summer: each Brandywine and Borghese, Stupice and Mortgage Lifter, Yellow Pear and Zebra Cherry. She’d identified them by poring through seed catalogs at her house. There had been some trouble with the Tigerella until she found it in the *Seeds of Change* Catalog. He’d gone organic on her.

Ruth and Old Vick slowed their stroll down the table to a crawl as they passed the perfect pyramid erected on wide grape leaves. Ruth recognized the bottom tomatoes immediately; there was no mistaking those lustrous pleats. “Zapotec—they’re Zapotec!”

“Calm down.” Old Vick attempted to take Ruth’s arm in order to lead her away from the display.

Ruth shook her off—no being coy now, she was staring outright. Why had she not seen this coming? It must have been the furthest plant—the one hidden by the fence. She should have known he would do this—he had scooped her. No one had been able to grow Zapotec. Goodness knows she had tried for years: babying seeds along, buying healthy plants. The same thing happened every summer, one day she would go out to check on her garden and the plant would have withered overnight.

Ruth closely inspected the other tomatoes seeing Brandywines on the next layer, then Tigerellas and so forth, up to a tiny green tomato on the top. There was something strange about that top tomato and she bent down to get a closer look. Scandalized, she realized it wasn’t a tomato at all—it was a tiny unripe tomatillo. This was against the rules! Ruth was sure Lars knew the rules just as well as she did. The only plants from the Nightshade family that could be exhibited were *Lycopersicons* and this was decidedly not. It was a *Physalis*.

She turned around to see Lars stride into the tent. Had he seen her? Immediately Ruth grabbed Old Vick’s arm. “Let’s eat,” she said. Somehow, she was going to have to find and speak to Candace Greeley before the judging. Lars needed to be disqualified.

Ruth first came to gardening after she was widowed, eleven years earlier. It was a lost time when she would attach puppy Sadie’s harness and take her for long aimless walks, as if that

next footstep would be the one to lessen the pain. They usually ended their walk by turning left at the corner of Adams and Marquette, following the robotic plodding path they had constructed for themselves that led back home.

One day they turned a street earlier finding a fenced garden in the back yard of a plain red brick house. The colors attracted her, warming her—a riot of magentas standing upright in a bed, azure blues climbing the fence, deep oranges and light yellows draped over lattices. Ruth stood and let that life warm her, rubbing her hands as if above a fire. She walked home with an unusual sensation in her heart. It felt as if she had been given the tiniest bit of peace.

More walks fostered a slow illumination, as if each evening a microscopic black layer of grief was pared off. Ruth discovered that roses could climb trellises that included grapes and cucumbers. She began to attach names to flowers: daisies, marigolds, lobelia, asters; and to shapes: long beans, round cabbage, crescent moon pea pods.

Eventually, Ruth eyed the small weedy inch of land that her late husband had tilled to grow some rosemary and basil. Nothing much remained but a vague outline. So, while Sadie scratched at anthills, Ruth wandered over, knelt and gave a mound of crabgrass a half-hearted tug. The ground, still crumbly from a recent rain, gave way, leaving her with a handful of roots. Ruth looked down at the weed she had pulled and felt some sympathy for its wild bedraggled state. Still, the hole left by the weed seemed hopeful. Holes could be filled. The thought held promise and she squatted down, pulling and cleaning up the little patch of ground. Over the next two days she cleared the old patch and went further, ending up with a five by four foot plot of earth. She bought a tomato plant, a Beefsteak—stuck it in the middle of the empty plot, dropped a tomato cage over the top, and went and sat on the back porch eyeing it. The plant was keeled

over by the next morning but slowly recovered over the course of a week and in a month it was five feet high and covered with small green tomatoes. Ruth was hooked.

An hour before judging Ruth left Old Vick in the food tent, claiming she needed to use a Port-A-Potty. Not that she would ever consider using one—she'd held it for a whole day at the last fair, even though it probably contributed to her coming down with a horrible urinary tract infection the next week. No, Ruth had spotted Candace Greeley entering one. It made Ruth despise her even more, that the woman could bear to take down her panties in such a place—that God-awful smell. Candace emerged and headed for the temporary sinks that were set up to the side. Ruth caught up with her as she dried her hands on a paper towel. “Candace.”

“Ruth.”

There was no need to bother with formalities.

Candace folded her arms across the front of her lilac dress. “What is it? I was hoping we could get through at least one year without your usual drama.”

Ruth reddened. “Drama? I’m the drama queen here? You took away my trophy and tried to have me disqualified for a tomato that you didn’t recognize. Who’s supposed to be the expert?” That embarrassment in front of the crowd was one of Ruth’s worst memories.

“I said I was sorry five years ago. I’ve said it every year since, when you always decide to announce loudly to the crowd that I’m not worthy to be a judge.” The front of Candace’s neck mottled, “What is it *now*?”

Ruth opened her mouth. She didn’t want Lars to win—he shouldn’t be allowed to cheat—but, in a moment of indecision, Ruth allowed to herself that he did have the superior

entry. Anyone could see that his tomatoes were better than every one else's. That wasn't the issue though. "Lars Johanssen should be disqualified."

"Oh, for God's sake, Ruth," said Candace throwing the paper towel in the trash. "Over what?" Candace held her hand up, palm out. "Wait, I don't even want to know what you've cooked up now. Listen to yourself. You're so jealous; you're willing to sell your integrity for a tomato contest. I've had enough." Candace walked away with long strides leaving Ruth to gulp air and eventually wander back to the food tent to find Old Vick—who immediately asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing," said Ruth firmly. She wasn't going to blab to Old Vick but in her heart she knew Candace wasn't being fair.

At eleven, Ruth and Old Vick stood near the front of the crowd just inside the entrance to the competition tent. Old Vick still burping from the combination of fried dough and Coke.

Ruth nudged Old Vick and nodded toward the entrance. "Here comes Candace Greely in that horrible old sun hat." Smarting from their conversation made Ruth mean and she waved an imaginary hat as if she was fanning herself, "Oh my, I just cannot believe how hoot it is in here!"

Old Vick's face cracked into a smile and she covered her light laugh with her hand. "She's not that bad and she certainly doesn't say 'hoot'"

"Yes, she does, just like an owl. You wait and see. She'll put on that fake fancy accent like she was from some other country." In a lower voice, Ruth said, "I've never met a smarter woman who tried so hard to be stupid."

Old Vick kept her gaze on the entrance.

Two men in dark suits followed Candace and they came to a stop just inside the entrance. Each carried a notepad and pen and stood for a moment as if absorbing the impact of their arrival. The crowd hushed, but some shoved quietly to get a glimpse.

As if on cue, the trio advanced dramatically toward the first of the long tables, raising their notepads at the first entry. They commenced a rapid jotting.

Ruth whispered to Old Vick, “Do you recognize those men?”

“No.” Old Vick’s alternately smoothed and plucked at the front of her teal blouse, “but I think one of them is Mr. Robertson, the county extension agent?”

“Wow. A celebrity.” Ruth squinted at the man who in turn squinted at the tomatoes. “I wonder who the last one is?”

“No idea. I’ve never seen him before.”

The judges continued their march, stripping off their dark coats and rolling up their shirtsleeves in the heat. They were almost to Lars’s pyramid; Ruth tapped Old Vick as she nodded toward the tall grey-haired man standing away from the crowd. Lars appeared crowned by a halo of floating bits of dust revolving in the tent-filtered sunlight. He stood off by himself but wasn’t above peeking at the table as the judges made their way towards his entry.

“Typical, “ sniffed Ruth, “He’s too good to come stand with the rest of us and look at that smirk. He’s just the cat who’s eaten the cream isn’t he?” Ruth hadn’t told Old Vick about the tomatillo or her run in with Candace.

“Oh, you are just so full of sour grapes. He’s always nice to me when he comes into the grocery.”

“Yeah, if nice means actually looking you in the eye and speaking. Does he speak?”

“Well... not really.” Old Vick aimed her eyes upward, thoughtful.

“Anyway, you’re checking him out. He has to be nice to you or you might overcharge him on apple juice or something.”

“He doesn’t buy apple juice.”

“Well, beer then. Something.” Ruth looked down at Old Vick. “What *does* he buy?”

“Ruth. I can’t tell you that!”

“Why? I don’t see why not –you’re not a priest or a doctor. Come on. Tell me one thing that he’s bought that’s kind of... questionable.” Ruth leaned in close.

“I can’t. It makes me uncomfortable to talk about this. Would you like everyone to know that you buy Depends?”

“Shush! Don’t say that so loud!”

“Well then.” Old Vick crossed her arms.

“Okay. Be that way. Look, they’ve gotten to his.” Both women stretched their necks to see the judges. One of the men gestured to the others in a manner suggestive of deep appreciation and the other man even walked around the table to see it from the backside. Finally, they started to write but Candace Greeley stopped and stooped to peer at the top tomato. She stood again, tapping her pen against her teeth. Her wide brimmed hat twisted back and forth as she looked out into the crowd. Finally, she lowered her head and continued writing.

“What was that about?” asked Old Vick.

“I have absolutely no idea,” said Ruth. It was just a little fib.

Ruth’s brain burned while the judges continued. It seemed to her that they spent an abnormally short period of time looking at her entry but Old Vick told her she was just imagining things again. When the three reached Old Vick’s display, the stranger actually placed

his hand over his heart in homage. Ruth gave her anxious friend a hug in solidarity, keeping her meaner thoughts about common tomatoes to herself.

Eventually, the pens were set down and the judges left the tent to confer. The mood in the tent changed. Anxious contestants cracked a few smiles, some left to seek refreshments. Most stayed put.

Eight years before, neon yellow “For Sale” signs appeared on the front and side lawns of the plain red brick house. It took about a year, but eventually the house and garden changed hands. Ruth fretted during the time it was for sale and worried even more when the “Sold” sign went up. She kept watch carefully but there were few changes made. All that happened was that some of the shapes of the garden beds changed and plants that weren’t thriving disappeared. Tall metal cages showed up at the end of May and by June interlaced green stems gradually swallowed them. Tomatoes in differing shapes and colors sprouted—wild and profuse—the plants grew into small mountains, covered in fruit. Sure, there had been tomatoes grown there before, but not this assortment, this diversity. Ruth found her competitive nature sparked and she went back to the garden on the corner with a different purpose now, to prove to herself that she could grow the same tomatoes. It was a challenge.

She’d catch a glimpse of the owner occasionally, shoveling, pruning or picking—a tall gray haired man who never looked in her direction. One evening he was out watering and Ruth got enough courage to wave and call to him, “Hi. I like your garden!”

Nothing.

She waved harder.

Finally, he raised his head and looked at her with no expression. She left quickly, embarrassed.

A week later he was working right near the fence and couldn't avoid her wave, "What kind of tomato is that?" She was pointing at one that turned nearly black as it ripened. He looked where her finger was pointing and muttered something she couldn't hear. "What?" she called.

He turned abruptly and went in the house.

Well. Ruth huffed internally. Not very neighborly. She stopped going by his garden in the evening and started early morning walks, hoping he wouldn't be out at that time.

She described the man to Old Vick at the grocery. "Who is that guy?"

"Could be it's Lars Johanssen, or that's what his name is on the credit card he uses." Old Vick said above the beeping of the checkout. "He moved in about the same time and likes to keep to himself. Tall? Gray hair?"

"Yeah, and a nasty attitude. Won't even look at me sometimes and then when I tried to talk to him he just walked away!"

Old Vick lifted a corner of her mouth. "Imagine that Ruth. Someone who walks away from people. Sound familiar?"

Forty minutes since the judges left to confer. Ruth checked her watch again and slipped a glance over in Lars' direction. The man hadn't moved and certainly no one had gone over to him to say hello. He stood with hands in pockets, staring down at his boots while kicking at dirt.

"Why do you think he's that way?" Ruth asked Old Vick.

Old Vick looked up from working on the crossword puzzle book she kept in her purse. "Maybe he's just shy?"

“I think he hates people. He probably hates me for winning the two times I did.” Ruth thought of her mantelpiece, the two trophies proudly displayed. She wondered where Lars had his two. He never seemed very happy when he won, though he won the only two years he had entered. He was slow coming up to get his trophy and once he had it, ducked his head, waved a hand, and left. “I think he uses his garden to set up a barrier to relationships. That’s it. His garden provides a *physical barrier!*”

Old Vick dropped her arm holding the pencil and stared at Ruth. “Number one –he probably doesn’t even know you won and likely doesn’t care, and number two –you’ve been watching too much daytime TV again. You need to get a life and quit worrying about anyone’s but yours.”

Ruth was too excited to pay attention. She was on to something.

A man stuck his head in the tent and called, “They’re on their way back!”

Returning contestants and family members who had left started massing through the entrance. It quickly got crowded again with more people than before waiting for the results of the judging.

Candace marched in, the two men striding behind. They walked to the center of the tent and someone handed Candace a wireless microphone. She smiled and flicked it on, “Oh my. What a wonderful day-what a beautiful day for the annual tomato judging! It’s not too hoot in here for you is it?”

Ruth smiled, not looking at Old Vick.

“My name is Candace Greeley, but I am sure I know just about everyone in here! This gentleman to my right is Bud Robertson, your county extension agent.

The crowd clapped, enthusiastic.

Candace went on, “Let me introduce our special guest judge! This here is Mr. Grosvenor, the Director of the Mishawaka County branch of the City Museum! Now folks, I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” here Candace leaned forward, “Mr. Grosvenor doesn’t know a darn thing about tomatoes but he sure knows a lot about art! He’s here to be our judge for artistic presentation!”

Ruth noticed some concerned faces about the tent as the crowd clapped again. Just then a diminutive woman came up behind Candace and tapped her on the shoulder. Candace turned to her and smiled, once again putting the mic up to her chin. “Well, this is just grand, folks! We were informed last year that there are some of you who are hard of hearing out there, so this year we have an interpreter, a sign language expert from the community college!”

The woman moved her hands, beginning to sign at Candace’s words. At that same moment, Ruth saw Lars Johanssen move – actually walking forward to get a better view. The woman waved hello to Lars and he signed rapidly back at her. The interpreter smiled broadly.

Ruth’s surprise was reflected on many faces. “I’ll be damned, “ she said because she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“All these years and I never knew,” whispered Old Vick. She put her fingers to her lips. “I should have known –I should have noticed. Why didn’t I pay more attention?”

“You! None of us paid enough attention. No, don’t feel too bad—” Ruth tried puzzling it out, “—maybe he just didn’t want anyone to know, and God knows you’re busy enough at the store.” She patted her friend’s shoulder. “One thing I’m certain of is that old cuss must be pretty damn good at lip reading.” Ruth remembered the times she tried to talk to him by the garden and thought he had ignored her. “Physical barrier, my rump,” she muttered, letting her theory go.

They jumped when Candace announced, “Okay, let’s get on with the judging!” The three judges moved down the table past Lars’s display; Ruth mentally focusing on the tiny top tomatillo on the pyramid. “Third prize this year goes to—” the three judges stopped next to Ruth’s display, “—Anne Southerland!”

Ruth blew out a deep breath and watched as the woman with the display right next to hers went up to get her big yellow ribbon. The display was nice but not as creative as Ruth’s, she was satisfied she was still in the running for the greater prize.

Ruth blew out her breath again when second prize went to a man that Ruth knew of but had never met. Earlier, she had admired his large pink Brandywines.

“And now, to announce first place, our special guest judge, Mr. Grosvenor!”

Oh, just get *on* with it, thought Ruth.

Mr. Grosvenor brought the mic to his face. “Thanks so much ladies and gentlemen, I’m so honored to be here. When I attended Art School back in...”

Ruth impatiently watched the small woman interpret the words to Lars. He watched her hands, sometimes smiling. The attitude of his body was so much more relaxed than Ruth had ever seen him and at one point he laughed, *laughed* at what the woman was signing to him. “... and because of this perfect aesthetic I am so very proud to award first prize to—“ Ruth shut her eyes and sucked in a breath, “Not Lars Johanssen. Please God, if there is any justice in this damn world, not that old prick, Lars Johanssen.” She waited.

And waited.

Ruth blew out her breath and opened her eyes—to Old Vick and the crowd all turned to her. She’d not thought the words; she’d said them out loud. Even Candace and the man with the mic were staring at her. Old Vick eyes reflected a deep disappointment. Not Lars Johanssen

though, Ruth could see him still watching the interpreter, who, thankfully, had stopped signing. The only sound was a huge exaggerated sigh coming from Candace Greeley.

In a stroke of grace that Ruth didn't deserve, Mr. Grosvenor coughed, "Ah yes, let's continue; I was about to announce First prize. He waved his hand to Candace and the other judge, "Why don't we move over to that display." The judges moved with the crowd following. The crowd, that is, except for Ruth who stood and hoped she could escape the tent without much fuss.

The judges stopped in front of Old Vick's display. Mr. Grosvenor turned the index card over, "Mrs. Victoria Martin wins First place!"

Relief as cold as lemonade on a hot day filled Ruth. She wished she stood next to Old Vick and not in purgatory behind the crowd, but she could see Old Vick clutch her throat and hear her squeak, "Oh my!"

Go on, Old Vick, Ruth thought, Go on and get your trophy.

Later, after Ruth had apologized profusely to just about everyone but especially to Old Vick for interrupting her moment, they loaded up what was left of their displays along with the rest of the contestants pulling their entries down and boxing things up. The buzz of noise and conversation felt soothing: warm bath, cup of hot tea comfortable. Most people had laughed when she had approached to apologize, just shaking their heads with wry smiles. There were a few sharp comments about minding her own business which Ruth took as she should – with a good dose of humble pie. Candace had taken Ruth aside and told her that although Ruth had been correct and Lars had been disqualified, it was not public knowledge and that kind of behavior would not be tolerated at future contests. A very meek Ruth had merely nodded her head.

Now, an older couple approached Old Vick with congratulatory smiles, and Ruth, not wanting to be a fifth wheel to Old Vick's success, leaned against a dolly, twirling the remnant of one of her zinnias. She watched the crowd and spotted Lars, still conversing to the interpreter. As if he was on the same wavelength he raised his head and started in her direction. He walked with the interpreter, sporting a serious expression. Not quite a complete frown but his brows were lowered enough to sprout a deserved anxiety in Ruth's stomach. He stopped in front of Ruth and the three of them considered each other for a half second. He extended a callused hand, holding the green tomatillo, a large green pearl.

So he *had* seen her looking at it. Ruth took it from him, held it up to her eyes, admiring its perfect shape, the papery skin. She moved her gaze to Lars and he nodded his head. He hadn't wanted to win. Why did he even enter? Why would a man who didn't like people and couldn't even hear his name being called come back to the contest? It was a challenge.

Ruth smiled at the green dot she held, rubbing the remnant of the thin covering at the base. Candace had figured it out; she should give her more credit.

Ruth looked at Lars, "Why?" she mouthed.

He shrugged, turned to the interpreter moving his hands and fingers. The interpreter smiled at Ruth, "He says, 'This old prick likes to keep the judges on their toes.'"

Lars gave Ruth a slow wink and it occurred to her that this might be a side-of-the-nose gesture at all of them and it probably wasn't the first time.

Ruth handed the tomatillo back to Lars who gave it an expert toss into a trash can about ten feet away.

"Touché," said Ruth.

CLASS:

ALCIE

She should have gone to The Park first. Her mother would have done that—done things the right way. If she'd gone to The Park first, she could have gotten a Spot. If she'd gotten a Spot, she could have already surreptitiously buried the box. Now she might be stuck with it for another year and her mother would have to wait. It was enough to make her cry; instead Alcie chewed on a fingernail. Gnawed on it, more like, making a sort of snapping crunching noise that caused the woman ahead of her in line to turn around twice.

Exactly one year ago, Alcie spent her Emergence Day with her mother. They had done what they always did on their shared day—gone to The Park, using up their whole three hours idling happily in the sun, then going to the Church of the Aged God where they wrapped parcels for distribution to the moderately wealthy. It had been a good day, sunny with a bit of a breeze. Alcie's mother had been killed exactly two weeks later—a bus jumped the curb when she was walking to work.

When Alcie had picked the box up at the reprocessing center, the same day as her mother's death, it had taken the man behind the glass five minutes to tear his eyes away from dog videos on his monitor. Alcie liked dog videos just as much as anybody, but having to wait for her mother's remains caused her heart to bash against her chest, the skin of her face to tighten. Alcie knew those signs and they made her uncomfortable, symptoms of her impulsiveness. "Sign here," he'd finally mumbled, pointing to a line on the form he'd slapped on the counter. She had, and he'd slid his window shut, preventing her from asking any questions.

Back at work after her two-hour grief break, her co-workers wanted her to open it. She'd been too afraid. What if it contained a whole finger, or worse, an eyeball? She'd heard stories. Since then, Alcie had decorated the box with pretty rubber bands, partly to brighten it up and partly because she was terrified of it opening by accident.

Now, it was her Emergence day again and everything that Alcie had planned for the day was turning wrong. All Alcie had wanted was a taste—no, not even a taste—that was too much to hope for, the scent would have been enough. A real strawberry. Real—not the wilted, moldy, genetic variant they had in grocery stores in her neighborhood. And then to come all this way and find they didn't have a single one, not a single one. She was beginning to think that perhaps her co-worker, who had bragged about sampling one at this exact store, had exaggerated. She should have gone to The Park first. If she couldn't get in, she'd have to keep the box for another year. It would sit on her dresser, a tiny brown box wrapped in multicolored rubber bands, but in Alcie's mind it was a monolith, a gigantic crushing stone, an accusing weight.

In line, Alcie alternated between her ragged fingernail, studying the back of the statuesque woman in front of her, and checking her purse to see that the box had not opened. The woman in front of her was fascinating—what would it be like to wear clothes like that—and to a grocery store too? Trylon top, beige ambi-suede pants, stilettos with the latest transference technology—this was clothing she'd only read about in her flash magazines. The stilettos updated metabolic information every evening based on foot sweat, relaying this information to the owner's kitchen, which got to work the next morning creating a nutritious shake to take care of any deficiencies.

Curiosity taking precedence, Alcie leaned over, pretending to scratch her knee. The woman's cart was piled with expensive replifish packets, a carton of real milk, salad, fruit and

other items Alcie didn't recognize. She blurted, "Is that all for just one person?" and regretted it instantly. The tall woman swiveled around again. Sculpted brows lowering and upper lip rising as if she smelled something rank; the woman pushed her cart to the edge of the buffer.

Alcie ducked her head, as people looked in her direction. Someone hissed, "City Hick," and Alcie wished, once more, that she could control her nature. Bad enough to be caught prying but to be seen gawking like an idiot? Alcie shook her head at herself as whispers came from two women in the next line over. The list of mistakes kept in her head expanded by one more: Wore synthetic leather coat to fancy grocery store. She should have known better, should have thought before running out that morning. It was in the poorest of taste to wear even *simulated* animal skin, but she'd been so keyed up –barely sleeping the night before –that she'd not considered her appearance, only the alluring possibility of catching sight of real strawberries, perhaps a whiff of real coffee beans.

She'd been planning this day for so long: grocery and strawberries; The Park; box buried. Now, the morning was speeding away and all the wonderful daydreams she'd had about wandering brightly lit aisles were receding. The reality was that when the Entry of the store scanned her, it spit out only a half-hour time card. She hadn't expected to be timed, hadn't even considered the possibility; it was such a blow. Then the store was crowded and she'd been so confused by the colors and abundance that she'd ended up in line with just a plasti-foil packet of crackers in her cart.

"Please lean in for retinal scan," said a neutral metallic voice at the buffer entry.

The tall woman in front of Alcie leaned in towards the small screen. "Welcome back Ciarra," the monitor said, its tone becoming a shade warmer as the woman straightened and walked forward, blurring for a nano second as she passed into the personal buffer before the

checkout. Alcie couldn't hear what was being said to her but she assumed it was pleasing as the woman smiled, smoothed the hair around her face with an exaggerated motion, then picked up and paged through a glossy fashion magazine before tossing it into her cart. Alcie rolled the woman's name silently over her tongue, Ciarra, Ciarra.

Last year, as Alcie and her mother wrapped packages on their Emergence Day, her mother had fretted, "You're twenty-eight and not married. Not even signed up for 'S. F. L.' What will happen to you? In two years you'll be ineligible."

"I'll be fine," she'd assured her mother, not telling her that 'Settle For Less' had already downgraded her to ineligible based on an Implied Instability Profile. Her mother knew she had a problem with self-control, no need to add to the terrible shame Alcie assumed she felt. Her mother died, and though Alcie's grief had been overwhelming, there was also the relief that her mother would never know.

"Please lean in for retinal scan."

Alcie jumped. She didn't want to call attention to herself again but she needed a moment to take a deep breath before she entered. The computer voice started again, "Please..."

"Go on," urged the man behind her, his tone irritated, impatient.

Resigned, Alcie pushed her almost empty cart forward, feeling the low vibration in her jaw signifying she had passed into the buffer. The calm blues and greens of the covers on the magazines immediately began to change, beautiful flower arrangements and lovely models faded—bleeding into harsh neon colors with two-inch blinking titles. While the neutral voice said, "Hello Alcie, would you like to purchase a magazine?" the first magazine altered its title to, *You're Fat!* Smaller titles appeared scrolling 'Gained a few pounds Alcie? More than a few it looks like! We'll show you how to get those off!' The second, formerly a gardening magazine,

changed into, *You Don't Have Money!* 'Alcie,' its sub-title flashed, 'your funds are so low they're almost non-existent! We can help you build a portfolio!' She gazed down the row; *Modern Architecture* now mutating into *Improve Your Slum!* Self-consciously she raised a hand to her head but drew it back. Disturbing her hair meant the hairless patch along one side of her head might show; she was hiding it by parting her hair in a different place. The doctor said it was stress and prescribed a vial of pills. He warned her that if she didn't take them she was in danger of the bald patch becoming permanent. The last magazine altered into *E-Match Love Stories*. 'Alcie!' it spelled in a dazzling orange, 'We can show you how to successfully live alone!' Nauseated, she pushed through the buffer and synced the cart with the register, her crackers moving forward toward the scanner.

"Good Morning, Alcie," the register said, the same neutral voice issuing from the speaker-box.

Alcie replied immediately, "Good Morning." If this register were the same as other grocery stores then if you didn't reply, it would say the same thing in a louder tone.

"I see you bought crackers today. Did you know that there are healthier choices for your body mass?

"Yes."

"Would you like for me to ring for a healthier choice?"

"No." Alcie chewed on her fingernail.

"Well, then Alcie, It's your funeral."

"What?" Alcie looked around. The computer was silent. "Did... did you say something about a funeral?" Maybe she misheard?

“I said nothing about a funeral. Are you feeling ill? Would you like for me to notify a doctor?”

Alcie looked around at the people at other registers. Everything seemed normal. “No. I just thought you said something different that’s all.”

“I have finished. That will be fourteen dollars.”

“Oh! I didn’t expect it to be so much money.” More than a quarter of the money she’d managed to save up during the whole year.

“That will be fourteen dollars,” the register repeated.

Alcie sighed, defeated, and said, “I approve based on retinal scan.”

There was a ‘ca-ching’ sound and the register stated, “You are free to go.”

As Alcie dislodged the cart from the register it said, “Moron.”

“Wait!” she said, but the walkway was already moving her and the cart forward. She turned and tried to walk back to the register against the flow of the walkway. A buzzer sounded and a man headed her direction.

“Excuse me,” he squinted at his wrist monitor, “Alcie, is it? I’m one of the managers, is there a problem?”

Alcie twisted her head around. People were *looking* at her. “The register said something... The register said something *different* to me.”

The manager extended a hand behind her back, gently moving her towards the door, “Of course it did. I’m sure it said, ‘Come back again!’”

Alcie found herself outside the door with her box of crackers. She looked up and down the street but there was nothing unusual to see. It was puzzling, how could a register make comments? She took her cash card out of her wallet having a look even though she knew the

amount had instantly been reduced the moment she approved the retinal scan. She'd taken a rare bus ride to the store but the crackers had definitely cost her the fare to The Park—time to hoof it.

Three blocks later she heard a voice behind her. "Excuse me," it said, "but did I hear you say that register said something out-of-place to you?"

Alcie turned to see a gaunt elderly man wearing a coat that was just the barest side of respectable, elbows worn and shiny, threads dangling from the cuffs. She didn't want to get into trouble. "No, you must be mistaken. No register said anything to me."

"I'm sure I'm not. I was listening to your short conversation with the manager. It's all right; I've had it happen to me. What did the register say to you?"

Cautious, Alcie checked around before replying, "It called me a moron."

"I see."

"What did it say to you?" Alcie asked.

The man rubbed his hands together, studying his shoes. "It was highly unusual."

"Really? Did it call you a name?"

"No. Let's just say it told me to attach my lips to a body part I'm certain it does not have."

"What should we do?"

"Do?" The man wrapped his arms around himself as if cold. "Why there is nothing to do. If we tried to tell anyone else, I'm afraid we would receive the same reception you just did."

"What reception was that?"

"They showed you the door, my dear."

It was fortunate, Alcie thought, as she plodded along, that her route to The Park also took her in the direction of home. Once she hit The Park's border she would be in familiar territory. Still a mile away, there was plenty of time to ponder what happened at the grocery store. A half hour ticket she understood —she had never been in the store before, but to be insulted by a register? Alcie shook her head. Maybe it was because she came from a different neighborhood —the Entry didn't know her—that was what it had to be. She'd make plans to come back next year and then maybe it would be different.

She gazed at the buildings that lined the street; tall high rises with reflective windows that glinted when the sun came out. The streets were almost empty with most people at work, sitting in the tall towers. Perhaps they would be looking down at her small figure that very moment and feeling a bit jealous that she was outside and they were in. She savored the thought.

She had a good job, it didn't pay much, but her options had been limited by test results taken in middle school. She hemmed things: shirts, napkins, tablecloths and sheets. They hadn't created a Mech yet that could lovingly fold a piece of cloth over and stitch a straight line to a precise point that had to be folded over again. Not even a straight line all the time —hadn't they asked her to do some whirls just recently? She adored it. She'd gone from the third to the fifth floor and learned to drop the feed dogs on the sewing machine, allowing her to do what the manager called 'free motion' stitching. "Don't go crazy, Alcie," he'd said, nudging her arm, "Follow the pattern and you'll be all right. Deviate and know that I've given you this privilege and I can take it away too." She'd nodded vigorously and worked hard to show an aptitude, proud that they let her stay on the free motion floor along with the hundreds of other women and men who'd also shown an aptitude.

Alcie lifted her face to the sun; it was such a nice day when the wind died down, now it was calm enough to enjoy the feeble warmth. She crossed the street and approached the entrance to The Park with its grand fountain just visible past the buffer. Although she couldn't hear it, she knew the fall and splash of the water would cheer her spirit—give her the courage to open the little box and bury the contents in a flowerbed—if only she could get in. “It’s what I want,” her mother had said a year ago. “I don’t want to talk about it,” Alcie had replied. “It’s not going to happen for a long time and it’s against the law.” Her mother had leaned back in the grass and said something so shocking that it caused Alcie to look over her shoulder even now as she was remembering her mother’s words. “I think I’m getting tired of all these laws.”

Alcie put her hand in the ID Box and let the Entry scan her thumb. There was no sound but the slight subliminal whine of the large buffer. “No Spot, The Park is full to Level Two Laborers. All Level Two Laborer Spots are full,” the metal voice said.

“Please,” said Alcie, “Please. I’ll only take a moment. You can send the Law Mech after me if I take longer than five minutes. Please, it’s my Emergence Day. I just want to hear the fountain.” It was a small lie but maybe it would work? Most Entries had a Law Mech nearby, standing guard. This Entry had a visible one, just to the side.

The metal voice was silent and Alcie wavered, uncertain. She said aloud, in the direction of the Entry, “Do you want to call me a name?” More silence. Perhaps, this indicated that it was all right? She leaned forward an inch; nothing happened. She took a step in the direction of the entrance and the Law Mech began to vibrate. Dust particles floated off of the metal and caught the breeze. Alcie immediately retreated and turned, walking away from the entrance. Her face was hot and she gulped at air. It just wasn’t turning out to be a very nice day.

She got to the corner and chose one of the two gray concrete benches that lined the sidewalk next to the street. Here, she sat, facing the park fence. No matter how her day was, it felt good to rest her feet. Inside the fence, she could glimpse the reds and yellows of a few far off flower banks. In front of the flowers excited children ran and played over a brilliant green lawn and if there was a slight gust she could make out their happy cries through the encircling buffer.

Alcie took the crackers out of her purse. The plasti-foil wrapper was brightly colored in blues, reds and pinks surrounding a photograph of two smiling women sharing a single cracker. She pulled out the tiny box with her mother's remains, running her fingers along the rubber bands. Placing the box carefully back in her purse, she ripped through the plasti-foil, selected a cracker and broke it in half. It tasted like cardboard. She threw the other half to a pigeon by her feet. A few minutes later, a flock of pigeons strutted around her legs and she crumbled the whole packet, scattering it around the bench. The soft cooing of the birds was soothing. Tomorrow it would be back to the unrelenting clack-clack of the sewing machines, the weight of the box on her dresser.

A woman who reminded Alcie of a concrete block came striding by wearing a raincoat and carrying a worn briefcase. She halted at Alcie's bench, face bunching and separating along frown lines. "I can't believe you fed those nasty birds. Now there'll be pigeon poo all over that bench. I should call a Law Mech and have you written up for abusing public property."

"I'm so sorry," Alcie said, "I wasn't thinking." Alcie took her handkerchief out of her purse and held it up to the irritated woman. "I'll clean up any poo, I promise."

"These benches belong to everyone and people like you are the reason they're always dirty. Who do think is going to pay for people to clean them? I'm not going to! I already pay two

percent in taxes and that's enough! Why aren't you at work? What are you doing sitting around during the middle of the day?"

It was the woman's right to ask these questions but Alcie fought to keep any form of anger out of her tone. "It's my Emergence Day."

"Well, if you don't work it means that someone else has to pick up your slack and then our taxes go up. I'm not paying for it!" The woman turned and stalked off.

Alcie sat, breathing hard. The sun had gone behind a cloud and she stood up, feeling chilly. After carefully wiping the bench, she set off for home.

Two blocks further she spotted a thick mass of people ahead and stopped a passer-by hurrying in the other direction, "What's going on?"

The man called over his shoulder, "The Neo-Luddites are marching again."

"Who?" Alcie called after the man but he hurried away down a side street.

Alcie looked to where the agitated throng was growing closer. Hecklers were moving toward her along the sidewalks at the same pace as the crowd in the street. Alcie frowned, hadn't her day been spoiled enough? Two Law Mechs emerged from their street shelters; the high screech of their engines getting louder as they powered up and moved towards the crowd on their treads. Alcie realized she couldn't cross over to another street without passing through a street buffer. That would cost her a dollar—she had to go straight ahead.

The shouting crowd was now almost up to her; the ones in the street were carrying thick paper placards; one stated, 'No More!' in large black letters, another, 'Turn Off The State!' The crush was now on her; everywhere, loud with people bellowing and shrieking. Alcie ducked into an entryway, which immediately announced, "Come in or move on. Come in or move on." A jewelry shop; it would cost her to go in. The Entry was becoming more insistent and one of the

men inside was talking to his wrist. She tried to continue down the street, bouncing from one person to the next with people pushing and shoving at her. A short woman with red hair marched by carrying one of the 'No More!' placards when a female heckler—face contorted by some terrible emotion—stepped into the street screaming, and swinging her briefcase aggressively. Shocked, Alcie recognized the raincoat woman from the park and ran into the street, grabbing Raincoat Woman's arm and spinning her around. "This was my one day off," Alcie shouted, "and you're ruining it for everybody." The short red headed woman continued to yell, "Turn off the State." More Law Mechs appeared and the crowd came to a stop. "This was my *day off*!" Alcie shrieked. Raincoat Woman pushed Alcie in the chest and then slapped her full in the face, scratching her with a nail. With disbelief, Alcie held a cold hand against her stinging cheek before rage took over and she slapped Raincoat Woman back. The woman's mouth settled into a snarl. Alcie slapped her again, as hard as she could.

The noise was incredible as Law Mechs started to wade into the mass of people. The short red headed woman stumbled backwards dropping her placard before disappearing among legs. Alcie lunged to help but someone grabbed her from behind and she spun with a clenched fist, smacking a man in the nose. Blood trickled down his face as Alcie struggled to get away. Someone pushed her from behind into the back of another person. A young man turned, screaming, "Watch it, bitch!" as he stomped down on the top of her shoe. Pain seared into her foot, her ankle. She went down hard onto the dirty concrete, skinning her knees and the palms of her hands. Above her Law Mechs moved through the crowd, people scattering, feet kicking at her. After catching a hard clout to the ribs she managed to crawl to the curb where a hand appeared. "Here, let me help you." Alcie grabbed the hand; a young woman lifted her up and

forced their way through to the back of the mob. The Law Mechs now turning, moving toward the front of the marchers. Alcie clung to the woman, shaking.

“You okay?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know. My foot hurts—so do my knees, my hands.” There was a tugging and Alcie realized she still gripped the woman’s hand.

“Let’s get you further back.” The woman put her arm around Alcie’s shoulder. The press was thinning out, shouts dying down as she helped Alcie over to a streetlight. Alcie held on to it and tried to think of something to say. “Thank you. Are you part of this?”

The woman looked around for a moment, “No. Just hanging out with a few people. You okay now? I gotta go.”

“I guess. Thanks again, that was very nice of you.”

“Yeah. Right.” The woman left and headed toward a young man who looked similar to the one who stomped on her foot. Alcie watched them run down a side street.

Limping, it took her a lot longer to walk home than she had planned. She rested a few times, leaning against buildings that were becoming grimmer as she neared her neighborhood. By the time she saw her Entry, the sun was setting and she was exhausted, fumbling in her purse for her cash card. She squatted down and emptied her purse on the sidewalk in front of the Entry but her cash card wasn’t there. She couldn’t focus; it must have disappeared after the grocery. Payday was in two days and then she could ask for a new one, but she’d lost all the cash she’d saved up. There was no way to get it back.

Alcie slumped on the sidewalk, her back against the building and looked at the miniscule pile of objects from her purse scattered about. A wadded tissue, an old key, a brush that was so old most of the bristles were gone, two buttons and a broken nail file. The box was

still there. One of the rubber bands, a turquoise one that had a few metallic threads spun through it, glinted in reflected sunlight from an upper window. That rubber band had been Alcie's favorite and she viewed putting it on her mother's box as an act of devotion. In one motion, Alcie pulled all the rubber bands off the box. She took the turquoise one and pulled her hair back with it, off of her neck and away from her face. It felt good. The box was crumpled in the middle, where it had been compressed.

It took only a moment to gather up the few items and put them back into her bag. She hadn't sat on the sidewalk since she was a child and she ran her fingertips across the small corrugations, the rough surface still warm from the sun. Her neighborhood almost looked different from this vantage point, the buildings taller somehow. She could see the last reds and yellows of the sunset fading from the roofs—colors as remote as the ones in the park. Lights were winking on in the apartments and along with the lights came the blue glow of televisions. All those people talking to their Systems. Tonight. Tomorrow. Everyday. She swept her hand along the concrete again, reflecting. How many days off did the woman with the briefcase get? She moved her hand back and forth, ignoring the people entering her building. Finally, the whine of a Law Mech appearing down the street jolted her into getting up. She picked up the box and the other rubber bands.

Now that she'd lost her cash card, her Entry presented her with an out-of-date thumb print lock. She had to apply her thumb to it innumerable times before it finally announced, "Alcie O'Connell, you may enter." Someday the super would update it. The outer door unlocked and she yanked hard before it had time to lock again.

Four flights up, she went through the same process with her apartment door. When she got in she flicked her fingers towards the center of the room. The TV screen shimmered, then

stayed on, its screen a vivid empty blue. The neutral metallic voice said, “Welcome Alcie. May I turn on a compilation of the latest kitten uploads?”

“No, System.” Alcie threw her purse on the bed, sat and put her face in her hands. She ached all over but the day had given her an idea. “I think I’d like to watch... I’d like to watch the news.”

“That’s a very unusual request for you, Alcie. May I put on the latest episode of “What Did Stacy Eat Last Night?”

“No. I’m tired of that. I want to watch the news.”

“Perhaps True Love Matches?”

“System, please put the news on.”

“I’m sorry Alcie, but your IQ and standardized tests allow for only a certain level of TV programming. An upgrade will cost you an extra ten dollars a month which you cannot afford on your current salary.”

“Oh.” Alcie stood in the middle of her apartment, the blue screen reflecting off the windows, the windows reflected in the blue screen. “Thank you, System. Please put the kitten videos on.”

She opened the can of soup she’d set out that morning. It would have been nice to have the crackers to go along but the pigeons enjoyed them. When the soup was hot she poured it into a mug and sat down on her bed to watch the TV, which displayed three kittens batting at a ball of yarn, tumbling over each other, emitting tiny mews. Alcie sipped the hot soup and watched the kittens play.

Later as she climbed into bed and pulled the covers up, she mentally gave herself a pat on the back for venturing so far and surviving the crowd. She gazed at the top of her dresser,

bare now—the box was tucked away under the bathroom sink—and felt a sort of victory. She turned out the light and the neutral voice said, “Good night, Alcie. I hope you enjoyed your Emergence Day.”

Another Emergence Day off in a year and Alcie knew she wasn’t going back to that grocery store. She’d try to find the Neo-Luddites. It would take all her skill to plan but there was a year to do it. She could show them the scrap of paper grabbed while on the street getting kicked: the word ‘No’ slashed across it. Even in the chaos of that moment, the paper felt smooth and cool. It was stashed in her bag where System would never see it. She’d ask them what ‘Turn off the State’ meant and they would explain it to her.

Until then, she would content herself with two things: an occasional tiny swirl of thread that just might look like the word, ‘No,’ and remembering the moment the smooth surface of Raincoat woman’s cheek fit into the palm of her hand, the hardness of bone beneath the skin. It felt good to slap her and Alcie indulged in the memory of swinging her arm and connecting again. And again. And again.

“Good night, System,” Alcie said.

ORDER:

KINDNESS BRINGS KINDNESS

Geraldine warned Etta not to pick up a newspaper when they landed in New York, but in typical style, Etta ignored her. She excused herself in the United lounge, surreptitiously picking up a Times on the way to the restroom. Now she sat, locked in a stall, trying not to rustle the pages too much while she scanned the columns. She found what she was looking for without too much trouble.

“Yesterday afternoon The Adelia Stowe Foundation settled its case against the American citizen Etta Loomis for refusing to pass on one of the “small, white” stones. Ms. Loomis, solemn and pale...”

Etta shook the paper with an irritated snap, she should have overcome Geraldine’s doubts about too much blush.

“...stood for the decision finding her guilty of “interference with a multinational object” at the International Court of The Hague. Instead of reparations, Ms. Loomis agreed to abide by the punishment deemed fit by the Foundation: six months of work representing Adelia Stowe in period costume at the Foundation’s establishment in Tasmania, Australia. The Foundation believes that this “would impress upon Ms. Loomis’s consciousness the vast importance of the message that the stone was meant for: passing on a good deed.” Ms. Loomis had no comment. The stone has been in Ms. Loomis’s possession since April when it was handed to her by her former fiancé, Marshall Wallace.”

Etta carefully ripped the rest of the newspaper page away from the article until she had a smallish square, then wiped herself with it and flushed.

Excerpt, “A Small White Stone,” Adelia Stowe, 1932

“The men in line stamped their feet and pulled their oilskin japarras closer. A few clapped their callused hands against their arms trying to stave off the cold in the frigid July air. George stood with the dispirited group, his slight height a disadvantage among men made even taller and wider by all the layers they had on. Although the sun had touched the clouds with orange and rose, it had yet to rise. The street still lay dark in shadow as the men waited silently for the old Anglican Church to open and hand out bread and broth. George would take it home in his tin as always, enough for Old Auntie Louise and Tildy but not enough for him. No matter. He’d be right somehow.

The first shouts of derision came from the very front of the line and George leaned out as the other men did. A grizzled old swagman, gray beard matted and dirty, was stumbling along holding his hands out.

“Gaw, ya smell like a dunny, ya dag,” shouted a tall man at the front of the line, giving the swaggie a hard shove.”

Two days later in Los Angeles, the bartender spots her for the first time near the beginning of his shift at eight in the evening. Etta Loomis, the girl who refused to pass on ‘the small white stone.’ She strides by the entrance to the bar and comes to an abrupt stop at the Arrival/Departure sign. He guesses she’s checking the Qantas flights out because this is Terminal Four, LAX. Her trail of interviewers, photographers, personal assistant, sycophants and hecklers stops also, backing into each other, creating a cresting wave of annoyed noises that causes other travelers to give a wide berth. He smiles, wistful, wish I had them. He longs for the remoras and

lampreys that come with fame, eely followers gaining their own kind of cultural capital just from being near you, gets a warm glow from the daydream, and finishes his strawberry flavored ‘Suck It Up’ box (straw included!). He crumples the box and tosses it into the trashcan from ten feet. Bingo.

Of course he recognizes her. The glowing blue of the flat screen TV accompanies him all night long. She’s been on all the news channels for the last two weeks, having lost her last international appeal in the courts. Now, she’s headed across the blue Pacific to Tasmania, to serve her six-month long ‘sentence’ at the Adelia Stowe Foundation. Abide by their rules, work for them, ‘adopt’ the persona of Adelia Stowe. Poor kid, all because that asshole dumped her as his good deed.

The next time the bartender sees her it’s close to ten. She’d disappeared into the first class lounge and now reappears accompanied by only a few people. She looks like she just wants to take a walk. He gets a good look at her face and thinks she appears hollow and nut brittle, she’ll explode into shards given the right tap. Her clothing though, it suits her, to be all Daisy Buchanan, all Great Gatsby. The dress floats in ways modern dresses don’t and he spends some time imagining girls from his past dressed like that.

Etta tries to walk faster. If she could only walk faster then maybe she could lose all these—she struggles to come up with an appropriate name—assholes. No, she reconsiders; Geraldine isn’t an asshole. She’s simply trying to do her job. A job that had put that poor woman into a spotlight Geraldine never expected. Etta stumbles and twists her ankle, these damn shoes. She’d better get used to them, six months of heels and dresses ahead of her. She already has blisters, but the no bra thing she likes. It feels good to have them swinging free, just a camisole. Her clothing has to be exact, from the year 1932. Nacre buttons and stiff grosgrain bows. Liberty

of London flowered lawn. Cloche hat. It's the Foundation's stipulation and she must abide by it now. Damn Adelia Stowe and damn that stupid children's book. Etta turns around defeated by the pain in her ankle. She's going back to the lounge, back to that crowd getting drunker by the minute. Poor Geraldine looks exhausted but still tries to be chipper. That's her job, to look after Etta for six months. Etta doesn't want to make it harder for her but she feels trapped among the lounge's folded newspapers, empty cups, crinkled cracker bags, echoing bathrooms. The whole place appears like one great big discarded trash can at this time of night. She spots a bar across the way and the bartender is looking at her, a sympathetic smile curving his lips. She marks it in her mind under the file: perhaps.

Third time's a charm, the bartender thinks as he watches Etta slip out of the lounge door just after midnight. Those trans-Pacific flights always leave in the middle of the night. Lots of time left for her to make a semi-escape. He nods to her as he scrubs off a combination of beer and nabs from the wood-grain Formica, the rag coming away an ugly yellow-beige and orange. She nods back what he imagines is a grateful nod and then heads to the 'intimate corner.' A part of the bar that curls towards the back window, hidden by a combination of pillar, dusty fake Ficus tree, and an equally dusty broken Italian cappuccino maker now holding chipped plates and a pile of napkins. Her purse hits the bar with a slight 'plomph,' that noise accompanied by a scrape of the stool back, a sigh.

He walks around the pillar. "What can I get you?"

Etta doesn't look up as she removes her dainty crocheted gloves. "Can you transport me back a year? I want a re-do." She does. Desperately.

"Tired of your fifteen minutes of fame?"

“Oh, blow me.” Etta puts her hand to her face. “No wait. I didn’t mean that. Please don’t tell anyone what I just said.” Visions of a severely disappointed Geraldine pop into Etta’s head. “It would be... unseemly. Yeah. Unseemly.” Etta shuts her eyes and rubs her forehead with her hand. Of course he knows who she is. He’s a bartender, for God’s sake; she glanced at the TV above the bar when she walked in. Set to CNN. Thank the lord it wasn’t Fox—they loved to rake her over the coals. And she was wearing these clothes. As if he wouldn’t know.

He doesn’t answer and tries to lighten her mood. “So, shall I get you a ‘Suck It Up’ box? You designed the label, right?”

Etta opens one eye. “Yeah, I did, in another lifetime. Actually, I’d kill for the chocolate right now but, no, I’ll take a Sidecar.”

“Keeping with the theme, right?”

“Well, I don’t have to go whole hog until I arrive but I might as well ease into it. I’m not even sure they sell ‘Suck It Up’ boxes in Tasmania.” She leans forward and whispers, “But stick a pickled jalapeño in that drink if you have one.”

He winks and smiles. She really did get a raw deal, although, he thinks, she made this all harder than it had to be. She could have just passed the stone on. Could have given it to some jerk, anyone, walking by. But, it is what it is, and he’d be happy for all the publicity she’s gotten. He has an audition tomorrow. A big one.

Etta reaches into her purse and finds her phone. They’ll take it away when she arrives but for the moment she can still have it. It won’t be for very long anyway, just six months, but long enough. She pulls up her e-mail; nothing new except for two more interview requests. Maybe it will be good to get away for a while. The phone dings an incoming text from Marshall. “Have a great trip and remember kindness brings kindness.”

The bartender is startled by a noise from behind the pillar. It's something between a screech and a howl. He looks around the bar but the few slumped worn out travelers there don't even look up from their phones or computers, they're totally mesmerized. When he brings Etta her drink he notices the fractured remnants of a phone on the tiled floor. It appears to have been stomped on.

"Want anything to eat with this?" he asks, sliding the drink over.

"No. I'm not very hungry. Sorry about the mess."

He shrugs. "I'm a bartender, that's not the last mess I'll clean up."

Etta doesn't have to explain. Everyone knows what's gone on. Everyone who's been keeping track of the stone, and that's just about one hundred percent of the populace unless you live, well, under a rock. It started seven months previously when an outdoorsy woman in Tennessee, Cynthia Cunningham, dying of ovarian cancer, was passed a real 'Adelia Stowe' stone. There were only three of them in the world and they'd been in circulation since the foundation had been set up in the fifties. Instead of giving it along anonymously with a good deed *as one was supposed to do*, Cynthia set up a blog, put the stone in a Zip-Loc bag with instructions, and left it on the Appalachian Trail. She said she wanted to experience the goodness of humanity in the short time she had left. A man by the name of Jim Bishop found it, followed the instructions and posted his good deed on the blog. By the time Cynthia died, the blog had gone viral with people posting good deeds they'd done and other folks posting comments. These good deeds ranged from buying a person a cup of coffee to paying someone's rent to finding a single mother a used car. It was the feel-good story of the year and it rippled out until it smacked right into Etta.

Etta chews on the end of the jalapeño. The second drink has gone down quickly and the bartender is making her another one. She doesn't care about her phone, glad to be rid of it. It's not like they would prevent her from using an old-fashioned landline once she reaches Tasmania. They had those, at least, back in 1932, right? Stupid rule. What the hell anyway? Why should she be punished for wanting to return the stone, just because no one had ever done it before, they have to go and make up all these rules? It wasn't like Marshall did a good deed when he gave it to her. Etta runs down a recent list of names for Marshall. She feels a bit better by the end but, still, two and a half years of her life down the proverbial toilet. He'd been perfect. All guitar and brown eyes and the way he tossed his hair after sex. She'd only caught him cheating once although she suspected that there might have been others. She'd ignored it, what was sex anyway? Nothing to do with a love like theirs, all air and light. He made her laugh and she liked the way other women stared at her when she was with him. She wanted to be special —just not celebrity special. She should have known when he called her and asked her to meet him at that café across town.

“Why not at Coffido's?” she'd asked. Coffido's was the comfortable coffee place that allowed dogs, right around the corner from the area where they both had apartments. They met there often for lunch and after work so Marshall could bring his dog, Bitch.

“I need a change of pace and besides, Coffido's doesn't allow outside food.”

“And this place does?”

“Well, yeah. I can bring my box there. Always thinking of you baby.”

Etta worked for as a graphic designer in the boxed liquids department of a large tea conglomerate; she'd personally designed the logo and the ubiquitous bright yellow and purple label for the ten-ounce Suck It Up (straw included!) box. The box came in three flavors,

Strawberry, Chocolate and the biggest seller, Zesty Paté. Zesty Paté was Marshall's favorite and he drank about four boxes a day. He claimed it made him mentally stronger and also a better lover. Etta thought she ought to tell him that they bought their flavoring from the same company that sold the Hearty Liver! Flavor to Alpo. She liked her job though, they were holding it open for her until her return, and spilling company secrets was never a good idea.

Etta agreed to meet him and after two bus rides, sat down at a table in a well-lit, somewhat crowded café. Jazz was playing in the background and she could smell the aroma of coffee beans roasting. Marshall had made a great find of a place even though it was a pain to get there. At that moment, Marshall walked in smiled and waved. At the time she registered his smile as a little off, kind of goofy. Now, she recalled it as an oily kind of smile, goopy, viscous, and malevolent. She waved back and he headed towards her.

"Hi," he said as he walked up, sounding just a bit breathless.

"Hi, great place."

"It is great. I've been coming here for a while now."

Etta felt a twinge of... something. He'd been coming here for a while? "How's my good friend, Bitch?"

Marshall signaled to the waiter. "She's good. At a friend's house."

Etta picked up the menu. "Wow. Must be some friend. I've never known you to leave her anywhere but my place."

Marshall laughed, "Don't make a fuss Etta. Just someone I met here."

Just someone he met and he was already leaving Bitch there. This did not bode well. Etta wanted to get down to business. "So, why meet here? Special reason or you just wanted to show me this place?"

“Actually, there is a reason I wanted to meet here because *here* is where I was given this.” Marshall slid a rock across the table.

Etta laughed out loud. “You were given a rock?”

“Take a good look at it.”

Etta picked it up. It was a smooth roundish white rock, more circular and flat than chunky. It fit into her palm, feeling cool, like when you put on a summer dress after wearing wool all winter. She turned it over and ran her thumb over it. There was a slight abrading and she looked closer. Small words were carved into it, two lines: *Adelia Stowe Foundation* on one line, and the next line below it, *Kindness Brings Kindness*. Etta took a deep breath. No way. She looked up at Marshall who was grinning.

“It’s real,” he said.

“Is this the one from the Zip-Loc blog?” Etta ran her thumb over and over the stone; she’d never seen a real Stowe Foundation stone before, just photos. It finally dawned on her, “You’re ‘Cigarette Guy’?”

She’d been keeping track of the blog along with everyone else. Her office had a constant pool going on how big each good deed would be in terms of related dollars. This last blog was posted by a young woman who worked as a waitress, Brittany Kaminski, who gave the stone to a “cute guy” along with a cigarette he begged her for in a way that touched her heart. Brittany had written a quite amusing post about how even “handing someone a cigarette could be a good deed if the person was in need and asked you by singing you a love song they made up on the spot and getting down on one knee.” (You didn’t put your name on the blog until you passed on the stone, which is why the current stone-holder was listed as Cigarette Guy.)

Marshall nodded as Etta handed the stone back to him. “I didn’t want to tell you until I had a clear plan about what to do next. What kind of good deed I was going to do.”

“Wow! Is that what I think it is?” The waiter, who had come up to take their order, leaned over and had a look at the stone in Marshall’s hand. “So Brittany did give it to you? We all were wondering. She’s been talking about you for weeks!” He lifted his hand and called over to the two other waitresses, “Gwen! Candy! Here’s the stone! I told you I had a hunch Brittany gave it to this guy!”

The other two waitresses came over. The one called Gwen said, “Hey Cigarette Guy!” and the other, Candy, said, “What are you going to do with it?”

A couple from another table got up, their chairs making a harsh squeak as they pushed from the table, “Can we see it?”

Over the next five minutes more people gathered as the stone was passed around and examined. Marshall seemed to relish the attention while Etta fixed a smile to her face and told herself, Don’t think. Don’t think, it’s probably just friends right? Wait, was *that* who has Bitch? The smile dropped off her face.

Marshall noticed. “Hey gang, can we get a little privacy here?” he waved at the group surrounding them and people drifted off, although the wait staff appeared to hover. “Want anything?” Marshall asked as he leaned over and opened his backpack. “I’m going to get a Evian to go with my box and order a kale salad. What about you?”

Etta’s stomach growled. She was really hungry after the walk but to order anything seemed like it would be a sign of weakness. Plus, as she gazed around the café, there definitely appeared to be a ‘Brittany’ camp waiting for Marshall to do something. Maybe leaving was the

best option. “No thanks, this place is great and it’ll be cool to think about what you’re going to do with the stone. Thanks for showing it to me, but I’ve got to be going.”

“Etta, don’t go. I’ve already decided what I’m going to do.” He slid the rock back over to Etta. “This is for you, baby.”

Etta looked at it on the table and did not want to pick it up. The small rock morphed into a boulder, a terrible responsibility, an onus, a burden.

Marshall took the stone, opened her palm and intoned, “This stone is yours,” as he closed her fingers over it.

“What’s your good deed, Marshall?”

“I’m breaking up with you.”

(Continued excerpt from, “A Small White Stone,” Adelia Stowe, 1932)

“The old man landed hard on his back among jeers and cries from the line of men. George watched him get slowly back up and, once more, start down the line with his hands held out. This time the swaggie’s posture seemed to be more erect, although his head was down, humbled by his fall.

The men quieted a bit but George could still hear a few men grumble, “Get on with you.” One man growled, “Would I be in this line if I’d ought to give?”

George was upset, pushing the man down was a horrid thing. He thought the men a rough lot and wished to be far away. Unbidden, the words of his dying mum came back to him, “George, take care of your sister, watch over her as I’ll not be able to. I’m going to join Da and we’ll both be watching you from heaven above.”

She was watching him right now. What would his mother think if he let the old man go by, cold and friendless? George fingered the red knit scarf wound round his neck. It was the last present his mother had made for him and he treasured it. It was the only thing he might have to give, but could he? Could he give his red scarf away?"

Etta swallows the last of the third drink. She's buzzed and it feels nice. This spot feels nice, back behind the pillar, tucked away with a large potted plant on one side and the coffee maker on the other. She wonders briefly about Geraldine, upstairs in the lounge, snoring lightly. Etta looks for her phone to check the time and remembers smashing it. I'll have to adjust to a watch, she thinks. Which is a shame because she never quite got the hang of telling analog time. Etta estimates it's about one when the bartender comes back by.

"Get you anything else?" he asks.

"Better not. Got a flight to catch, remember?" She rubs at her forehead again.

"I'm sorry you lost the appeal."

Etta gives him a look, heavy, filled with blue boulders, "Well, accepting the stone is apparently," here Etta made quotation marks in the air, "tacitly agreeing to all rules of the Adelia Stowe Foundation."

The bartender makes little circles in some water on the Formica with his index finger, "Did you read the story when you were little?"

"Of course! It's a classic. My mother she read it to me all the time—good little moral Georgie—standing along with those mean men who push the angel down.

The bartender leans in. "the book doesn't *say* he's an angel."

Etta sits up. “Oh please, what else could he be—reaching down and giving poor little Georgie the stone in exchange for that red scarf. Telling him, “I have nothing to give you in return but this white stone. Pass it on when you see someone in need and I know God will reward you.” Etta snorts, “And then he disappears! I’m surprised they don’t make me wear a scarf too, the red badge of ‘look at this stupid woman who would rather bring the stone home than pass this fucking good deed along.’”

The bartender puts both elbows down on the counter; he wants to ask her something.

“What?” said Etta, sensing a question forming. “What do you want to know?”

“I’ve read the blog, the part about how Marshall met Brittany? When he realized he wanted to marry her and the kindest thing he could think of was to break up with you immediately?”

“Yeah?”

“Why’d he do it in such a public place?”

“Probably so I couldn’t indulge my homicidal tendencies.” Etta taps her fingertips on the counter. “Probably, because in his twisted little arrogant mind he really thought he was doing me a favor... plus he wanted the publicity for his song. I guess he was— doing me a favor I mean.” Etta smacked her hand on the bar and the bartender jumped. “In *all* my interviews I’ve been maintaining that kindness is a perception based on the experiences of the person who is giving the favor. It’s not that I don’t believe in kindness, it’s that I don’t think it needs to be public. I don’t want to put my name on the blog. I don’t want to pass on the stupid stone. I’ll be kind fifteen times a day just don’t make a spectacle out of it. Kindness is not entertainment! I’d rather take the rotten thing back to where it belongs and they can start again.”

The bartender leans back, “Yeah, well, that sort of thinking has backfired on you huh? You’ve become a major source of entertainment for a lot of people.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t what Adelia Stowe intended either. She just wanted to inspire people to do things for each other. It was Cynthia Cunningham, the cancer woman, who started all of this. She’s the one who started the blog.”

“And now you have to pay.”

“Yeah, I do.” Anger floods her as she thinks about the lawsuit. All she wanted to do was pack the damn thing in a box and send it back. Why’d she have to fling her plans at Marshall? Etta wishes she’d flung the stone instead. Maybe it could have broken his nose. The shit went and posted her plans on the blog and the Adelia Stowe Foundation had responded stating that, “they’d never had a stone returned before and it was not in the spirit of what they stood for.” They were okay with the *blog* even though the good deeds weren’t totally anonymous. If it hadn’t been for that damn blog, she could have tossed that stone down a gutter and no one would have known. But, the Foundation was adamant that if a person was going to return a stone then they were going to go about it following *their* rules. And then they had gone about creating the rules with a vengeance. Etta was a hostage to kindness. I am a hostage, she thinks. It’s the mantra that consoles her in the embarrassment of being dumped and then rebuked publically. Etta grabs her bag and roots around for a moment. She pulls the stone out. “Here,” she says, “Want to see it?”

The bartender leans in for a moment, than backs away.

“Don’t be a schmuck,” she laughs. “I’m not going to try and give it to you at the last minute, I’m stuck with it now.” She offers it again, wagging her hand, and this time he takes it. He’s nice, she likes him.

The bartender thinks it's pretty small to have such a legend. He turns it over to see the engraving. "Mind?" He holds the stone up and takes his camera out.

"Nope, have at it," she says, leaning away from both the bartender and the stone.

He takes a few photos of both sides of the stone, while he's holding it of course, his large class ring easily identifiable. He holds the stone up next to his face and takes a selfie then abruptly gives a half jump over the bar to put his head near Etta's and snaps another photo. He pushes back, grins at her while handing the stone back. She is now looking at him with what he thinks is a very weird look, something between amusement, disappointment, and horror. She takes her time stowing it back in her purse.

"I hope those photos bring you luck," she says, but her voice has gone a bit funny, an unpleasant vibrato added.

He's thinking about the audition tomorrow and the story he'll have to tell.

Etta pushes off the stool and brushes her dress down. She bends and rubs her ankle.

"What do I owe you?"

"Seven bucks each," he says. He kind of wishes they could be on the house. Maybe that kind of publicity would bring more celebrities in.

Etta pulls her wallet out, congratulating herself on not smacking him for the photo of her face and not crying. She pays, gives him a tip, and as she walks away she thinks of what she'll do when she arrives at the Foundation.

In five years, she'll point a photo of the bartender out to her husband, who is patting their baby on his back. "I met this guy once," she'll say, "he's an asshole." By then, her notoriety will have worn off, she'll have gained weight, but the fear will still make her tired, make her wear large sunglasses in the grocery store and the mall.

Now, though, she knows that when she arrives in Tasmania she'll take the stone out and hold it in her palm. She knows that before she's met anyone but Geraldine, before she works for them, before anyone can convince her that maybe she was in the wrong, she'll take the stone and throw it through their window. Just to hear the glass shatter.

FAMILY:

FAMILY CHEMISTRY

Charlotte cleans and oils her shovel with quick precise strokes as she sits, content, on an old stump beside her shed—the remnant of an oak her grandfather planted. A couple of butterflies practice a do-si-do above her shoulder and she slows, glances, doesn't stop. It's been a good morning; her muscles ache with a satisfying pain. The earth in her two largest garden beds has been turned where the annuals are to be planted; the perennials fertilized for the coming summer. The garden seemed to laugh while she worked; Charlotte imagines it felt like a marvelous back rub.

As she labors now, her mind turns a word over—polishing, examining, attempting to dissect why it is that she finds the word so attractive, so pleasurable? Is it the onset consonant cluster of the “spl” beginning? The short second syllable that tap dances on her tongue?

Splen-

did.

Splen-

did.

Or is it the fact that it was a surprising word that Dr. Weston used when describing Charlotte? In fact, upon hearing the word, it was the first time Charlotte felt any affinity at all for the withered Chair of her department. Charlotte disregarded the following adjective that Dr. Weston had used: disgrace. That word didn't matter—and it certainly didn't apply.

Humming, she hangs the shovel in its place on the wall of the shed then checks on the latest concoction brewing on the small table. Brown liquid not quite as dark as it should be, so she adds a sprinkle of dried herbs from a glass bowl and dusts her hands on her jeans.

Today, as always, she sweeps the floor before leaving, casually grinding a stray spider beneath her shoe then sweeping it's twitching carcass out with other dust from the day. She pulls the rattling door down and locks it, putting the extra padlock in place, as she isn't planning on returning until tomorrow.

Sweeping the path to the shed, Charlotte hears the phone ring through an open window in the house. She puts the broom away in a closet in the mudroom, closes the door softly leaning her forehead against it briefly. She presses the playback button on the answering machine while putting the kettle on for a cup of tea.

"It's Doris," Charlotte waits patiently as Dr. Weston's admin continues, "your appeal's been heard, can you get over here before five? You know she leaves promptly."

Charlotte thinks of course Dr. Weston will be leaving at five as usual. What if *my* earliest convenience was after five? Then I'd be out of luck – as usual. Splendid.

As Charlotte walks briskly to campus she ruminates on the fact that her academic panel met fairly quickly after they refused her dissertation—light speed in the academic world. This is unusual, but whether it's good or bad is still to be seen. She hadn't pressured them and had made most of the agreed changes to her dissertation.

She remembers walking across campus the day they'd been introduced, when Dr. Weston had politely, awkwardly, invited Charlotte to lunch. As they climbed the steps to the Student Union, Dr. Weston said, I read your Master's thesis on Seventeenth Century Herbal Decoctions twice. Exciting that you plan to investigate even further back into the Fourteenth Century. It's

plain the University will be a good fit for your doctorate, Charlotte. We can talk about the addition of tincture and some of the lesser-known mixtures you're interested in when you've gotten a good start. Dr. Weston's face, dominated by large sunglasses, was strangely animated. She didn't take them off when they reached the cafeteria, only removing them while she ducked down to the water fountain. Charlotte remembers the spectacular black eye. When the older woman stood, fitting the glasses once more to the bridge of her nose, she noticed Charlotte's glance. "Oh," she said, lifting a veined hand to wave at her face, "I'm so clumsy. I ran into the doorframe."

Charlotte smiles when she remembers her surprise that Dr. Weston lied so easily—and was so bad at it.

Doris, the admin, nods at Charlotte as she knocks lightly on Dr. Weston's closed door.

A muffled call and Charlotte enters; she's prepared for the reek, but when her nervous stomach combines with the sharp, bitter odor of stale coffee, it makes her nauseated. She takes a seat in the one hard chair and looks over scattered dirty half-full cups, (was that mold in one?) into Dr. Weston's thin face. Charlotte thinks she looks tired; her wattles appear longer—giving her nose a more pronounced beak-like look. They exchange superficial pleasantries, and Dr. Weston starts in, opening with, "Based on your thesis, once more, the committee *does not* recommend you be awarded your doctorate."

Charlotte tries not to show any emotion, remaining still, not flinching, even though her face is burning and her heart is flipping out of her chest. Such a blow, she had made all the changes. She worked so hard.

Dr. Weston continues on in her prim manner, "I can only remind you that you ignored our suggestions to change the course of your research."

“I did change it, Dr. Weston. I changed it completely.” This was all so wrong.

“Please, Charlotte, I know this has to be difficult for you, but let me finish. You changed what you wanted to change but you made no attempt at a revision based on the committee’s recommendations. As we discussed before, your technical proficiency is obviously excellent, but how can we possibly judge it when we are *History professors* and this is once more written for chemists? All of the equations, those odd recipes, which we asked you to remove, are still included. Granted, you provided more explanatory material, but how can we question your defense when we don’t understand what you are trying to prove? The literature you’ve linked these concoctions to is based on the flimsiest evidence—”

“Dr. Weston, please. The formulas are important. You cannot remove Biochemistry from History. They revolve around one another--”

“Do not interrupt me again, Charlotte.” Dr. Weston’s face grows pink. “If you wish to continue with this line of research, I suggest you propose it to the Chemistry Department. No doubt they will be as uncomfortable with the subject matter as we were when we advised you previously. It would be irresponsible of us to let you publish a manual on distilling fourteenth century poisons and psychotropic compounds.”

And fifteenth century. “As you are well aware of, this subject matter is already on the Internet and has been for some time.”

“Not in as great a detail as it would be if you ever manage to get this published.”

“But the manuscript would be restricted to access within University settings. It would be almost impossible for it to fall into the wrong hands.”

Dr. Weston picks up papers from her desk and smacks them smartly to align the pages. “I’m sorry, Charlotte, but the committee has reached a final decision.”

Charlotte wants to retch. She leans forward over the desk doing her best to appear gracious. “I’m deeply disappointed in the results of the appeal, but I have no choice but to accept the committee’s decision at this point. I will, of course, speak to the Provost.”

“You can try, but I assure you, the Provost will not be able to change our minds. It would take a major revision –taking *all* of our recommendations under consideration –for us to even have another look at your thesis.”

“I understand,” said Charlotte. She rises, be dignified she tells herself, and moves towards Dr. Weston’s door.

The next morning, Charlotte has retreated to the shed, checking on her concoctions, wiping a few tools, when her sister, Anne, finds her. Anne stands at the entrance to the shed swatting at mosquitoes, looking around. “I’ve haven’t been out here in years. It was always so damp, so *buggy*—how can you stand it?”

Charlotte doesn’t look up. “Doris called you.” It’s a statement.

Anne leans against the frame, “Well. I guess this was expected huh? I mean they told you they didn’t like your paper or whatever it’s called. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, I guess I need to think about packing up my office at some point.”

“I meant today.”

“Oh.” Charlotte aimlessly moves a few things around, shuffles her feet, picks up a small bulging package in brown paper, moves it behind a bowl full of some dried leaves.

“What’s that?”

Charlotte says, “Nothing,” a bit defensively.

“Really?” Anne moves forward into the shed, “Looked like a bag of coffee beans to me. What are you brewing in here? It smells awful, like something died and rotted back here.” She moves in, invading, advancing. Charlotte skitters away. Anne picks up the bowl of leaves, sniffs at it, then picks up the bag. “I was right, it’s coffee.” She drops the bag on the table with a thump. “I’ve always been so curious about what you do back here, thinking you’re some sort of herbal genius and here you just brew coffee. Weird coffee,” she gestures at the bowl, “but coffee.”

Charlotte is expressionless.

Anne puts her hands on her hips. “It’s a joke, Charlotte—bad timing though. Let’s go get some lunch.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well,” says Anne, “if you’re not hungry, then you can drink. It might do you good to get drunk. “C’mon, sis.” Anne reaches out, wrapping an arm around Charlotte’s neck, just the slightest bit too tight, “It’ll do you good. I’ll buy.”

Charlotte agrees. It will be a distraction, whether good or bad is still to be seen.

A half hour later, Charlotte watches her sister cross her legs and take her time lighting another cigarette, even though the hostess stands behind her with the menus, waiting. She finally leans back, and the frowning woman hands them the wooden and cork boards, stalking away.

A drop of sweat runs down behind Charlotte’s ear as she studies the trendy menu. Anne insisted they eat outside under the umbrellas though the cooler screened-in patio had empty tables and made Charlotte take a seat in the sun telling her she was too pale. Spring and Charlotte observes Anne already wears the deep tan and bleached hair of late summer. She looks partially

roasted, not quite done but almost there. Next to her, Charlotte thinks, I *am* pale, chicken raw, served up on a plate of frizzy hair. When people see them together they always peg Charlotte as the older one, though she's younger by two and a half years.

"Isn't this nice?" Anne says, gesturing at the tables. "It's much nicer than that old bar you suggested, and--" she raises plucked eyebrows, "--it's better if you aren't too near the University anyway." She just can't help starting in right away. "So, what are you going to order?" she asks.

Charlotte tries to focus on the menu. "I don't know. I'll probably try one of my usual standbys, either tuna or chicken salad. I said I wasn't hungry."

"God, so boring. When are you going to branch out and try something different?" Drawing the ashtray closer she tilts her head, "I'm sorry, Charlotte. I know you've just had quite a blow, but maybe it will do you good to step outside your comfort zone. Why don't you try the polenta fritters?"

"I don't want the polenta fritters. I'll have either the tuna or chicken salad." Charlotte lays the menu down.

"Be that way then," Anne says snappishly as if she's been disappointed in some way. "I'm thinking of ordering the marinated Octopus over arugula because *I'm* not the one who's afraid of my own shadow."

A memory arises in Charlotte of the two of them as young girls on the boardwalk with their grandparents. The sun glints off the ocean so bright and hard they shade their eyes, beg for ice cream, then take their dripping cones onto the sand to walk among the seagulls. Charlotte can't resist chasing a gull, laughs as it shrieks, but her ice cream falls. Go ask Grandma and Grandpa for another cone, Anne says. No, Charlotte says, I'm afraid. They'll be mad. Anne

pushes her, again and again, Go ask. Go ask. Finally, Charlotte walks back and explains. They look at each other and say, No. Anne makes a show of eating the rest of her cone.

Charlotte's reverie is interrupted by the arrival of the server to take drink orders. Anne looks at her pointedly and Charlotte orders a beer. Anne frowns while ordering a martini, says, "I thought you were going to drink."

"This *is* me drinking."

Anne laughs, "Pathetic."

Anne talks while Charlotte sips at the beer. She and Hayden are going to the Caribbean in a few weeks; he's loving his new job; he thinks he can make partner in less than two years; some fashion line excites her. The words wash up against Charlotte, pound against her and she adds a nod here or there. It all seems to add up to a rich and full life and Charlotte feels something; is it anger? She squashes it. Emotions are not useful; they just cloud the mind. Besides, she needs a clear mind to figure out what to do, how to proceed now that her academic plans are dust.

"Are you listening?" Anne sits back against her chair waving at a fly buzzing near her large white sunglasses. "You weren't were you? You were moping over your school stuff. I just don't understand the fascination with plunging your hands into worms and dead sticks. Look at your hands, they look awful, you have dirt under your fingernails, you might try some polish sometime."

Charlotte holds her hands out and considers her nails.

Anne extends her own manicured hand to squash the burning end of the cigarette in the ashtray; then drops the butt onto the concrete under the table.

Charlotte shifts in her seat, gazes at the butt. Anne is talking now about the garden—Charlotte's garden, but the remnant of the cigarette smokes feebly under the table. It makes

Charlotte uncomfortable that Anne does this. Years ago, Anne told her, “Someone will sweep it up. I don’t want to look at them while I eat.” By the end of lunch, the area under her chair will be littered with the dead ends of little white cylinders. Dry husks stained red on one end.

Charlotte could ignore that for a while but there’s was no way she could continue ignoring what Anne just said.

“What?” did Charlotte hear correctly? “A bully? I don’t understand why you would call my garden a bully.”

“I didn’t mean to call just *your* garden a bully.” Anne stretches, arms above her head. Something about the movement makes Charlotte ill at ease. “I basically meant to say that all gardens-,” Anne draws out the plural, “–are bullies. It just seems to me that you’ve spent too much time on it already when you have other things to do now. Gardens need so much attention, they’re like children –always needing watering or weeds pulled or something like that. You’re not even growing anything you could eat. You’re just growing random flowers and the leftovers of whatever Mother and Father had growing in there.”

“They’re not random flowers. They’re specific medicinal herbs, and you know they’re important to my research.”

To which Anne replies, “Right. *Were* important.”

This jolts Charlotte, irritating her with her new reality. It’s a grain of sand in her shell destined not to be a pearl.

Anne twists around. “We’ve been waiting forever. You’d think that server would have come to take our order by now. Anyway, I think you’re avoiding what you need to do.”

“And what is it you think I need to do?”

“Deciding whether or not to clean out your office should be your number one priority. You’re not teaching any classes are you this semester? You can get it done right away. Be done with this. Move on.”

“I’ll do it in a few days.” Charlotte turns away from her sister to the few other diners on the patio, only women, all in sundresses and sandaled feet. What is it about lunch that attracts women in bright clothes and unlined faces? Their polished toenails provide a welcome distraction. Colored toenails always fascinated her. What if people were born that way? What if you could make a bouquet of toes, each strung on an individual wire, so when you gathered all the wires together into a bunch the colored nails waved and rippled in the wind. Would they look like flowers?

“Really? Well then... that’s that.” Anne moved her hands together in the classic wiping ‘done-with-that’ movement.

Charlotte plays with a drop of water on the glass table; smearing it and watching it reform. Easy for Anne to brush away years of her life as if it were so much wasted time. She’d never seen the value in pursuing a doctorate. Not that Anne had ever inquired into Charlotte’s studies—distilling herbal concoctions referenced in fourteenth and fifteenth century histories just wasn’t ‘her thing.’

Anne leans forward until Charlotte’s beer looms like a huge alien object reflected in the lenses of her sunglasses. “So what are you going to do after all this? Drown your sorrows in your sandbox?”

Charlotte takes a deep breath. She hates it when Anne calls the garden names. “The garden makes me feel better.” What Charlotte means, what she won’t say to her sister is, I need the garden and it needs me—it’s so peaceful there. It tells me I’m not a failure.

“That’s just so dreary, Charlotte. It’s just a bunch of plants. You need to get over this. So the committee denied your appeal, where’s your gumption? Go talk to Dr. Weston about your appeal. Ask her for a meeting and figure out what you need to do to move forward.”

“You just said I should be done with all this.”

“I just wanted to see what you’d say. I didn’t think you would give up so easily.”

Two months later, Charlotte comes out to the garden to walk a circuit along the orderly paths. Her hair is longer now and she’s taken care with her clothes, wearing a skirt that could be almost seen as fashionable, a hint of color on her cheeks. There’s a bit of grass growing at the base of the Datura so she pulls it out while admiring the flowers that hang down, so beautiful. Upside-down fluted trumpets casting intricate shadows that bounce, joining and separating with air currents. She holds the bit of grass in her hand as she continues on, checking on poppies frilled by crepe paper petals. The gentle breeze pulled at her hair as she deposits the grass in the compost bin and takes a pharmacy vial out of her pocket to harvest more Morning Glory seeds. The Oleanders are just beginning to fade and she stops to see if aphids have attacked them again. Pink and white flowers litter the path and she notes that she’ll need to sweep soon. It brings her such peace, this walk. All is as it should be with no sound other than wind and bird. She can breathe here.

Charlotte is sixteen again. Flying down the road on her bicycle. Every day she rides. The only sounds are the wind by her ears, the skreek, scrunk rhythm of the bicycle as the pedals turn and birds. She is at peace, but hears a car behind her. Hayden pulls up in his convertible and her heart thumps. Inside sit Anne and Trish. Her only consolation is that Anne is not riding in the

front seat. Hey, says Hayden. It's the first time he's spoken to her. Hey, she says back. He says Want a ride? with a grin that makes him look golden radiant. Charlotte looks to Anne who smiles and Trish says, Come on. Charlotte asks, What about my bike? Trish says, just leave it by the side of the road; no one will bother it. Charlotte lays it down, gently and turns because they have pulled beyond her. She walks up to the car and Hayden reverses. He drives over her bicycle as she watches. Oops, he says as they drive away. Charlotte realizes Anne hasn't said a word. Later when their parents tell Charlotte they are not going to buy her another bike, she asks why Anne isn't being punished. There was nothing she could have done, they say.

Two weeks after the bike was destroyed Charlotte is idly turning the pages of a magazine she picked up from the city library's summer station for teens. She has sequestered herself in her room every night. At first she cried fiery tears that burned and stung as much as her self-imposed exile. She wants them to miss her but it is apparent they do not. A knock at her door surprises her; her mother strides in and crosses her arms at the foot of the bed. You are taking over the garden tomorrow, she says. No, Charlotte replies, I don't want to, and besides, why me? Why not Anne?

She holds an index finger out to Charlotte. All you do is waste time up here mooning over those useless magazines. At least Anne is out with friends. Where are your friends? Oh, I remember. You don't have any. You *are* going to do this; you'll help the family by weeding.

Charlotte hurls the copy of Scientific American down on the bed. How is Anne helping? she asks, but she knows the answer, and anger makes her go too far. Is she helping by letting Hayden put his hand up her blouse? Isn't that a little like selling her, mother?

Charlotte's mother lifts her hand as if to strike her. How dare you? You think money grows on trees? Anne is helping your father with business. She draws the "s" out snake-like and Charlotte tries not to laugh but can't help imagining her mother with a forked tongue.

Charlotte gets it –it's simple enough. Hayden's father owns the Cadillac dealership and Father needs a job.

The next morning Charlotte is marched out to the garden early with brief instructions on what to pull out of the ground and what to leave. She stands for a while, alone, than savagely pulls everything. When her mother returns she has cleared a whole garden bed of all plants.

That evening, her father removes her from her locked room. He holds her upper arm in a grip so tight her hand goes numb. He pulls her to the room in the house he and Mother call "The Library." They speak of the room with hushed respect but keep it locked. They profess to respect knowledge but Charlotte has guessed the truth. It terrifies them in a knock-kneed, cringe on the floor sort of way. Knowledge is out of their control and it is dangerous.

Charlotte does not want to enter the room. She despises it. Libraries should be living places; this one is long dead, smelling of must, mildew and rotting leather. None of the titles published past the Thirties. It is a monument to past wealth, preserved like something disgusting in formaldehyde.

Father shoves her into a chair and removes several tomes from the shelves. Silverfish fall out as he drops them on her lap. Here, he says, these are about plants. Learn what to pull. I will be quizzing you. He gestures to the books, leaves, locking the door behind him.

Charlotte throws the books on the floor wanting to tear them apart but afraid of the additional punishment. She imagines pulling every book off every shelf, but she will be the one to put them back. She moves to the floor and lays on the carpet staring up at the water-stained

ceiling until her back hurts. It is futile to cry, even more so to scream. She pulls a book over and create a breeze by shuffling the pages. The odor makes her stop and she decides to read one page at random. The book falls open to “*Nerium Oleander*.” A boring black etching of the bush is underlined by the word, “Toxic.”

When Charlotte’s father finally unlocks the door, she has turned down the page corner on every plant described by that word.

Later, she disguises her budding enjoyment of the garden by pretending to pout when her mother sends her out. No, she complains, send Anne. She knows her mother won’t, but suspicions might grow if she is too compliant. She recognizes that Anne’s success is important to the family. Her bookishness is not attractive. She will bring the family neither accolades nor reflected triumph nor a job for her father. It makes her tired just to think about it, the shining star and the ugly duckling; she is trapped in a cliché.

But she is content to let the disappointment and hurt dissolve into the various solutions she starts fabricating in the tool shed. It feels like a wonderful lightness every time she adds leaves or seeds to a battered pot filled with water and lets it stew in the sunshine. She keeps the garden with just enough weeds to be seen as a typical teenager and hides her experiments from all but the rats that come to investigate. Poor rats. Charlotte supposes when she dies she will have to face the countless rodents who paid the price for her knowledge. She does bury them. Will they thank her for that?

After a year, her parents suffer from a variety of ailments. Some come and go, some stay with serious consequences. Charlotte keeps meticulous notes. Poor parents. She does not mourn them.

Charlotte shakes the memories off and continues on her walk, ending up back at the tool shed. Her laboratory now, she has moved all the old tools into the basement. A spotless white Formica table holds her processing instruments and she sets the vial down. She checks on a distillation process and is satisfied that all's well. She closes and locks the door, dusts her hands and heads to her house. Anne is picking her up for lunch and Charlotte is light as a feather, happy. She has finally given up that most terrible of emotions, relentless hope. The hope that one-day the sister of her imagination, the nice one, would show up. Charlotte knows now, it's not going to happen; there is no changing someone's nature. There is only the garden and it's loving whispers.

They return to the same restaurant and sit on the patio as before. It's sweltering when they're seated and they quickly order two iced teas. As cigarette butts begin to pile up, Anne says, "You look better than you have in along time Charlotte. Like you've turned a corner."

Charlotte smiles, "Yes, I feel better. I've been thinking of sending out applications. Hopefully, something will come of one of them."

"Well, I can't imagine where you'd apply? You've no aptitude for anything other than your weird history project and that garden – perhaps Hayden can see about getting you a job doing something with files at the firm? At least then you would be out in the real world."

"Perhaps."

They sit silently until the drinks are set down; both of them squeezing their lemons and Charlotte stirring her tea with her index finger. It was a habit she knew Anne abhorred. Anne watched, shook her head, setting her spoon down with a sharp clack.

Later, Anne took a long drag off a now short cigarette, little more than a filter. She'd been nattering about Hayden and her life while Charlotte pretended an avid interest and

daydreamed about the cigarette burning her. Charlotte wanted the burn to run from Anne's fingertips all over her body—she would turn into a glowing red shape and then blow away. Charlotte saw her rising on the wind – a cloud of embers.

“...and what ever did you do to your little finger? That blue nail looks disgusting. You might try some polish over it.”

Charlotte returns from her daydream and laughs, delighted. She holds her hand out for Anne to see. “It is nail polish. I'm so glad you noticed. It's a new pet project of mine, an organic nail polish. I'm trying it out, plus it dissolves in water.”

“Interesting,” Anne says in a way that indicates she could care less. “Try a different color next time. That color makes your hand look like it belongs on a corpse.”

The server comes back with their meals and they eat their chicken salad in silence. Anne pulls out her phone and gets busy tapping, occasionally laughing. The server returns with the iced tea pitcher, puts their glasses together and makes a show of refilling, pouring from a height of more than a foot, splashing tea onto the table. Anne grimaces but goes back to her phone. Charlotte squeezes their lemons and stirs the teas. Anne looks up briefly when Charlotte moves her tea across the table. “Thanks,” Anne says, distracted and engaged by whatever is on her phone. She lifts the glass, takes a sip and then wrinkles her nose, “Tastes funny.”

“Oh, sorry,” Charlotte says dreamily, “I must have squeezed in too much lemon.”

They pay and when Anne leans in for a goodbye hug, Charlotte backs away. Anne's eyebrows lower and she puts her sunglasses on and takes Charlotte's hand, squeezes it, “It will all work out, Charlotte. When one door closes another one opens.”

“Yes.”

“Oh look,” Anne says, holds Charlotte’s hand up and points to her pink nailed little finger, “It does dissolve in water.”

Charlotte strides by Doris on a Tuesday afternoon and is amused by her startled expression. She knocks on Dr. Weston’s door before Doris can stop her and hears the familiar, “Come in.” Charlotte enters, shutting the door, watches as Dr. Weston sits up straight in her chair.

“This is a surprise, Charlotte. What can I do for you?” she creaks.

Charlotte smiles, making sure it shows in her eyes. “I’ve had time to think and I don’t want any hard feelings between us. You and the committee did what you thought was correct. While I may disagree, I have decided that truly moving forward would be in everyone’s best interest. I thought I’d ask for a recommendation as I’ve decided to apply to several pharmaceutical companies. I think I can count on you to write one?”

Dr. Weston relaxes back into her chair. “I don’t think I can do that, Charlotte, for the exact reasons you were denied your dissertation. It just doesn’t make sense. Again, I would urge you to take your observations to a different department. Good day.”

Charlotte to the door and turns around. “Dr. Weston?”

“Yes, Charlotte?” This is uttered with an aura of benighted resignation.

“Your husband. I never told you how sorry I was.” Dr. Weston blinks her pale blue eyes. “Cyanotic for a while wasn’t he? Blue lips? Blue fingernails?” A pink spot appears on one drooping cheek. “I heard they thought it was something pulmonary... such a shame they never did figure out the cause. Perhaps you weren’t uncomfortable with my distillations after all.”

Dr. Weston and Charlotte face each other for a series of minutes until Charlotte opens the door wide. Dr. Weston pulls a pad of paper across her desk. “Of course, Charlotte. I’d be more than happy to write you a very good recommendation based on your work. You understand I am not a chemist as I have expressed previously, but I will be happy to see what I can do.”

“I felt sure you would be able to help me, Dr. Weston. I will forward the names and addresses of the personnel departments this afternoon. Please do your best to get them done by the end of the week. I’m sure you don’t need to see me again.”

Dr. Weston’s eyes are bright. “Of course.”

Charlotte turns to go, stops. “Oh yes, I almost forgot.” She reaches into her purse to pull out a fragrant wrapped package. The rich scent of ground coffee fills the room. “I brought you a pound of your favorite coffee. Consider it a parting gift.” Charlotte sets it on the desk where Dr. Weston regards it with lowered brows.

“Thank you Charlotte,” she says, taking the coffee and perching the bag on her desk next to the waste bin. “Perhaps this next step is for the best,”

Charlotte leaves her office, smiling broadly at Doris who Charlotte finds standing near Dr. Weston’s door, positive Doris has heard everything. Charlotte almost skips when she hears the unmistakable thump of the bag as Dr. Weston pushes it off her desk.

Charlotte spends the rest of the week dismantling her small lab in the tool shed, carefully cross referencing recipes and diagramming set ups for refining and purifying liquids and powders. All goes into a small black notebook. Such wonderful knowledge; she knew she would find a group that appreciated her research. She releases a handful of garden spiders inside the shed and when she finishes, it looks like it had been abandoned years ago, down to rat droppings,

spider webs, dust and rusty tools. Anyone peeking in would decide it hasn't been used for anything but the most mundane daily gardening chores.

On Monday Charlotte receives an e-mail from Doris addressed to everyone in the Department. Dr. Weston's body been discovered in her bedroom—she apparently died over the weekend after complaining to a friend of a headache. Charlotte immediately sends her condolences and cleans the house expecting a visit from the police. None came. With Doris's help, they must have drawn the conclusion that the relationship was ended on friendly terms.

Particulate dispersion can be such a tricky thing. With this particulate, the one Charlotte had soaked the coffee beans in, a person walking in and out of the office might notice the slightest of headaches after three or four days, but a person sitting *in* the office, their unemptied wastebasket next to their desk and given four days of exposure, why by the fifth day *they* would start spitting blood. When the blood appeared the concentration in the bloodstream would already be quite lethal, so lethal, that at that point it's mere minutes before unconsciousness. Too short to write a note or make a phone call, and the absolute best news was that they cleaned the offices and emptied each wastebasket, every Friday night.

Now, early fall, Charlotte thinks of leaves twisting and curling. No longer bright with youth, the garden prepares for dormancy. She will miss the garden. Her friend. Her bully, according to Anne. Never. Charlotte knows what bullying is and her garden was never that. She loves this time of year equally as well as the period brimming with life. The smell of leaves crunching underfoot and dried shells of flowers once so bright.

The breath that escapes her chest is filled with sadness as she imagines the garden coming back to life next spring without her hand to guide and protect it.

She sits in the grimy basement café of the Psychiatric Hospital sipping a cup of weak tea, gazing out the barred windows. Hayden enters through the double doors and walks to her table. She gestures to the cup of hot water across from her and he sits. With unsteady hands he opens the tea bag, drops it in.

Charlotte asks, “Need sugar?” He nods and she hands him several packets she’d stowed in her pockets from the station near the cashier.

“Thanks,” he mutters.

He appears exhausted, deep bags under his eyes, frown lines etching their way deep into his forehead. He seems weak, diminished. He holds his tea with both hands a moment, then covers her hand with one of his. She can feel the warmth of the hot tea on his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he starts, then hesitates, looking away at a wall painted a drab color of institutional green.

Charlotte doesn’t move and after a minute he starts again.

“Anne and I used to think you were kind of crazy,” he pauses again, “We could never figure out if you were an earth mother or just bat-shit crazy. We were wrong. You’ve been such a rock in all this and I appreciate it.” He lifts his cup and blows on his tea, still leaving his hand on Charlottes. “The doctor says it might be a much longer hospitalization this time. This time is so much worse –she tried to chop her own hand off.” He starts to cry, “She was screaming that she was bleeding spiders.” Shoulders trembling, he drops his head. “I can’t believe we used to make your life so miserable. You’re teaching me so much about forgiveness...”

“Oh, Hayden.” Charlotte pats his shoulder with her other hand. “Water under the bridge. We’re all adults now and that was a long time ago.” Her chest feels warm, a nice sensation.

He coughs and rubs the back of his other hand across his nose, wipes his eyes. “When are you moving? Not soon, I hope.”

“A few more months. Long enough for me to finish helping and see Anne safely settled in this caring institution. I know they’ll be able to help her.”

He shivers and stirs his tea. “What did that company hire you for again?”

“Well, it turns out I’m a genius at certain herbal distillations and dispersions. Who knew?” Charlotte smiles, turns her hand to squeeze his. “You’ll take care of the old house and garden for me won’t you? I found out that old tool shed was infested with rats so I’m having it demolished tomorrow. You won’t ever have to worry about it.”

Hayden squeezes her hand back, harder. As if it is a lifeline he’s clinging to. “I’m so glad you’re not moving for your new job yet.”

“Me too,” She says covering his hand with her other.

GENUS AND SPECIES:

THE OCCURRENCE

If Louise had liked being a Rat less perhaps she would have been more sympathetic to her co-workers, but the truth was, she loved being a Rat. She loved the changes having the head of a Rat had bestowed upon her life, transforming her from a solitary, somewhat morose statistics professor stuck in a dead end teaching job—in real danger of becoming an alcoholic—to an upper management go-getter at *the* firm to work for: New Start Technology, producer and patent holder of the multi-use translator. She loved her expanded sense of smell, the soft fur that lay upon her head and cheeks, she loved how expressively she could twitch her downy shell ears.

Louise adhered to a firm belief that she couldn't let on exactly how much of her human life she did not want back. She believed she was hiding this well. She was not. Her love of her new head showed through her weak protestations as transparently as if she were a large windowpane. In fact—everyone secretly knew how much she loved it, and some, in particular her admin, Ginger, loathed her for it.

Ginger was bitter. She'd had a good life, been reasonably happy, and why wouldn't she? Steady job; long held security that she was better looking than most; popular, with the kind of wit that, while relying mostly on flaying the egos of those around her, guaranteed a close ring of sycophants eager not to be the target of her sharp humor. That had all come to a full stop almost ten years ago, on the day of The Occurrence when Ginger had woken up with the head of a Dog. To be specific—a Pug—all bulbous eyes and flattened nose. Following this, Ginger had done a lot of work to maintain her sanity. She'd joined the appropriate support groups and had done extensive adjustment therapy. It hadn't worked. There was not a single day over the past almost

ten years, that Ginger hadn't mourned the loss of her human face and that identity. She often got the feeling that, in her case, there was some God sitting in front of a God-like computer monitor somewhere saying, "Oh, this is *too* good." If she'd been a Collie, it might have been better. A Collie could, at least, wear an Alice band, comb some hair, fluff it up, but to put hair ornamentation on a Pug...well, it just looked like hair ornamentation on a Pug.

She hadn't even liked dogs.

Ginger's mother tried to ease her pain by sending her what she thought of as 'cute' Pug merchandise: Pug saltshakers, t-shirts, dinnerware—these sets being very popular with the separate species. Each time Ginger received a carefully wrapped package; she called her mother, thanked her graciously, took the gift and set fire to it behind her house. It took two years for Ginger to make up her mind to embrace the Pug in her. When she claimed the Pug personality as her own, she became bright and chipper—a brittle, razor-sharp bright and chipper. Her once biting personality became more self-deprecatory and her friends, recognizing that she was trying to turn a corner, celebrated it. Surrounding herself with a constant circle of people and activities helped.

However they each felt about their appearances, this was not the first thing on Louise and Ginger's minds that morning as Ginger knocked on the open door to Louise's office. "It's about the interview," Ginger said, as she pointed to the phone on Louise's desk – a red button blinking.

Louise nodded, nervously patting at her speech translator implant, a gesture she hadn't been able to stop even though it had been two years since insertion—much simpler after getting rid of those bulky hand-helds. She watched Ginger's disappear back to her desk—was it her

imagination or was Ginger particularly perky this morning? Then, it was hard not to look perky with the face of a Pug. They just looked so damn cheerful all the time.

Louise had been very successful at putting the interview out of her mind in the intervening months since management told her they were considering her, and following, that she'd made the final cut. She'd been pleased and flattered, but that morning, when she'd ripped off the previous days page from her desk calendar, a chill went down her back. Only six weeks to the tenth anniversary, where Louise's interview would be first in a world wide special entitled, "Heroes of The Day," to air just after Reginald Beadle's yearly appearance.

She hit the red button and spoke, "Deonte! Always nice to hear from you."

Since the implants could only do so much over a phone line, a tinny voice replied, "Hey, Louise. Just checking in. Still on for the interview?"

"Absolutely. I do have a little gripe that your admin still hasn't sent me a set of questions to run through before we sit down together."

"I thought I had discussed that with you."

Louise sat down, picking up the receiver, "Discussed what?"

"We want to get unstudied replies, off-the-cuff honesty. We don't want to give you time to make the *correct* remark."

Louise was silent. This was unexpected and dangerous—she might let slip that she was content and not interested in finding a solution or even dealing with the issues around having a new head. What if Deonte asked her if she'd ever been to re-adjustment therapy? "I assumed that I would have time to prep. I'm in a delicate position here and wouldn't want to give anyone the wrong impression simply because I took too long to answer a question."

“Louise, our goal is not to put you in an uncomfortable position but to get your memories, your true account of that day and maybe up to a year after, not some sanitized version. You know we’re also interviewing Larry Johansson, your former neighbor?”

Louise’s heart blipped. “Yes, I knew that. In fact we were talking about it the other day.” Larry currently led the Catfish Contingent of the Louisiana Region of the Mississippi (CCLRM). Louise had been looking at production rates that very morning for the new translator with better waterproofing. It wasn’t going well, the Fish were growing impatient and threatening to disrupt shipping with another blockade. She’d saved his life on the day of The Occurrence and although they hadn’t known each other well before, they had become good friends in the aftermath.

“Look,” Deonte said, “I’ll be in New Orleans day after tomorrow and we can talk over lunch.”

“Sounds good, I know you’ll be happy to be back home – even if it’s just for a short stay.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably get a lot fewer looks than I get up here. If this special goes well, I think my career is made and I’ll be able to live anywhere I want.”

Louise laughed and hung up the phone. New York City was not a very friendly place for an Alligator.

When Louise awoke with the head of a rat on the morning of The Occurrence, she initially thought she’d passed out from the massive bourbon bender she’d been on the night before. It wasn’t until wobbling up from the kitchen table, where she’d been nursing a weak cup of tea, that she realized she’d changed. Her teeth felt wrong—there’d been some wild drunks recently but never hallucinations. The overwhelming reek of tuna salad made her eyes water

until she remembered it was sealed up tight, in a container in the refrigerator. How could she smell it? She put a hand to her cheek in thought and immediately gave a sharp scream. Clenching her eyes shut, she raised both hands to her face and touched strands of coarse hair on either side. She bent up a bristle to have a look, and saw a black hair that gave every indication of being a... whisker? Patting the tips of her fingers on either side of her cheeks caused more coarse hairs to ripple, sending unusual signals to her brain and she became aware that her face was vastly different, elongating out from her head and narrowing down to cold but extremely sensitive rubbery skin at the end, where her nose ought to have been. The skin gave her the sensation of a normal nose when she rubbed it. On her fingers she sniffed and detected the faint scent of roses. Where had that come from? She'd pruned the rosebush yesterday, stopping only to touch and smell one perfect bloom.

Louise ran her fingers back towards her face, rubbing the smooth satin of short fur. Fur went down her neck, turning back to skin at her clavicle. She moved her hands down the back of her head, and again, fur turned to skin just below the nape of her neck. Moving her hands up her neck ruffled the fur and she found her ears were not tucked neatly by the side of her head but extended out into thin delicate shells. She turned to the microwave to see her reflection and it confirmed her suspicion. The brown head of a rat stared back.

Louise depended on logic; it was the foundation of her life. Logic was always what she turned to in an emergency. Even as a child, when frightened by a noise or mysterious shadow at night, she chanted to herself, "There *must* be an explanation." Sure enough, in the morning, she saw the pile of clothing on her chair that caused the shadow, heard her mother talk about wind that slammed the shutters.

Now, her mind could find nothing, and as she stroked the silky fur of her neck she thought, statistically there is a one hundred percent chance that I have gone insane.

Ginger heard Louise hang up the phone and with her notable efficiency, checked Louise's calendar for her next meeting. Not until two—that gave Ginger most of the day to work on Fish updates. But first, Ginger got her lipstick out of her purse; hers had worn off after her last cup of coffee. It looked fairly ghastly on a Pug but Ginger wasn't giving it up. She counted on the fact that the same weird event that had taken their human faces and heads could happen again, and everyone would reclaim the façade of whom they once were. She was going to be prepared—with her signature 'Pink Lemonade Punch' lip-gloss.

Humanity had not been able to figure out why The Occurrence had happened. Theories abounded and new schools of philosophy developed. What no one was prepared for was Reginald Beadle, the creator of the multi-use translator and subsequent owner of New Start Technology, Louise's employer. Formerly a Brooklyn janitor, Beadle received a vision while he was unconscious with the rest of the planet on the day of The Occurrence. In this vision he received detailed instructions enabling him to build the translator. After waking as a Lion and with admirable calm, he'd picked his Mets cap up off of the floor, crammed it on his mane, and had taken off for the nearest electronics shop. He got to work during the chaos of adjustment and most viewed him as a savior who brought back the ability to talk to one another. Extremely wealthy and very reclusive, he only spoke to the populace once a year, on the anniversary of the event, from an 'undisclosed' location. He had absolutely nothing to do with Beadle-ism, the religion that formed to explain his vision and the translator.

Louise had been correct though; Ginger *was* perkier that morning. There was an odd smell she'd been sniffing for a few days, something that smelled like a cross between ozone and electricity—the smell excited her, made her feel like something new was coming down the pike. When she'd met another Pug at a party the night before, it seemed a sort of confirmation. They weren't many, the Pugs, and even fewer were males of the type Ginger was attracted to—guys who had both a good job and didn't once ask her if she wanted to go back to her place to do it 'doggie-style.' She and Stan hit it off immediately and he'd asked her out to dinner.

Ginger took a moment to daydream about how his rich brown skin enhanced the color of his fur. It had been sheer luck she'd stayed at the party long enough for him to arrive. She'd been disappointed to enter and find mostly common animals milling around: Cows, Pigs, the occasional Sheep. It wasn't as if they were beneath her, really, she just couldn't imagine carrying on a serious conversation with them.

That night Louise sat in her bathtub worrying. She'd worked late on a number of issues as the Catfish were threatening not only disruption, but also a major suit, if the translators didn't show up soon. It had taken hours on the phone, but ultimately she and Larry worked to sooth everyone into a new agreement. Louise knew it hinged on a short dime though and exhausted, she'd skipped dinner, lit a candle, put on some light jazz, and poured a seriously wasteful amount of lavender bubble bath into the running water.

Now she sat, listening to the tiny hiss of the popping bubbles and thinking of how many human faces appeared to her in the changing mass of white foam. Eyes, noses, lips, and teeth, appeared and disappeared over and over again. Lifting a handful of water, she dripped it over her knee and watched the drips choose one side of her leg and then the other. It seemed random but

she knew there was a reason. One fleck of skin moved the water one way, or a hair, a raised freckle moved it the other way—she used to be able to work out these movements statistically but now... Louise knew she was trying to put off the inevitable. It was time to admit to herself she was in love with a Catfish.

The day she'd saved his life, she'd still been staring at her new reflection in the microwave. She'd blinked and large liquid beady eyes blinked back. She held up her hand—they were the same as they always had been, chewed nails and wrinkly knuckles. No claws; that might have pushed her over the edge. She twisted and turned in front of the microwave but the only part of her body that appeared altered was her head. Louise jumped again at a light touch on her leg but it was just her cat Mothball, coming for a pat. The cat behaved normally, purring and curling around her ankles, meowing softly for attention—as if there was nothing different. Louise squatted down to pick her up but the reverberating clang of a knocked over garbage can made the cat shoot off in the direction of the bedroom.

The noise came from the shared driveway between her house and the next. The sound of shuffling, a heavy thud against her kitchen door, and an insistent, almost frantic, banging panicked her into thinking about hiding, but it finally occurred to her that she might not be the only one with a problem.

Flicking the curtain back, she squeaked as she faced the bulging eyes of a catfish dressed neatly in a pin striped suit gesticulating wildly around his throat. She backed away, while he slid down the door, until the thought arrived—he's suffocating. Louise was positive it was her neighbor, a corporate lawyer whose name she could never remember—she just called him 'BMW Guy' to herself. Now he'd crawled over to his car trying to get the door open. He jerked back and fell into the driveway writhing and flopping.

Louise flung the door open and sprinted down the steps to where she grabbed the collar of his suit and alternately pushed and dragged him to the deep drainage ditch lining the front yard while thanking God that it had rained recently. She pushed his head into the muddy water until he shuddered and his body relaxed. After a moment she shook him, asking if he was okay, but all that came out of her mouth was a high squeaking. Giving him a pat on the back, she ran back to her house where she yanked out three garbage bags and grabbed her grocery pad off the fridge. Back at the ditch she wrote "I'll drive you to the river," and held the pad over his head while tapping his shoulder. He lifted his dripping head and she caught his attention by waving the pad. He raised a hand and gripped her wrist holding the pad still. He studied it for a moment then nodded, large eyes blinking. His hand moved to her fingers and he gave them a squeeze before returning to submerge his head in the ditch.

Ever the conscientious one, even in this crazy state, she layered the garbage bags one inside the other, filling them with ditch water while wondering about the drive. Would the streets be clear? Would she be able to drive with this altered vision? She looked at his muddy suit as he lay twitching slightly in the wet grass and decided that no matter what, they would most definitely take her car.

Back in the house, she pulled her keys off the hook in the kitchen and grabbed for her purse. The heft of it made her stop, What are you? A stupid rat or a smart rat? (Somewhere in the back of her mind she noted this new characterization and saved it to be examined later) Who cares if you have your license? Even if the police stopped her, even if the rest of the world was normal, would they really care if she had proof of insurance? Yes sir, here we are just a rat and a catfish with his head in a bag just out for a summer drive. Yes, I know I was speeding, you see this particular catfish doesn't seem to be able to use his lungs anymore.

She threw her purse across the room but made sure she had the pad of paper and pen in her pocket. She did pause and lock the door on her way out, some habits you just can't give up.

Louise woke up from a doze realizing the bath water had cooled. She let the water out, listening to the sucking, burbling noises of the drain. Mothball minced along the edge of the tub until she arrived at Louise's head and commenced to rub her fur against Louise's fur. It always surprised her that animals and pets didn't seem to regard the change as anything special. Pets still knew their owners and now some even spent time grooming their owner's fur as if it were their own. Mothball did this at night, creeping up to Louise's pillow. At first, Louise had been kind of grossed out by the thought of all that cat spit but now it was such a soothing routine, she looked forward to it. She heard the ding of a text arriving on her phone and fetched it after she dried off.

It was Larry. He'd typed: Still awake?

Yes, she typed back.

What a day, huh? Sorry I had to pull the hard ass routine. You ok?

Yeah. I know it's your job. Let's talk about something else ok?

Ok. You wouldn't believe this Bass I came across today. He used to live in Nebraska...

This was the nightly habit they had fallen into—checking in with each other and reviewing the day's events. Louise could snuggle into her warm bed and chat until she fell asleep. She knew Larry was swimming near the main dock and had good reception there, he didn't seem to require as much sleep, and after he and the other adult Catfish had rounded up all the children into the main pen, he stayed near to keep an eye on them.

Sometimes, Louise felt a deep jealousy for the gentle companionship the Catfish had. Of course, it was hard won, and since she had witnessed the beginning she knew how awful it had been.

On that terrible first day, by the time Louise reached the base of the levee, she jumped the curb—the bottom of her car screeching over the concrete—and drove as far as she could up the slope. Other cars were parked haphazardly or arriving as she ran around the car to yank the door open on the other side. Gallons of water had sloshed into the car as she drove and as she wrenched her neighbor out of the car she knew there wouldn't be much time until the oxygen was totally depleted in the water that was left. He lifted his head out of the garbage bag and she pointed out the river to his frantic eyes. He would figure it out—he had to—it was get in the river or die. His bulging eyes grew wider and he shook his head. You asshole. Louise pointed at the river again and gave him a hard shove. His head dipped back into the garbage bags but his feet stumbled forward as she guided him up the levee slope, the mud from the recent rain making slurping sucking sounds against her bare feet. As she pushed him she glanced over her shoulder and was struck by the sight of the crowd of people streaming forward behind her.

Louise and her neighbor reached the top of the levee and started down the other side, towards the water. The fence had already been pulled down as she marched him to the edge of the river and, at his hesitation, pushed him between the shoulder blades, hard, so he stumbled in, calf deep. She was sure the oxygen was running out. He waded in a bit more then fell to all fours. The garbage bags fell off and floated away. He paused, turning to her, she took out her pad of paper and scribbled, "I'll be right here. Go on." He ducked his head into the water, suit coat billowing up, and she watched his back move up and down as if he were taking in great droughts. Finally, he held a hand up giving her a thumbs up. She'd been holding her breath and collapsed

in the mud, dizzy and laughing with relief. He stood back up and stripped his suit coat off, handing the sodden thing to her, than going back into the water. Louise held on to his suit coat tightly.

As her adrenaline drained a bit, she got a good look at others. A pink tracksuit with the head of a zebra ran by clutching a toddler whose head was sunk into a punch bowl sloshing water. Two more catfish ran into the water, naked, they rapidly disappeared under the surface then reappeared ten feet away. Other than a vast rumble of hisses, growls, squeaks and lowing and the occasional car screeching to a halt, it was silent.

As she watched the pink tracksuit lower the child gently into the swirling black water of the Mississippi, Louise's only thought was—I hope that kid is fresh water.

By mid morning the streams of people slowed and stopped and Louise, who had been helping but was now covered in mud and exhausted, sat down on the bank of the river. She picked uselessly at her fingernails then stroked the fur on the top of her head. Who knew? They could all change back tomorrow. She pulled her knees up to her chin (which stuck out a bit further now) and chewed on some theories. The first was that someone had polluted the water or air supply giving everyone a mass hallucination. No, Louise thought, discarding it, if it was a hallucination all the fish would have drowned by now. She mulled over another: what if someone had done a mass hypnosis? Nah, same thing, unless they were hypnotized to think the Fish were alive. Too complicated. Keep it simple. Maybe, she thought, maybe it's just you, Louise, and this is the wildest most real nightmare you are ever going to wake up from. This thought had been a back-burner mantra that had remained in her head since she first looked in the mirror that morning, but after hours of trying to haul people up the levee with various fish heads, Louise let

the mantra go—imagining it and her former human face floating south on the river towards the gulf.

Later, she sat on the bank next to a varied group, all of them silent. The Zebra with the pink tracksuit was still there rocking back and forth, stroking her long nose over and over again. Louise understood that motion—the stroking, for fur was soothing, warm, soft, and usually belonging to a pet. She smoothed her own. A light touch was strange but...nice.

Louise's neighbor, after recovering from the ride, stayed near the edge of the water and helped, holding on to the Zebra's child (who turned out to have the head of a bass), and keeping other children near. The children behaved as children will after the initial shock, they began diving in the water, splashing each other, sometimes spitting water at the people on the shore. Those older children who could write communicated with parents via Louise's notepad.

The bank was littered with various wet paper notes that had been scribbled by people and Louise's pad was reduced to the cardboard backing. One of the first items Louise attended to was to ask for people to bring food to the Fish. Her neighbor (whose name turned out to be Larry) wrote that he had an unbearable urge to suck up and swish the mud on the bottom of the river in his mouth, and upon attempting such found it delicious, but he wasn't sure it would sustain them.

A Cheetah (for this was now how Louise was thinking of people) dressed in one heel and a ripped skirt held a baby with the head of a frog. The Cheetah had taken her top off and was nursing it. It had latched on and was sucking lustily. Louise was so tired she only briefly gave it a small thought, frogs aren't mammals—they don't drink milk, but who the hell knew at this point? All the rules for humanity had been turned over and thrown right in the trash; Louise just watched the baby suck along with the crowd as a sign of hope.

She stood up and walked to the crest of the levee where an assortment of former people lay alone and in small groups all along the length of the path. An old mnemonic from high school popped into her head, ‘King Phillip Came Over For Great Sex’: Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species. It still was true as far as she could tell, with one gigantic species possibly missing – *Homo sapiens*.

Louise heaved a huge sigh; it was becoming clear that if there were a chance of survival, they would need to band together, to form some sort of alliance, anything, to follow in the face of this incredible disruption. The crowd would need direction. If they were like her (and her neighbor) they still retained their thoughts, memories, ‘human’ inclinations. Louise thought of all the disasters she’d watched on TV: tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes. Priorities were clean water, food, and shelter. For this event, the infrastructure hadn’t changed, only the ones who *used* the infrastructure. No hurricane blew through; the levees hadn’t broken; the electricity might even stay on if people could cope. She got her pen out of her pocket and tapped it against one of her long canine teeth as she thought. The immediate scent of plastic and ink made her stomach turn and she recognized that would be one habit she’d have to stop. What was important for people to do? What could they do? She started to write a series of simple instructions down on the small piece of cardboard.

- 1) Go home.

- 2) Try to eat something. (Her own stomach was growling, she knew everyone would be useless unless they managed to get some sort of sustenance).

- 3) Charge your phone so you can text; or find a pad of paper and a pen and carry it with you. (How long would they have electricity?)

- 4) Come to (she gave her address) tomorrow at ten am.

5) Help One Another!

She underlined that last one and tried to make the letters larger and darker. Appealing to their altruistic side might be the only way for people to survive. A small list but it seemed to cover everything for now; maybe fifteen people would show up max, but it would be a start. She envisioned small groups going to houses knocking on doors. She made a note in her head, better make sure they had white flags or something so they wouldn't get shot.

She waved her hands to attract attention in the silent crowd and walked up to the first person—could they be seen as people anymore?—showing him (obviously a male, no female would wear a tee-shirt that had 'Show me your tits!' written on it. Well-maybe, but the probability was low) the cardboard. He was a freaky sort of lizard who reminded her of a Velociraptor. The lizard nodded and, hands shaking, took a phone out of his pocket, making an entry in the 'Notes' section. She took the phone from him entering her phone number and name. Calling was out of the question but texting would be useful.

She went from group to group trying to make her message known. A few people fled at the sight of her and Louise dreaded seeing anyone with the head of an insect; sure she would react the same way. No way could she stand and face someone who had a spider's head, but so far had only seen various mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

After another hour of alternately attempting to spread the message and tending to new Fish, she realized she couldn't continue unless she ate something. She was ravenous and what she wanted was a big plate of scrambled eggs. If the power wasn't on she'd fire up the camp stove in the garage, but she was having those eggs. Was that a Rat thing? It didn't matter. She just wanted to be back somewhere familiar. A part of her recognized that for the Fish and their

families, this was going to be the worst night of their lives, because familiarity for them was over.

The next morning, when she opened her front door—coffee cup in hand at nine-thirty—thank God she could still drink coffee—a seemingly unending assortment of silent figures that had formerly been human covered the block all the way down to the corner.

Louise got to work.

After organizing food relief for her neighborhood, the mayor tapped her for regional relief work, and the clear concise ideas she developed helped many in those first months. She went to the riverbank every day at first to check on her neighbor, communicating with a constant pad and pen. He would rise out of the water just enough to write back, letting her know that they (the new Fish) were taking care of the children consigned to them and helping them to learn to scavenge and eat. Although the television and electricity were still off and grocery stores had been emptied and vandalized, she brought any extra food she could find to the riverbank, dumping in moldy bread, cans of beans, giant bags of dog food, anything. The Fish did not seem to be too picky but they were very grateful, especially for condiments like ketchup and pickles.

Because Louise was a Rat and some still had an irrational fear of rodents, she found herself in a position of relative freedom and authority. Her sharp teeth deterred wild Dogs and Cats in the beginning and even in the worst situations she would write notes and appeal to the humanity they once had. She began to find herself elected to more leadership positions. People who had seen her on that first day helping on the levee remembered her strength. Word of her reliability reached the fledgling New Start Technology Corporation, and they hired her to liaise between groups, aiding in getting the translators distributed in an even manner.

By six months, most people settled down. The police were patrolling again. People realized that although their exteriors had changed they still were basically the same as before. New alliances formed, however, and new castes developed. No one seemed to like amphibians, seeing them as slimy and bug-eyed. Reptiles were seen as untrustworthy and scary. The Farm Animals unfortunately could not shed the reputation of cowardice and being stupid and slow. Birds were flighty. Dogs and Cats were seen as common. But the various Rodents excelled by their sense of smell and were seen to be industrious. Many medical doctors had become rodents of some ilk, along with an inordinate number of scientists.

It was difficult to see any pattern in the type of animal one became. Some seemed to become one animal due to profession, some genetic lineage. Lawyers seemed to be split among Rodents and Fish. Some, especially the few Lions, appeared to the populace akin to prophets or saints. It took months before the world could ascertain that there were no apes. None. It was as if whatever force did this thought descendants of apes had totally screwed up and now they were going for diversity.

“I’m positive they’ll be shipped soon. The company assured me over the phone this morning that they were on top of this.” Louise scratched her nose. It was difficult to meet at this point along the river, but she had no choice if she wanted to talk to Larry face to face today. If they met about business, it was always in the warehouse district, and the explosion of scents overwhelmed her; twice she’d had to cover her nose with a scented handkerchief when the wind blew from across the water and over Larry before reaching her. Despite her deep affection for him and knowing what a wonderful person he was, for the first five years, the sight of him had always been a shock; his skin had changed—becoming more rubbery and translucent. Now,

Louise was accustomed to the sight. Catfish tended to not wear much clothing and were very casual about nudity; Louise was quite familiar with Larry's body but she still tried not to stare too much.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything at all." Louise loved hearing her voice. All she had to do was open her mouth, so much easier than holding a translator against her throat. The handheld Larry employed used to be the new generation, smaller and lighter than the first ones that caused riots to break out. She'd heard rumors of one that would be designed for ears but knew volume control was giving the scientist's fits because of sensitivity issues.

Larry nodded, holding his translator below his left gill. "This delay isn't helping our attitude any," he said, "This appears to be rampant discrimination."

Louise nodded back. Frankly, she agreed with Larry. It didn't seem right. Old prejudices had gone out the window with their human faces, but new lines were constantly being drawn. A lot of religions had been discarded but the ancient Egyptian worship of Osiris and Thoth was on the rise, along with Beadle-ism. Cows had taken over ranches out west, converting them to dairy farms and fighting over boundaries. Territorial disputes between Cane Toads and Kangaroos were disrupting most of the east coast in Australia. People needed more sources of protein but the Fish weren't buying it and were threatening oil production in the Gulf. The only ones who were just about right at the top of the heap were soybean farmers.

Louise stood on the bank wrapping her arms around herself. Larry dove under to get some air. When he came up again, he seemed more relaxed. "Want to meet up on Sunday at the usual place?" he asked.

Their usual place was further down the river, away from the city. A nice little park where Louise could sit on the grassy bank, they could talk, and the only smells were the fresh scents of

outdoors. Louise ran a hand over her head fur as if she was tucking hair behind her ear. “Sure. I’d miss it a lot if we didn’t.”

Larry rose up out of the water a bit more and held his hand out to her. “Louise, I’m not sure I’m doing you any favors by monopolizing your time. I don’t know where this can go.”

Louise crouched down. “It doesn’t matter Larry. I’m happy with it the way it is right now.” An idea occurred to her. “Have you met someone? A new Catfish?”

“No. Not really.” The words reassured her, but there was a slight hesitation there that made the pit of her stomach turn.

“Text you later?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Louise. She cried all the way back to the office even though her eyes could not produce a single tear.

When she got back Ginger was waving her hand dreamily in the air accompanied by the sharp scent of nail polish. It made Louise inordinately grumpy and she was very short when she told Ginger to open a window.

“I thought you’d be gone longer than that,” was all Ginger said, but it implied plenty.

“Get a fan up here and get that stink out!” was Louise’s reply. She went to her desk and dabbed at her face with a scented Kleenex.

Ginger walked to the storeroom to get the required fan. She’d done nothing wrong, Louise was usually gone for the afternoon when she met that ugly old fish, as if they didn’t all know that she mooned over him. Like that was going to work.

Ginger knew of plenty of cross-species relationships but not with Fish. Number one: there was the issue of air—not a little issue itself, and number two: the Fish tended to keep to

their own. They saw the world as separated into those that were air dwellers and themselves. It was also the air dwellers that polluted their lands and tried to take away their main food source. Real fish. Louise was just plum stupid about her old neighbor.

Ginger was feeling fairly superior this day, as she'd her seventh date with Stan the night before. They hadn't slept together yet; the looser morals of pre-Occurrence went out the window with non-human heads, but as she sat across from him at the restaurant last night she felt a curious peace. His face was a true mirror to hers and she loved the way he flicked his tongue out to lick his nose after every sip of red wine. It wasn't so bad looking at him and it made her own reflection in the mirror easier to take. He was easy to talk to and the fact that they would have previously come from different worlds was ignored. The sense of peace was strange and welcome.

Reginald Beadle wanted a pretzel. Not just any pretzel, but a large warm chewy-doughy one, slathered with yellow mustard, the kind he used to buy from the pretzel cart outside of the Brooklyn Museum. He had enough money and he'd even tried to have one brought in – cost a fortune. When he bit into it, it just wasn't the same and he realized it wasn't just the pretzel, it was the place. The pretzel needed to be consumed on a wintry morning where you stamped your feet and inhaled diesel fumes spiced with the faint whiff of horse manure long buried under paved streets.

Currently, Reginald lived in a remote area of New Mexico where the tiny populace ignored him. It helped that he bought the town and paid each person a handsome salary for leaving him alone. He did feel, though, that they were the kind of people who would have left him alone without the money, but he wanted to insure his privacy. He'd never intended for the

kind of notoriety he had now—or a religion. He'd gotten the instructions for the multi-use translator, and he'd followed them; that was all.

Ha hadn't told anyone that he'd had another vision on the ninth anniversary. It had been almost exactly the same as the first, down to the road he'd found himself walking on: a soft dirt path across a flat grassy landscape that sloped away from him. The grass was a thick rich green and, again, to Reginald it smelled like life. Clouds, reflecting the breeze, split into long wispy shreds and there was the same solid sharp clarity to the sky – as if one could break off a piece, hold it and then put it back. As in the first vision, he wasn't alarmed but had the sense of belonging in this serene place; that it was constructed from some part of him that he wasn't even aware of.

He spotted the tiny rectangle across the path a long way off and knew it was again his destination. He didn't have to hurry to get there, it wasn't going anywhere, he could take as much time as he wanted. He stopped to pick a thick shaft of grass - tufted seeds on the end reminding him of a foxtail - and waved it as he walked. He heard some birdsong in addition to a faint susurrus of the wind causing great waves of grass to bend and shift.

As he grew closer the rectangle formed into the single door he remembered—still upright and blocking the path. The door had seen better times, painted a deep green once, the paint now peeled and faded with original wood showing through in many places. A brand new doorknob contrasted though, shiny brass glinting and polished. Reginald ran his fingers across the surface of the door smiling as he knocked, once more thinking that if he had the time he would repaint it. He understood that he could not try to go around the door. Eventually, as before, he got tired of waiting, grasping the doorknob and turning. The door swung open easily, the continuation of the

path heading off into the distance. Again, he knew he was to enter – but not to go through. He was welcome to stand half in and half out but that was all.

A woman walked towards him down the path from the other side. As she drew near, Reginald saw she still wore the same blue polka dotted dress his mother was buried in. Although she was the same woman who had greeted him in the first vision, Reginald had only seen her that one time and couldn't place her from any part of his life. She smiled as she approached and handed him a tightly rolled sheaf of tracing paper tied by a blue velvet ribbon. He took it and looked into her eyes. They were blue. No, green. Her eyes changed color so quickly he couldn't keep up, ranging from a series of deep purples to greens and browns. Each color was so intense he could have stared at her eyes forever. She raised a hand to his face as if to caress his cheek but did not touch him before turning and walking away leaving him with the roll of papers. He turned to leave but remembered the roll would not come with him. Some sort of invisible wall kept the papers on her side of the doorway – he'd have to read them there – half in and half out.

He untied the ribbon, letting it fall and unrolled the sheaf. Last time, the plans were beautifully drawn in shimmering ink—a series of technical diagrams—this time, although the ink was the same, there were no technical diagrams. Instead, he gazed at a series of detailed drawings of plants and what seemed to be distillation instructions. Not in English, but somehow understandable. It was awkward to hold the sheaf, it kept trying to snap back into a roll, but he could press the bottom of it against one side of the doorway to balance. As he studied the first drawing, just as before, there was the curious sensation of an imprinting in his head, a momentary heaviness, a pressing in—almost pleasant, but most definitely permanent. By the time he reached the third page he started to laugh.

Now, hours before his tenth anniversary broadcast, Reginald regarded the one small vial of liquid that sat on his steel-topped lab table. All the work of the last year culminating in a few ounces: one sitting in the vial, the other ounce locked in his safe.

The pretzel he desired was closer.

The morning of the tenth anniversary was frenetic at the New Orleans branch of the New Start Technology Company. Louise sat in a large padded chair covered by an enormous cloth bib placed over her suit. A Giraffe cosmetologist fussed over Louise's fur after spending a tediously long time measuring and trimming her side-whiskers. Louise, who neglected to eat anything out of nervousness, now felt faint. Her cell phone dinged under the cloth and Louise scrambled to pull it out accompanied by the Giraffe's disapproving large tongue 'tsking' at her. Lifting a lip on one of her large canines was enough to make the Giraffe back off.

Larry's chirpy text filled the screen: "Break a leg (or a whisker!) I'm looking forward to your interview – after all, it's all about Catfish!"

Louise smiled; Deonte already completed Larry's part of the interview—it was too dangerous to try and move Fish—although Louise had not been allowed to see it. Bits of it would be spliced in during Louise's section and she would respond—live on camera—to the interview questions and also what Larry said. The unstructured nature of the whole thing made her sick to her stomach with worry.

Ginger, on the other hand, was totally energized. She'd received a hefty amount of 'importance by proximity' and friends, awed by her closeness to the celebration, were envious. Plus, she and Stan were spending every second outside of work together with the only drawback being that it forced Ginger to develop her contemplative side. She had to confront her long

bitterness for, if she hadn't become a Pug, how could she have met Stan? It wasn't like they ran in the same circles before and they were so perfect for each other—finishing each other sentences already. Stan was such a gentleman and just last night he'd held her hand and talked of their future together. Ginger's heart was full as she watched the Giraffe powder Louise's fur again, causing Louise to cough and sneeze. Ginger wouldn't be in that chair for anything, not even a human face.

A half hour later, the staff moved Louise to one end of a plush white sofa at one end of a large studio. She sat—a bundle of nerves—pulling at her skirt, twitching her whiskers, and blinking her eyes from the dazzling bright lights. Deonte would sit next to her during the interview but right now only a microphone lay on the seat next to her. A few yards away stood an immense screen, which, in five minutes would display Reginald Beadle's yearly appearance and then Larry's part of the interview. People were hustling back and forth but Louise barely noticed them. Reginald Beadle had been fairly mysterious, as usual, as to what he would talk about; in years past he'd hem and haw before speaking briefly, appearing acutely embarrassed by the attention. One year, he'd just gotten up and walked off the stage.

Before Louise knew it, the cameraman held three fingers up and Deonte, standing by the screen, introduced Reginald Beadle. Louise sat, stiff as a board, unsure whether the audience could see her. Just in case, she plastered what she thought might be a nice expression on her face. Ginger, watching from the side, thought Louise looked like she had swallowed something bad.

The screen flickered, came to life and the leonine head of Reginald Beadle could be seen close in, adjusting the camera. He never allowed any cameramen to help, sending the feed in himself. After a few seconds of the focus changing, Reginald backed up, sitting down in a comfortable old wingback chair about six feet away. He removed his cap, placed it on a side

table, and smoothed his mane. His shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep breath. “Hello ladies and gentlemen, species of all kinds, air and water breathers—wherever you are, please take a seat. This will not be my usual broadcast.” Reginald looked off to the side, smoothing his mane again. “I can finally tell you all that I received another vision—exactly a year ago on the ninth anniversary. During this vision, I was given instructions for an elixir, a potion if you will. This elixir, which has taken me a whole year to brew, will enable each of you to make a choice. You will have a year to consider this decision, so do your best to think and ponder. In short, drinking this—” He held up a small vial of a violently chartreuse liquid. “—will allow you to become human again.”

A loud murmur arose immediately and Deonte yelled, “Quiet!”

Reginald had continued, “...has not been tested and I have always planned on taking the first dose.” Now, it grew so quiet that Ginger could hear Louise’s sharp breaths. They all watched as the majestic Lion unscrewed the top of the vial, and downed it in one gulp.

Many people screamed as the change happened almost instantaneously. Reginald’s magnificent head deflated down to the size of a prune while his body remained sitting upright in the chair. Horrified, Ginger watched two people next to her throw up. She felt like the floor was moving. Reginald Beadle just committed suicide in front of the whole world and shrieks of sadness surrounded her.

Louise, displaying the same strength she had on the day of The Occurrence, never took her eyes off the screen, while rising and shouting, “Look!”

The noise died down as the prune began to swell, inflating gradually. A horrendous nightmarish change, but after a minute small features could be made out on the surface of the swelling. Eyes, lips, nose all began to reappear until after a period of ten minutes or so the

camera was focused on the body of a man—a whole man—unconscious in the chair, a placid expression on his human face.

Deonte was the first to react, shouting, “Someone get a photo up on the screen of his human face from before!” People raced, and before a minute had passed a window popped open on the side of the giant screen displaying a photo of Reginald Beadle from years ago. The face of the reclining man resembled the photo—eyes a bit wonky and one eyebrow missing, but in general it seemed as if the elixir had worked.

Regaining consciousness, Reginald rubbed his eyes, ran his fingers over his face, and bent over coughing. When he sat up again, a translator was in his hand—the implant, just coughed up. He gazed at it, lifted his head, grinning at the camera, and eased out of the chair. He wobbled on his feet for a moment, then picked up his cap, placing it firmly on top of his human head. He approached the camera, “This is my last broadcast. It takes a while to formulate this stuff but you’ll have access to it in about a year.” He rubbed his chin, grinning again, “Oh—forgot to mention, it’s going to be free and with any luck, next year, I’ll just be a face in the crowd. Goodbye.” He reached the camera and switched it off.

The studio erupted into pandemonium. Ginger pushing through masses of celebrating people, heard shouts and cheers coming from outside the studio. Her only thought was to find Stan. She needed to see his face.

Louise and Deonte both tried shouting over the crowd for quiet but were drowned out. Silence didn’t arrive until the studio emptied, leaving Louise on the sofa and Deonte standing, staring at the microphone in his hand. He tossed it on the sofa next to Louise and watched it bounce twice. “Shit,” said Deonte, his “Heroes” special down the toilet.

Louise raised her hands to her face and examined them closely. She wondered if, in another ten years, they would all have paws, or tails? Who or whatever had done this to them had reconsidered. Fine. But Louise was skeptical. Statistically; if it happened once it could happen again—and she knew that chances were it would happen again.

Deonte argued with the network for eight months before being allowed to do the original, “Heroes,” show—with a twist. He would ask each of the heroes what their plans were now that they could undergo the change back to being totally human. He already had his mind made up; he’d made it up the moment Reginald Beasley grinned with a human mouth again. Deonte was returning to humanity. He wanted to look in a mirror and not see reptilian eyes. He harbored a secret fear that everything but his eyes would return to normal. It was something he had nightmares about.

Now, again, Louise sat on the plush white sofa. Once more sick with anxiety and sneezing at the powder the Giraffe was patting on her brow. Ginger, once again watching from the side. Louise’s job—formerly so secure—was now tenuous. Translators were still needed, but how many? Louise calculated statistical percentages daily, the numbers shifting every twenty-four hours as masses of people changed their minds, creating landslides, earthquakes in mountains of figures. Louise, perched on top of the pile, felt every tremor. Turning to ask Ginger for the updates—she wanted to be spot on for the interview—Louise caught Ginger looking at her, arms folded.

Ginger had surprised Louise by becoming firmly ‘anti-change.’ Now married, Ginger and Stan had joined an exclusive ‘Dog’ pedigree club. Stan, recently elected President of the organization, spouted its philosophy regularly: that the Occurrence had happened for a reason—

their ‘appearance,’ as it was, had been gifted to them. To return to humanity was a slap in the face of a much larger entity. Who knew if the same entity that gave Reginald Beadle the elixir was the same as the entity that had produced The Occurrence? These Dogs were going to stand their ground. Ginger had become quite militant but, in private moments, she wasn’t quite so sure and sometimes gazed at old hair and make-up magazines.

Deonte approached before Louise could ask Ginger anything, giving Louise a ‘thumbs up,’ as he seated himself next to her. The interview began, and after Deonte’s introduction, he started with questions about Louise saving the life of her former next-door neighbor, Larry. Louise’s nervousness dissipated as she spoke movingly of what she witnessed on the riverbank. When she talked of Larry staying near the shore to help, Deonte interrupted her. “I understand he is engaged to another Catfish and planning on remaining a Catfish. Is that correct?”

Louise shrugged. “I believe so and I wish him well. He has a strong wish to keep working on the Catfish Clean Water Initiative. Besides, he and his fiancée can take the elixir any time. It’s not like people have to take it on the anniversary.”

Deonte nodded, “That’s quite true.” He held the microphone closer to Louise, “I need you to think carefully now. This is a question I’m sure you’ve asked yourself, and now that it’s a reality let’s find out—” Deonte looked into the cameras and then back at Louise, “—what would you do, if right now, right at this moment, I handed you a tiny vial?”

Louise picked up her glass of water, taking a sip. She rubbed the fur on the sides of her head, producing a trickle of powder that fell on her blouse. “I’d take the vial from you, certainly.”

“Would you swallow the contents right now, right at this moment?”

Louise waved a hand and laughed, choosing her words, “Perhaps not at this moment, but I think... I think I will take it eventually.” She continued in a wistful tone stroking the surface of the sofa, “There are a few things I would miss. I think I might miss my enhanced sense of smell.” She waited a few seconds before continuing, “And the fur. I would really miss my lovely brown fur.”

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