2012

Epistemology

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Epistemology

by

Dana Kathleen Woolley

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
Christiana Langenberg
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2012

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The following is a collection of six short works of fiction. Each story contains at least one protagonist who grapples with some sort of ethical decision related in part to science or natural resource management. The story titles reflect the type of study and quest for knowledge each protagonist goes through. This collection contains elements of scientific influence, humor, and magical realism in combination to reflect a world very similar, but slightly off-kilter, to the one the reader inhabits.
Even though Jon had cracked open the passenger window, the inside of Nick’s car filled quickly with hot, thick, skunky smoke. Nick coughed hard and offered some to Jon. He thought about it, a part of him wanted to take a drag, but decided staying inside the car while his old childhood buddy got high was enough of a risk. Jon held up his hand to decline the offer and took another drink.

Nick raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure?” He winced a bit in the effort to hold back another cough. “I don’t really either, anymore. Just thought tonight might be worth it.”

“Did you put anything else in it?”

“Come on man, why you gotta ask me that?”

“Sorry.”

“You should be, asshole. To tonight,” Nick winked.

Jon agreed with a short laugh, clinked his beer with Nick’s, and stepped out of the car.

Jon thought his old friend had been clean, that was what Marie, the boys’ high school crush, had told him. But he knew how Nick could be.

Nick walked a few paces behind and tossed the remnants of his joint down a storm drain, just like they had done when they were kids. Because that’s what they were in high school, stupid kids, who saw the little fish plaque next to the drain but never bothered to read the words Leads Directly to River.

“Where’d she say she was going to meet us?” Nick asked. He lit a cigarette and picked up his pace to walk with Jon.

Jon tried to subtly sniff his sweater.
"Too late, dude. Guilty by association."

Jon had no reason to worry. The smell would blend in with the rest of the crowd at the concert, a stoner-metal subculture that Jon used to be part of. It would be as if the college degree in community planning and management, a parking spot with his name on it at the municipal Water Works, and a fiancé had never turned him into an adult.

As they crossed the street, Nick kicked a cornhusk at Jon. "Shit. I don’t understand how you or Marie are content with living here."

They were in the middle of the city, far from any fields, but wind and rain always managed to drag in bits of country.

"No way, man. I’m glad to see you. We put this off for too long. But passing through is enough for me," Nick said.

Jon held his tongue.

"I thought for sure you’d at least come see me on the road."

"I was busy with school."

"Too busy for your oldest friend?"

"Come on, Nick. It went both ways. You could have come back."

"I really thought you’d leave this place." Nick played with the zipper on his jacket. "I really thought you’d be better than this place."

"Hadn’t planned on staying. Just sort of happened."

"Yeah. But why not try living somewhere new?"

"I choose to stay."

"See, I don’t buy that."

"This wasn’t a back up plan."
“Uh-huh.”

“Marie said she’d be around back.” Jon dug his cell phone out of his pocket as he spoke.

Jon’s phone service was normally pretty good in the low-lying floodplain. But there was a sixty percent chance of rain that night, and the clouds made it a bit harder to check the band’s website to find out what time Autochthonous Debris would take the stage. Jon leaned against the cool concrete wall of the ballroom, mildly frustrated with his phone, and realized he was sort of drunk. He gave up with the phone and watched crowds of people tailgating in the parking lot under lit streetlights.

His childhood neighborhood always looked wrong when he was intoxicated. An observation he had first made in high school. Across the street was the parking lot to a Taco John’s. That lot had held a grocery store, then video arcade, and then the Red Cross. Their mobile station had handed out bottles of water to Jon and Nick’s families, after the water plant flooded and the town’s drinking water had been contaminated. He had helped his father fill sand bags alongside Nick and his father for their neighbors. Jon still felt that connection to this place and hoped that somewhere, deep down, Nick felt it too.

“There’s my girl,” Nick exclaimed.

Marie walked around the corner of the building towards the two old friends. She gave Jon a quick familiar hug and peck on the cheek.

“Nick. God. You look good,” she said. “How long has it been?”

“Seven, eight years?”

Jon noticed, with just a hint of jealousy, that Marie closed her eyes when she hugged Nick. Nick responded by leaning back and lifting Marie off her feet. Her sandy hair was collected into a sleek ponytail and she wore a navy halter-top under overalls.
She squealed in surprised delight and playfully beat on his shoulders to put her down. Then he turned to Jon and pretended to untie the string of her shirt. Nick winked and stuck his tongue out. Jon felt like tackling him.

Marie had never dressed like anyone else at school. In their senior year of high school, the three friends had all gone to Homecoming together, as a joke of course. Marie had worn a pair of baggy black dress pants with a sparkly red, sleeveless top that was completely sheer in the back. The boys had each worn ripped jeans and thermal long sleeve shirts under their over-washed concert tee shirts.

“Madam, would you care to dance?” Nick bowed and swept open his arm, the trail of smoke from his cigarette hung in the air.

Marie laughed and looked at Jon. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Just trying to rebuild a memory,” Nick said as Marie took his hand. He flicked the cigarette away and placed his other hand on the small of her back. Jon cracked open another beer he had stashed in his sweatshirt.

Homecoming had been held in the Ballroom because the floodwater-stained high school gymnasium floorboards were being replaced. With the rest of their high school class inside the venue, the three had snuck out back and took turns drinking from a flask. As Nick had stepped away to pee, Marie leaned into Jon.

“I know what you’re trying to do.” She poked Jon in the shoulder.

“Yeah? What’s that?” Jon and Marie listened to the sharp hiss of Nick pissing in the gravel of the parking lot.
The Ballroom had never been renovated at that point. It was still the same building their parents had danced in at their formals. The fluorescent B of the sign was always burnt out. Always. On the rare occasion someone thought to fix the light, it had just looked wrong.

“You’re letting Nick win. And I wish you wouldn’t.” Marie had moved closer to Jon. He remembered Marie always smelled like peppermint, because she was always chewing and popping her gum. “I know you have feelings for me.”

“He’s my best friend.”

“He’s my best friend too.”

“I couldn’t do that to him.”

“When are you going to stop trying to protect him?”

“And I have to consider the band.”

“Really? Whatever. But know this,” Marie stepped back and crossed her arms. “You’re the only one with talent in that group. And I want you, but I’m not going to wait forever.”

The two had turned around, startled when Nick stumbled back to them. Marie had smiled nonchalantly at Nick, and with her hand hidden by Jon’s baggy thermal shirt had curled her finger around one of his belt loops. Jon hadn’t wanted to, but he stepped away from Marie to help his friend back inside the Ballroom.

Now here they were. Jon didn’t think the reunion would ever actually happen. People always mean to reconnect with old friends. It’s the cordial thing to do. No one ever actually follows through with it. So when Nick called Marie and said he’d be in the area, she suggested they all get tickets to see his old band.
Marie turned to Jon. “I saw your folks last weekend at the Farmer’s Market. They looked well, and said you were engaged? When did this happen?”

Nick punched Jon in the arm, “Dude. Why didn’t you say anything? You bashful fucker.”

“I was going to wait until we were inside with a pitcher.”

Jon hadn’t told Marie or Nick about the engagement, because when it came down to it, they weren’t close. Not anymore. He had called his family, fraternity brothers, and a few co-workers, but he didn’t think to call his hometown crew. But eventually the information had trickled down.

Jon liked his life in the eastern part of the state by the Mississippi River. After college, Jon accepted the fact that he still lived in Iowa, and he probably would never leave. But he refused to live in the same town where he grew up. He’d thought it would mean something if he didn’t.

Marie, on the other hand, never left their childhood zip code, got a job at an auto insurance company, and was perfectly content moving up the ranks. That’s what Jon’s mother had told him. The two women occasionally saw each other around town.

Nick was the only one who got out. And all he did was piss his opportunity away.

Perhaps, based on some desire to follow or relive their childhood, the three walked to the loading dock and climbed up the cement landing using old tires bolted to the side of the wall so semi trucks wouldn’t hit and damage the foundation. Jon hesitated, at first. Then he jiggled the handle, kicked the door hinge, and the emergency exit popped open for them to enter. Just like it always had. Jon left his empty beer outside and slipped through the door.
After graduation, the three had promised that no matter where everyone was, if the Autochthonous Debris came home, they would all go. But this promise had been made while Nick was still part of the band.

Jon felt Nick’s eyes on him as they made their way past the heavy, purple velvet curtains and avoided haphazardly laid power cords. The stage looked different, almost brand new. Years of flooding, damage, and mildew finally took its toll on the place. Four years ago, the building had been partially gutted and remodeled. Jon’s mother had sent him a newspaper clipping about it. The floorboards creaked louder now than in his memory.

“You know, Jon, I wasn’t going to say anything in the car, but you’re acting super paranoid. Is everything alright?”

“Could ask you the same thing.”

“Naw. I’m good.”

Marie stumbled over a power strip and grabbed for Nick’s arm. “I think I see an open table.”

Jon wanted to ask about the terms of Nick’s probation. If they were anything like his father’s terms. He wanted to embarrass Nick. To have him admit that he’d messed up. He wanted to ask what a person could do to so supremely piss off an entire band that Nick lost his contract and six-figure salary. He wanted to ask why Nick hadn’t called his own parents in five years. He wanted to tell Nick of his father’s tearful confession, I don’t care where he is or what he’s done, I just want to know he’s alive. I mean, who am I to judge? If he contacts you, would you let him know I love him?
Both of their fathers still worked for the cement plant in town. When the boys were in elementary school Nick’s father went to prison for knocking over their local gas station – for the third time. The older man had asked Jon to look after his son while he was gone. His own father had expected the same. When Nick’s father had called Jon asking about his son while Nick was on tour, he had cried. It had made Jon sick to his stomach. Those men never showed raw emotion.

But instead, Jon simply said, “Cool,” and forcefully patted Nick on the back.

The guy behind the bar and concession stand recognized Nick right away. His nametag said *Your Mamma* and he leaned across the cash register to high-five the former rock star. The table next to them was occupied by co-eds who kept eyeing Nick and giggling.

In high school Jon was the heartbreaker. Nick learned all his moves from him. At this moment he wanted to remind Nick, humiliate Nick on his turf, but decided against it.

“Perks.” Nick winked at his high school friends after getting the pitcher and three shots for free.

Both Jon and Nick held a chair out for Marie. She pulled out her own chair and sat next to Nick. “Such gentlemen. So tell me, Nick, have you written any songs lately?”

“A few. Not as much as I used to. When I lived in Louisiana though, shit, I damn near wrote a new song every night,” Nick said as he filled Marie’s cup, then Jon’s.

Jon wondered how it was possible for *Your Mamma* and the girls to recognize the former bass player. All night Jon had had a hard time finding Nick inside this man across the table from him.
Some things hadn’t changed. Nick still had the scar on his right palm from when they were six years old, running around the cement plant while their fathers worked. Jon had knocked over a saw blade and Nick had reached out to catch it without thinking. Then there was the tattoo of a Water Bass style Fleabass with blue details and orange tuning pegs. Marie’s favorite band in high school was the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and when the famous bassist came out with his own line of instruments, Nick had decided to go for it.

But Nick’s hairline had receded, way more than normal for a twenty-eight year old man. His eyes were sunken in and his cheekbones more pronounced. Nick had always been an anxious person, jittery, like he had had too much caffeine or was perpetually about to go on stage, but now his fingers couldn’t stop. They played imaginary scales on his plastic cup of beer. Nick’s color was pasty and he had lost weight. So much that Jon could see Nick was adding holes to size his belt smaller and smaller.

Pathetic. That was the word that came to Jon’s mind. A pathetic addict. When they were kids they had promised each other they would never do anything stupid. At least, not without the other boy. But now, it was clear to Jon that Nick had done many, many stupid things after they should have grown up.

“Sorry folks. Too much head.” Nick swiped at a line of grease across his forehead and stuck his middle finger into his second cup. The foam disappeared instantly and Nick wiped his hand on his shirt.

“That’s so gross, Nick.” Marie squirmed and pushed her beer away. She watched the opening act, Last Harvest, set up and tune their instruments. “Jon, do you play anymore?”

Jon had been the drummer of their little high school garage band. Nick was on bass and lead vocals. Marie’s older brother Rob had played guitar. Rob was dropped from the line-up
when he graduated high school and enlisted. But by that point both boys had started to fall for Marie.

Marie, it seemed, could never decide which she had wanted.

It had started as a dare.

“Bet you boys don’t have the guts to audition.” Marie had said during study hall.

Autochthonous Debris, the local, well known band, had been holding an open casting call. Their lead singer, Laceration, had graduated a few years ahead of Jon and Nick. Back then, the students at their high school knew him by a different name; Jamie.

Laceration had achieved early success with an aggressive ballad featured on the soundtrack to a zombie movie. He had gotten out of Iowa, made a name for himself, and was a hometown hero for it. After the band’s national notoriety, their line-up changed, and Laceration thought it would be a great statement to the music industry that they wanted to support other artists from their home.

The news media loved it. It had been called, The Rural Diamond in the Rough Search.

Hundreds of kids tried out. After their third round auditions, Nick and Jon had been told that only one of them would get signed. Nick got the callback.

“No. I don’t really play anymore,” Jon said and slammed his shot.

Nick shifted in his seat and draped his arm across the back of Marie’s chair.

“Is this where you suggest we get the band back together? Come on Marie, don’t be so fucking trite,” Jon snapped.
“Whoa. Ok. I’m gonna run to the ladies real quick. You wanna come with me so you can pull your panties out of a bunch?”

Nick chuckled.

Marie stood up and walked over to Jon. She tussled his hair and then hugged him around the neck. Jon felt self-conscious and embarrassed for the outburst.

“Lighten up. This is supposed to be a fun night. We’re all together again.” Marie patted his chest, winked at Nick, and walked to the opposite side of the ballroom to the line for the bathroom.

Once it was just the two men, Nick leaned back in his chair. “Seriously dude? What’s with you? You need to mellow out.” Nick cracked his knuckles and signaled Your Mamma for another round. “Iowan’s are supposed to be nice and chill. Maybe you should go outside and get some air or something.”

“Not a bad idea,” Nick said while finishing his cup of beer. “Remind me when the show starts?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“And how long you’re staying?”

“For the whole show.”

“No. I mean in Iowa.”

“Just tonight.”

Jon nodded and walked back towards the loading dock.

Outside it smelled like rain. A faint ozone and wet worm smell. Jon looked out at the creek just beyond the paved parking lot. A handful of trees that lined the bank still held plastic
and garbage in the lower branches from the early spring flooding. A deer, a young buck, poked around in the grass on the other side of the creek. It looked up and Jon wondered if it spotted him. A car’s headlights caught the deer’s eyes, painting them neon green. The deer turned, stuck up its white tail, and darted off.

Jon had been working on two big grant projects. One would fund an effort to replace the old rusted water lines in the historic district of town with new plastic pipes. The other was a grant that would fund a citywide rain garden project. Eventually, he wanted to see native vegetation around the creek. Nothing seemed to drain properly in the area. The water stagnated and flooded into every corner of town. At least with some permeable surfaces, whatever water stuck around had options. Somewhere to go.

Jon looked at the years painted on the south side of the building.

Each year represented some of the water’s highest points.

- **1967** The lowest water level. The year Nick and Jon’s fathers had graduated from high school. The boys were both third generation graduates from that school. Both boys had vowed in the eight grade that they would be the last to graduate from those halls. They’d move together to some place like Arizona, where it didn’t flood. Their wives would be best friends too. And their kids would grow up together, just like they had.

- **1945** A flood Jon’s grandfather remembered clearly. Every spring, when the snow melted and the rain started, he would tell his grandchildren how their father went around to the neighbors’ and asked if they needed help moving furniture out of
their wet basements. The story made Jon proud every time he heard it. Nick didn’t really remember his grandfather. He died when the boys were young. It was an accident at the cement plant, and the emotional toll had hit Nick’s father hard.

- 1989 The boys were too little to remember much. Their neighborhood was evacuated by the Red Cross. Families lost the power and water pressure in their homes. Anheuser-Busch bottled water and distributed it to families. The families that did have water couldn’t drink it. The news said it was unsafe to drink. The only moment of the flood he remembered clearly was watching a neighbor canoe down the street in two feet of water.

- 2009 Jon was in eastern Iowa completing an internship. Nick was in a Kansas City jail for the second time. His new town had had minimal flooding, which was new to Jon. His mother called and told him the floodgates had been used for the first time since they had been installed in 1994.

- 1993 The highest mark. Nick and Jon were just kids scooping sand into bags with hand spades and plastic beach shoves. They wanted to help their fathers and neighbors. They sandbagged until lunchtime, then went and helped Nick’s elderly next-door neighbor pump water from her basement. Nick’s father made the two boys stay on the stairs and avoid the water. Neither of them understood why, but did as they were told. The old woman had baked chocolate chip cookies for the boys.
Jon felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Figured I might find you here,” Marie said in a soft voice. She popped a stick of gum into her mouth.

“I needed some space.”

“You mind me being here?”

Jon shook his head. “Of course not.”

“I have a story. Wanna hear it?”

“So you know Nick and I stayed in touch his first year of touring. And he came back to visit me every-so-often. Personally, I think he was homesick. But you know he’d never admit to something like that. The second year he wasn’t so good at returning my phone calls. The third year. Nothing. So I thought, fuck it. If he’s not gonna bother to call me, I won’t call him. At least, not often.

“But then I get this call out of the blue. I hadn’t heard from the kid in forever. He tells me about all these crazy things. How he climbed the rafters of this outdoor amphitheater in Tennessee and pretended to hump the support beams. How he got drunk in Nevada and woke up alone and naked on a pontoon boat in the middle of Lake Tahoe. Just crazy stuff. But then he asked if he could take me out to dinner.”

Jon crinkled his nose and made a face in the dark, but it wasn’t dark enough, and Marie saw.

“Right?! But anyway, I’m like, ‘Nick, we don’t live in the same state anymore.’ And then he says this, he says,” Marie took a deep breath, “he says he loves me and wants to move back.”

“He said that?”
“Yup. Said he had loved me since high school. He wanted to move back and quit music. It wasn’t what he thought it would be like. No one on the road understood him. Not like you and I had understood him. And something about how it was so much easier to go with the flow of things. Felt like he was going against the current all the time.”

“How long ago was this?”


“So what did you say back?”

“I told him he was crazy. But I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean like his father.”

Jon did the math in his head and noticed Marie was starting to tear up.

“All this time I’ve felt guilty. And I know I shouldn’t.”

Nick massaged his temples and closed his eyes.

“What if I’m the reason he got hooked again? Could I have been the reason he went to jail - the reason he got kicked out of the band? Everything is my fault, and I didn’t want to tell you because I know how much you cared about him.”

“Marie, you have something in your hair.”

A mayfly climbed the wispy strands that surrounded Marie’s face. She held still while Jon grabbed the insect from her hair and pinched its wings together. The creature writhed and its legs flailed, trying to right itself. Jon tossed it into the air and it flew up towards the neon Ballroom sign swarming with June bugs and moths dying to get at the light and warmth. The cluster moved as a mass in waves.

“How could it be your fault?”
Jon thought about saying Nick was impulsive and childish. But he was also loyal. And Jon had known way before Nick that his friend was in love with Marie. He knew they both were, but hadn’t said anything.

“It’s not your fault,” Jon said again.

“I bet you don’t miss this.”

“What?”

“Drama. You’re getting married. You’re done with drama.”

Jon smiled. “I don’t know about that. I love her. But we still have our moments.”

“Why do you think the timing never worked out between us?”

“We should go back inside.”

“Jon, really though.”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“You can’t control other people or their feelings. When are you going to learn that you’ve got to let things go?”

Jon stood and dusted grass from his pants. “We should find Nick, the show is about to start.”

The two found Nick on the floor, front and center.

“We should move. I don’t want to be so close that we get into the mosh pit. Marie might get hurt,” he said.

They tried to fall back behind the crowd and allow people to trickle in-between them and the stage. But the flood of fans pushed them forward until they could practically reach up and touch the microphone stands.
Nick turned to Marie and had to shout to be heard above the noise, “Just grab me if you need me.”

She raised an eyebrow and placed herself between her two friends. She squeezed their hands. “I’m so excited!”

The lights in the room dimmed to black. The crowd grew quiet, then a low rumble began to build before it boiled out as a massive wave of shouts and whistles. The band walked out, and the audience threw devil horns in the air. The drummer emerged first, and started banging away slowly joined by the bassist and second guitar. The lead vocalist, Laceration, spoke from behind the purple curtains.

“Iowa. Damn. It’s so great to be home. You know why I love it here so much? Because you fuckers are insane. Just like us!”

He ripped a chord out on his guitar and appeared. The crowd pushed the three friends closer together.

Nick clapped and shouted with the rest of the audience. He turned to Marie, whispered something in her ear and pointed towards the stage.

“Got a familiar ugly mug in the crowd tonight,” Laceration said into his microphone as he pointed towards Nick. He held a cigarette in his hand and a mass of ash dangled from the tip, about to drop at any moment.

“They actually let washed-up musicians like you in?”

Nick stuck his middle finger in the air.

The singer shook his head. He took one last drag, and flicked the cigarette over his shoulder. The drummer and the rest of the band stopped. Laceration played the acoustic version of the song from the zombie movie.
The crowd seemed in a trance. All eyes were focused on stage. Laceration closed his. Jon noticed Nick’s eyes were locked on Marie. Then the lights went out again. A single blue glowing stick hung above the singer. As he hit a power chord, the rest of the band joined in and the stage was illuminated in blue and purple flashing lights sending the audience into a trance.

Jon had forgotten how great the band was. The deafening feel of the music, the crazed flurry of arms on stage, the smell of sweat and weed. He had also forgotten how quickly a mosh circle can ripple through a crowd.

It started with two men behind Jon. The men had started pushing each other, then people around them. One of those moshers shoved into Marie. She stumbled, but regained her balance. She tried to shove back, but the guy was much bigger than her.

At the same time, Jon and Nick shoved the guy back, but the crowd kept pushing them forward. Marie made eye contact with Jon and pointed toward the tables. He mouthed back *Want me to come with you?* She waved her hands and shook her head no. She elbowed her way against the crowd and Jon lost sight of her.

Both men were now together in the middle of the mosh pit. A skinny guy elbowed Nick in the side, and he winced before he pushed back using his whole body. A man with a tattooed head shoved the skinny guy back into Nick, and Nick crashed into Jon. Jon pushed Nick towards the center of the circle.

The shoving domino effect continued. Nick was smiling. He turned to face Jon and shoved his friend. Jon could feel his face get red and warm. His heart sped up. Nick pushed again, harder this time.

On stage, the music powered along, gaining momentum from the crowd. The band’s bassist broke out into a deep solo, and that’s when Jon swung a fist at Nick.
Jon could feel the bones in his hand connect with cartilage. Nick’s nose bent to the side from the impact. The blow and noise was satisfying, but more painful than Jon had anticipated. He was never the kid who fought in school. But he usually started fights. Jon would mouth off to the wrong ignorant bully, then Nick would step in and finish Jon’s fight.

Nick stood still, shocked. Other men shoved him, but he held his ground. His eyes narrowed as he spit a wad of bloody, thick mucus from his mouth. He wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve and took a step closer to Jon.

Jon swung again, but missed. Nick recovered his balance and wind, and shot an elbow to Jon’s face.

The crowd around them had evaporated until they were alone in a big bubble exchanging awkward blows. To Jon, the fight felt like forever. It was only after security separated them and were dragging them out with their arms behind their backs that Jon realized the band had stopped playing and was watching.

Laceration spoke, “See folks? What I tell ya? Just a washed-up musician who returned home with his tail between his legs. Get him the fuck out of here. Now let me hear you scream.” The crowd roared and flowed into the hole Jon and Nick left in the front row.

As security carried the men out of the building through the front doors Marie followed behind shouting, “Stop! They’re good people! Give them another chance.”

The three high school friends sat across the street overlooking the creek. The music from the Ballroom barely audible over the sonar sound of cicadas.

Marie held a Kleenex to Nick’s nose, “Lean back.”
He did and said, with some effort, “Jon, you need to get the hell away from me.”

Jon felt exhausted. “I’m done. I got nothing I want to say to you.”

He leaned against a silver maple whose roots were exposed. A corncob floated in the water, turning over in the tiny runs and ripples. It got caught in a pocket of fallen leaves and plastic bottles. Jon grabbed a stick and tried to fish some of the junk out, but all he managed to do was break the mass loose and send it on its path downstream.

Jon kicked off his shoes and slid down the bank.

“What are you doing?” Marie called.

Jon splashed in the water, which came up past his knees and went after the corncob and bottles. He stubbed his toes on rock, felt a sharp pain in his heel, but kept walking down stream. Finally he caught up with the debris and scooped it into his arms soaking his shirt.

“Jon. For fuck’s sake, man. Let it go already.”

Jon stood there in the water with his hands full or trash. He stared at his friends. Marie with her hands on Nick’s shoulders. Nick with blood on his shirt.

“That stuff didn’t belong in the water. I had to get it out.”

“Maybe not, but it still found its way to the water,” Nick said. “Just let it go.”

“I can’t.”

Nick wiped his nose with his sleeve and climbed down the bank towards Jon. Jon tensed up, fearing retaliation of some kind. Instead, Nick knocked the debris from his arm, sending it back down stream.

The three looked around when they heard what sounded like thunder, but it could have been the band.

“It’s a ninety percent chance of rain tonight,” Marie said.
Nick breathed in deeply and checked his temple for blood. “Good. It should rain here this time of year. It’s only natural.”
Less than thirteen-percent. That was our chance of getting pregnant. My body was literally attacking my husband Gavin’s sperm. The doctor made an angry stabbing motion with a clicky pen to emphasize his point.

“This is not as uncommon as you’d think. Hormone therapy can greatly increase your chances of conceiving. I can give you the name of a specialist if you want.” The doctor stared out his office window while speaking. I followed his gaze to a couple approaching a red SUV. The woman was very pregnant. If I had to guess, I’d say about seven months along. The man opened the front passenger door for her and walked around the car to the driver’s seat. As the car pulled out of the Expectant Mother’s Parking and drove away, I saw the peeling leftovers of several bumper stickers. One I recognized as a sticker from the last presidential race. The other, an oval National Park sticker: BBNP. I guessed it was for Big Bend. Our old Ford Escort had a CCNP sticker we picked up on our Honeymoon five years ago. Each summer since we added CLNP, GTNP, JTNP, and RNP. After we sold the Escort for something more car-seat friendly, Gavin reassured me that we’d get more stickers on family adventures.

Gavin gently squeezed my hand. “Cora, what do you think?”

“Huh?”

“Do you want to see a specialist?”

“Let’s think things over before making an appointment.”

Gavin thanked the doctor for his time while I put on my fleece jacket. We walked in silence through the lobby and out towards the hospital’s huge parking structure. I waited. I wanted to hear first what Gavin had to say.
“Well, thirteen percent. There’s still a chance. It’s not like we were told absolutely, no way.”

“He basically did.” I mimicked the stabbing pen motion with the car keys.

“I’m not ready to give up on us yet.”

“But hormones? I don’t like the idea of putting something unnatural into my body.”

“Hormones aren’t unnatural.”

“No. But they’d be at unnatural levels. Maybe I’m not meant to have kids.”

Gavin stopped walking up the stairs in front of me and grabbed my hand. He pulled me up to the same step as him and looked into my eyes. I focused on his eyes, one green and one blue, when he said, “We’ll find some other way. You’ll be an amazing mother.”

***

I like to describe Gavin as my closeted intellectual. He single-handedly introduced me to The Discovery Channel. As a fourth grade teacher’s aid I’m usually more interested in what my children are learning. Maybe my sense of curiosity peaked in my late teens and its been going down-hill ever since.

After dinner we both sat in front of the TV and watched a documentary about acupuncture practices in Taiwan. Apparently acupuncture could cure just about anything. Stress, muscle aches, chronic pain, and infertility.

Neither Gavin nor I were very good with needles. I nearly passed out when I got my ears pierced. And anytime my blood is drawn for standard health exams I have to warn the nurses I may pass out. Now, after going to the same clinic for five years, they see me coming and have a
bottle of Gatorade handy. Gavin donates blood regularly to the Red Cross since he has a rare blood type, but feels sick afterward every time. He jokes that the cookies and juice make the experience worth it.

“Can you imagine? That man looks like a living pin cushion!” I pointed at the screen and stole the remote away from him playfully hoping to make Gavin squirm.

“Did you hear that? It can cure infertility.”

“But how long do those needles have to stay in? What if the wrong nerve gets tweaked?”

“Cora, look at me for a second.” In his glasses, Gavin looked older, more authoritative.

“Maybe we should look into this. Summer break starts for you next week, and I have a few vacation days saved up. Why don’t we take some time and really explore our options.”

I agreed by kissing my husband and trying the real all-natural way. Maybe thirteen was our lucky number.

***

Gavin and I spent the next weekend searching out books on acupuncture in a new-age store filled with mass manufactured crystals and moldy smelling incense.

“Gavin, why don’t we talk about adoption again?” I knew where this question would get us, but decided to ask anyway.

Gavin’s best friend and co-worker at the cement plant where he worked had gone through similar fertility troubles with his wife. The couple decided to adopt a beautiful baby boy, but the birth parents, a couple of ex-drug addicts, had recently decided to pursue legal action to see their child.
“Everyday I have to hear about their problems. And I’m sorry. But I don’t want to be able to relate to him. Not like that.”

Gavin began chewing on his cuticles. “Besides, this stuff is kind of cool.” He pulled a taxidermy chicken talon out of a glass bowl and held the claw up to his chest and smiled. “What do you think?”

An older woman behind the counter cleared her throat and motioned for us to come closer.

“See what you did? You got us in trouble.” I poked Gavin in his side and he put down the chicken foot. I covered my mouth with my hand and tried to keep a straight face.

The woman held a stone in her hand. “Rose quartz. Take it. Feel the energy.”

I raised an eyebrow but reached for the stone. Gavin stood next to me reading a pocket guide to karma sutra.

“This will solve all your problems. The both of you.” Her hair was buzzed short and she wore purple cat-eye glasses frames low on her nose. I couldn’t be sure, but I think she shot at look at Gavin’s crotch.

“We don’t have any problems.”

Now the woman raised an eyebrow. Behind her glasses her eyes were a bit distorted, but they seemed kind. “That’s not what your aura says. Just buy the quartz. Please. It will make me sleep easier knowing you have it.” I noticed a mole on the tip of her nose. More like a freckle really. I’ve always been drawn to odd features.

My boyfriend in high school had ears that stuck out slightly. A summer fling had a little gap between his two front teeth. And during my one and only semester of college, I dated a guy
with a unibrow. My friends gave me a lot of grief for him. But I swear, once you get to know the person, you don’t even see the oddities.

We broke up after two months because he cheated on me with one of my closest friends. All of my friends were on a quest to find the perfect man it seemed. They gave me a hard time about the men I chose, but obviously I had found some treasure in Unibrow or else my friend wouldn’t have betrayed me.

I met Gavin on a blind date. He was very handsome in the traditional sense. Dark hair, olive complexion, and tall. But what caught my eye, were his mismatched eyes. They stared directly into my hazel eyes, and made me feel comfortable. I could really see myself with him. But I didn’t agree immediately to a second date out of fear.

I feared that I would lose him. A man that good looking would see my faults instantly. But somehow he didn’t. Gavin was very nearsighted.

Gavin reached for his wallet in the back pocket of his jeans, handed the woman five dollars, and picked up a book called, *The Medicine of the Ancient Chinese*.

“That’s my best seller,” she said.

“Do you know much about Eastern Medicine?” Gavin asked.

“I know a bit. But my son knows more. He owns this shop, but his main store is across town.

She took out a green sticky note and wrote down an address. “His name is Kurt. Let him know I gave you his name. And wait, dear.”

The woman motioned for my rose quartz. “This one will do you more good.”
She exchanged the stone for another, smaller piece with a hole drilled in the top. She looped a piece of black string through the hole, tied a knot and gestured for me to bend close so she could place the necklace over my head.

She tapped the stone with her index finger. “Closer to your heart this way.”

***

A week later, Gavin and I stared at 7439 Grand View Crest. *The Tantric Rabbit* was another new age shop with stained glass windows in the historic building district of town. The shop was part of a mini strip mall that also housed an ice cream parlor, a watch repair boutique, a podiatrist office, and a greeting card depot. A couple who looked to be in their forties sat outside on metal bird-poop covered picnic tables eating banana splits, and failing to get their children to share. An old man walked out of the watch shop alternating between tapping on his wristwatch and holding it to his ear.

Gavin and I walked into *The Tantric Rabbit* and were greeted by a sharp jingling of sleigh bells attached to the door and a large white parrot on a wooden stand next to the cash register. No one else was in the store, but some kind of tribal drum music was playing softly. Along each wall were shelves of books divided into genres like *Alternative Fixes, Cosmic Herbalism, Modern Om and Garden, Energy Arts, Mind & Body & Plasma*. Gavin walked past the bird and toward the bookshelf labeled *The Powers of Power*. The rest of the floor was filled with random coffee tables, each featuring bowls of different gems, stones, candles, jewelry, figurines of Buddha, and coins.
“This place has a way bigger selection.” He picked out the same book on Chinese medicine we’d found in the last store to show me, and then pointed to five more titles specifically relating to pregnancy.

The bird squawked and raised its lemon yellow head feathers, giving it the appearance of a mohawk. It bobbed its head up and down while running back and forth on its perch before coming to a sudden stop at one end. The weight of the bird on one side looked like it might make the stand topple over, but just then a man’s voice came from behind a beaded curtain over a door labeled Employees Only.

“Pete, you crazy feathered fuck, what’s the matter?”

Pete, the bird, lowered his head crest and reached around to smooth a tail feather that had become disheveled in his outburst. A man with spiked blonde hair and a tattoo of a koi fish swimming up his forearm parted the beaded curtain as he stepped through.

“Oh, sorry folks. Didn’t hear anybody come in. Have you been here before?”

Gavin spoke for us. “No. Never. But the shop owner’s mother in the smaller place on the other side of town recommended we talk with her son, Kurt.” Gavin looked at me for reassurance. I nodded at the man.

“I’m Kurt. Are you looking for dream catchers?” He held his arm out to Pete who scrambled one foot over the other to perch on the man’s shoulder and began to tug at his silver earrings.

“The woman sold me this,” I touched my quartz necklace, “but she said you were the one to talk to about this.” I pointed to the books Gavin stood next to. The spiky haired man walked over to Gavin and me. Kurt reached up to Pete and gave the bird a gentle scratch on the back of its neck and his little feather eyelashes closed slightly with content.
“Ah. Trying to get pregnant?”

“Yeah. We saw a documentary about acupuncture, but honestly, Cora is terrified of needles. We’re looking for a natural alternative. We don’t know what else to do.” Gavin glanced at the rose quartz around my neck, and then he winked his green eye.

I wanted Kurt to know Gavin was just as scared of needles as I was.

“I think I can help,” said Kurt.

***

Kurt specialized in aligning chakras, the art of feng shui, and selling illegal exotic animal parts for medicinal purposes.

“I like to consider myself a straightforward person. This is what I do. This is who I am. I’m a bit of a Robin Hood to the people of Western Medicine.”

“Huh?” I asked. But Gavin squeezed my hand before I said anything else.

Kurt went on, “I have a good feeling about you two. I feel like I can trust you. And if my mother approved – that says a lot. I’ll give you want you want, but you have to decide right now.”

Pete the parrot went back to his perch and cracked open a sunflower seed in his food cup.

“We’ll make it a trade. My cashier just quit, so I’m a little short handed in the shop. If you work for me, I’ll talk to my contact and find something made of fur or scales that will give you a baby.”

I said, “We need time to think about the offer.”

“I need you to make a commitment right now. This is what you want, right?”
“Yes. Yes it is.” Gavin spoke up and placed his arm around my shoulder. “More than anything.”

“Alright. If you trust me, I’ll trust you.” Kurt stuck his hand out for Gavin to shake.

“Wait.” I said. I stuck my hand out. “We’ll both work for you,” I turned to Gavin, “summer will be here soon, and I only work part time anyway. It makes more sense for me to work.”

“Kurt, I’ll see you Monday. Cora and I will figure out the rest of the week.”

I glared at Gavin, but he didn’t seem to notice. We left The Tantric Rabbit and didn’t speak at all until we were back in our apartment.

“I’m not sure what to think about this, Gavin.”

He sat down in the middle of our couch in the living room and motioned for me to join him. I sat next to him and spun around so my legs were across his lap. I laid my head against his shoulder and he played with the hair falling out of my ponytail.

“I think we should try working for Kurt. We should try something different. We’ll only be working at the cash register. Whatever else he does, we won’t be aiding. Like he said, he’s Robin Hood. He steals from the real illegal traders and then uses the parts to help people like us.”

I exhaled sharply.

“But Cora, let’s make a deal. The second you feel uncomfortable, we stop this. We’ll go back to talk to a fertility specialist or, as a last resort, look into adoption. Deal?”

I looked up into his blue eye. I trusted this man. I nodded.

***
Monday night, after his shift at *The Tantric Rabbit*, Gavin cooked my favorite chicken parmesan and gave an uneventful account of his experience. “Most of the patrons in the shop were totally normal.”

I shot Gavin a look.

He smiled. “Ok. Maybe not normal. But they didn’t seem threatening.”

Kurt had a system for his illegal exchanges that Gavin assured me was nearly flawless.

“It’ll make more sense when you work there this week, but Kurt really is a professional. It’s not much different from working retail, and you’ve done that before. You just have to read your customers and figure out what they want.”

I tore up pieces of romaine lettuce and put them into a large bowl with sunflower seeds and Caesar dressing. Gavin put a small zip lock baggie filled with orange powder next to my glass of water.

“I have something for you. Kurt said you should start off with a pinch of this. For now.”

He opened the baggie and the powder sank to the bottom of my glass. He swirled the liquid like a professional wine taster and held it out to me.

I placed the salad bowl at the center of the table and smelled my water which was slightly yellow now. It didn’t smell like anything chemical or toxic. Maybe a bit fruity or sweet.

I didn’t hesitate. I just wanted to get it over with, so I chugged the glass of water down. Looking at Gavin, I noticed he had been biting his lip. But was smiling now.

“We’re going to have a baby,” he said. “Oh. And something else.”

Gavin handed me a book called *A Pocket Guide to Nirvana*. The guide had little sections about herbal remedies, gemstones powers, and moon phases.

“It couldn’t hurt,” I said.
The guide said, *use jade for balance.*

***

As soon as I was done helping monitor recess at the elementary school, I drove over to Kurt’s shop. I called Gavin on the way over, and got his voicemail. The cement plant was getting a shipment of granite that day, so I figured he’d be busy. I left a voicemail on his phone.

“Hey, it’s me. Driving over to work at the *Tantric Rabbit.* Is it weird that I’m nervous? But you’re right. I’m sure it’ll be like any other retail job. And be careful. I read in the pocket guide that granite contains mercury. Love you.”

Pete was back at his post near the cash register preening wing feathers. As I approached, he stopped what he was doing. I extended my hand, unsure of the gesture I was supposed to make towards a bird that would show him I was a friend. Pete hunched down and looked sideways at my hand. It seemed like he wanted to climb on, so I got closer to him. To my delight, he slowly walked up my arm. I remained rigid for fear of dropping or scaring him and turned my whole body to shift perspective on the store.

Pete let out a laugh. Not an actual laugh, but a bird mimicked human laugh. I heard the back door slide and the bead curtain trickle as someone walked through. Kurt walked out dusting his hands on his pants.

“Good afternoon. Looks like you two are bonding.”

Pete let out another laugh, then whistled.

“Yeah, little buddy. I agree.” Kurt rummaged under the cash register until he held up an apple. Pete made a clumsy attempt at flight and landed on the counter expecting to be fed.

“His wings are clipped,” Kurt explained.
“Your training won’t take long. Gavin said you worked at a grocery store when you were in high school. But, you need to know three things.” He bit off a hunk of apple and held it out for Pete. The parrot nibbled on the fleshy, sweet part and then held on to the skin with his foot. His sulfur colored crest rose and he squawked three short, shrill beats.

“One. Learn to recognize the customers. Some people come in looking for incense or gemstones, and some,” he pointed at me, “come in looking for something a bit more advanced.”

“Two. If the Employees Only door is closed, don’t go back there. If I want you back there, I’ll ask.”

“Three. Feel free to ask questions. We’re all family here.”

Pete finished his apple chunks and laughed.

*For courage use sugilite.*

***

The code word is: Dream Catcher.

The conversation goes something like this:

A patron walks into the store and says this, “I’m interested in purchasing a dream catcher.”

I ask, “Where would you like to hang your dream catcher?”

If they say, “In my kitchen.”

Then I say, “Let me see what I can find for you, right this way please.”

I take them past Pete and books on yoga poses towards the beaded curtain. Three short knocks on the sliding door behind the beaded curtain and Kurt walks out to greet his customer.
I’ve handled two of these patrons so far. The first was a woman about my age with psoriasis. The second was a teenager with acne. Gavin had met only one – an elderly man with joint problems. They all seemed friendly.

But if a patron wants to hang their dream catcher anywhere besides their kitchen, they can buy one made by a genuine Native American with beads and feathers for the low price of $14.95.

***

Gavin and I didn’t work together in the shop. Kurt said too many people in the store at one time would ruin the energy flow and seriously mess up the feng shui.

“Besides, I like to keep things low key. My special customers don’t want a lot of company while making purchases,” he said.

At the end of my shift Kurt handed me another baggie of orange powder. “A teaspoon,” he instructed before disappearing behind the beaded curtain.

Over dinner, I stirred the powder into my water and sipped. The taste wasn’t bad at all. I thought over time it might sour. Instead, it was starting to grow on me. The texture was the only thing that bothered me. It was a bit granular. But taken with food, it wasn’t horrible.

Gavin reached across the table and took my glass. He held it under his nose.

“Yeah. Not so bad. I wonder what it is, exactly. Kurt said in a week or two, if we don’t notice anything, he’ll change your prescription and give me something too. Cora, everything I’m reading on the internet says there is so much untapped potential in exotics. Kurt told me about a
couple he helped by using the swim bladder from a blue fin tuna. He said it was way more effective than acupuncture.”

Kurt knew a lot about everything it seemed. He grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and moved abroad when he was nineteen to cure his apathy. But instead for finding himself, Kurt learned that dried tiger penis and the gall bladder from a sun bear would make him rich.

“He’s a really fascinating guy. You should make more of an attempt to get to know him,” Gavin said with a mouthful of green beans.

“Are you nervous to take something?” I asked.

Gavin swallowed and shook his head slowly. “No. If you can do it, then so will I.”

To harmonize the home, use chalcedony.

***

The day had been slow. An elderly woman walked in looking for aromatherapy candles, and a couple of teenagers bought hemp necklaces with pot leaf pendants. Pete got upset when the shorter one reached out to pet him. He let out a high-pitched squawk and tried to bite the boy’s fingers. The teenagers both laughed and tried to pet him again.

“Leave him alone boys,” I said.

“If he’s so unfriendly, why keep him in the store?”

“Not my store. Now leave him be.”

The shorter boy reached out one last time as Kurt stepped through the beaded curtain.

“What’s going on out here?” he asked.

The two boys hurried out the door. “Nothing man. Cool bird.”
Pete turned around and picked at his tail feathers, smoothing each one.

“Sorry about that, Kurt.”

He waved off my apology and walked over to the bookshelves, a section called *Interpreting Cosmic Signs*. “So how’s it going out here?”

“Just fine.”

Kurt picked up a book on gemstones and walked back to me. He flipped through the pages then pointed to a type of clear geode.

“Datolite. You use it with calcite to tune into your emotional side and expand consciousness. Some cultures use it to connect with nature. Anything bigger than yourself.

“I bought a little cluster of datolite crystals right before I left home. Mother had been in some pain, but she’s scared of doctors, so I told her I’d find something for her.”

“What did you find?”

“You should keep this book. It’s better than the pocket guide Gavin gave you.”

He held the book out and when I reached for it, he took my hand.

“Cora, is family important to you? To me, it means more than anything.”

“Yes. Family is very important to Gavin and me.”

“Good. Then the three of us have something in common.”

The book says, *to achieve balance between light and dark, use pyrite.*

***

Lately, Gavin seemed moody.
I brewed him some tea Kurt recommended. It was made from the sepals of some flower found in Thailand. Kurt said it would help us both relax. Gavin was taking a tiny bit of brown powder like me. It smelled like pumpkin pie.

“Drink this,” I said.

“Three weeks. He said he’d help us. But so far, nothing.” Gavin scratched the back of his neck as I poured some tea for myself. “Shouldn’t we be pregnant by now? How much longer will this have to go on?”

Once he got an idea in his head, Gavin would pursue it until it came to fruition. His father was the same way, so I understand it’s in his blood. Nature beats nurture.

“Kurt’ll uphold his promise. He said he’d be getting a new shipment of stuff in on Thursday when I’m working. I’ll talk to him then and see what he thinks. In the meantime we both need to limit the baby anxiety. I hate seeing you like this.” I rubbed Gavin’s shoulders and neck trying to recall the body’s pressure points I had read about in a book Kurt had given me that day. Gavin was right, Kurt was an amazing well of information.

“I just want you to be happy. The end will justify the means, Gavin. Just try to relax.”

For serenity and peace of mind, use gypsum.

***

I was selling some Wiccan wannabe a black candle and pentagram necklace with a moonstone in the middle when the shipment came. After I completed the sale, Pete laughed and Kurt came out from behind the beaded curtain. He walked to the front of the store and flipped over the Open sign.
“Beat it kid.”

The Goth raised an eyebrow and hurried out of the store tucking the candle into his black trench coat. When he passed a bowl of African coins, it looked like he swiped some, but I didn’t say anything to Kurt. The sleigh bells on the door clanged, and the Goth was out of sight.

“I’m going to need you to help with some light lifting.” Kurt opened his arms to demonstrate the box’s dimensions. “I promise not to give you anything too heavy. Mother usually finds people to help on these days, when we get deliveries, but she hasn’t been doing so well lately.”

I watched Kurt part the beaded curtain, took a deep breath, and followed him into the back room.

It was smaller than I’d expected. Aside from a utility sink and card table, the room was wall-to-wall shelves. Everything was tidy and organized. Packed away in blackened Tupperware containers. The lighting was poor. A naked light bulb hung in the middle of the room above the card table, a shoelace tied to the pull cord. A fluorescent light flickered near the back door. I could barely make out the labels: rhino, gorilla, leopard, turtle, and others I didn’t recognize. Some labels weren’t in English.

Kurt noticed me squinting at the boxes.

“I have the master inventory in my head. No paper trail.” He made a clicking noise with his tongue and tapped his forehead.

Kurt didn’t deal in live animals, only dead things and parts, so the boxes I lifted out of the van were small and relatively light. If there was a driver in the van, I couldn’t be sure. No one ever got out. The back of the van had a beat-up bumper sticker that read, *He Who Laughs Last Thinks Slowest.*
I looked down at the wooden crate I held labeled Scorpions.

Aside from our smaller boxes were three large crates. One had Japanese kanji on it, the other French, and the last something I didn’t know. This box was the heaviest. After sliding the back door of the van down, Kurt pounded on the side of the vehicle. The driver waved two fingers out the window and drove off.

I helped Kurt push the large crate into the center of the storage room and ran my hands over the unfamiliar language.

“Rhino. My best seller,” Kurt said as he patted the crate.

I nodded and left Kurt to sort and organize the merchandise by himself. I emerged from beaded curtain and into the store to find the little Goth peeking in the front window. I flipped the sign around and let the kid in. Pete squawked and I reached under the cash register to check for apples.

“Hey lady, I forgot to ask. Is this crystal moonstone or azurite? I want to recall my past life, not gain intuition.”

I find black lipstick the most unflattering color on a person.

After the kid left I turned on the multi-cd sampler to Lullaby of the Loon.

Before I locked up the shop Kurt gave me the usual baggies of orange and brown powder, a tablespoon each, and asked if Gavin needed any more tea. I’d said no to the tea. Gavin was doing better.

But when Gavin came home for dinner he had horrible dark circles under his eyes. He had a coughing fit at the kitchen table and hacked up cement dust. I gave him a glass of ice water, without powder.

“Did Kurt give you something new today?”
I shook my head. “No. Nothing new. Maybe he needs time to make the powder. I didn’t really get involved with the delivery.”

“You didn’t see anything?”

“No. Nothing.” I stirred the brown powder into the rest of his water.

“This tastes like shit. Anything this nasty has to be good for something, right?” He took one more sip before dumping the rest down the drain.

I moved closer to him to rub his neck and shoulders. I just wanted to take his stress away. I began to nibble on his ear, but he pulled away. “Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

“We can’t rely on the powder alone,” I reminded him.

I wanted to tell Gavin about the Goth kid, about the delivery, about Pete and how he spit apple pieces on the Goth kid. I wanted Gavin to tell me about work or what his friend was going through. Maybe all the legal stuff was settled for that man and his wife.

I stepped towards Gavin and hugged him from behind. He never turned to face me. It was as if he was waiting for me to let go.

That night, as Gavin lay asleep beside me, I wondered if I could have had the courage to travel like Kurt had. He was only a year or two older than Gavin and myself. His life was so different from ours.

*For endurance, use topaz.*

***

Another week went by, and I still wasn’t pregnant.

I thought maybe my hair and nails were thicker, but it was probably just my imagination.
Gavin seemed tired all the time. Some would call it patience, but I know him better than that.

While the store was empty, I approached the beaded curtain. I stood there a moment, looked back at Pete who was happily eating a plum, and knocked on the doorframe.

“Yeah?”

“Kurt, can I talk to you?”

“Sure. Flip the sign around, count to fifty, and come back here.”

I stepped through the beads and saw a variety of dried snakes arranged on the card table in front of Kurt.

“They’re sea snakes from the Indian Ocean. Highly venomous. And those are cobras. I got them from a heroin dealer. See, they put cobras in their shipments so if anyone opens the container and tries to steal the supply, bang, they suddenly wish they hadn’t. And this little fella would’ve gone to waste if I hadn’t claimed him. I could never do that.”

“What, open the box?” I asked. Pete sat still sat on my shoulder and I was worried that I shouldn’t have brought him into the back room.

“Waste life. Deal drugs. Those are some bad hombres.” Kurt took a scalpel out from a dissection kit at his elbow and began scraping the scales off one of the sea snakes. “Mother taught me to never be wasteful.”

“How is she?” I felt a twinge of guilt.

Kurt shrugged his shoulders and picked at something under his fingernails.

“Cora, do you think I’m a bad person?”

“What? No. Who am I to judge?”
“I just want to help people. But I can’t find a doctor that will see my mother. And it’s all my fault.” Kurt took the scales and threw them in a mortar with what looked like mint leaves and ground them with a pestle until it became a fine green powder. “Family is very important to me. You and Gavin are like family to Pete and me. You understand that, right? And I’d do anything for family.”

For the first time I noticed a pale scar next to his right eye. It was short, but wide and interrupted his eyebrow.

I smiled and gave Kurt a quick hug without trying to stare at the sea snake’s severed head. Kurt put his hand on my arms, not letting me go.

“It’s not working for me. The powder. Gavin either.”

“Are you sure you don’t feel anything? Nothing has changed?”

“I thought my hair was thicker, but I’m not sure.” I can’t believe it had taken me so long to notice that scar.

“No, not like that.” Kurt paused.

Several species of bird lay on the shelf next to the utility sink half plucked of their feathers. Some had the same coloration as Pete.

“Did you ever wonder if maybe the problem wasn’t you? Maybe Gavin is the problem.” Kurt let go of my hand and touched the quartz around my neck. Then his finger traced the curve of my collarbone.

“Cora, I can give you what you want. There is always another way.”

I thought of the night Gavin and I had spent in Devil’s Lake State Park. Herons roosted in the trees above our tent and screamed and cackled all night. I couldn’t sleep. Gavin offered to pack up in the middle of the night and find a motel, but I said no. I knew the amount of trouble
he went through to take time off for us to go camping. I knew the amount of hassle and time he spent to make sure I was happy. So I had laid awake all-night and listened to the birds. We hadn’t been camping since.

Kurt kissed me, and I didn’t stop him.

For guidance use malachite.

Gavin was already asleep by the time I got home.

As I stepped out of the shower, he was sitting on the toilet with the lid down.

“Late night tonight? Did you bring something new home?” Gavin stared at the bathmat. Under the light from the vanity mirror, his features were sharp and gaunt. The black circles under his eyes more exaggerated.

I stood there, naked and dripping water. He handed me a towel.

“I’m done. I can’t go back to that place.”

Gavin finally looked up, his green eye and blue eye both bloodshot.

“Gavin. Promise me you won’t go back.”

I wrapped the towel around him and led him back to bed. I didn’t bother getting dressed. I climbed in beside him and held his hand until we both drifted off.

For strength, use turquoise.

***

I woke up early the next day. There were kids lined up in front of the ice cream shop all the way to The Tantric Rabbit. Summer had officially started.
The Closed sign hung in the door. I let myself in, then slipped the key inside the cash register. Pete fluffed all his feathers, making him look huge, and then deflated by shaking. I held my arm out to him and he climbed on. Pete raised his crest and picked gently at my necklace. I kept him on my shoulder and walked through the beads without knocking.

I could hear Kurt’s radio and what sounded like a power sander going full blast. As I entered the back room I found Kurt wearing a mask with his sleeves rolled up standing over a smoothed down horn. On the floor next to him was a bucket of water with several more horns. He saw me and cut the power to the sander and radio.

“I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“Kurt, what are you doing?”

He pointed to the pile, “Rhino horns.”

Stacked in the center of the card table was a collection of little blue pills. When he removed his mask, gray powder left a line around his nose and mouth. “Wanna guess?”

I shrugged. “No idea.”

“Viagra,” said Kurt. “In some cultures rhino horns are believed to aid in male strength. But really, it’s all bullshit. The horns are incredibly porous and if you soak them in Viagra they are worth five times the price of gold. You know why?” He unplugged the sander and walked over to me. “Because they perpetuate the myth.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“Cora, I wish it wasn’t true. But now you see. There isn’t any magic in the world. There are no simple fixes.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I try not to. One day, I hope I prove myself wrong.”
Kurt led me out of the back room and held out his hand for Pete to return to him. Pete climbed onto his owner and lifted his foot to wave at me.

“You know, your husband and I aren’t so different. We both want the same things. Which is exactly what we can’t have. But you, Cora. I hope you figure it out soon.”

*For insight, use coprolite.*

I unclasped the chain around my neck, slid off the rose quartz, and handed the stone to Kurt. I could feel his eyes on me as I walked out of the store.
Matt didn’t have much of a choice. Kelly called and said she would pick up her stuff in the morning, when his shift at work had ended. He gently scratched his neck as he listened to the rest of Kelly’s voicemail and watched his blueberry pop tart start to burn.

“You have a choice. It’s your stuff or me. But you already made that choice. See you after work. Please don’t make this any weirder than it has to be. I tried.”

He forced the toaster lever up and the pastry got jammed between the heating coils and the spring-loaded bottom. He unplugged the toaster, flipped it upside down over the sink, and shook. His dinner fell out into a pile of dirty dishes.

Matt knew Kelly’s ultimatum was coming. He had detected a pressure change in his lateral line that had become too painful to ignore anymore. That, and he noticed Kelly’s suitcases, which were usually kept in the garage, had been taken out and hidden among his things.

Matt grabbed the shirt for his uniform off one of the kitchen chairs, sniffed to make sure it was decent, and decided the pop tart wasn’t burned all that bad.

He searched for his keys in his pants pocket, his father’s old alma mater beer mug, a shoebox full of stamps and movie stubs, then the refrigerator, before he remembered where he had thrown them. His father’s twenty-gallon saltwater fish tank.

The tank needed a few repairs before it could be used again. Matt had been looking forward to shopping with Kelly to pick out brightly colored fish to put in the tank. Fish really weren’t her thing, but she had tried to understand why Matt loved them so much. The tank restoration was her idea and Matt had felt promise in the gesture.
The pop tart hadn’t really cooled down yet, but he stuck the whole thing in his mouth to free his hands and lock the front door. It took him two tries to correctly button his shirt. Matt scratched again at the lateral line on his neck, which looked like a series of pronounced, pink goose bumps along his left side from ear to hip. His father had the same skin thing and had described it as the “Ledbetter’s sixth sense”.

It was his father that had coined the term. Their lateral line.

Matt had first noticed his when he turned eleven. He remembered standing in his father’s bathroom, experimenting with his father’s razor. Close to the mirror he noticed the bumps on his neck and shoulder. He thought maybe he had gotten into some poison ivy while running around outside, but Matt had always preferred to hang out with his friends around water.

He had gone to his father, with bits of toilet paper stuck to his face, and pointed to the rash. His father had seemed so proud. It was the first time Matt had ever seen that side of his father. He then proceeded to let Matt in on the family secret.

His father could use his lateral line to tell him when a rainstorm was coming, who would win a pay per view fight, or if he was being lied to. He had even used it to win a local lottery. He used the money to start a college fund for Matt.

Matt had never seen himself as the textbook type. But regardless, the money was left to Matt in this father’s will.

After Matt had told him about his new job at the aquarium downtown, his first real job, his father had laughed. *The place suits you.*

As he grew older, the patch of bumpy skin grew to a strip a few inches wide that ran down his body. But no one really asked him about it. As a child, Matt had thought his father’s
lateral line was a scar from a burn. He guessed other people must have assumed the same thing. Or a birthmark. And in a way, it was.

Matt always hoped he would be able to use his lateral line just as well as his father. He didn’t know if age or some kind of mental training would make it stronger, so he experimented every so often. Herbal supplements were next on his list to try. But his lateral line didn’t seem to work the same way as his father’s did.

He brushed the crumbs from his dinner out of his beard and got into his car. The sun began to set, but Matt didn’t turn on the lights. He hoped maybe tonight he could let his senses take over and guide him.

With his mind preoccupied, the drive downtown didn’t seem to take too long. Matt worked the night security shift at the Kiefer Aquarium and despite what he told Kelly and everyone else, he loved his job.

Kelly had said, “Fish are cold and don’t have any feelings. They don’t even have eyelids to blink.”

The night shift was where he did his best thinking. Granted, he never thought about too much. Like, if he had his own habitat exhibit, what would it be called?

The Hall of the Jaded Bachelor. *Notice how the male collects objects to create his home. The magpie of the under water world, our fish friend prefers to surround himself in a maze of treasures - rocks and vegetation. The males are often solitary. Family structures are small and rarely leave their microhabitat except when in search of food or other vital resources.*

Looking below and into the tanks was part of Matt’s nightly routine. From above, the water made everything smaller and blurry. He couldn’t help but feel this was the proper way to
view the fish. Not face to face through the glass. That seemed too personal and invasive. When children tap at the glass and yell *Here Fishy Fishy*, there’s a reason the fish will dart away. And it smelled much more authentic from above, mackerel or sardines in various states of decay, which was the way it should smell in an aquarium.

He had tried to explain this to Kelly, but instead he just agreed with her that it smelled like fish ass. She would gently scratch his lateral line when she teased him. It was a gesture he knew he would miss.

Upon entering the aquarium, Matt relieved the day guard of his duties. The two exchanged quick, polite comments about the weather, and then Matt began his rounds.

A general sweep of each exhibit, double check the locks on the main doors to the building, and then sit and watch the monitors in the control room.

But Matt couldn’t sit still.

The first tank, a collection of smaller tanks grouped together to form a sort of mosaic, featured fish from the area. Local, un-exotic types. These fish were often overlooked by visitors – children who wanted nothing more than to see starfish and dolphins while gorging themselves on multicolored lollipops. Matt walked up to a tank of catfish. About three feet from the ground, the glass was sticky as hell.

His own father didn’t like crowds. *Too much of a clusertfuck*, he’d say. But the real reason the two felt uneasy around large groups was their lateral line. They felt compelled to be part of a group. Needed to be part of a larger whole. His father was incredibly social, but only with the people he trusted most. The urge made Matt feel pathetic. The only person he wanted to be around was Kelly.
The first big exhibit Matt walked into was the Far Away Northern Seas exhibit. The space was large and open, more like a zoo exhibit, to accommodate the size of the inhabitants. He walked down the steps to the whale tank and peered down at mother and calf. It reminded Matt of his first date with Kelly, the cute teller at his local bank.

“I have a surprise for you,” he’d told her.

Kelly had smiled up at him and raised an eyebrow. He led her through the Northern Seas, which was partially closed off for maintenance.

“Don’t tell anyone. But this isn’t really closed for maintenance. One of the Beluga Whales is about to give birth any time, so we closed off the exhibit. It’s less stressful for the mother that way.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to see the birth?” Kelly had asked.

“If we’re lucky. I had five dollars in the aquarium betting pool for last week, but I’m not very lucky with that kind of thing. But one of the summer interns has today, and he said he has a good feeling about it.”

Matt had stashed away a couple of sandwiches and some wine in one of the artificial conifers near the sea otters’ cave. He’d been afraid one of the veterinary staff would find his cache, but he was pleased to find they hadn’t. It was nothing fancy, Matt wasn’t very good in the kitchen. He’d pulled out two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to share with Kelly.

“You’re different from other men, aren’t you?” she’d said.

Matt had smiled, “You could say that.”

He walked over to the otter enclosure, the keys clipped to his pants jingled.
This was where they had had their first kiss. Kelly was so touched by the picnic gesture she ate graciously and kissed a bit of peanut butter off Matt’s lower lip.

They had stayed watching the mother beluga for hours. She didn’t give birth to her calf that day, a janitor won the pot of money a week later.

On their way out of the aquarium they had stopped at the jellyfish tube. The tall tank stood like a column and allowed patrons to walk all the way around and gaze at the translucent creatures. The entire colony glowed blue in the darkened aquarium. Matt walked clockwise around the tank with the mass of cnidarians. Kelly put her finger on the thick glass and traced the path of a jelly going in the opposite direction as the others. She had smiled when their paths crossed and playfully bumped into Matt. When they said goodbye that night, a chill ran up and down Matt’s lateral line.

Now, Matt stared at the tube of jellyfish. He walked around the tube, counter to the rest of the glowing creatures. But quickly, the cluster changed direction and followed him. Matt began to feel dizzy.

He stopped and rested his forehead on the glass. It was cool to the touch. Matt pressed his cheek to the tank for a moment, and then resumed his rounds.

Inside one of the concession and souvenir shops he grabbed a blue shark puppet with googly eyes, put it on his left hand, and used it to check that the cash registers were properly locked. They weren’t of course. The interns were never dependable.

Matt searched through the coins and checked if there were any years and mints he didn’t have yet. He personally thought collecting coins was a waste of money, but his father had kept several books of half finished coin collections which Matt had taken upon himself to finish.
He found a 1957 Denver nickel he wasn’t sure was in the collection, so Matt replaced it with a 2004 quarter from his shirt pocket because it was the only change he had, and then locked up the register.

He made the puppet hold his flashlight while checking under the counters for fallen merchandise. All he found was a puka shell necklace and a few gum wrappers, which he left alone. But instead of leaving the puppet on the shelf, he took it with him.

In the Hall of the Great and Mighty Amazon, he stared at a Dwarf Caiman. It floated in the water virtually lifeless. All but the tip of its snout was submerged and propped up by one clawed front leg on a log. Matt hesitated, then tapped on the glass, but the caiman remained still.

The next tank over contained an anaconda whose head was only visible through some fake Amazonian vegetation that Matt suspected wasn’t modeled after anything native from the Amazon. It looked like the leaves of a birch tree, which bothered him. Matt reached out with his puppet hand and made a wave motion in front of the Caiman, but again got no response.

Matt’s gentle tapping soon turned into pounding. He beat on the glass until his hand throbbed. He heard a ringing in his ears and his lateral line twitched. Water splashed against the glass.

The Wonders of the Caribbean Reef exhibit was Kelly’s favorite. Matt rubbed his puppet hand across his forehead and his neck trying to calm down. In the fake neon-rainbow colored coral entryway, steel drum music played and cartoon images of clownfish spouted facts for kids whenever they touched interactive buttons near the floor.
It was just short of their six-month anniversary that he had brought Kelly to the newly renovated exhibit. Matt pointed out to her which fishes had just gotten out of the nursing unit for parasites, or maybe it was for a torn pectoral fin. But suddenly all Kelly would talk about was taking a trip together. To escape their daily lives and do something new.

“We’ve both got some money saved up. And I’ll bet some of your dad’s junk is worth something. It wouldn’t even set us back.”

There it was again. Matt had agreed that it could be nice to take a vacation, but his stuff was not junk. He kept this comment to himself that day. It wasn’t worth the argument.

He passed by the tide pool exhibit and stuck his puppeted hand in with the starfish, sea urchins, and stingrays. He tried to will one of the rays to pierce his hand. Matt leaned over the edge of the tank and shoved his hand into the fine sand up his elbow. His lateral line felt cold, and all the creatures in the tank scurried away from the foreign appendage.

“Come on,” Matt pleaded.

He pulled his arm out of the sand and water, the shark puppet soaking wet and dripping water everywhere. Matt ran his other hand through his hair and began to pace around in the reef until he stood in front of Lucia, the parrotfish’s tank.

Matt waved the shark puppet in front of the fish and Lucia cautiously swam along the length of the glass before flitting off and biting the artificial coral in her tank. She was a magnificent combination of yellow stripes with patches of blue and purple with red fins.

“She’s beautiful.” Kelly had remarked. It was the only moment in Matt’s memory when Kelly had complimented a fish.
Lucia had been given to the aquarium as a gift from the ambassador of the Lucayan Archipelago nation. Lucia was a favorite exhibit of the aquarium. Matt had memorized the little plaque below her tank. Parrotfish sometimes change sex and color in response to population and environmental change. They also secrete a mucus case during the night to protect them from predators, and it is full of antioxidants to help them naturally heal from cuts and bodily damage. Matt knew all about her.

He pointed directly at the fish and said out loud, “Wait right there.”

Matt walked into one of the Employee Only private rooms that led to the upper feeding deck, climbed the stairs, and stood over the shark tank careful to avoid a length of tubing the scuba cleaning crew had failed to put away.

The tank was one of those tunnel types where large rays and sharks could swim over the aquarium patrons. A lone sea turtle resided in the tank, which the other fish left alone.

From above, Matt watched the occasional shark fin or sting ray tail break the surface of the water. The noise from the aerators was almost deafening.

He leaned over the edge of the tank and wished he could talk to his father. He felt pathetic to wish for something so selfish, especially since he had so many things at home to remind him of his father. But still.

His phone vibrated, snapping him out of his trance. All of a sudden the buzz in his head, or maybe from the aerators, reached a higher pitch.

A text from Kelly: Don’t forget. I’ll be home in a couple hours.
Matt’s memory had never been the best. Usually he’d at least get the feeling he was forgetting something. It was one aspect of his lateral line that he had actually figured out. Then he had failed to make it to Kelly’s work-related dinner party.

The dinner parties thrown by Kelly’s boss were legendary. She had often gushed about her plans for their future, but she had usually kept things about work to herself. Especially since she out-earned Matt.

“Actually, it’ll be totally boring. But the office legend goes that after attending one of these dinners, you become VP of your branch within a week.”

Matt had handed Kelly a soapy wine glass to rinse. It was one that his father had bought on a trip to Italy. The only trip his father had taken out of the country before he died.

“And this is what you want?” he had asked.

“More than anything! I mean, I’ve worked hard for this. But the thing is, it’s a couples only evening. So I need you there.”

Matt remembered the feeling of Kelly’s hands soaked in dishwater. She’d never bother with wearing gloves, and Matt liked that. She had taken his face in her warm, sopping wet hands. They’d felt slimy. “Promise me you’ll be there.”

“I promise.” And he really had meant it.

As she reached to place the wine glass back inside their top cabinet, Kelly’s elbow had knocked over a pile of papers next to the sink. Legal documents Matt had yet to go through.

She’d tried to catch the papers, but forgot about the glass and it fell. Shards scattered all over the floor.

“Shit. Matt, I’m so sorry.”

He had replayed this moment a lot lately.
“…But it wasn’t my fault. You really need to start getting rid of some of these things. Or at least sort them out.”

Kelly had tried to tiptoe around the biggest pieces, but still managed to get a tiny triangle of glass stuck in her heel. The wound was small and never bled, but for a week, she had complained about the pain.

The night of the dinner Matt had taken time off from work. He wanted to support Kelly, more than anything. It was also the anniversary of his father’s death.

He had been looking for his father’s nice pair of leather penny loafers to wear at Kelly’s dinner. He didn’t own anything fancy. Matt opened a shoebox containing a random assortment of power cables, one with an old pair of his father’s slippers, and a New Balance box full of birthday cards, construction paper, and stick figure drawings.

Matt’s father was not the type to hang artwork or grade reports on the refrigerator. But here was a little time capsule of his childhood tucked away in his father’s belongings.

Matt’s lateral line had started to get warm, it was the first time he had ever felt the sensation. He walked out of the house, clutching a picture done in blue crayon of one big fish and one little fish swimming in a pond with a smiling sun. He had recognized the handwriting on the back of the drawing as his fathers. “Matt, age five.”

He’d walked home a bit drunk and when he finally got his keys into the lock he found Kelly in a navy cocktail dress sitting on the floor in the small clear space in front of the TV. He remembered feeling his lateral line bristle, still warm.

Standing over the shark tank, reading Kelly’s text, he felt his line bristle again.
“I called you.” She had said, with pain in her voice. Matt could sense the pain but hadn’t been sure why.

Matt had stumbled a bit and knocked over a pile of his father’s clothes stacked in the recliner. The clothes had tumbled every which way - into a bundle of wrapping paper tubes, slid off a coffee table, and onto a mess of Halloween decorations.

He had tried to walk over to Kelly. To kiss her and show he really was sorry that she was mad. But then Kelly stood up.

“You did? Guess I didn’t feel my phone vibrate.”

Matt had reached into his coat and looked at the phone. “Ha. Yup. There you are. Three missed calls from Kelly and four, no wait, five texts. Sorry babe, what did you need?”

He tried to slip his phone back into his jacket, but instead it just fell into a plastic, light-up pumpkin with crooked teeth. “Ah damn. Jack ate my phone.” Matt snorted when he tried to stifle the laugh.

“Forget it. You know, with that thing you and your father have – your line. I thought you’d know how important this was for me. I’m going to sleep. We’ll talk about it in the morning when you’re sober.”

“Kelly, do you know what day this is?” The drawing was still in his back pocket. He’d fumbled with it, meant to show her, but then gave up. He loved her, but Kelly wouldn’t understand.

The worst part was he’d sensed this was going to happen.

Matt closed his phone, and tossed it into the shark tank.
This lateral line was no longer burning, but pulsing. Matt’s heartbeat sped up, and then he spotted what he had been hoping to find. An extended D-ring net used for grabbing up sick or dead fish.

The wet shark puppet grabbed the net’s handle. Matt stood still for a moment. His father had never taught him how to deal with so many things. And he hated him for that. Matt hated the pressure inside him. He paced around the upper level of the tanks, looked down into each one until he found her.

Matt stood above Lucia’s tank. The parrotfish hadn’t formed her cocoon yet and swam towards the top of the water, expecting to be fed. Matt slowly lowered the net towards her. Her strong, pronounced beak made it look like she was smiling as she snapped at the mesh.

Matt chased her around the tank for a bit until he had her cornered by the pH meter. Lucia started biting the net and Matt saw he needed to work quickly or he feared she might rip a hole in the mesh. After a brief struggle Matt managed to twirl the net around and brought Lucia out of her tank in a froth of bubbles.

Matt stared at Lucia. She lay under the mass of netting on the rubberized floor, not moving much except for the hurried panic up and down motion of her gill covers and the occasional hard body flop against the floor.

Matt scratched his lateral line. He wanted to scratch until he bled and it was gone.

He went to one of the food preparation sinks and found a large bucket, filled it with water from Lucia’s tank, and carefully dumped her into it.

Matt’s lateral line bristled as she sank to the bottom and remained perfectly still. She wasn’t dead, just stunned, which would actually work better for the drive home. He grabbed a
sparer aerator from the lionfish tank and shoved a handful of dry fish supplements into his uniform pocket.

Matt threw the shark puppet into Lucia’s tank and walked out the back of the building next to the loading dock to avoid the security cameras.

He sat the bucket full of Lucia down in the passenger seat, looked around for a towel or something to cover her up, in case he got pulled over, and turned on the car stereo.

His father’s cassette tape of The Allman Brothers Band, Where It All Begins kicked on. Matt pressed his finger to the speaker and listened to the whir of the tape fast forwarding until he reached the song he wanted.

The stroke was sudden and unexpected. Matt’s father had lost the movement of the appendages on his lateral line side of his body first, then his sixth sense completely.

Matt had never seen his father like everyone else. Normal. The sight was dehumanizing. For the first time, his father had to watch the weather channel.

At his sixty-fifth birthday party Matt brought Kelly to meet his father for the first time. The two had gotten along well and had bonded over their shared appreciation for The Allman Brothers, brown ale, and cycling.

Matt still had the candles from that birthday somewhere on the second floor of his house. Maybe some pictures too. He’d meant to organize and scan his dad’s photos from his computer, but just hadn’t got around to it yet.

*I have a good feeling about Kelly. Promise me you’ll marry that girl. You’ll need someone to look after you.* It was the last request his father would ask of Matt.
Matt remembered feeling embarrassed and proud to have his father approve of Kelly. But he questioned the old man. After all, he had lost his sixth sense.

*I could be wrong. But I’m not. Learn to trust your instincts, boy.*

Later that night, Kelly had asked Matt about the birthmark he and his father shared.

“We call it our lateral line. It’s weird, I know.”

“I never thought anything of yours until I saw your father had the same mark. What is it exactly?”

“You’ve made quite the impression on my father.” Matt hesitated before he spoke. “You know that feeling? Intuition?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s that. And foresight, and instinct. My father and I, we don’t wear our hearts on our sleeves, but we have this.” He took both of her hands in his.

“I don’t fully understand.”

“I love you.” This was the first time he had said it to Kelly. And this first time he had ever meant it.

Kelly had kissed him back.

The fourth time Kelly, Matt, and his father were in the same room was at the wake.

Matt parked his car on the street and uncovered Lucia. He scanned up and down the neighborhood before lifting her bucket out of the car.

His arms and hands started to ache right away from the weight of Lucia in her bucket half-full of water. Matt realized there wouldn’t be enough water to fill her tank completely. He’d
have to figure out a way to sneak water out of the aquarium later or else he needed to figure out another way to get water with the correct salinity.

Matt was glad it was still too early for most normal people to be up. He saw an elderly dog walker emerge from a house across the street, but he paid no attention while Matt struggled under the weight of the bucket and splashed water on his pants.

From the knees down he was soaked. His shoes left wet footprints behind him on the sidewalk and started to squeak the closer he got to the door. He tried setting the bucket down on the sidewalk for a few paces to rest, but it made it that much harder to lift Lucia back up again. He hadn’t realized he had gotten so out of shape.

His lateral line was only twitching now, and Matt began to feel calm when he entered his home. But as he entered, he got a strong whiff of Kelly’s perfume, a vanilla and sandalwood combination. He set Lucia down on the floor and started looking for Kelly’s things.

Despite what it looked like, Matt had a system.

Household products, cleaners, paper towels, and his father’s record collection were in the guest bedroom. His childhood things and the majority of his father’s furniture were lined up along the hallway. Books were stacked on the stairs, which was perfect, and he had them organized so that you could make out the titles as you walked up towards the master bedroom.

When she moved in, Kelly had said that she didn’t need much. She didn’t want him to change his life for her, she had just wanted to be with him. To occupy the same space. It had made sense to reorganize a bit, but he hadn’t been very comfortable with the idea of throwing away his father’s things to make room for her. And she had said she was all right with that.
Kelly had always been understanding. Had always been in tune with Matt’s feelings, better than he had been with himself. She had her own unique intuition, it seemed to Matt.

He stood over Lucia’s bucket and tried to decide how best to get her out and into the tank. Matt knelt down and tried to scoop her out of the bucket and into his arms, but she was much slimier than he had anticipated.

He struggled to get a good grip and finally pinned her against the side of the bucket and hauled her out by her tail. Once in the air Lucia gave a hard body flop and freed herself from Matt’s grip. She landed on the floor, with a sharp, wet, smack and spastically twitched her body.

Matt chased after her as she slipped under the kitchen table and knocked movies off down to the floor. Plastic bits went flying and Matt saw a pair of headphones he thought he had lost.

Matt grabbed a pair of oven mitts for grip and finally regained hold on Lucia. He wasted no time and put her in the tank. She was covered in bits of toast, dust, and hair.

Matt looked down into the tank at her and felt sorry, he hadn’t meant for things to get so serious that quickly. He poured the rest of her bucket water in and sat on the floor looking up at her. The tank was way too small; he’d need to figure something out and quick, but didn’t know what to do.

His lateral line felt itchy. He sighed and heard a key turn in the lock on the front door.

Kelly stepped inside and slid her heels off.

Every day when she got home, this was her habit. Shoes off. Earrings out and on the table. Hair untied. Coat off and hung up. Work pants off, yoga pants on.

But Kelly took nothing off. She mumbled a quick hello and didn’t look at Matt. She walked past him towards the stairs.
Matt felt like he couldn’t move from the floor. He stared up at Lucia and around at the piles of things surrounding him.

Kelly came back downstairs, her shampoo and hairspray in her arms, and looked at the tank containing Lucia. The parrotfish had roused itself and tried to bite at the glass.

“What is this?” Kelly pointed to Lucia with a bottle of mousse. “When did you buy a fish?”

“I didn’t buy her,” Matt said, and then cleared his throat because he was afraid he didn’t sound forceful enough. “I found her.”

Kelly’s eyes narrowed, then widened.

“No, no, no. Wait.” Kelly paused.

When she and Matt had watched movies together, she’d always guess the ending out loud before Matt had figured it out. His father had similar intuition, like he did with almost everything else. Matt didn’t know how Kelly was able to do it.

“The parrot fish. Matt, is this the fish from the aquarium?”

Kelly walked over to Lucia and pointed at the tank. “And you put the poor thing in one of your dad’s busted up tanks? You haven’t even fixed this yet. Look. It’s leaking.” She stared at Matt as a spring of water shot out from the tank.

Lucia swam back and forth in her tank. Low tide was fast approaching in her new home.

Matt felt her panic. He stood up and put his finger over the hole and tried to plug the leak with an oven mitt.

Somehow he could tell, Kelly wasn’t mad. He could sense that instead, she felt pity for him.
Matt stood there holding his finger on crack to hold back the pressure until he had a better feeling about what to do next.

“I can’t stand to watch you like this, Matt.” Kelly bit her lip. “I still care for you, but this isn’t healthy. You need something that I can’t give. I really wished you had figured it out sooner, but I can’t wait anymore.”

“What about your stuff?”

“Doesn’t matter. Its just stuff.” Kelly dropped her hair products to the floor. “It’s all just stuff.”

“Wait.” With his finger still on the tank, Matt reached for the shoebox full of movie stubs and old stamps and held it out to Kelly. “You’re right.”

“Matt.”

“Go ahead. Take it. Throw it away.”

Matt’s head throbbed. He watched Kelly thumb through the papers and then looked at Lucia.

“Really? You’d let me get rid of this?”

“Really. Take the plates. Take the clothes. The furniture. Shit. Just throw all of it away for all I care.” He lifted his finger from the tank. “If you’re leaving, I’ve got nothing anyway.”

The two stood facing each other for a very long moment.

Then Kelly turned towards the door and walked out with the shoebox.

Matt remained still. Water started to leak out and soak the junk covering the table. He shrugged at Lucia who stared at him, wide-eyed like always. Then he heard the doorknob turn.

Kelly walked back towards him, and placed her hand directly on his lateral line behind his ear. Instead of the shoebox she carried a roll of duct tape and a garbage bag.
“This should hold, for now,” she said. “Where do you want to begin?”

Matt looked around at the little paths he’d made between the mountains of his father’s stuff. He looked down at Lucia and noticed her color was starting to change. But more than that, he’d sensed it.
Ornithology

Exactly one week from the day a chicken walked into the garage at Connor Printing Industries, another chicken walked across the street and onto the premises. It was a cliché chicken too. Black and white, with red wobbly bits on its beak. It picked at a curled-up pill bug in the dirt next to the portable ashtray by the loading dock.

The chicken seemed undaunted by its surroundings. It took its time crossing the road. The little traffic that did exist at the intersection of 27th and Grand Street was limited to the other six warehouse employees and the rare USPS vehicle.

Dillon, the newest employee at Connor Printing, was the first to notice the bird, but not the first to say anything about it. Instead he continued to eat his lunch while sitting on the steps of the loading dock, and belched his salami and provolone sandwich.

“Are you kidding me? Another one?” Frank Connor said as he carried a box of door fliers for Little Chico’s Pizza to the delivery van. Connor Printing was a modest operation with four full time employees. Dillon had been introduced to them, and was on friendly terms with each, but hadn’t made an effort to remember their names.

“Dillon, deal with this? I’m not touching that thing. The last one almost ripped my ear lobe off.”

To Dillon, Frank was over-reacting. The last chicken had put up a pretty good chase, and had maybe given Frank’s ear a scratch, but it wasn’t anything to bitch about. Dillon brushed some bits of bread off his chest and stomach, wiped his hands on his jeans, and unzipped his sweatshirt. Casually, he walked over to the chicken with Frank watching, threw the shirt on the bird, and grabbed it up like a pile of laundry.
Frank looked at Dillon, slack jawed.

“Ok,” said Dillon. “Now what?”

It wasn’t that Dillon was particularly good with animals. He had never dreamed of becoming a veterinarian as a child. Had no innate sense of kinship with them. In truth, he’d killed hundreds of pocket-sized creatures before their time. Loads of fish that never made it past a week. A newt met his demise after Dillon forgot to put the lid back on his terrarium. He found Fernando dry and brittle under his bed a month after he went missing. A blue parakeet named Suzette would sit on his shoulder and ride around with him as he walked inside his childhood home. She’d pick at the strands of hair on his neck, which tickled. One day over summer break he walked outside to get the mail like his mom had asked, and forgot Suzette was on his shoulder. She flew to the neighbor’s crabapple tree, then far over their house and away. The chicken smelled like Suzette. Like maple syrup and mushrooms, sweet and musty.

Frank set the box of pizza fliers down and asked, “What did you do with the first chicken?”

Dillon nodded his head and walked to the back of the garage to the basement, chicken in tow. Its head popped out of the sweatshirt and appeared calm despite the racing heartbeat under Dillon’s palm.

He hadn’t told Frank what became of the last chicken, a little brown bird with bright orange feet, because he hadn’t done anything with it other than give it some newspaper, sunflower seeds, and water inside a supply closet in the basement of the warehouse. The only things stored in the basement were old typesets, ink, and reams of oddly sized paper. Frank never went down there because the basement smelled like flood water poorly masked with Febreeze.
Dillon had a few other things kept in the basement his boss didn’t know about. Besides
the chicken was his bike, a few boxes of clothes, and a sleeping bag which Dillon had been using
for the last nine days.

He’d left his apartment for a couple reasons. Andy, his best friend from college, used his
shit and never owned up to it. He brushed his hair with Dillon’s comb, ate out of his bowls and
left spaghetti sauce stains inside, and discarded half-empty pop cans everywhere which led to a
huge ant problem. But the tipping point came when Dillon got home early from work and found
a pair of his girlfriend’s gym shorts in Andy’s room.

He put the new chicken with the old one, and it dawned on Dillon that now he actually
had to do something about them.

After a brief Google search, Dillon had discovered that it was, in fact, illegal to own
livestock within the city limits. His first thought was to post signs throughout the city.

*Have you seen this chicken?*

He could tack a picture of the brown chicken and the black and white chicken side by
side, like a mug shot. Might even be an advertising opportunity for Connor Printing. Cryptic
ads always sparked public curiosity, and Dillon was looking for ways to get more responsibility
from Frank, besides deliveries. Dillon sat alone in the office, letting phone calls go to voicemail.
He checked his email, noticed another message from Andy, and ignored it.

He thought about killing the chickens. On purpose. Grilled chicken tenders. Beer can
crunch. Chicken noodle soup. But dispatching a chicken didn’t sound very appealing to Dillon.
He was never good with blood and violence. The brown chicken hadn’t laid any eggs in the
week it had been kept in downstairs either, so without one redeeming quality, Dillon needed to seek someplace that would take the chickens off his hands.

He searched the internet for the city’s animal shelter hours and phone number, a place called *Bepaws We Care*, but just below the entry for the shelter, his Google search for animal shelters was a site that caught his eye.

A hyperlink with the name Rick the Raptor Guy stood out in bold, blue, childish font better left to advertising lemonade sales.

_Rick the Raptor Guy is certified in falconry apprenticeships, bird breeding, and gun safety training. He likes to spend his time gardening, hunting, and works part time as an auctioneer. If you’re interested in hiring Rick for your event or are interested in an apprenticeship, please call 515-370-9939._

He clicked on the link and sat facing Rick the Raptor Guy’s webpage. The site was done completely in an African safari motif. Tacky as hell. But in the center of the screen was a video freeze frame of a red-tailed hawk swooping down on something that looked like a rabbit.

Dillon turned up the video’s sound and listened to the sound of wind through a field of short, dry grass. The hawk rose high into the air, straight up, without much effort, and in the background a man’s voice whistled and said, “Here. Here! Watch her go.”

The hawk dropped from the sky and landed on the furry creature in a tumble of fur and feathers. The video shook as whomever was filming walked over to the bird. “Phew. Something, ain’t it? You should see how she goes after her own kind.” Then the video ended and suggested a different video called *Hawk vs. Deer.*
It dawned on Dillon that a video where some animal got absolutely destroyed might appeal to his friend. They shared the same interests. But Andy had crossed a line.

Dillon clicked on the link, then called Rick.

***

On the drive over to Rick’s, a funny thing happened. Dillon was driving the company van with the two chickens in a cardboard box, with holes punched in the sides for ventilation. He vowed not to make that mistake again after Snickers the hamster bit the dust. The chicken box was strapped down with bungee cords in-between the front driver seat and shotgun seat. He put a towel inside the box to give the chickens a little bit of comfort. But by this point, Dillon really didn’t give a damn.

And then Andy called.

Dillon let the call go to voicemail, then listened to the message.

Dillon’s girlfriend had left Andy, and was on to someone new, just like Dillon told Andy she would. Andy’s voice sounded strange, sad, and Dillon was glad to hear it. But as he was listening to the rest of the message and debating about calling Andy back, he noticed a hawk or an eagle, Dillon wasn’t the best at identifying birds of prey, sitting in a tree along the river. Dillon slowed down as he approached the bridge to get a closer look.

A splash really couldn’t do the sound justice. But that’s what the large bird did. It swooped out over the water, raked its talons forward, kicked backward in the water, and came up with a writhing fish.

Dillon gasped and whispered, Dude.
The bird shifted its grip on the fish as it flew over, and Dillon panicked for a moment. He imagined the bird dropping its fish on the van. Broken fish and car parts flying all over the road causing complete chaos.

But instead, the bird flew in a circle, and returned to a different tree across the river to a giant nest built in the highest branches. Dillon could just make out the shape since there weren’t any leaves or buds on the trees this early in the year. A second bird left the nest after the fish arrived, and flew along the length of the river, away from the road.

Dillon’s phone was still open playing the message, and he heard Andy’s faint voice say, “Do you hate me, bro?”

Dillon turned at Mile Marker 74 and towards Rick’s property.

It was a little savanna grassland dotted with a few trees and covered in tiny blue flowers. Closer to the house were various flowerbeds with azaleas, tulips, begonias, and snapdragons. Each garden was separated by a low barbed wire fence to ward off deer and rabbits. Stooped over a patch of purple hydrangeas was a man sporting denim overalls, a green plaid shirt, tennis shoes, and a loosely tied red ponytail.

Dillon gave the horn of the van a couple short honks, and the man turned towards the noise and waved. Dillon put the van in park and half stepped out as the gardener walked over.

“Hey, fella. I have a question for you. Why’d the chicken cross the road?” He smiled and stuck his hand over the barbed wire, and Dillon noticed that in addition to the red ponytail, he sported a rather thick coat of red hair on his forearms, like an orangutan.

“To prove to the opossum that it could actually be done.”

“That’s good. I haven’t heard that one before. I’m Rick. You must be Dillon.”
Inside the van, Dillon’s phone rang and startled the chickens. He glanced towards the screen and saw a text from Andy.

*I know you must h8 me. I feel like a dick. I’m sorry.*

“Sorry kid, no phones on the property. If you’re going to be here, you’re going to be fully aware of your surroundings. And please watch your step, I’ve just seeded.”

Rick the redheaded raptor guy leaned over the passenger side of the van and pointed to the box of chickens.

“This them?” he asked.

“Yeah. They just showed up where I work. Out of no where.”

“That’s one hell of a story.”

“It’s true.”

“No. Chickens never show up randomly. You must have seen signs of them. Feathers, shit, something.”

Rick opened the box with the chickens. The brown one took the opportunity to escape and flew into his face. But the raptor man was quicker than he looked. In one solid movement he wrapped his arms around the frantic chicken, tucked it under his arm like a football, and closed the box with the black and white chicken inside.

“I hate chickens,” he said as he closed the van door.

In hindsight, Dillon really should have been more prepared for what was about to happen. Instead, out of nowhere Rick took a tiny silver whistle from his back pocket, tossed the chicken into the barbed wire enclosure, and a torpedo-like animal fell from the sky and blew the chicken into nothing more than a pile of fluff.

“Eh?” Rick turned to Dillon and smiled.
Dillon tried to reply, but realized his mouth was hanging open and felt himself on the verge of laughter. Sick freaking laughter.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“That was awesome.”

Rick extracted a long leather glove from the back of his overalls and slipped it over his hand. When the cloud of feathers had settled, Dillon saw a red tailed hawk, like the one in the video, sitting on top of the chicken.

Rick approached slowly, saying “Easy girl.” He got the hawk to climb onto the glove, then placed a little cap over the raptor’s head, which had a vague S&M quality to it. He walked back towards Dillon and fed the hawk some scraps of meat that had been hidden in his pocket.

“What just happened? Where did that thing come from?” Dillon asked, still a bit stunned.

“This here is my pride and joy.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Oh. She was over by the house. See, when she swooped down she snapped the chicken’s neck and spine on impact.”

“And what is that?” Dillon pointed to the scraps of meat dripping juice into Rick’s arm hair.

“Squirrel.” He held out the bits of meat. “This is like desert for her. Why would she want that, when she could have this?”

“So she doesn’t tear into the kill?”

“Oh no.”

“But she killed it. Why would she take that over fresh meat?” Dillon asked.
“No. I’ve trained her since she was a fledgling. This wasn’t her kill. It was mine. And she knows that. She could leave any time she wants. But she chooses to stay with me.”

Dillon didn’t really see the logic, but he followed Rick under the barbed wire fence and into the man’s house.

“Wait here for a second,” Rick said as he went around the house to a large cage. It reminded Dillon of a kennel. Rick took the hood off the hawk’s head and let her fly inside. She landed on a sawed off tree stump and began preening her feathers.

“Mi casa,” Rick pointed at Dillon, “Su casa.” Dillon followed the man into the house and wondered if he had any missed calls.

Dillon really did feel comfortable in Rick’s home. It smelled like spearmint and eucalyptus, “For stress relief” Rick informed Dillon. In a glass-front curio, Rick had a collection of hawk and eagle resin figures. A dartboard hung on the wall over the dinning room table, where one might expect to find a painting or family portrait. In the kitchen, a mass of grow-it-yourself herb trays covered the counter tops. Above his television was a collection of ribbons. Most were yellow or red, a couple blue.

“What are these from?” Dillon asked.

“I compete in falconry events around the Midwest every now and then.” Rick answered while he rummaged in the refrigerator.

“Are you from here?”

“Originally. Yeah. But I’ve bounced around quite a bit. Moved back about a year and a half ago.”

“Do you still have family in the area?”
Rick rubbed the back of his neck and handed Dillon a bottle of pop. “Don’t really speak to many people anymore. Too many bridges burned. You know how it is.”

Dillon watched as Rick took a gulp of the beverage and started to pick at the label. Just like Andy would do. To any container. Spaghetti sauce jars, beer, pickles, soup. Andy was always involved. Always needed to be active. It drove Dillon nuts. But in college, their sophomore year, it was Andy who convinced Dillon to join an intramural bowling team, and that’s where he met his ex-girlfriend. Both boys were interested, but Andy had backed off and let Dillon pursue her.

“Are you from around here?” asked Rick, who burped and blew the air out the side of his mouth.

“Born and raised.”

“You see your family much?”

“Parents moved out of state after I graduated high school and went to college.”

Rick nodded. “So you’re a my-friends-are-my-family kind of guy, huh?”

“I used to be.”

Rick walked over to the sink and rinsed the plastic bottle out. Then he put it in a paper sack with a crude recycle symbol drawn on. “Come on outside. This will wake you up.”

Dillon followed Rick out of the kitchen onto Rick’s back patio. Hanging from the laundry line was a collection of mismatched socks and animal pelts. Dillon wrinkled his nose.

Next to a green, painted shed was a bed of cherry tomatoes, banana peppers, and baby carrots. On the east side of the shed was another row of four cages like the one the hawk was in.
The last two were empty. The cage on the far left contained a bird Rick called a kestrel, and the cage on the far right contained another hawk.

“This is my family. I’d do anything for these birds. They depend on me. Could fly away if they wanted. But they don’t.” Rick said, beaming. “Wanna see Half Pint go after a rabbit?”

Rick reached for his leather glove, opened the cage, and let the bird fly to him, without any sort of persuasion.

The two men walked past a bed of cabbage, a patch of what Rick defensively called “ditch weed”, and an array of pathetic looking cacti. The cacti were a poor idea, Rick agreed, but at the time he wanted to try growing something completely different. Dillon walked a few paces behind Rick, slightly offended that Rick hadn’t once looked him in the eye when he spoke.

Dillon stumbled and tripped over a small tree stump hidden in the dead looking grass.

“City boy,” Rick laughed. “Guess this spot is as good as any. Unless your clumsy ass scared everything away.”

He took the hood off the kestrel and whispered something to it. Then he threw his arm up and launched the bird.

It flew far away from the men, and Dillon thought, “Good, the birds do leave him.”

But then the animal stopped and seemed to fly straight up.

Dillon must have had a perplexed look on his face because Rick answered, “Thermals. They’re columns of warm air the birds hitch a ride on. Lazy bastards. Makes them rise straight up without any effort.”

The kestrel stayed in the thermal until, rather suddenly, it dropped from the sky and careened into a pile of brush. A single high-pitched scream let the men know that the bird had been successful.
“Haha! Got one! Looks like we’re eating rabbit tonight,” said Rick.

The rabbit kill was different. There wasn’t the amount of feathers this time. But the bird had begun to pull clumps of fur from the animal. The rabbit had struggled. Dillon gagged, just a little.

“Damnit. Stop!” Rick threw precut bits of meat at the bird, and the kestrel ignored him. “This one was always a bit of a rebel.” Finally, the kestrel left the rabbit and ripped into the meat Rick held in his non-gloved hand.

The rabbit stew tasted better than Dillon had anticipated it would. Seasoned with garlic and vegetables from Rick’s garden, Dillon could almost forget about the sound it made when it died.

“You’re kind of quiet, something on your mind?” Rick asked.

“Sorry. Just some shit I don’t want to deal with waiting for me.”

“Well, it’s the weekend tomorrow, want to go fishing?” asked Rick.

“I don’t have a license.”

“No matter. We won’t need one.”

Back at the van, Dillon had forgotten about the black and white chicken. It was asleep in the cardboard box. He thought about going back and asking if Rick would hang on to the creature, but decided against it, and drove back to Connor Printing.

His phone showed seven missed texts. The first said something about guy code. The second about how much their friendship meant to Andy. Dillon didn’t bother to read the rest of the messages. He pressed delete and brought the chicken down with him into the basement for the night.
Dillon thought about blowing Rick off. But decided against it. After all, he hadn’t been fishing in years.

When Dillon pulled up the gravel drive, he saw Rick’s red-tailed hawk flying on a thermal.

“I’m letting her get warmed up.” Rick stepped outside wearing a furry hat with blue plaid lining and earflaps.

“Oh. Are you bringing her along?”

“Yeah. How else would we fish?”

“You can train them to fish?”

“I didn’t so much as train. More like I got her over her fear of the water. Hawks don’t normally fish much. Eagles sure. But owning an eagle is frowned upon. I know. I already asked the game warden.”

“I brought the other chicken with me. Should I put it in one of the cages?”

“No. Keep it. You can decide what you want to do with it afterwards.”

Rick used his tiny silver whistle, and called for the red-tail. “Meet us at the bridge. I’ll be along the east bank.”

A quick drive and Dillon parked the van, with the chicken inside, on the shoulder of the highway next to the bridge. He looked for the eagles he had seen yesterday, but from his distance, the nest appeared to be empty.

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Rick, carrying the hawk and a bucket, appeared a short while later. He waved with his hand that carried the bucket, and almost whacked himself in the face with it. Dillon raised a hand in return.

His phone buzzed with another text from Andy. Dillon felt irritated every time his phone vibrated. Enough already.

*Please call me. I don’t want 2 fuck up our friendship over this.*

“Try to pick a clear spot without much ice,” Rick shouted.

“The river is partially frozen, there isn’t a lot of big open areas.”

Rick walked down the embankment and along the river for a few hundred feet before stopping. “Here. This looks good.”

Dillon was tired already. He’d slipped down in some mud, and could feel the cold seep through his shoes. He hadn’t dressed properly either. A long sleeve t-shirt, college sweatshirt, and windbreaker was all that offered him protection from the chill.

He really should have blown Rick off.

“How long will this take?” asked Dillon.

“Dunno. She’ll be hunting by sight alone with the fish. Takes longer.” He threw the hawk into the air, and she immediately flew to a tree and perched. “Guess someone else isn’t awake yet.”

“Rick, what did you do before this?”

“Like how’d ya mean?”

“A job. What did you do before this?” Dillon cupped his hands and blew into them.

“It doesn’t matter. I do this now.”

“But you haven’t done this your whole life. You can’t make money off of it.”
“A bit.”

“But it’s not a job. It’s not a real job anyway.”

“I guess.”

“I just don’t understand what’s the matter with a guy like you who doesn’t have a real job and doesn’t have any real friends or family,” Dillon said.

“You want to go there,” Rick laughed and rolled up his sleeves, “Alright. No one can say to me, hey, you work in an office, so you’re boring, you work in a hospital, so you’re noble, you deliver copies, so you’re wasting your life. And I don’t care to be close to people because they are fucking pathetic.”

“Hey.” Dillon lifted the lid of his baseball cap and glared at Rick. But the man once again wouldn’t look him in the eye. “This is just temporary. I have a job, so no one can look at me and say, you’re a lazy bum.”

“Is that right?”

“You heard me.”

The hawk finally left her tree perch and flew high into a thermal. With the men still arguing, neither noticed her decent towards the half frozen river until they heard the crack.

“Shit look.” Dillon pointed behind Rick, and the red-headed man stared at the lifeless bird crumpled on a barely submerged patch of ice. “Is she alright?”

Rick threw the fish bucket on the ground and walked towards the edge of the water.

“Ugh. Not again.”

“Holy shit. She’s really dead.”

“Damnit.”
“Shit. I’m sorry, Rick.” Dillon didn’t know what to do. He put his hand on the man’s shoulder, but could tell his gesture was empty.

“Damn it. Not another one.” Rick kicked a polished river stone into the water sending out a small ripple into the ice-cold water. “Well. I have another hawk back at the property, want to drive me back there and grab him?”

“Wait. You’re just going to replace her? Just like that?”

“Don’t have much choice in the matter, do I?”

“Shit. I’m so sorry, Rick. I really am.”

“Stop apologizing. Doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

Dillon carried the bucket for Rick back up the muddy embankment. Rick stood on the bridge and looked at the dead hawk before he walked to the van.

“At least you still have your chicken,” Rick said.

Dillon started the engine and waited for the van to warm up. The chicken sat between them in the box softly clucking to itself. The two men rode in silence back to Rick’s home.

As he pulled onto Rick’s property, Dillon’s phone buzzed and startled everyone in the van.

Dillon put the vehicle in park beside a bed of daffodil sprouts.

“I’ll just be one second,” Rick said as he shut the van door and walked towards the remaining red-tail.

Dillon tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and looked at the chicken inside the cardboard box. It flapped its wings as well as it could within the confined space. He opened his phone to read the text from Andy.
I won’t bother you anymore. Call if you want.

Dillon looked up to see Rick walking towards him with the second hawk.

He put the van in reverse and left the drive kicking up a trail of dust from the gravel.

In the rearview mirror Dillon saw Rick throw the bird into the air, and with the ungloved hand flipped Dillon the bird. He looked at the chicken. It had puffed up its feathers and looked much larger than it actually was.

On his way over the bridge, Dillon dialed Andy’s number. Driving past the river, he could barely make out the feathered creature on the ice.

Andy picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Dillon.”

“Hey. Um. Sorry I haven’t called you back.”

“No worries man. I bet you want to tell me off. Go ahead.”

“I’m not sure what I want to say yet.” Dillon looked at the chicken in the box. “Want to grab a drink later and talk?”

“Sure.”

Dillon hung up the phone and dialed the number for Bepaws We Care because he decided the chicken deserved a second chance.
Cryptozoology

When I was sixteen my parents sat me down on our camel colored, faux leather couch and told me I had been conceived through in vitro fertilization. The whole production, or discussion, whatever you want to call it, was stiff and artificial. They asked if I had any questions and when they were done, gave me a pamphlet to read. I wondered how long they’d held on to the informational brochure.

*What to Expect When You Make Sure You’re Expecting.*

The couple on the brochure sported acid wash jeans, high-tops, and the woman’s blonde hair was cropped short except for a rattail in the back. Yes. A rattail.

I sat on the couch and folded and refolded the old pamphlet until the creases started to disintegrate. My mother and father were positioned on either side of me and explained they’d loved the idea of children, but just hadn’t had luck on their own. And they wanted their children to be *theirs*. To carry their genes and share their traits.

From phenotype to genotype, they’d decided the kids were going to be Ulmans.

They’d already planned the whole thing. First they would have a boy with a strong chin and green eyes like my father. The girl would come second and have my mother’s curly red hair and her drive.

Of the four eggs that were implanted only two stuck – me, Tania Ulman and my sister Paula. My mother awkwardly patted me on the knee and my father gently punched me in the shoulder for reassurance. Paula had been lost early on in our mother’s pregnancy.

That was the part of the story I already knew. My parents were upfront about my twin sister ever since I was four and asked why they didn’t want any more babies. I had been jealous
when I saw my friends’ siblings. I wanted to know why they didn’t have any more kids, and then they told me they had.

But this new part of the story, that we resided in a deep freeze, hung out in a Petri dish, and traveled in a micropipette together, made me feel a new, freakish bond toward my sister. On the bright side: the thought of my birth no longer involved the idea of my parents having sex. Not many children get that luxury. We were conceived in a sterile lab.

Ironically, or maybe because of my own origins, I fell in love with genetics, laboratories, and microscopes. I’d like to think my firsthand experience gave me a leg up on everyone else in my class. My parents were thrilled with my future career path since they had always loved the idea of one of their children being a doctor.

“You’ve got a gift. You’re very smart,” they would say. “And we bet Paula would have been just as gifted. She could have gone into medicine, like we wished.”

Personally, I couldn’t care less about becoming a medical doctor.

Instead, I wanted to study echidnas.

***

Dr. Jennifer Brisbane was the next big thing in endangered monotreme genome sequencing. I hadn’t known too much about her work before I went to see her talk at my University’s annual *Victories in the Biosciences* conference.

The lecture hall was filled with people I recognized.

Not to sound bitchy, but usually there are three types of people who attend these events. The first are respected members of the academic community; professors from this University and
sometimes neighboring Universities, if they have the funding. The next largest population of attendees belongs to the students. The undergrads are a dead give-away because they fall asleep during the lecture and leave the moment the question and answer portion starts. The third group of people is the local elderly population who has nothing better to do on a Thursday afternoon other than attend something free in their neighborhood. The crazy-ass questions come from these folks.

Do you believe in anarchy to convince people to recycle?

On page 325 of your text you say… (Fill in the blank with an absurdly long quote with absofreakingnothing to do with the lecture)… does this mean you believe in stem cell research for male pattern baldness?

I have been a member of this community for twenty-five years and notice that… (ok, that wasn’t even a question.) Some old people will do anything for attention. I guess once you reach a certain age, people stop listening to you. I can empathize with that.

I’ve always admired a speaker who can take the crazy questions in stride and turn it around to make the old weirdo look like he actually made some brilliant observation. I hope when I get my doctorate I’ll be able to compose myself during those types of questions. As it stands, I wouldn’t be very respectful of my elders.

Dr. Brisbane looked the part of an accomplished researcher, or at least the way I pictured myself looking in ten years. She had her hair pinned in a high bun, wore chunky earth tone jewelry, and a gray suit that looked masculine and feminine at the same time.

Before she started to speak, Dr. Brisbane motioned for the lights to be dimmed and directed our attention towards a screen with a projected slide titled Greek Mythology. Pictured
was a spiny echidna nudging a tiny speckled egg with her elongated nose in some sort of moss-covered burrow.

“Echidna was the mother to all monsters in Greek myth. A half woman, half snake creature she birthed Cerberus the multi-headed dog; the Chimera, a fire breathing part lion part goat part snake creature; the serpent-like Hydra, among others. Zeus allowed her to live for only one reason; to create the challenges which all heroes must overcome.” Dr. Brisbane clicked through artistic renderings of each monster depicted on pieces of broken pottery.

“I, too, like to consider myself a mother to monsters.” Dr. Brisbane said with a wink. The next picture featured her students in lab coats and goggles pipetting solutions into standard 96 well plates. The audience laughed.

“My students aren’t really monsters. They are some of the brightest young minds I’ve ever met. But we still face the epic battle of publish or perish everyday. And recently we’ve had a win. I’m proud to announce our lab just received the Reinowski grant for biological research, so I’ll be accepting applications for a new PhD candidate this fall.”

The mother of all monsters. The statement sounded familiar.

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“You want to study what?” My mother made a habit of calling everyday at six.

I wish both of us were genuinely excited to talk to the other. But we weren’t. I was her only living daughter, so this is what we did.

“Tania, is that some sort of reptile?”

“Echidna or Spiny anteater. It’s a mammal that lays eggs. You’ve never heard of it?”
I fumbled with my phone between my shoulder and cheek careful not to drop it while pouring an Erlenmeyer flask full of melted agarose gel for my electrophoresis plate to analyze a new batch of soybean DNA.

“They are fascinating animals. And the best part is there’s an assistantship available. It would be a great opportunity. And the fieldwork would be in Australia.”

“That sounds exciting, dear. But don’t get your hopes up. I’m sure there will be a lot of competition for the position.

“Yeah I know.

“And why would you want to work with wild animals? Tania, there’s no money in that. None. You know, Paula could have become a doctor if she had your talent for biology. There’s money in medicine.”

There it was. Paula guilt not even five minutes into the phone call.

Despite her lack of actual existence in the world, Paula was the golden child in our little family. In school when I scored poorly on an exam, Paula could have done better. After I became first chair in the second violin section, Paula could have become first chair for the first violins. I went with my best guy friend to the Homecoming dance. But Paula? She could have picked from any one of the starting football players. And for college, Paula could have had the scores to make it with a full scholarship to an out of state school.

My mother reminds me how great Paula is every time we talk. My father agrees when he speaks up, which is not often.
I felt more obligated to call my mother outside of our nightly ritual because her health hadn’t been so great. She had been on dialysis for several months now. I had hoped the health scare would soften her, but it didn’t.

She refused to give me too many details about her failing kidneys because if she talked about it, she would worry. And then she would blame me for making her worry. Something like this would never happen with Paula.

Paula wouldn’t make our mother worry.

***

My graduate school acceptance letter had come the same week my mother was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease. Neither she nor my father had called in weeks. I had decided to bite the bullet and call her first. She was mad at me. Like usual. When I tried to lighten the mood and tell her my good news, she ignored it.

“Mom, why didn’t you call me sooner? I could have driven you to the hospital.”

I had been busy taping the sides of my agarose gel mold in preparation for an experiment that afternoon. The guys I worked with never bothered to wear gloves while they prepared the agar, even though it contained known carcinogens with components shown to cause birth defects.

Not that I had been super concerned with having babies in the future. I just preferred, if I was to have a child in the future, it didn’t end up with an extra arm or two.

Normal offspring are usually preferred. So I wore the gloves religiously.
“Your father is signing paperwork right now. I thought you would have called. You
never call me anymore.”

“You told me not to call and worry you.”

“Your sister Paula would’ve called.”

“Paula isn’t here, Mom.”

Sometimes I wish Paula were around, if for nothing else but to finally end this argument
and weigh in with her two cents. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

It wasn’t hospitals that made me uncomfortable. I knew my way around clinical type
places fairly well, but my parent’s vision that I should have been a medical doctor continued to
haunt me.

My mother’s doctor approached me in the hall and handed me a cup of coffee before she
let me in on the full prognosis.

“She needs a transplant. Your mother doesn’t want a kidney from a deceased donor. She
says a new kidney is our only option, but I’m afraid that due to her age she won’t be very high on
the recipient list. It’s best in these situations to have a relative donate. And in these cases, we
approach the children first. You are her only living child, correct?”

I thought about the question. It seemed silly to argue with her. “Yes.”

“Ok, then we’ll need to take a couple blood samples to determine if you’re compatible
matches.” I began to feel clammy and light-headed.

Blood.
Blood was the main reason I didn’t want to become a doctor. I hated to admit it, but I was never very good around blood. And its something I have always worried about.

I worried I couldn’t advance very far in science and genetics if I couldn’t handle blood contact.

Once, as a child, I cut my knee on a metal playground slide. I hadn’t even realized the injury had occurred until other children around me started to cry and point at me. Blood ran down my leg, soaking my socks and shoes. I remember looking down to see a chunk of skin torn and pushed up to reveal the next layer of tissue. I hadn’t known what tissue layers were then, but I had thought it looked cool.

I ran over to my mother, to show her my injury. She had gasped. My blood soaked shoes are what she noticed first.

“Those are brand new. You need to be more careful with your things,” she had said.

I’d looked down and felt ashamed. My cut had begun to sting.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.” She’d patted my shoulder when it looked as if I was about to cry. “If Paula was here, then we would have two of everything. So I guess one pair of ruined shoes is better than two.”

She’d continued as we walked across the street towards the car. She’d taken my hand and I watched the trickle of blood slow. The streaks on my legs had darkened and begun to flake away from the skin.

“You need to learn to be more careful. Your sister could’ve watched out for you. Paula wouldn’t have let this happen.”

I snapped back to attention as my mother’s doctor elaborated about the blood work.
“Your blood test results will be in tomorrow. You can stay with your mother and father or go home if you like, but we’ll need to keep your mother here for a few days.”

The doctor left and I walked into my mother’s disturbingly pastel colored room. She was wearing the cat print pajamas I got her for Christmas two years ago. Actually, the pair I got her had been solid blue, but she exchanged them for this pair.

“Mom, why didn’t you tell me you had gotten worse?”

“I didn’t want to bother you with my problems. You’re always so busy in the lab with your research and you sounded so stressed with graduation. I understand you don’t have time for us.”

My mother reached out for my father’s hand. “But your sister would have put family first. I just know it.”

***

The hospital in the morning was so much different than during the night. My father had fallen asleep sitting up, holding my mother’s hand. To me it had seemed oddly still and peaceful in the room. So I had to get out. I tried to sleep in one of the least occupied waiting areas. The lounge chairs were impossible to assemble in any sort of comfortable arrangement, so I had nodded off a couple times, but hadn’t actually managed to enter my REM cycle.

Which was just as well. If I had slept, it would have shown my mother that I wasn’t worried about her.

I walked back to her room and covered my father with a blanket just before the sun had started to rise.
A nurse came in to bring my mother some juice, asked if I wanted coffee, and motioned for me to follow her out into the hall.

“I’d like to speak with you for a moment.” She opened a manila folder labeled with the first three letters of my family’s last name. “This is your blood work. There was some initial confusion in the lab.

“You’ll recall that because you were uneasy with the needles we had to sample blood from your left arm, right arm, and hand.”

“Yes. I recall.” Even the word blood made me cringe a bit.”

“Young blood type isn’t a match for your mother.”

“That’s impossible. We are both A positive.” I remember.

In my freshman year of college, I had been curious about my blood type. I’d accidentally bit my cheek and in my lab and ran the test. Which was completely against protocol, but I was curious. I had called my mother and asked her blood type. A positive. I was positive about that.

“Would you like to see the analysis? Your mother said you work in a lab.” The nurse flipped through the pages of my mother’s file. “See? Your blood type is B negative. But there was something odd about your right arm. The technician said he must have gotten it wrong. He initially thought the blood was A positive as well.”

I nodded and grabbed the folder out of her hands to make sense of it.

“Yeah. I work part time.”

“She said something about a platypus?”

“Echidna. I’ll be studying that in graduate school”

“Oh. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”
“Well. The technician must have been tired when he was running the samples. You’re very clearly type B negative. Why would you have two different blood types?”

Something wasn’t adding up. The nurse was right.

“I must have been mistaken.”

“It’s not a problem. But now we need to find another donor. Do you have any other relatives that might be willing to donate a kidney to your mother?”

“Paula would.”

“Who is Paula? Is that an aunt?”

“No.” I realized I’d said her name out loud. “Sorry. No one.”

I heard my mother waking from inside her room. “Dear, is that her? Why doesn’t she come in? It’s so strange that she talks to the staff before talking to her own mother.”

I walked away from the nurse and into my mother’s room.

“Hi Mom. You look good. How are you feeling today?” She didn’t look good. She was pale and without her hair or makeup done, she looked a bit crazed.

“I’ve felt better. What did the nurse say?”

“She was just showing me my blood work. Apparently I’m not a match.”

“Not a match? How can that be?”

“Dad, are you doing alright?”

My father had stretched and looked like his shoulder was hurting him. He nodded.

“Fine, Tania. Just need some caffeine.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“Tania, why wouldn’t you be a match for me? I need you.”
“I don’t know, Mom. Let me get Dad some coffee, and I’ll try to figure this out. This is probably just some big mistake.” But I knew it wasn’t. I had a hunch. But it was crazy.

“Alright dear. Thanks. Could you get Father some coffee?”

“Yeah. That’s where I said I was going.”

“Oh good. Ask if Paula wants anything.”

I stopped in the doorway. “What?”

“Coffee for your father, and juice for me.”

“Your juice is in front of you Mom.”

“Oh.” She reached out and grabbed the Styrofoam cup and sipped. “Thanks dear.”

I walked into the hallway, confused. My father stared after me. Not confirming or denying Paula’s ghost in the room.

I sat the two cups of coffee on the sink counter in the bathroom and took a deep breath before I walked back to my mother’s room. I washed my face with hand soap from the dispenser that probably a million hands touched. Even with that diluted bleach and antiseptic smell, I knew how easily microorganisms could survive on touched surfaces. Sometimes, the less you know the better.

My contacts felt dry and suctioned onto my eyeballs. I wish I had had the foresight to bring my glasses, but I hadn’t known all this would happen. I washed away the sleep from my eyes and smeared my mascara making my dark bags look even darker. My hair was frizzy and way past fashionable bed head, so I tied it in a knot. It was long enough now, I didn’t even need a rubber band. Mother hated when I wore my hair in a bun. It didn’t do anything for me, she said.
As a kid, my favorite doll had been a Cabbage Patch kid with long, curly red hair and blue eyes. I had taken a magic marker and colored them green so she looked like me. Paula had gone everywhere with me.

One time I had forgotten her in the front yard after our mother called us inside for dinner. By the time I realized what happened, she was gone. I was five years old and spanked for being irresponsible. I had lost my sister.

I handed my father his coffee and didn’t sit down with them.

“I need to get going. I forgot about something in the lab. But I promise I’ll be back tonight.”

My father thanked me for the coffee and gave me a hug.

My mother sat there, staring at the empty cup of juice. She mumbled something under her breath.

***

I flipped open a box of yellow pipette tips and inserted a broken multipipetter. I twirled the broken calibrator and ejected the tips back into the box, then recapped, and ejected. I always thought it odd that such an expensive piece of lab equipment could resemble a hair pick.

The guys had arranged the tips into designs like a Lite Brite and I took a small amount of satisfaction in ruining their masterpieces. Waiting for my samples to finish had proved more nerve-wracking than I had thought it would be.
I’d given the tissues, my tissues, to a colleague to run. Hair, cheek swab, nails, and even some blood.

The lab phone rang, and I’d sat down to receive the news.

“Say that one more time?” I asked. This confirmed it for me.

“These tissues are from a chimera. As you probably know, this almost never happens in humans. But this individual has two different sets of chromosomes. It’s amazing.”

“Yeah. Amazing.”

“I read where sometimes Chimeras have two or more different genetic codes found throughout their tissues and blood and the likelihood of chimerism tends to increase when the offspring are produced via in vitro fertilization.”

“So, remind me what could have caused this?”

“The condition sometimes occurs when there are twins and one doesn’t make it. The failed embryo is absorbed within the surviving twin.”

“Absorbed?” I pictured a straw and my fetal sister swirling within it. I shook my head to get rid of the image.

“Phenotypic differences are usually very subtle. Some mice might have patches of different colors on their fur. Some might not. There are almost no physical indicators within human chimeras. Shit. This is incredible.”

“Shit. Yes. I know.”

“So who is this person? They could be a medical goldmine. Do you think they’d mind some minor tests? I’d even give you partial credit in the report.” Publish or perish.

“The individual has been tested enough. Thanks.”
“Do you understand what this means?”

“Yes.”

“It means the person is their own twin. Crazy, huh?”

“Yes. Crazy.” I hung up the phone.

I am Paula.

I’d like to think there was always a piece of me that knew. A little piece of her inside telling me that she had never gone far. I had absorbed my sister in utero. I was Paula. And she was me.

***

The next day I called my mother in the hospital. My father had answered the room phone.

“I’m afraid she’s gotten worse, Hun.”

“How so?”

“She needs a new kidney. But she is still refusing to take one from a deceased person. She’s pretty doped up on painkillers right now.

“Tania. The doctor spoke to me this morning. There was a bad car accident on a country road last night. A woman died. Her blood type was a match for your mother. The doctor said she could probably get the kidney, but your mother has to consent. Could you talk to her?”

“I’ll try, Dad.”
I walked into my mother’s room feeling confident, but apprehensive. I had never seen her so frail looking before. In my childhood memory of her, she had been tall and imposing. And I had wanted to be exactly like her.

I found my father in the hall. He hugged me and followed me into her darkened room.

“Mom?”

My mother reached for the lamp next to her bed and knocked over a Styrofoam cup full of water. I went to the bathroom and got paper towels to clean up the mess. She glared at me with morphine in her veins.

“Tania, what are you doing here? I asked Paula to get me something to drink. I feel thirsty. Where is Paula?”

“I’m here mom.”

My father sat beside her and tried to hold her hand, but she pulled it away. “Tania is here to talk to you about your operation.”

“No. I’m not a freak. I don’t want something dead inside me. Paula. Where is Paula?”

I stood in the doorway of the bathroom. The mirror was behind me, but I knew what would be reflected.

“Mom, Paula isn’t going to help you get better. I’m here. I’m going to be with you while you get better.”

“How do you know what Paula would do?”

“Mom, I am Paula.”

She started at me, but not directly at me. It was like she didn’t know where to look, like I had too many heads to pick from.

“What?”
“I am Paula. I’m your daughter. And we’re going to get through this. But you need to listen to me. You need to trust that what I say is the right course of action. Can you do that for me? Can you do that for Tania and Paula?”

The heart monitor by her bed began to slow, just a bit.

I placed the cup of water before her and smoothed her hair back.

I fluffed her pillow.

I heard my father exhale.

Soothing actions are shown to lower a patient’s heart rate.

We sat like that for a long while before she spoke again.

“You’re not what I expected,” she said. Then she looked at me and gave a tiny smile.

***

I held the little echidna awkwardly in my gloved hand. They are such fidgety creatures. This was only my second sample and individual of the day, and I was still a bit clumsy handling the animal. The spines were shorter than I thought they’d be.

Dr. Brisbane laughed as my echidna balled up on me again, their natural defense pose. But I took the opportunity of limited movement to snip a spine and place it in a scintillation vial. I labeled the tube with the date and code number; F2_002 aka Mitzy. Names are important. It adds an element of humanity.

It was fall back home, but here in Australia, it was spring. I handed Mitzy to Dr. Brisbane who was waiting with the highest gage grade needle I had even seen. I didn’t even know syringes could come that small. She stuck Mitzy and the syringe started to fill with blood.
The little creature squirmed, but I didn’t look away. I watched the vial fill with just a tiny amount of blood.

Dr. Brisbane said I could take the next blood sample if I wanted. I cracked my knuckles and took a deep breath.

Finally, I was ready.
The wooden barrel I carried sloshed water on my shirt, suspenders, and work pants. Soaked work clothes normally irritate me to no end, but the tepid water helped with the scorching heat of mid-day in the July sun. At nearly twenty-five, I was the youngest man hired this summer to work for the Diamond Lake branch of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and was therefore delegated most of the grunt work hauling carp from a boxcar which had arrived from Milwaukee that morning. At the risk of sounding like an uneducated fool, I had to admit, the whole scene was rather exciting.

The Diamond Lake crew hadn’t issued a formal announcement to the town declaring the carp’s arrival. But people talk. Especially the women and old folks in this town. Somehow our little stocking session had turned into the event of the season. Men in canoes pretended to fish in the shallows near the dock to get a better look. Women stood under the shade of trees and encouraged their children to play near the banks. Even a few stray, mongrel dogs stopped eating out of garbage bins behind the butcher shop to come over and sniff around the boxcar.

“Put your back into it!”

“Watch out now. You’re wobbling all over the place.”

“Don’t drop anything, Clarence. If even one fish dies, I’m taking it out of your pay.”

The older men laughed and imitated me as I carried yet another load of carp to the dock, my shoes squeaking, full of water.
“If I’m doing it all wrong, why don’t you help?” I muttered to myself, but dared not say anything aloud.

Deep down I liked to believe that the more the men laugh at my expense, the more they appreciate the work I do for them. Just some good-natured ribbing. It’s nothing my college chums wouldn’t have put me through.

“Those fish are going to be this town’s meal ticket, Clarence, just watch your footing when you step off the dock,” said Dr. Ellis Tompkins.

Tompkins, a bespectacled middle-aged man with a red, upturned mustache in the style popular with academic types, was the state biologist. He was the man almost entirely responsible for the sudden influx of on-lookers.

I sat the barrel down at the edge of the wooden planks and stared into the eyes of half a dozen large scaled, bug-eyed fish. Their mouths gaped open and close, sometimes in unison, gulping for oxygen. Their eyes were larger than I had expected. They were large and blank, like a cow’s, but with far less humanity than any land beast. Some of the fish had lost their scales inside the barrel and I scooped up a couple and laid them out on my palm. The edges were sharp and the scale gave a satisfying crack when I pinched it in two.

I threw the broken scale back into the barrel and poured the fish out into the lake like dirty dishwater. Some fish instantly swam away into the rushes, but a few seemed stunned once they hit the water. They lay on their sides, one pectoral fin occasionally sticking out as if to turn themselves over.

I thought about asking one of the older gentlemen for help, but didn’t want to seem incompetent, as if it were my fault and had thrown the fish into the water incorrectly. But after I
walked back to the boxcar for another load of fish, I returned to the dock to see that the previous batch had swam away.

“So what do you think?” Tompkins startled me as he approached the dock.

I have to admit, I had held Tompkins in some esteem since my collegiate days. Like most young men who grow up around water, I’d wanted to have a career doing the thing I loved the most, fishing. But universities with reputable fisheries departments were few and far between when I graduated high school.

So I settled with a forestry program, and hoped I’d have the opportunity to work with fish in some small way with the Forest Service. My senior year of college I read a paper by Tompkins, Initial Stocking Tendencies of Cyprinus carpio – A Comparative Study, and became inspired to follow the man’s work with fisheries management.

My coworkers were publicly cordial with Tompkins. Most had gone along with his proposal for carp stocking in Iowa at the 1898 American Fisheries Society meeting. A few even had dinner with Tompkins and his wife.

But over a private poker game, at least this was the rumor circulating around town, where land deeds had been used as wagers and apple-flavored moonshine was imbibed by the gallons, my boss had criticized everything about Tompkins. Everything from his lady-like spectacles to his views on oceanic fisheries harvests had been a target of ridicule. And in this particular case, I knew my employers had been serious. Tompkins was a political fellow, something our town wasn’t used to, and didn’t appreciate. He didn’t seem like one of us.

My theory was that my co-workers found the man intimidating, too powerful, but were too proud to admit to it.
“Me, sir?”

I looked around me in hopes that Tompkins was addressing one of my work peers. I feared speaking to the man for whom I held so much respect, I would inevitably stick my foot in my mouth and therefore discredit any formal education I possessed.

“Yes. Do you think people will take kindly to me ruining their walleye catch?”

Tompkins sat down on the edge of the dock and meticulously untied both shoes, pulled off his socks, and cuffed his pants before dangling his feet in the water. His straw boater had darkened with sweat around his forehead and he took it off to fan himself. I couldn’t tell if his face and cheeks were flushed from the heat or from the effort of bending over and untying his shoes.

“I’d suggest you join me in the water, but it seems you’ve already been swimming,” Tompkins laughed.

I suddenly became very embarrassed by my disheveled appearance and dripping clothes. Of all the times to make an impression.

I began to explain myself when Tompkins waved off my excuses and reached into his vest pocket to pull out a few hand rolled cigarettes and a match. He held one out for me and I took the offering before shooting a look over my shoulder at the older men standing around in a circle talking. Tompkins replaced the cigarettes in his vest pocket, then brought out a gold pocket watch which he held close to his ear, shook, and once again secured in the folds of his vest.

“Honestly,” I began, but hesitated.

“Yes, honestly. Don’t worry. I won’t say anything to the gentlemen who refuse to help you labor. The whole motley lot of them.”
“Then in my honest opinion, I’m not sure what to think right now.”

I dumped another load of carp into the lake and set the barrel between Tompkins and myself. I took off my shoes, even though I didn’t really need to bother, before sticking my feet into the greenish water without rolling up my pant cuffs. I took a drag on the cigarette and relished in the expensive and fragrant quality of the thing. I had only smoked cloves a couple of times, mostly with the encouragement from my college peers and chemistry lab mates. But the smell brought me right back to my days in the moldy lecture halls I loved.

The water was typical for the summer. Warm, green, full of plants and algae, probably low in oxygen, which was why some of the carp took so long to acclimate to the water. I felt stupid for the oversight and for thinking I had stunned the fish by throwing them from the barrel.

The crowd around the boxcar had grown considerably. School must have gotten out, because a little gang of young boys had begun to form along shore, skipping rocks. A few girls inquisitively approached the shore as well, but were eventually driven off by the young men. A handful of well-off children rode in on bikes, which the local children eyed with envy.

Tompkins slowly started tapping the surface of the water with his heel, creating slow, steady ripples under his foot. Then his tapping began to increase and the ripples sped up until water splashed and got the back of his knee wet. I kept my feet still in the water.

“Elaborate, please. Why are you unsure about the carp?”

I thought for a moment about how I could shape my answer to be more saccharine. Then, thought better of it.

“Alright. Then with due respect… and this is just my opinion…”

“Clarence, I know where you received your degrees. I welcome your educated opinion.”

“It is my opinion that the carp are a bad idea.”
Suddenly, I wished I were back loading carp, being made fun of by my co-workers, working in a bank counting out dollar bills to men in bowler hats and oxfords, cleaning a pig sty full of manure, anywhere but sitting on a dock getting a sunburn on my neck and splinters in my hands with Ellis Tompkins.

Several blue gill, Lepomis macrochirus, had approached our toes out of curiosity while they wiggled in the water. A tiny, black spider, it’s species unknown to me as I’m not very good with invertebrates, scurried past the fish barrel. A monarch butterfly flew above my head and back toward the rocky shore. I’ve never understood how a creature such as a butterfly could come to find itself in the middle of a massive body of water, comparatively, and survive the flight back to shore.

“I wonder if the carp management plan has been thought through carefully enough, rather than being a knee-jerk response to substituting as a cheap food source.

“I have to tell you, I’ve eaten carp before. I’ve had it blackened, baked, broiled, I’ve eaten it with every sort of seasoning you could imagine, and any way you prepare it, the stuff is repulsive. Nasty, “fishy”, slimy, vile, squishy. Personally, even if my family were starving, I wouldn’t feed it to them.”

“So you have a family you provide for?” asked Tompkins, already on his second cigarette.

“No. But that’s not the point. Nobody should eat this fish. Period. It tastes like that Irish abomination. Lutefisk.”

“You mean, Norwegian?”

“Sure. But what I mean, sir, is that we’re Americans, right? Why do we try to hang on to food like it’s some link to a history we were never really part of?
“I say we forget about bringing carp or other species into our American rivers and lakes to fill some blood memory void and just accept the species we have here, right now.”

Tompkins took out his watch, held it to his ear and shook it again. I’m not exactly sure why, but the action made my blood boil. After all, I hadn’t wanted to voice my opinion in the first place.

“Do you know why carp taste as they do, Ellis? I mean Dr. Tompkins.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. It’s because of what they eat.”

“They root around in the lake muck like pigs.”

“I agree. A completely undignified fish. But what fish isn’t?”

“Pig fish is what they should be called. They’ll destroy this lake if we don’t manage them properly. Mark my words. They’ll destroy the vegetation, they’ll mess up the sediment, they’ll out compete other valued game species, and then they’ll out compete each other until all you have left is a pit full of mud that once resembled a pond. And what is the only species able to live in that mud? I’ll can tell you. Carp.”

At the end of my rant, I realized that my hands were shaking, and my co-workers on the shore had stopped talking and had heard the whole tirade. The little gang of schoolboys stopped skipping rocks and whispered to one another. The blue gill had even swum away from our feet.

Tompkins took a long, deep drag on his cigarette before tossing the butt into the barrel, swinging his legs out of the water, with some difficulty, collected his shoes, and walked from the dock.

No one spoke as the state biologist walked across the sharp, jagged rocks back to the main road in town. One of the mongrel dogs approached him, in a rather playful manner, but smelled something on the man that made him run away with his ears down.
Before he climbed the embankment to his carriage, Tompkins stopped. He turned around, adjusted his glasses, and took out another cigarette. Without lighting it, he placed the thing in the corner of his mouth and spoke.

“Honestly. The lack of professionalism and foresight in you people is unbelievable. By bringing carp to this lake, your town will prosper. And the sooner the better, by the looks of this uncivilized place. You don’t even have a proper road built for cars yet. Not that anyone would want to come here. I’m doing you a favor. And it’s not out of the goodness of my heart, it’s after careful consideration, research, and many meetings,” Tompkins pointed to the oldest employees, “most of which you all have attended with me.

“But you know what? The carp are here. They are in the water to stay. It’s our job to make sure the correct things happen, and I hope this little outburst from your department’s young employee isn’t indicative of the kind of work ethic the rest of you plan to portray.

“Carp are going to save this town. Just you wait and see.” Tompkins pointed his cigarette at me, lit it, and blew a ring of smoke before disappearing into a thicket of cattails towards the road, their pollen leaving a vermillion cloud behind.

The men were silent for a moment before the oldest man of the cohort, one of whom had attended the American Fisheries Society meeting in 1898 with Tompkins, spoke.

“He’s right, you know. The carp will probably save this town. Last week, after our first carp shipment, I saw more boats in Diamond than I had in as long as I can remember. The little lady who bakes cinnamon rolls every morning up the road complained to me that she had run out of coffee, eggs, and butter because so many people were stopping into her café. Hell, Tompkins
is probably right. Carp fisheries might even save the state. Lord knows we could use the revenue.”

Then the old man turned to me.

With a disappointed look, like my father had used to give, he said, “But for Christ’s sakes, kid. There are three things in this world you don’t mess with; a man’s family, his fish, and his ego. Now put your shoes on and get back to work. Those fish are going to boil alive in that boxcar if you don’t hurry up.”

I slipped my shoes on and did as I was told, felt my cheeks burn a deep red, and wondered where I had gone wrong. I purposefully overloaded my barrel with fish. Anything to be done quicker.

“I’m not wrong,” I almost shouted.

The men broke apart slightly from their circle and faced me directly, maybe for the first time.

“I said, I’m not wrong. What we’re doing to the lake, to the entire system here…we can’t predict thirty years from now. We all know those fish are going to do well here, sure. Loads of scientists have proven that. But the other species? The habitat? The lake itself? This place is going to be ruined. And we caused it. We’re responsible.”

I walked past the men to the edge of the dock, shifting the weight of the extra heavy barrel from side to side, unable to feel any comfort under the load I was carrying.

“No Clarence. You’re the one dumping carp into the lake,” the old man said.

A butterfly, a yellow swallowtail this time, passed by my ear and flew out onto the lake. I tried to follow its path, but the farther it got, the less well I could trail its yellow wings. I thought I saw it fall into the lake, like a leaf, but I couldn’t be sure.
I’ve been told I’m quite like my father. We have the same green eyes, we are the same height, we have the same laugh, and we have the same interests. I haven’t decided if I like being so closely tied to his persona in this town.

Sometimes, my father, Clarence, exaggerates when he tells stories. I’ve heard him lie to make something sound more grandiose than it really was. If I’m being honest with myself, I guess we both make pretty good story tellers. We both try to make things more interesting. He is the king of embellishment and flare.

But when he talks about Grace, my baby sister, to a room filled with concerned citizens, for once, he’s telling nothing but the truth.

My father works for the Department of Natural Resources, in the Diamond Lake branch behind a desk. I’m interning for the department at the moment, hoping they’ll give me a full time job so I can quit school.

I’m not as smart as Father, never will be, but I don’t mind manual labor. When I work with my hands, I feel like I’m actually accomplishing something. Words can’t do that. Words don’t make you break a sweat.

For once, the topic of discussion is not fish, exactly. Father has his opinions about Diamond Lake and how it’s been managed, but he told me if I want to advance farther than he has, I need to do the grunt work that is asked of me and keep my mouth shut.

So today, I’m in the crowded, musty smelling community center. I look out one of the large windows towards the west part of the lake and wait for my father to tell our neighbors how chemicals killed Grace.
I was twelve or thirteen at the time. My father had the day off of work and he was teaching me how to noodle. We didn’t call it that at the time. We called it getting dinner.

Noodling was a poor man’s way of feeding his family without the fancy fishing supplies most people owned. The kids at school didn’t invite me to go fishing or camping because they knew my family couldn’t afford the gear.

They’d said, how can you consider yourself an outdoorsman? You don’t even own a tent? I’d asked why I needed to have stuff in order to enjoy being outside. They just laughed at me, and I guess in their minds they had won the debate.

Father knew all the best spots for noodling. Shallow pockets of dead vegetation and trees, or mud holes along steep embankments. He would wade into the water, shuffle his feet, and then holler like a mad person whenever he felt a catfish.

I stood along the bank and waited until he was ready. And I hated waiting on the bank. Gnats would swarm my ears and eyes. Mosquitoes took the distraction as opportunity to land on my back and stick me. I tried my best not to swat them away. I thought it proved I was more grown up if I tolerated pests. Amidst my swatting and slapping, my father would throw the muddy, whiskered fish my way and I’d thump it on the head with a tree branch. I’d wrestle the beast into a canvas bag, careful to avoid the spines, and would look forward to fish, yet again, for supper.

When I asked if just once we could go into town and buy a pound of ground beef, Father would scold me in that dramatic way he had.

“Everyone in town is suffering financially, Walter. If we bought beef when our neighbors couldn’t afford it, what would that say about us?”
So we ate fish. But he refused to eat the carp from our town lake. I had never really understood why. Personally, I thought carp tasted pretty good. Besides, fish tastes like fish.

Grace would beg to come along with us on noodling trips. Our father had said it was not the place or activity for a little girl, but finally decided there was no harm in letting her accompany us outside.

She was four years old – a rather large age gap between us which caused the neighbors to whisper. She looked nothing like me, or the rest for the family for that matter. Strawberry blond hair in a family of raven haired, eastern Europeans. But whatever the cause, she was my sister, and I should have kept a closer eye on her.

I wasn’t close to Grace. I hate to admit that now, but it’s true. She was so much younger than me, and a girl. It’s not like I could relate to her. We had nothing to discuss. But it was my responsibility while our father was in the water to play nursemaid, and I resented them both for the task.

Not a dozen yards away from the stream bank where Father fished was an apple orchard. Old man Anderson and his wife lived on the property. His missus was known around the state for her pies. Grape, rhubarb, and apple were what she was known for. Almost always took home a ribbon or two at the county fair. Mrs. Anderson was a rather crafty old broad. She was always competitive with the women in our town and any town within a fifty-mile radius. Her search for an edge had driven her to try something new. Something she persuaded Mr. Anderson to try before anyone else had even heard of it.

I recall all of this and wish I had done something to prevent the events that followed.
I saw my little sister pick up an apple which was remarkably devoid of insect blemishes, and didn’t react until she took a bite.

I had walked over, batted the apple out of her hand and she swallowed the bit of apple she’d been chewing on. I had grabbed her forcibly by the arm and told Father what she had done. He ignored my frustration and had told me to grab the catfish he was about to throw to me.

That night, over smoked catfish and a side of green beans, Grace feigned illness. I had rolled my eyes and called her a spoiled brat. But as the night grew on, it appeared her condition was more serious than I had given credit.

Our mother walked over to a neighbor’s house and traded some of our fish for a cup of milk to settle Grace’s stomach. During the night she began violently vomiting, and complained of fever. She’d spoken nonsense when her temperature peaked.

By morning she’d left us.

Father took it the hardest.

He sought out information and read as much as he could on pesticides. To his dismay, the literature base wasn’t exceptionally large. He became obsessed with finding out the chemical components of bug spray. This was the only time in my life that I had ever wanted to be a college boy like my father.

He had written to his old college professors and asked for any information they could offer. We’re not completely sure what the name of the stuff was that had been sprayed on Grace’s apple, but apparently that orchard had been a test strip, a real live experiment of sorts.
Mr. Anderson had signed a legal document allowing someone to come and spray poison on his apples.

After learning about the spray, my mother had lost her composure. At the general store, she had run into Mrs. Anderson. The old woman expressed her sympathy over Grace. Had offered my mother a strawberry pie, which my mother accepted.

But in the dark of night, Mother had crept onto the Anderson property with the pie. She had thrown it against their front door leaving crust and sticky, red goo everywhere. She had then walked over to the apple trees. Mother picked an apple from the tree and had sniffed it. She later told my father that it had smelled lovely. Just as an apple should. Then she had taken out a box of matches. She’d wanted to burn the whole world down. But after she had lit the match, all she could do was stand there. She confessed to my father that she had watched the flame burn down to her fingers and let the flame burn her flesh before extinguishing the match.

Mother could never tell me this story herself. She had been too embarrassed by her emotional outburst. But my father had thought it important that I understand her. To better understand the delicate nature of a woman’s psyche.

Now, the city wanted to implement regular sprayings over the entire town, including the area over Diamond Lake. To cure the town’s mosquito, corn borer, and June bug problem.

My father’s voice carried well in the crowded room. He sounded sure of himself and confident, but I heard him confess to my mother that morning that he felt ill to his stomach. He must have smoked an entire pack of cigarettes before we walked to the community center.
I sat in the back of the room, tucked into a corner with a note pad and pencil in hand. I didn’t plan on writing anything down, but I needed something to do with my hands. If Dad found out I had started smoking too, I’m sure he would’ve hollered at me.

An ancient, crusty old man was introduced as our mayor, but I had never seen or heard of him before in my life. The rumor circulating around town was he won the title of mayor during a game of black jack. But other people say he won the vote fair and square. A few think it’s because his wife is so beautiful, the men in town admired a man as ugly as he could sweet talk a woman so young and beautiful into marrying him. My theory was that his wife must have been near-sighted.

“Today we’re meeting to discuss the application of DDT. A spray which has been shown to limit bug and pest disturbance to our food, our homes, and our lives. The former state biologist, and current head research scientist with Hancock Pharm, Ellis Tompkins is here to comment and offer answers to any questions you may have.”

The mayor coughed at the end of his little speech, hacking up a wad of phlem into a neatly folded, blue checkered handkerchief.

“We ask that you keep your questions to a minimum so as not to waste Mr. Tompkins’s valuable time,” the mayor added.

Tompkins rose from his seat at the front panel and took a sip from a glass of water placed by his nametag.

I had heard of the old man before; Father had talked about him. But only that he was a coward and a bastard. I never really got an explanation for why. For once, his story had lacked details.
I shot a look over at my father. He stared down at the floor and tapped his right foot. The cigarettes he kept in his shirt pocket were within reach, but he didn’t light up as he often did when faced with confrontation. I noted the time, 11:35, and felt the first pang of hunger for lunch. I hoped Dad would suggest we get a sandwich in town, or maybe a bowl of chili with a side of potato salad. Sometimes it’s better not to remind yourself about what you are hungry for.

“Good afternoon everyone,” Tompkins glanced at the clock. “Forgive me, good morning.” The crowd chuckled. “I’ve been asked to sit in on your little meeting today to talk about the benefits of DDT.

“For those of you who have never heard of DDT it is the sensational, miracle spray that will take all your pests away.” He winked.

“Mosquitoes, ants, flies. You name it. Any pest that invades your home will be history once we spray this magical mist. Imagine a summer without bee stings, worms spoiling your corn, or flies landing in your homemade jam. All this is possible with a few simple treatments throughout the year and in no time at all, this dream can be real.

“Now there are some precautions to take, like with anything new. But rest assured that DDT has been proven effective in six other midwestern towns, just like our home. Why, it has even aided in the war effort in Europe. That’s right ladies, a genuine European product! I endorse this effort and would like to see the whole state participating in DDT sprayings by the end of next year. The manufacturers of DDT made this product with people like you and me in mind. “

A murmur rose from the crowd in the community center. A middle-aged farmer in denim Levis sitting next to me turned and tapped on my blank note pad. He smelled vaguely of pig manure, but I didn’t hold that against him.
“Nothing worth remembering?”

“Oh, no. I’m just not sure what to think of all this,” I said.

“I hear the mayor has two cars. Can you believe it? Two.” The man held up two fingers and didn’t put them down until I made eye contact with him. “And I hear his wife is a whore he pays to keep him company. Can you believe it?”

“Why would anyone need two cars?” I asked hoping the man would stop yammering to me.

“I got folks in Haversfield, one of the towns this fellow was talking about, said they starting spraying a couple months ago.

“It was great for a short while, then there was a fish kill in the town’s pond by the cemetery. I heard fish was floating in the water, washing to the shore with their eyes all cloudy and bulging out. Gills caked with goo and their bodies dry as sandpaper,” the man spit a wad of tobacco juice into the floor between our feet.

“It’s not right. Nothing about this sounds right if you ask me.”

“All right gentlemen, at this point I welcome any questions you may have,” Tompkins said as he returned to his chair and water glass.

The farmer next to me stood up, spit, and spoke. “Yeah. What do you know about the fish kill in Haversfield? It got anything to do with this DDT stuff?”

Tompkins cracked his knuckles and almost smiled. “Haversfield was an isolated incident. I’ll be honest with you, because honesty is Hancock Pharm’s motto. It was a tragic miscalculation of DDT for application. Unfortunately a fish kill occurred. But I assure you, oversights like that will not happen again. People make mistakes. But they learn. It’s not something the people of this town need worry about.”
I wondered when my father would speak. That he hadn’t did not make any sense. This wasn’t like him. I had expected him to give these men a verbal whipping.

He reached into his shirt pocket as the old man who ran the shoe repair shop asked a question about the DDT and leather.

Before the old man was finished, my father stood up. His hands shook a bit, and he fumbled with his match as he lit a cigarette and shouted, “What if we ingest that stuff?”

“Clarence. Good to see you. It’s been a few years.” Tompkins walked out into the crowd as he spoke. “I can assure you that with the proper rate of application, and a trained professional administering the chemical, it is perfectly safe.”

“My daughter is dead. My daughter is dead, and that supposedly safe chemical is to blame.”

The room went silent.

I waited for my father to elaborate, to tell his story in great detail from beginning to end. To explain the tone in the priest’s voice when he showed my parents child sized caskets. To describe the perfect way he had folded her clothes and given them to another little girl down the street whose family was less well off than us. To tell how proud he was that despite eating nothing but fish from the streams in town, he was able to keep his family from going hungry. To recount Grace’s little face as her body gave out because of the accumulation of toxins in her body. To detail the process of cell breakdown that he had tried to explain to me, but I didn’t understand. I’d never be as smart as my father.

But instead he stood there, unable to speak.
My father had always taught me to keep my head down, do the grunt work, and keep quiet. But this time, I went against his wishes. I waved my arm into the air and stood up. All eyes were on me.

After all, I’m my father’s son. I can tell a story just as well as he can.

Erica Williams 2005

I should have worn my thick, warm, wool socks inside of my waders. I sit on a life preserver to put some distance between me and the cold metal of the boat’s narrow bench. Besides my lapse in appropriate gear, this is all pretty choreographed.

I hold out the tiny yellow envelope to my boss as he drops a gooey, severed carp dorsal spine inside. The youngest technician yells the fish’s weight 48 and the length 77 at me. I record the information and try to keep my fists balled up inside my damp gloves to keep my fingers from going numb. Doing the same with my toes only makes my feet cramp up. I shake out my ponytail and let my hair down before pulling my lined camouflage hat over my ears. It’s then that I realize this is the first time my co-workers have seen me with my hair down.

Cold as I am in the boat, I try to keep my complaints to a minimum. The boys have the tough job. Standing in waist high, thirty, maybe forty-degree water, reaching into the fish pen erected with metal steaks and long lines of mesh netting. The last time our lab personnel helped the Diamond Lake DNR, it was summer. The water was warm and the fish were feisty. Today, I’m grateful for two reasons; I’m not sweating my ass off, and I’m not losing the feeling in my arms or fingers.
The DNR employees are shivering and waiting for the commercial fisherman’s crew to return to the pen so they can load his large plastic crates with more carp. 10,000 pounds is the goal, and we are well on our way to reaching it. The fish will then be sold somewhere to a market on the East coast. The commercial fisherman tells me that carp, or any white fish, sell real well in the Jewish and Asian markets. So well, in fact, that he just bought a new truck. On the side of his shiny new black pick-up is a cartoon fish and underneath it the words, *Here Fishy Fishy.*

My research team finishes recording weights and taking spine samples. I pick the iridescent carp scales off of my gloves, careful not to expose the skin of my wrists to the late October air. With the commercial fisherman’s boat in sight once again, the boys dig back in the pen and throw more carp into our boat. The wind picks up slightly, and the steel commercial vessel bucks the white caps. The men tuck their chins into the necks for a little warmth and curse. At the start of the day, all the men I met for the first time kept their language in check, and it was real obvious who was married and who wasn’t. The single guys never have any manners. Not that it matters to me much. I hate when guys treat me differently.

My mind wanders when I’m not recording information. I lean over the boat’s rail to pull up a senesced bulrush as close to the surface of the water as possible. I need to look at the roots. If I were to find any evidence that lizard crest snails had become established in Diamond Lake, emergent vegetation would be the place they’d start.

The young lab tech throws a fish into the boat that slides past his desired landing spot and crashes into my boot. I look down at it and gag, though I instantly wish I hadn’t done so.

Normally, I’m not a squeamish person. But here’s some information you can only learn in the field. The longer carp are penned up, the more agitated they get. The more agitated they
get, the more they move. The more they move, the more they injure each other. The injuries are usually just flesh wounds. Nothing too serious. To sedate the fish, we usually shock them with electricity. It doesn’t kill them, just makes them easier to handle. We didn’t shock today because the water was cold enough that the DNR employees figured the fish would be sluggish.

This is the first time I’ve seen a carp with its eye poked out.

It’s at this moment when I hear my mother’s voice in my head.

“Why do you want to work in fisheries like your grandfather? Darling, I’m not saying you can’t do something a man can do. But the work is going to be hard. Before you do this, think. Do you want to spend the rest of your career trying to prove yourself?”

Dad agreed with her; he usually kept out our disagreements. Therefore, she spoke for them both.

My argument was usually a combination of the following; Fisheries run in the William’s blood. I was born in the eighties, not the fifties like her. Times have changed. If I were a boy, I wouldn’t be talked to like this.

As the Cyclops fish lay still, the empty eye socket fills with blood, and with each body flop the blood sloshes out and splatters everywhere. The boots of my waders are coated and my data sheet has a few drops sprayed over the date and our GPS coordinates. In the cool air the copper smell of blood is made sharper. The tech picks up on my reaction.

“He’s got his eye on you, Erica.”

My boss starts singing, *I always feel like, somebody’s watchin’ me.*
I let the guys tease me. I even tolerate the young technician breaking our unspoken lab rule regarding age and hierarchy. He finds the lost eyeball rolling around in the boat and dangles it in front of my face like a yo-yo.

I let the ribbing go on, because when my co-workers laugh, it’s the first time all day their lips don’t look blue.

We finish weighing carp, and I look toward the shore. A few of the lake’s residents have gathered near the dock out of curiosity. Any time a boat with Department of Natural Resources stickers or federal stamps gets close enough, we invariably field questions and hear about the crazy stories people tell about fish they’ve seen or caught.

Most of the time, old men stop us because they have no one else to listen to their fishing tales. I’ve heard everything from the presence of barracuda in the lake to a fish with flesh eating diseases. But when a man with a seed hat and stutter asks about a strange looking snail he saw near the beach, my heart skips a beat.

On the boat ride back to the dock, we are all quiet. Everyone is cold and hungry and all anyone can talk about is food. Roast beef, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, chicken noodle soup, cheeseburgers, chilidogs, Ruben, enchiladas, and hot coffee.

Sometimes I feel bad for the fish we sample. I know I’m not supposed to. I even composed a little speech inside my head about why I would refuse to tag or take spines from fish if asked.

*I’m ethically opposed to cutting fish. I’m against brutal force on fishes. I might puke if you make me yank the dorsal spine out of a fish using a pair of rusty pliers.*
But when my boss hands me the pliers, I push all that aside as I stare into the carp’s bulging eyeball, and do my job. I hold out the left pectoral fin, make an incision as close to the socket as possible to limit the regrowth, thus limiting confusion about the fish being recaptured and tagged. I hold the fish down with my left hand and grab the dorsal spine at the base, and rip the spine out of the fish’s back. I rationalize the situation.

After all, we weren’t killing anything. Taking spines is much more humane that taking the inner ear bone of a fish. At least this way, the fish swims away, just slightly off balanced. And the fish today will serve the purpose of feeding people. Even the eye-less ones. Besides, once it winds up on your place with a side of lemon and butter, you have no idea the fish was once traveling across the country in a container with 10,000 pounds of his species, blind.

My lab mates and I pile into our own truck, crank up the heat, and ignore the wet sock and fish combo smell released from our waders. We’re too hungry to care about the subtleties of scent.

I walk into the bathroom of the little deli in town we always eat at to clean up and warm myself under a hand dryer. The deli is one of the oldest places in town.

In the 1920’s it was a butcher shop. On the counter is a little black board with the soup and sandwich of the day scrawled in neon pink and blue chalk. The only decorations in the place are the little silk sunflowers in a tiny vase on each table, and a mosaic of black and white photos on the walls. A picture of my great-grandfather hangs behind the cash register. He’s wearing his brown DNR uniform, but in the picture it’s grey, obviously. I just know his uniform is brown, because they haven’t changed much over the years. He’s holding up a huge walleye by the gills. In his grin I can see a bit of my father, but I don’t see much of myself.
I make it back to the table first since I’m the only woman in the group and the rest of the men have to wait their turn to use the bathroom.

“Why don’t you use the ladies room instead?” I ask. But they just laugh and roll their eyes.

It’s then that a child, a young girl wearing a pink camo baseball cap, taps me on the shoulder.

“Do you work in the fish station?”

“Me? No. I work for the university. I’m just helping the DNR office out today.”

“Oh. Well, could you tell me what this is?”

The girl pulls out a peanut butter jar filled with sand. The label is still fully intact, and I can tell the jar hasn’t been washed by the little clumps of sandy peanut butter stuck to the bottom of the jar. She unscrews the lid and I’m hit with the scent of decaying plant matter and wet dog – which I can only assume must have been the putrid peanut butter.

But after she scrapes away a layer of sand, I see them. Conical shells, a sharply pointed spire without any knobs, bright yellow lower whorls. The tiny shells of dead lizard crest snails.

“Where did you find these?” I ask in a whisper.

“At the north shore. Do you know what they are?”

The carp population made the water unsightly. That was how the problem was presented to my major professor. We received a grant to solve the problem, and it was a guaranteed publication for the both of us. Bio-control as a management tool seemed like the best option. My advisor approached me with the idea and a paper on lizard crest snails, a native species from
Tibet. The freshwater snails were highly adaptable, highly competitive with carp in their native habitat, but wouldn’t survive our harsh winters. On paper they seemed like the prefect solution.

What my advisor and I failed to account for was just how highly adaptable the snails were.

“I’m not sure what they are, you should give the jar to me, and I’ll take them back to my lab and run some tests.”

The girl squints her eyes at me. “And then you’ll let me know what type of snails they are?”

I nod and give the girl my office phone number. She slips the piece of paper into her back pocket, walks to the cash register to order a brownie.

I look at the faded, black and white photo of my relative, and feel nauseous.

Next to his photo was a picture of a railroad car in front of a pocket of oak trees. I wasn’t sure what part of the lake this photo was taken, because those trees don’t exist anymore. Maybe on the east end of the lake. That area has gone through a lot of changes since I was a child visiting my grandparent’s cabin.

The oak trees were filled with leaves that didn’t look quite right. The shape and patterns seemed all wrong.

“See something interesting?” My boss asked. “These old photos are really great. People can tell stories, but pictures really do speak volumes.”

I snort, “Sure.”

I point to the oak tree picture. “What is the matter with these oaks? Or maybe they’re elms.”
“Oh wow. I’ve never noticed this picture before. Those aren’t leaves. Look closer.”

I get up, out of my chair and walk to face the picture. He was right.

The trees are covered with butterflies. Dense clumps hang down and create a hazy effect around each tree.

My boss taps on the picture. “My grandparents used to tell me stories about the monarch migrations around here. Hundreds and hundred of them would fly through here every year on their way to Mexico. The trees around the lake would be coated in butterflies passing through, until the city started spraying.”

My boss took a bite out of his grilled cheese, dipped the rest into a cup of tomato soup, and spoke with his mouth full, “Whoever thought it would be a good idea to spray DDT must have been out of his mind.”

“Maybe they thought they were helping. Everything looks better in hindsight.”

I order a cup of chili and sit down at the table with the rest of the DNR crew and my lab mates. I put my hair back into a ponytail and the guys tease me about the dainty way I slurp up my soup.

On our way out of town, we pass a weathered sign that reads **Wildlife Management Area**. The green paint was faded and flaking off and I wonder how soon someone else would come by to replace it with something new and better.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dana Kathleen Woolley was born October 25, 1985 in Des Moines, Iowa. She received the Bachelor of Science in Animal Ecology from Iowa State University in 2008 and the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment from the Iowa State University in 2012.