

FLOTSAM

A Thesis Presented
By
CAITLIN N. GHEGAN

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Creative Writing Program

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ABSTRACT

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FLOTSAM is a novel in short stories that explores near-dystopian scenarios informed by contemporary American socio-political issues. Each story focuses on the predicament of a low or middle class person, all of whom must cope with their crumbling, thinning environment and subsequent, pervasive feelings of loneliness and isolation. Among its many themes, 'Halogen' explores how humans try to cope with mass, widespread violence; 'Cooperstown' reflects on the stark inequities of privatized healthcare; and 'Flotsam' examines coastal erosion and ocean contamination in the Pacific northwest. The thesis explores the forms prose writing might take in light of a post-Globalist ideological movement and post-catastrophe urban flight.

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I am not "me" without "you."

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1. HALOGEN

I am not a military surgeon, but what I saw looked like a war zone. Small gunshot wounds in legs amounted to huge areas of cavitation with exit wounds larger than grapefruit. I had never seen anything like this before. How could a firearm create this type of destruction? The next woman I treated was calmer than the rest. She had a third of her pelvis shattered into dozens of pieces. Multiple holes in her large and small intestine were too extensive to be repaired. In damage control surgery, decisions have to be made to remove parts of intestine instead of sewing the holes closed when there are more pressing injuries to be addressed. In this case, it was clear that none of that intestine could be salvaged. We packed with a temporary dressing once she stabilized and planned to return to surgery in a day to reassess for any missed injuries.

Prepared Statement of Alejandro Rios Tovar, MD,
Associate Trauma Medical Director at University Medical Center of El Paso
Hearings before the United States House Judiciary Committee, 116th Cong. (2019)

162 American bodies. 162 American barcodes—parcels of lines, penned beneath the skin.

The captain, crew, and children came first, nondescript on the stark steel tables. So much tinier in death. Shrapnel scrapes of flesh. Charred socks. Smashed chins. All that was left. On a break for a sip of water, Todd walked past, down the corridor, past the shiners who saw the bodies first after intake—they first pulled and picked apart the remains, and tossed any effects into buckets. The watches and wallets and bracelets and scarves didn't tell any story. What survived and didn't break or burn up rarely made it back out to the waiting family. Todd didn't know where those things ended up.

New staff at the morgue wore masks. They were always in short supply. They usually went to the cleanup crew. The guys—it was always men—who scissored and pulled and scrubbed off clothing and wiped away the blood. These orderlies wiped away splatters and smears with berry-colored cloths. A phlebotomist oil-pulled congealed blood that swelled at the arms and legs, sutured lacerations, trimmed burnt fingers and packed severed nerves into soft parcels of flesh rounded and held underneath with special silpats.

Todd was a scanner. The bodies came to him last. Pre-weighed, cleaned. They usually had little to no surgical masks left for him. He rubbed a smear of orange vapor rub under his nose in fruitless habit to block the odors and stepped into examination room 7.

Todd flipped on the lights. He recalled his earliest days in the lab, nervous under the vibration of the large, blue bulbs buzzed in their sockets. He booted up his computer, his camera, his scan gun.

He tried to reassure himself, every time bile came up his throat or a stitch in his throat or stomach doubled him over, that this was more about the paperwork. Focus on the paperwork. Fold the victims up.

The co-pilot came in without a head. Todd found a barcode in the crease of the elbow. Position 2. Todd pulled at the lower lip of a teenager with a gloved thumb, and discovered the code in her gums had been shredded by the brackets of her braces, smashed upon impact. Her elbow was pink and puckered with eczema. He found her code at the underside of her knee. Position 3.

Victim 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Positions 2, 3, 1, 1, 5.

The steps were simple. Adjust the light according to skin tone. Find the barcode—positions 1 thru 7. Scan the barcode. Watch the stories flood the screen upon impact, the purple LED beam landing upon the skin. Package up their remains. Tell their stories.

“They won’t be silent in death.” A motto. Promises in halogen glow.

Todd arrived home fifteen minutes after Kendra had slipped off her shoes.

He came in, a streak of oil or grime or something gruesome pushing down his hair, eyes cast down to his feet. He looked up, and he seemed confused, Kendra thought, to find the light on, like he wondered how could the apartment not turn off the lights when he left. And then he found her at the counter, still in her scrubs, pulling a box of red bean rigatoni from the pantry, and he looked askance. Kendra offered a little wave.

“You’re here,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “It was a... day.”

He smiled, taking off his coat and unlacing his bleach-spotted sneakers. It was easy not to hear her, a voice as pocketed and soft as hers.

“I’m so glad to see you,” he said.

She turned and filled a pot with as much water as the tap would allow. The steam billowed into her curls for a generous moment of warmth before the water slowed to a trickle. The curfew was coming, and the condo’s timers were old, the pipes clenching and lights dimming and shutters creaking towards the shutoff hour early, 23 minutes before the rest of the city said goodnight.

Todd sent a maintenance request weeks ago, he said. Maybe she could try them tomorrow.

She put the pot on the stove, and reached into the cabinet for a jar of sauce, a brand and flavor she didn't like, but that Todd kept buying when he brought in the week's box of groceries. The lid felt tight and the torsion sharp in her knuckles. She pulled and pulled, and a pillow of panic pushed against her throat, why couldn't it go right. Nothing could go right. Not even a jar could give.

The jar. Not opening. The job. "Out of our hands." Watching the neonatal bag fail, watching the small cluster of alien fetal features flutter and lose color and drown. Walking home. Walking to the train. The job. The jar. The job. She didn't really *want* Todd to step over and take the jar and open it for her, because she didn't want his calloused hands to touch hers, not where they'd been, not when he hadn't washed his hands yet, again and again in the foam and whatever water they had left, and she would drop the jar and the glass would shatter and they wouldn't have power left to vacuum up the shards.

The jar relented with a pop.

He never offered to help with these things. The domestic. The small. The present. The now.

They ate. Todd scarfed down the noodles and speckled his tablet with sauce, mumbling through his full mouth that he hadn't had time for lunch. There was never enough time for lunch, she knew how that was. He wiped the orange sauce dots carefully from the newspaper, a vague tangle of white and black and brown and many splotches of red.

"That was one of my caseloads today," he remarked, tilting the screen towards her.

She took a long sip of water and looked into the glass.

“Not at dinner, please,” she said.

“Right, sorry,” he replied. He kept scrolling.

The severed bodies, the blackened sidewalks, the crumbles of shanties rolling into the spill of the bay. It was enough to have seen them coming into their emergency room as she headed home, to the train. She poked at her pasta, too bright, too red, the mushroom loaf meatballs too textured, and she tucked one of them onto his plate, watching him swallow the last crumble of his own portion.

“People are just so sick, you know?” he continued, staring at the photo gallery. “The intake was awful.”

“Todd—”

He chewed on the meatball and he mused through the corner of his mouth, still staring. “What kind of person bombs a homeless colony? City can’t keep closing the shelters if they’re not going to hire more police—”

“Can you *not*?”

Todd looked up at her, his fork suspended in hand.

There was a tart taste in the back of her throat. She forced another noodle onto her fork, up to her lips, under her tongue, feeling the separation of the oil and cream of the cheap sauce, and he was silent. Swallow, then another long sip of water, and getting up from the table in one fell swoop. She tucked her dishes into the full and moldering dishwasher, and he was silent. She shut the door. She stared at it a moment, wondering if he’d come in after her. A moment passed and she heard the fork scraping against his plate.

The anger, the sourness. It didn't come from Todd's disaffection. This was something she'd prodded and felt within herself for some time, chewing it over in fitful sleep, even when she had the whole width of the bed to herself, even though their schedules had not aligned in many weeks, and they didn't share a meal or wakeful moment, and she hadn't felt the awkward pressure and presence of his mind, wandering elsewhere like a phantom child.

Kendra turned to the small, slotted windows of their bedroom. The months percolated and pitched in this creaking, flickering apartment, and the lamp started to dim without her touch. She thought of the envelope in her dresser drawer and she knew the letter from their marriage counsel had merely confirmed what Kendra had already felt for a very, very long time. She would be mad. But where? At what? What would she pocket? What would she fold? Swallow? Abandon? Her mother's advice, ringing, that there were habits and faults you washed, folded, and put away. The little forgets. The little quirks that you have to stomach for steadiness and security. And her pride, hurt at losing the job, though the loss felt displaced, greater for the weeping mothers and angry fathers.

She could be mad at the smallness of the windows, at the city, letting in too much neon, crumpled streetlight and yet not enough all at once.

It had been several months since they'd last gone to bed at the same time.

There'd been a moment, Todd thought, when they came home not minutes apart and he thought they might take a break, kick off their scrubs, pull up a blanket, and watch a movie, drink some rye or gin or whatever was open, and even if they did not kiss a lot then they might share a closeness. But Kendra's eyes were dark, her shoulders sinking, her lips

pursed, and he didn't know yet if he could pry or peel her open. There were things that took time to know even after the certainty that TheMatch afforded. The algorithm knew—it was a strong first date. It was a glass of chardonnay, a port, half a year of dating, a month of counsel application, a month of paperwork with the city, a year of marriage.

He found himself referencing and indexing the past in hopes of finding a reference point—would it help to hold her hand? Offer a warm cup of tea? Where did this start? She loved lilies but he could rarely find them at the co-op. She loved croissants but he didn't know how to bake them, and there was the fear of wasting flour, butter, hardening into black clumps of catastrophe on a tray, but they never remembered to fill the fridge with the right things either way, no butter, flour.

Should he write a note? A letter?

Wasn't it human error to not know these things? Wasn't it odd to not know these things at thirty? The way to pass the little affections back and forth and steady and still make it to work on time? And they were always, always working. Always on time.

The lights flickered off at curfew. Light from his tablet kept the kitchen blue and glowing until his eyes grew heavy from scrolling, parsing out his day's work, putting stories to faces and remnants of flesh, willing them alive again, and the battery went dead. He fought the urge to cry, to throw the tablet against the wall. Turn on. Turn on. Turn on.

When Todd came to the bedroom, Kendra was already asleep, facing the street, and he slipped out of his clothes and under the covers as quietly as he could. He felt the pocket of her warmth leak into his side of the bed, and she curled into herself, arms hugging her sides tighter.

He reached out and placed his palm on her shoulder. He rubbed a thumb at the small curve between her neck and back, and callous caught an edge of dry, ashy skin. A moment passed, then her hand reached to her waist and slowly pulled the comforter up to her chin, pulling it tightly around her. He withdrew his hand and put his head on the pillow and fell fast to sleep.

It seemed quick. A sharp beep came from his bedside table. The alarms were coming so often. There were never enough staff, never enough night shifts.

2:37 a.m. Unity Flight 743, Boeing 787 X. 263, international manifest. Come now.

He sat up in bed, tugging at the comforter clutched around his wife's shoulders.

"I'm sorry I woke you up," he mumbled.

She pulled the comforter back over her tangle of curls.

Kendra woke from a nightmare of drowning, a sudden rush of water, a blanket of warm pressure overtaking her, bundling and tightening around her throat. Todd was gone. Morning rushed in.

Robby. That was the tiny, bean-sized boy's name. The governor's boy. She'd been awake half the morning trying to remember the name beneath the ID code. 560381. 560381. Needs more nutrients. Needs more nutrients. But she'd fed him. She had. She watched him waft through the water, shimmy in his little sac. She checked the logs, the records. They said she must need rest. No one just makes this kind of mistake. A hole in the biobag? How could she have let that slip? The doctors and clinicians had a lot that needed to be said. And so

much to be done. Not anymore. Not for her. She'd be in to fill out her resignation later that day, all the legal forms that kept her safe from prison.

Baby killer, one orderly had yelled in the puddle of the aftermath. How could you? You failed him. You failed them.

At their first dinner meeting, Todd's new in-laws had asked, much to Kendra's distress, about the weight of a soul. That seven ounces—did it have any merit? Her parents were admirable in their faith, still clinging to gospel and that thin, waxy paper of the word, attending church thrice a week. Todd thought of that dinner conversation every time there was a crash, an explosion, a collapse, when the bodies were halved or mostly missing or they had to spend extra time and extra shifts putting pieces back together, sorted and gathered up in covered milk crates. Mass shootings were so much easier—they came in pockmarked and torn but still in one piece. How much weight? How much.

Photographs. Home video. Diaries. Last words to last loves, labeled neatly: ICs. In Case memos.

Take care of Theo.

Remember Mom's pearls? I'm sorry, I took them, they're in the jewelry box, Jack will give you the key, please don't be mad.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been so reckless. I don't know what it'll be that I do but I know it was stupid.

I lived hard, I loved good.

I'm not sorry. I'm happy now.

I'm in a better place now.

Beneath the halogen lamp, the victims were flaps of alkaline skin and soggy bone. A brief flash of the scan gun and under Todd's watch, they came to life. Videos and photo albums flickering.

I don't want to go this way, Daddy.

Kendra's patients were all so tiny and pink and purple. Wrinkly, curled raisins of humans. She leveled that it was for the best. Their wide, open room felt too white, too sterile, too mechanical even with walls painted a pale blue to soothe their tired, fretful families. They looked, Kendra once noted to a coworker, like lumpy fruits in an empty shopping cart. Plums with little hats under soft blankets. It just didn't feel right, so removed, with even the viewing windows plastered up. There were too many risks now. So many germs. Parents had a special room now, freshly done up with plush couches, tall vases of lilies, and cameras that hovered over their newborns to capture their wiggles and gasps.

Did she ever get used to it? Kendra asked once.

The coworker had nodded politely and Kendra kept further thoughts on the alien world of the Neonatal unit to herself. Months passed and the sterile suit they'd given her *still* wasn't the right size, a snug fit over her flat tummy, her narrow hips, with a loose stitch itching and worrying the small of her back.

In any given rotation, they had four babes to watch in an assigned lab room. There were no healthy, kicking newborns here. Sasha, up on the twelfth floor, spoke of the quiet wing like a plastic nirvana, where the lights from the windows glowed rose-gold as the sun

dipped down over the city and the sloshing harbor. The halls were festooned with thank you cards and bundles of balloons from ecstatic new grandparents. Carts of flowers and lavender tea were specially ordered and rolled to the new miracle moms and their kiddos.

The NICU had no windows. They held fast to hope in the warm light and the low dark, in the state of the art cubicles where the micro-preemies slept in heavy bags of mineral water, nutrients snaking through picc lines attached to sterile tubs, and a small pulsing disk beneath the sack waved and jiggled the movement of their mothers. She should have been more excited about this, Kendra thought. The latest technology, stepping in to save the most innocent. But she looked down into the murky pink liquid where the red and veiny children flapped and floated, and she flipped the buttons to recycle the fluids, and rubbed the bags for hours in mimicry of a gentle pat, a reassuring coo, we can't wait to meet you, and she just felt sorry. So, so sorry.

She had only rotated to the biobags twice a week. She'd have liked fewer hours there. She said as much. But Todd insisted—they should keep saving up for one of their own. That was the plan once. Kendra couldn't remember the last time they tried.

On that particular day, Kendra was in charge of Delaney. She was 7 months grown, and 2 days old. Beside the infant's plastic crib, Kendra adjusted the ventilator, fiddled with the tubes draped across her belly, and rubbed a swab of cooling cream over areas made rough and red from adhesive tape. The tape was too rough but the tubes had to stay put. The world was too rough, but the dome of the incubator kept the danger at bay. So scary the world was that Delaney's dark, beady eyes wouldn't dare to peek out at it. The warming lamp was so bright. The air reeked of saline. What a world to come into so early. Despite congressional

wishes and warnings and threats, there was no drug to tell the womb to hold her tight, keep her safe in there, just a while longer, no remediation that worked without defects like clenched skulls and collapsing lungs.

Thus Delaney fell into that middle margin—too small to go home, too big to swim in a premie bag.

Kendra withdrew her hand from the incubator, slow and steady, as though the mere waft and wiggle of her fingers in the plastic dome could stir up the child's pain. She tossed the gel swab into the contaminant bin and looked down at the baby, sleeping, her arms open in a "Y" beside her lumpy head, her tiny chest puffing up against her IV tubes, her breathing mask like a thimble.

The ventilator coached her—puff, puff out. Mommy's here. This is your body. Let me teach you. Your very first lesson. Puff, puff out. Feed that hummingbird heart. A little wheeze is okay.

Little touches weren't something the hospital condoned. That's a sacred space for mother and child, they said in the handbook. A thumb on the cheek. A soft hand on the tummy. Don't do it.

She looked at Delaney's head tilted back on the cot, and it looked wrong, like it should be cradled. Kendra stared at the dark, tufty swirls of hair on the infant's crown. She wondered if the parents were watching at 3 a.m., peering through the dark. She looked at Delaney's little pink fingers, fisted in sleep, and Kendra reached into the incubator, placed her thumb at the child's palm. Delaney's body murmured in response, her fingers fluttering over Kendra's knuckle.

Do you understand this? Kendra thought. It means I'm here. I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

At another cradle, an alarm started to go off.

Three hours into the deep, dark of morning was enough to chart fifty bodies. They called in Jeff for backup. Three hours, Todd flagged behavioral oddities, filtered fetishes, and uploaded each profile to the incident folder. Somewhere, on the other side, the producers saw an icon blink once, twice, however-many times. Here they are. There they go. Onto the radar and into the airwaves.

He'd fought to keep his newest job from obsolescence. He signed and collected petitions. Developed organic, more sustainable inks. Attended medical tattooing consultations and lectures. He shared his colleagues' research, believing in it truly: chips cause cancer and the mines in Sudan are at risk, the metals low in supply. Scanners and their tattoos, as the director himself noted to Senator Russo, were more humane. Artists pelted in dragons and Dixie pinup girls and poker chips proclaimed government control, their skin their own canvas to do with what they wanted, uninterrupted by a barcode, like they were products. As though the dangers of the city weren't enough. Shoving bodies through machines and detectors made them look like no more than cattle, like turkeys wrapped for Thanksgiving, like just a number—17 or 28 or 162 bodies and bodies and bodies.

Around 6 a.m.—he called the room speaker to attention to ask for the time—Todd opened a coffin of shredded ribs and lacerations, and plucked a wedding band that the shiners missed in the swells of a burst thigh. He lifted the folds of skin with delicacy, and curled

around bone as he might tuck a nephew into bed. He scanned the extra precaution tattoo at his navel, and the monitor flickered and reminded Todd of who he really was, more than a body, more than an envelope. This was a part of life, to shed one's body. Their memories remained, came to life, became shareable, and that's what was important.

He was a hunting enthusiast, Dave, en route to Jakarta.

Another pair of boxes contained a husband and his daughter, they were Ross and Maria, posing by a violet Christmas tree in matching reindeer sweaters, and there were other pairings, too, just in case the other members went in any which order, in any which grouping. Brother-father. Brother-mother-daughter and dog. A dentist named Joy with a nostalgic fondness for potato guns—Todd tapped the monitor and watched Joy launch a blackened lump into a clump of naked pines, the force doubling her back onto the gray earth that'd once been her grandfather's farm. The dentist's laugh rang from the computer and bounced against the walls.

Morning brought rain and fuzzy, dreary light, and Kendra watched a dribble of water emerge from and pool at the window sill. Somewhere in the sealant, a tiny hole. She wondered who would take a maintenance request. The property manager, Todd had said, was impatient and strapped and short on the phone, insisting they send a notice through the service portal though their requests went unopened, unreplied. It was, Todd reassured her, just because his other properties were down on the waterline, and he had much bigger matters to attend to.

She wished his displaced tenants well. At the memory of her mother's home, washed away but for a Christmas tree stand in the old barn out back, she pressed her grimace deeper into the pillow. They should have raised the flood barriers. They should have built the levees. They should have done so many things. The tenants still forked over rent for dissolving spaces. In this spiral of gloom, Kendra wished their negligent landlord would tumble into the harbor, strike his leg on the spindly, riptide wreckage of his sinking ground-floor units, and never be found. Maybe then, someone would fix the window. Someone would fix the lights. Someone would find a heat that wouldn't run out.

She remembered this promise was vital to their Match. Their dreams, their goals. A 97% success rate. A shared love of cooking, their grandmothers' recipes—his kohlrabi slaw to her jollof rice and peppersoup on a particularly cold, drawn day, when the curfew seemed to stretch into weeks as they stayed clear of the flooding streets and busted drains. There was an intimacy in sharing more, beyond what the online surveys first asked and parsed for them. It was a treat to share one new thing on date night, in the twisting sheets, on a rare night out. Kendra didn't know or remember when it happened, the day Todd ran out of things he wanted to share. He'd smile and say, tell me one more. One more for both of us. Please? And his smile seemed to crack and wobble into the empty bowl in front of him.

Her phone lit up on the bedside table. The hospital, the NICU.

Todd withdrew the sheet from the face of the next victim. A young woman, paler than pale, her cheeks teal under the examination light. He held back a bit of bile in his throat at the sight of her. Not a child, but not one who'd seen this world for long. Her expression held

mild concern, her eyebrows tight whereas others' faces had slipped into death without a care, their images loose and slack, as though her worried soul still fluttered beneath her eyelids, wondering where they'd put her missing legs. Todd pulled back her bottom lip. A gray splotch spread between the flesh of her bottom lip and the fuzz of her front teeth. He withdrew from a supply cabinet a square of soft, damp mesh and rubbed carefully at the blot. The ink came clean, revealing a puff of unblemished muscle.

This was not right.

Todd next examined the elbow. Left, then right. He rubbed harder, dousing the skin with a puddle of solution, squishing against the broken humerus that crunched under his knuckles. The barcodes came free.

Todd shimmied the sheet over spot 7, to the right of her navel. A last resort for women, whose bodies swelled and slacked in pregnancy and were stitched across one way or another. He pushed the scanner button over the code. The machine chirped in error. Data not found. Not found. Not found. Chirp. Chirp. Todd dialed his supervisor.

“What’s up, T?”

In the background, Todd could hear a buzzsaw, sharp and whirring. A muffled crunch.

“I’ve... got a question?”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“So... You received nothing from Input Crew about a chemical spill? Nothing out of the ordinary? Was it a water landing?”

“Small blast. Landed on the runway. Some just below fuselage came in with severe burns, gasoline, but which one are you on?”

“I’m looking at ID 45839. Severe trauma, blood loss, double leg amputation—”

“What’s up?”

“The barcodes are missing.”

The supervisor snorted. “The woman got on a plane. The likelihood—”

“But they’re not there.”

“Todd, I swear, I’m armpit deep in a stewardess, you gimme a minute and I’ll be right there. You’re just tired.”

ALL BUT ONE: Passenger Missing

And underneath, the lazy scroll of the byline. ***Records suggest foul play in retrieval process for Unity Flight 743 crash. 161 memos have been recovered. Black box intact.***

Kendra stared at the waiting area television, folded up on the plasticine bench, its cushions worn and stringy, too muddle-colored to know if her sneakers made much difference or dirt or imprint. She felt the damp of her commute beneath her. She hugged herself tightly, her sweatshirt loose and holding chill. She wore scrubs out of habit. The crowded waiting room hesitated before her, as though to ask how much longer to wait, where the bathrooms were, and if she had any extra federal forms for debt release. A glance with her weary eyes gave them pause, and they held up their hands, as if to say “I didn’t know, you’re one of us, I see now.”

The shift director said, first, on the phone, to go to the staff lounge, but sent a text as Kendra made her way to the hospital.

Go to reception and we'll call you to a room.

The shame seemed to sag from her shoulders into her ribs. Kendra hugged her knees to her chest like a child, leaning against the wooden armrest until it ached its shape into her side. Headlines slowly morphed and dragged into one—the unknown girl, cut too sharp in the crash to share a picture of her remains, and removed from the system that might have given viewers her name, her lost dreams, her family's grief. Nearby waiting room squatters looked on, aghast, some yanked fully from the fear that sat in the room with them, at full attention to the screen, puzzling over her absence.

It was, Kendra thought, likely Todd's case. And he would be upset, agonizing over how he could have gotten this one wrong, how something that was not his fault was now his fault, and that another dead girl he could not bring back to life was in his hands, and this system he supported, how could it not work? How could these tattoos not work?

Bitterness bubbled in her. Fuck the tattoos. Fuck Todd and his dumb barcodes. The thought she swallowed. Her throat was dry. The waiting room was antiseptic cold, free of breeze or damp. Kendra rubbed the skin of her own ID, those ugly, stubby lines in the crease of her elbow. She pinched the skin until it burned. It didn't kill anyone to get death wrong and miss the message. There were other, more methodical ways of knowing someone, knowing a body.

The morgue grew wider, bigger, and the hospitals still couldn't get nicer chairs to wait in.

Kendra recalled earlier days, before the scanners, when there were quiet hours of unknowing before the spell grief, the “we don’t know yet” statements while mourners were contacted, when a picture of a wreck was someone else’s tragedy. If a tragedy came in the night, you could spend a whole morning sleeping until the news arrived. When her uncle vaulted his car into the ravine, there was her own serenity—a few hours in the front yard, tornado-spinning on the tire swing before the police pulled into their tiny driveway. The not-knowing put all that followed in sharp relief. The blistered summer grass and dirt on her bare feet, the lurch of thrill in her stomach, swinging, dizzy—those last moments of peace so clearly defined the sharp cries and sobs and screams from the front porch. Perhaps the process dulled those last moments, the “where-you-were-when’s.” Kendra couldn’t say from experience. Her last grief fell from her into the shower, a tiny blob of blood and bright color, like a wad of orange pulp.

Occasionally, an echo of pain throbbed through the halls, through the labyrinth of service halls, yelps and screams originating from the emergency room in the West wing. In the surgical waiting room, she pondered coffee from the moaning vending machine in the corner. Her wet shoes kept her anchored to the bench, stubborn, tired. She reached into her purse to pull out a tissue and dab beneath her eyes, waiting for the supervisor to call her in.

It was an accident. She watched the bag fail without any press of a button, just the small wriggle of life struggling at the wall of the makeshift womb, trying to break free until it drowned.

Not sure what's up or what's next here, Todd texted his wife, but wanted to let you know I'll be back late. Just so you know!

At the morgue, they'd cleaned the back room out for the press corps. Conference rooms had mostly turned into surplus storage, but the last empty space was reserved for what the director called Big Ones. Guerrilla casualties. Building collapses. They all had their names for these things, murmured in passing as they hustled down the halls from the double doors to the input station to the scanning room and back to the water coolers and sterile fridge space where most couldn't stomach more than a couple crackers.

Input called these bad days Copycats. Banshees. Tribute traps. 500+ bodies. 100+ weapons. Stockpiles of all kinds. But this was how it was. News of a late-night flight to a less-traveled cross-zone shot down was normally tucked under ads for hair cream, fertility gel. But this was different. Todd emerged from his lab, hands dry and cracked from sanitizer, to see a reedy woman fussing with his supervisor's sleepless cap of hair.

"Holding up?" Todd offered. The supervisor scowled.

At his last job, people had been much nicer. But they'd experimented with miniscuses and meninges from endangered penguins and monkeys, not humans. They had the energy to gather after hours for drinks and bring each other crullers and coffee for no occasion other than Tuesday. It had been a cheerful business until the funding ran out.

Here was go, go, go. Policies for the people over people for the people. The media got them all a second life. Todd remembered a bygone day of watching television dramas with his mother, nodding off at her feet, watching actors in scrubs hang their heads and turn off

the equipment, slow and sad while a family member screamed. Life into death was sudden and slow all at once—the life was gone and there was nothing to be done.

There was always more to be done, and Input growled that bodies were raced faster to the morgue than to the emergency clinics choked with lines of morphine drinkers. The ambulances circled the medical district like birds over open water, nowhere to land. There weren't enough beds. There weren't enough doctors. There was plenty of room for dying. Todd hedged the fall quarter would bring him a bonus.

The spread of information, the spread of keeping the world honest and knowing when it kept spinning, bleeding, dying to the second. It was their collective duty. It was of great value.

Todd's stomach grumbled. He pulled out his phone. Kendra hadn't answered him. Their conversation was cozy on his side of the screen, her messages pert and small and taking up so little room.

You know what I'm craving. Palazzi's. Garlic. Bread.

It was her favorite. Or it used to be.

He looked down and saw a splotch on the floor, and thought for a moment it might be blood, but it could have been any stain, the room facilitated the Input Crew's hush-hush gin tubs and poker games, and it might have been just that. Team building. Todd often missed that part. Too much paperwork on his end. After filing to the press, he'd send notices to extended relatives, parsing through the Grief Network, flagging email addresses that bounced back, and chucking addresses for the dead who could not mourn the newly dead.

In anticipation of the director's press run, stacks of ruby chairs were spread to seat the

journalists, the cameramen, the sound squads, and soon, they all filed in silently, missing nothing.

The morgue supervisor strode to the cluster of microphones, squinting his eyes against the flap-clack-click-flash of cameras.

“Good afternoon and thank you for your time today,” he said, a good distance from the microphone. Todd watched as he wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, shuffled a sheet of paper in front of him, his eyes cast down.

“I am here to provide a statement with regards to this morning’s incident, provided by the authority of the Association of American Undertaking, and confirmed by Station Executive Officer Chris Downey, Cross Center One-fifteen. As follows.”

Todd recalled the tone from the last conference. Reflective. Watery. But he thought *this* session deserved a stronger, more insistent tone. They were doing all that they could. It wasn’t anyone’s fault other than the girl’s that she had broken the law, boarded a plane without clearance (though how she could, no one could yet say), and fell from the sky in a ball of wreckage and fire. All the others, an inundation of grief and stories being poured out into the airwaves, 161 lives and all their families, each making impact, each gaining hits and clicks and broken heart icons, were there. Todd sent out In Case memos for all but one. He maintained a near-perfect record in that way. He poured hours of himself into their stories and cast aside years and years of deep and untroubled sleep. The whole team did.

“As our report submitted this morning at 7:42 suggested, 161 American records were present for the public’s notice. International manifests were sent to seven different countries, and records are available, applicable under the united transatlantic mortality agreement. One

record remains unavailable. Contrary to initial messages posted by several sources, the remains are not missing, nor have they been misplaced. Cleanup in the area of the impact has been thoroughly completed, though any matter smaller than one gram is excusable under Title Nineteen.”

“As noted in Misha’s Law, paragraph 3, a body must be properly identified prior to the public release of a government-mandated personal history. Following identification, a member of the respective AAU district must then contact next of kin by way of insta-scan. Next of kin’s receipt of this scan then signals consent to release of the name of the victim, and will then provide the AAU, as legal representative to the media, objects of record for the preservation of the victim’s history and personhood.”

This was not the Shabbona Lake massacre, Todd thought. This was not a shelled-out apartment complex. Not thousands. Just one. Just one girl. Just a missing name. And it was important, and Todd would figure it all out or someone else would, and more bodies would be wheeled in, and he would keep pushing out stories, keep peeling out the facts from elbows, abdomens, teeth, heels. He couldn’t get fired over something that wasn’t his fault.

“Our conversations with supporting detectives suggest that though the victim did not display inappropriate nomenclature for registration with the AAU, in accordance with The Transparency Act, she is not undocumented, we suspect she is a naturalized citizen, that she did not work in connection with terror networks to plant the incendiary device upon the aircraft, but this will be concluded upon further investigation and after conversations with the victim’s next of kin.”

Todd’s stomach ached, from hunger or what else, he couldn’t be sure.

“We have been unable to contact the next of kin at this time, but will continue to reach out to the appropriate contact until we receive a response. Thus concludes our statement. We—”

Todd’s phone started ringing.

“—will not be taking any questions at this time.”

The press room erupted in anger. Excitement. Fever-wracked joy.

Kendra’s call went to voicemail. She hung up before she could hear Todd’s mechanical reply, please try me again later. Try, try again.

At the bus stop, Kendra clutched her small, sterile box of things from her locker. All that remained of her career. She’d never work in pediatrics again. That little hand against the biobag, reaching for the outside, they concluded, was not effectively her fault, but it was nothing they could explain to the grieving governor’s wife, to the public. The image, the abject rejection of survival, was too much to explain. A nurse who tangled her lines or mixed in the wrong fluid was easy to explain. Accidents happen. They may or may not press charges.

The rain came down in heavy sheets, and the flood gates grumbled. Kendra looked down at her phone, watching the bus trundle through the safe routes of the city, slow and steady. Ten minutes of waiting. A small drip, drip came down through the bus shelter roof, leaving drops of rain and a pink of rust on the knee of her scrubs. The ads on the billboard to her right flashed and bloomed pink and yellow and golden brown, the screen cracked and leaking intense violet light in the top right corner.

One, a somber gray with white letters.

If you have been inappropriately Matched and engaged, you may be eligible for compensation. Call 1-800-MATCHUP for a free consultation with our legal experts.

It flashed to messages for cinnamon whiskey pops and eco-friendly reusable bandages and double coverage life insurance. Smiling faces with takeout containers and dark brown shopping bags and perfectly pleated beige raincoats. An ad reflected the street behind it, a work of camera trickery, and the illusion of a pair of small, dark-haired boys hopped from one puddle to the next, stomping in bright green boots. The traffic rolled torrents of water up and over the curb, running towards booted feet. Kendra would have watched these puddle jumps for days. The Match firm ad came back on again, cycling every couple of ads of the department stores, the whiskey pops, the strawberry gelato bites, the boys, the smiling mothers in perfect raincoats. Perfect little boots for perfect little toes. Toy trains from recycled cityscapes.

She wanted so badly to reap the promises the system had promised. Because they could have worked good. They could have been great. She saved the number on her phone.

On his way out, through a hall the director insisted was more discreet, Todd's path to the car was interrupted by a yelp. Todd turned back, hands shaking. A reporter, gangly and gray-haired, had jammed his foot into the slow path of the sliding door upon Todd's exit. Todd kept calm. He kept calm. He tried to tack his face to a more dismal expression. His temples and cheeks felt pinched and greasy with tired.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you an employee at Cross Center 115?”

“I—”

“Can you please tell me your name?”

The policy was to say yes, the policy was not the law but was the rule.

“Todd Claymore?” he murmured.

“Do you acknowledge that this transgression could take a full 24 hours, Mr. Claymore?”

Todd managed a nod.

“That’s too long.”

“We are doing everything we can—”

“Do you acknowledge that missing information places undue stress on the city? With increased numbers fleeing in observation of recent violence, we deserve to know who was on that plane. Do you comment?”

“What do you want me—”

“What is your function at this facility?”

“I’m just the scanner—”

“What was Olivia planning? Was she involved” the reporter’s face was flushed pink and forward and bristling and scary.

“Who?”

“45839, on the manifest from Unity. We confirmed before you even opted to let the public good in on all this mess.”

Todd felt the pain of the reporter's eyes, the sting, the burn, the ache in the back of his head. He reached backwards for the door handle on the car. "I can neither confirm nor—"

"But there is no Olivia Burgess. There's no social media presence. Nothing. Any—"

"Goodnight."

"They deserve to know her! This was a tragedy," he screamed. "FBI suggested it was a plotted—"

"Please leave me alone—"

"What does this say about the future of the AAU?"

Todd pulled hard at the door and threw himself into his seat. He locked the door against the hey, hey and hand slam of the reporter at his window and Todd shook tried to shake his head, no, no and pictured his name in this reporter's log, his home address, Kendra staring out the window at a throng of cameras and recorders, their lenses capturing goldfish eyes behind the window, then the wrinkles in between her brows and at her chin. Kendra, angry, that he'd brought a horde of intruders to their own walkway, trampling the blue, wet grass in front of the building.

"I did what I could! I did what I could! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He remembered a professor, and the line echoed, pounding—"even the dead deserve good PR." His chest heaved, desperate for air. The world seemed to narrow inward, tighter and tighter.

Kendra opened the door and found Todd on the kitchen linoleum, hands pressing against a deep purple splotch on the floor. He looked up, his eyes dark, and he offered a slight, crooked smile.

“Ah, sweetness, hi, uh,” he murmured. “I’m so sorry, just a bit of butterfingers over here. Don’t step over, uh, by the island, I’ve gotta turn on the vacuum. Glass.”

“Why are you drinking at 2 p.m.?” she croaked. “Of all things, Christ.”

“Wait are you okay? What’s in the box?”

She noticed the large takeout bag on the counter. A plate of crusted, golden garlic bread. A rare bit of prosciutto, sopressata. Fresh little tomatoes. *Real* mozzarella, the kind not made from powder, you could tell from the sheen, the little puddle of cloudy water. A popped-open bottle from New Sonoma.

“Todd, what is this?”

“I-it’s uh...well. I just had a craving. I didn’t know you’d be home? Do you want to make a date of it? Date night, er, day? Why are you home? The Calendar said you were on shift.”

Her eyes stung. She put the box on the floor by the door and knelt to slowly unlace her shoes.

“I’m sorry,” Todd spoke softly. She felt him move closer across the kitchen. “I think... I feel like I’ve hurt you, Ken. But can we talk?”

Kendra rose and slid her coat from her shoulders, one arm out, then the other, sloughing the rain onto the floor, sprinkling against her socks.

“We don’t ever talk when we’re home, we’re just so busy, I know—”

“It’s not your fault, Todd.” She turned to him and he offered up his arms. She drew closer to the door.

“No,” she said.

“Kendra, I’m sorry—”

“Stop being sorry, why are you *sorry*?” she groaned.

“I’ve done something wrong, you’re just not saying what!” he cried, his dry voice cracking.

“The Match is wrong is what!” she shrieked. “I’ve got the letter in our dresser; I know you’ve got one too! It’s wrong! They fucked it up!”

Todd’s arms wilted to his side.

“The algorithm didn’t do it perfect, Ken, but the algorithm doesn’t do all the hard stuff.”

“It didn’t do anything but get me *stuck*,” Kendra said, a sob welling in her throat.

She said it. She said what had been there, sitting in the corner of the rooms of this little condo the past 6 months. Todd’s face fell. It was sad, greasy, tired.

“I... I know I’m not perfect,” he tried.

“You’ve brought home nothing but *death*,” she cried. “Months of just *death* and *gore* and obsession over *all of it*. Did the Match know that? They said, hell, give it to Kendra, she can just *deal*?”

“That’s just how it *works*! That’s the *job* and someone has to do it!” he yelled, puffing up defensively.

“You could have any other damn job!”

“This one *matters*.”

Kendra felt the last smudge of makeup drip and she rubbed her eyes on the shoulder of her scrubs, already gray with mascara leaks. She heard a beep—the apartment security. A warbled, static voice called out from the ceiling.

Are you in danger?

“No,” Todd growled.

Are you in danger?

Kendra shook her head.

Are you in danger, Resident B?

“I am not in danger!” she sobbed. “Turn off! Turn off!”

A short double beep responded in confirmation. Todd’s shoulders heaved.

“It’s not just a job to me,” he murmured. “I remember my first In Case memo, verbatim. To a crush,” Todd whispered. “Told her, or, you know, wanted to tell her, that no one else’s eyes sparkled quite like hers... I was 12, you know, after that shooting in Ditmas? At the Panera? And they sent out the reminder—like oh! Oh! Don’t forget to update them! But I’d never felt the need to do it? Except for my mom?”

“You’ve told me this before, damnit,” she said. His dark eyes were set, weepy, but it wasn’t for her. That wasn’t how he worked, how he kept going. She noted a smear of dark brown on his hip, and she realized he never changed, just came straight from the morgue.

“I need... I need to explain. It just felt...so real then. Two blocks from my house. I wasn’t home at the time but mum felt the house rattle. And... and I thought she was dead, and I thought then that this was the worst feeling. And... and you remember Helen? Lived

down the hall? She got nothing when her husband died last year, I scanned him, don't tell them I told you, but you remember he careened the car into that tree and copied Helen on a dry cleaning bill. That's all she got."

She couldn't look at him. She turned her eyes to the counter. Sopressata. Plum wine.

"My IC to you is longer than what I wrote for our vows. This world is crazy, Ken. Ken? When you go... no. I want to make sure that when I go—"

She lurched forward and grabbed the neck of the bottle, wrenched back, let it fly. It crashed against the soft white wall and rained to the floor. An urgent beeping from the apartment.

Are you in danger?

At the start of their marriage, he'd watch and observe Kendra through the Measurements in the little screen in their medicine cabinet. So lucky he was to be her person. He read her blood pressure, her heart beat, levels of alkalinity and salinity and hydration, thinking of the life that throbbed behind it, and pictured her brushing her fingers against a phantom swell of her stomach, their future. They brushed their teeth side-by-side as newlyweds, so early in their courtship, and he saw it then. Flossing in the mirror and staring deep into it, into the cabinet, at the reader. A small bean of a person growing. The child would have the tawny flecks of gold in her hair, like that picture, that youthful afro flowing out into dark waves. Todd imagined her trying to pull a downy rabbit trim sweater over the hem of her jeans, but no, it wouldn't fit, because there it was. There he or she or whoever was.

But then her stomach stayed trim, tight. He often reached out in sleep, rolling his arms over her waist, and for months felt sadder and sadder to re-discover those still-sharp hip bones. She pulled herself closer and closer to the edge of the bed all the time. And then they got the letter.

It happened, the counselors said. Rarely, but it did. But it didn't have to change your plans. Couples could always plan to change.

Long after the floor-vacuum had sucked up the broken glass and the apartment was locked down for curfew, Todd tossed and turned in the empty bed. Kendra. The job. Kendra. Scanning. Looking, searching, for that hollow in the hips. He pictured Olivia's severed legs, and when he slept, they were sliced and split open again, and she screamed and screamed, though he'd never heard her voice. She left no note.

His phone went off early that morning.

This is not the usual, but none of it is. The lieutenant wrote. *We found a name, a next of kin. You need to go to them, make the case to release her records, log the remains.*

At the address they sent him, outside of Branson, where the waters at Indian Point threatened to swallow moss-dabbled cottages and suck docks down to the mud, a mailbox protruded from the reeds. Todd parked the car against the curb outside. The windows were dark. He'd give it a moment. He checked his phone. He watched Kendra's position on his smart watch, flickering and throbbing blue, the simple Home Lynk message buzzing each time she passed through a doorway.

Kitchen. 30 seconds. Little steps.

Kitchen. Pausing at the sink.

Kitchen. A beat, pausing to put on her shoes?

Sunroom. She stood there. A long while.

Door. Departed, 9:30.

He tapped his screen. It was that quick. Date, engagement, marriage, per the pattern, per the script. It all went so smooth, and he learned a lot, as they said he would. But the hum of her crossing the doorway had not felt that intimate since they began courting, since they'd first been married, swapped passwords, lynked, entered the same tracking, the same rhythms, shared that monitor in the bathroom and the messages on the fridge.

The tracker could not see her down the street. He pictured stopping, thinking. Maybe she would turn around. Unlock the door. Come back in. She used to love to bake. She baked when she was stressed. She held herself when she was scared. She smiled and smiled so sweet, and talked about her patients, her *babies*. So soft. Todd pictured her reach for the mixing bowls. He imagined her whipping cream into hard peaks. He wondered about the flavors. So busy, so focused.

He looked up, and still no one stirred. There was a car in the driveway, but it wasn't clear when it was last driven. He got out, locked the door, and approached the mailbox. Scum and rust chewed at the letters: Burgess-Fulton-White. It stood attention beside a small ranch, neatly attended to with potters of petunias in bright orange and pink. Todd could not recall a planter so full and so fresh outside a greenhouse. He went up the gravel driveway, crossed the sodden green porch, and poked at a petal. Plastic. The front door was bedecked in a

chintzy purple plaque, a status made of garbage, a recent fad. Mind the Mutt was etched in wood beside expired license plates and rubber daisies.

Todd knocked on the door and stared at the patches of bristles of what might have been a Welcome mat. A gray and sagging woman appeared at the door in a long tartan bathrobe, her eyes rimmed pink, a spill of perspiration and tears at her upper lip.

“Can I help you,” she wheezed. Todd swallowed.

“Hello, Mrs. Burgess-Fulton-White? My name is Todd Claymore and I represent the—”

“They said you would come,” she murmured.

She turned into the shadows of the hallway with a loud sniff of phlegm, and waved him inside. Todd wondered if he should keep on his shoes. The floors were surprisingly clean. The woman, Mrs. Burgess, shuffled into a small den and sank into a worn and chewed sofa. She pressed a palm to her cheek and stared down at the coffee table, laden with photographs. Todd had not seen paper and filament pictures since his childhood. He recalled his notes from his supervisor—he offered a small smile.

“Your daughter?”

The woman did not answer. She withdrew her hand and began to place each image in piles, a rhythmic sorting.

“She got out. She did. She got outta the podunks. And that... that was a big deal. I told her the city was dangerous, but, ya know, that was... that was always what she wanted.”

“When was the last time you spoke with her?” he asked. He pulled out a tablet and started to take quiet notes.

“Last week or so. She was planning a trip over east. Always wandering... always...”

The woman sighed and continued her stacks. A minute passed. She did not offer tea or coffee or vita-water. Todd cleared his throat.

“Mrs. Burgess-Fulton-White, I... I’m here on behalf of the AAU, and we need to collect—”

“I know what you’re here for, boy,” she coughed. Todd felt a hot sweat in his stomach, felt moisture on his collar. He said nothing. Her eyes were on him, stinging, burning.

“I told her not to go,” she said.

“You wanted her to be safe—”

“She’s not safe. She was not safe nowhere,” she rasped. She coughed and coughed. A gob of moisture splattered onto the denim at her knee. Todd froze, she was crying, coughing, really gasping.

“Yer gonna arrest me,” she wheezed.

“No, I’m n—”

“Yeh’d have arrested her.”

“She did commit an infraction,” he said, calm. “The ID lines are ways to keep people... safer.”

“So you’re gonna charge me.”

“There’s nothing to charge you with.”

“It’s my fault, I confess. My sin. I didn’t believe in those things. Put the big man under my skin? I don’t mind. I’ve done nothing wrong. Under the skin of my infant

daughter? No. No, thank you. No, that's her choice. When she's ready. And she wasn't ever ready."

Her hand hovered over a blurred photo of a cherubic, chubby baby in a pumpkin hat.

"I want to share with the public that she has indeed passed away, but I want to do it in a way she'd have wanted," Todd said, drawing in a sharp breath, pulling another tablet from his bag and placing it atop the photo album. "I need you to sign and consent. The public—the public has a right to know."

Tina's finger hovered over the glowing screen. The light amplified the cracks in her hands, the lines on her face. She sucked her lips and narrowed her eyes, scanning the pages. The woman's chin wobbled. Her face twisted into rage, and Todd thought she might heave up and pound him across the head. But she stared at the space on the coffee table, on the photo album, where the tablet rested, as though it might catch fire.

Todd withdrew his camera, his scan gun. He placed the items on the table besides the stacks of photos. Tina's knuckles gripped at the folds of her bathrobe. She let out a whimper.

"The media needs to know her story, it's law," Todd urged. "Did she leave behind any diaries? Any letters? Even dated? Are they kept here? Where does she live now, if not here? I need this. You have to tell me."

With one wave of her arm, Tina pulled the stacks into the folds of the album. She closed the overstuffed volume and hugged it to her chest.

"Ma'am. Our association, our goals for the public good, they're at stake. They're at risk. I need to share one of those photos—"

“Tell ‘em she left,” the plump woman snapped, her shoulders quaking. “She made it out of the middle of nowhere-or-nothin’ and some brown bastard took her and her legs. Does the media want that? They blew her up? And now there’s nothing left. She keeps extra sneakers here for runnin’ do you want to know that? She comes home for every weekend. What more do you want? Some rough-sleeper commie or brownies, you can bet, you can bet they blew her up.”

She pulled the book tighter against her chest and rocked forward and back. “The world wants to know all there is? All’s left is me and I’m *sad*. What do you want? Don’t they know? Don’t you know before me that she’s dead? What more can you say?”

Todd lifted his tools from the table and left with his hands full of them, did not restore them to the bag until he was in the driveway, glazed with swamp sweat. From the porch, he listened to her yell.

The house logged him in at 2:36 a.m. The kitchen hummed, empty and blue by the light of the fridge. A small scroll: *Maybe you could use a little ice cream.*

He plopped his bags down on the table and walked through the living room, legs aching, head buzzing. The report was sent. Alerts and messages paraded across the screen of his watch, his cell. Questions. Always more questions.

In the dark, at the threshold to the bedroom, he stripped the clothes that reeked of the moisture from the Branson marsh, the stale reek of the house, the grease trap of the city, all of it. He slipped beneath the sheets. He rolled over. His arms reached. Found the hollow. He hugged his shoulders.

His phone beeped.

Club shooting. 51. Come ASAP.

2. COOPERSTOWN

An uninsured 40-year-old woman with a large mass in her breast delayed seeking care for a year until the mass started to bleed. She has an aggressive form of breast cancer. ...We can't ignore the economic cost of the way we finance health care in our country. [The patient] was saving to build a house with her fiance. She couldn't afford to do that and pay for health insurance. Millions of people make these sorts of economic decisions every day.

Prepared Statement from Deborah Richter, MD
Hearings before the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Retirement Security, 115th Cong.
(2018)

Abigail does not meet a Cross Corp. donor in person until she's eighteen, when she starts thinking about the future, when she starts hanging out with the older kids, the kids who just got out of Otsego County High, when she finally starts blooming and saving up quarters for tops from Stewart's Depot, ones she later slices with garden shears at the midriff. It's summer, and the boy had opted to give up his toenails, the wriggle of cells at his nail beds, and when the party crowd sees, they whoop and laugh wildly at the misshapen wobbles of feet in the grass. The miners, the powder keggers, the loggers, the little kid teachers all crowd around the gin tub perched on Sarah's mom's picnic table, together pour mismatched cups and mugs from chipped cabinets. Strong, bitter berry mash spills into the dirt patches. The group, twenty or so in number, trail plum drops of mud into Sarah's living room. Under the white light of crooked lamps, the boy's stitches purple.

Cosmetics are easy, he slurs, easy, and they numb you up, do the damn thing, then you wake up, there you go! You get a thousand bucks in a little manilla envelope before yer mam gets to come in.

Abigail grimaces. She asks if it hurts.

Better and worse than some things, he says. And some things you need more than fingernails.

She questions this but doesn't know how to say it. He holds out his hand, introduces himself as David, call me Fitz.

She walks away home, long after general curfew, takes the lakebed path along old I-80, sleepy, sore, sober, and toe-tripping on the rocks and dry rot. Up the hill, up the crumbling walk, through the fence slats, she sees the kids gather dry bits at the edge of the woods, and race back across the brown lawn to the grills, where their parents watch the fires carefully, watch dinner bubble, wait to swat at dangerous stray sparks. At the edge of the hill, Ma's cottage is dark. Blue light flickers in a window. From the half-open door, Abigail sees the smartbox blinking ads for toffee vapes, draping over her mother, in nothing but big cotton undies and a matching top, a wheat spliff at her lips.

You have fun?

The blinds are open. Where are your pajamas, Ma?

I dunno, guess someone didn't do the wash, did they?

I did, no, I did do it. I put it on your bed. I didn't finish putting it away.

In her Ma's bedroom, Abigail searches, finds a green tee shirt, then sees the gray one, cotton and worn, well-loved, well-tossed-around, stuffed into the bottom of the trash. She

tugs and finds evil red and brown splotches, dripping from the collar. In the living room, Ma curls on the couch, watching the kids outside chase after each other with spears of thistles.

Why'd you throw out that shirt?

I'll just get a new one, Ma replies, her voice watery, phlegmy.

I can find some bleach. Ma coughs. Ma coughs herself into a ball on the couch. Ma's face purples.

Ma, are you okay?

I'm fine, scout, just leave me alone for a minute, okay?

Ma.

I'm going to bed, she declares, hastily popping her cig into a jam jar. She doesn't give her daughter a hug or sidewise glance. She locks the bedroom door. Abigail leaves the green shirt on the bathroom doorknob. It's there the next morning, a wilted up flag, when she wakes for church.

Abigail goes alone, and this observation draws the parish to her like cows to grass. She puts pennies in a till at the door, and in the arms of the grandmothers and devout uncles, she is holy and special, a Jesus-fearing babe, a rare white lamb. They cradle wafers in their hands and scoop them into her open palm, and press their thumbs to her cheek with a deep, deep love. She is the granddaughter their children cannot, will not have. She smiles at them and does not betray that she first came to the parish for their bundt cakes and blackberry jam. Because Ma only burns things, and teaches her none of the skills to make their cottage homely. The chapel is a quiet retreat from her Ma's angry tears, her old friends' catty swipes

and verbal jabs, their urgent, panicked praise of one another's sharp hip bones, holding one up for being thin while the cupboards stay empty for weeks, their mouths puckered and stomachs sour. They cry not knowing what to do.

Pastor Jacob unfolds his arms and lifts his bony fingers toward the steeple. He asks the congregation for blessings, for prayers, for fears, for questions about the scripture.

Prayers for Greg Stevenson, who found a lump on his thyroid.

Prayers for the Mathesons, whose home burned down a month ago, and still can't reach the insurance wardens.

Blessings for this sunshiney day. Isn't that great?

I fear for the poppy crop.

I fear for my brother, Sal, who hasn't come home.

Yea, blessings for this weather! God is good! (The congregation responds, "All the time!")

Prayers for Laura, who lost another babe.

Abigail has a moment of fear. She has two. But she does not want to be the parishioner with so many questions, does not like to draw attention. She has two fears. She will only ask for one answer, she made this choice on the way here down I-80, stomach gurgling. She nibbles on one of Karen's lemon squares. She raises her hand. She is sixteen and this is not the first time she chooses a boy over Ma but it is the first time she feels something other than guilt.

Pastor Jacob. What would Jesus say of donors? Not those who give at the front door. *The* donors. He says not to harm one's self. He says to treat thy body like a temple. But...I don't understand. You can't strip pieces of yourself out, and still make it to Heaven, can you?

She shrinks into her chair at some of the nervous glances, the frowns. Their parish is open to taboos but the grandfathers sniff at them like spoiled trout.

But Pastor Jacob's doughy, sleepy expression breaks into a grin.

Ah, but is it not a gift to tend to new chances, to renew one's commitment to life and to God? The grandmothers wring their hands and raise their white brows. To go help your neighbor, your brothers and sisters in Christ, so that they might see the errors of their ways, wipe their body of the cells of sin? Is that not what Jesus wants? Go forth and give! Give what you can! For if it is not greed that pushes you to sustain the body of another, how can it not be nothing but a gift?

The older kids think Abigail cool and mysterious, her quietness an air of fortitude, rather than nervousness. Her pale face betrays nothing. She sends out a group text the day before Ma goes to Bassett, to the clinic. Wanna come over for a bucket? Because Ma has kept to her bedroom. Ma won't care if they folly on the lawn. She invites the Otsego kids over and they love her for the creek berries and moonshine she gives so easily. Are you sure? Are you sure? Abigail shrugs. It isn't a big deal. Knock yourself out. Ma hasn't touched Dad's stash in the tool shed. No one will notice. And so ten, twenty, thirty teens file through the fence at the bottom of the hill, and clamber up to meet outside the cottage. The neighbors say nothing, and don't bicker at the landlady's girl and her friends. The Otsego kids are eager

to see each other after long days in the field, at the plant, at the bottle house. They coo at Abigail's coon cat Mowgli, and he circles sandaled, gritty, beat up ankles, purring loud. They answer Abigail's questions, sequestered in trios, whispering giddily as if talking of nighttime tristes in Oneonta and boys they kiss in barns. Give blood after payday, they tell her. You'll need to have eaten. Della at Stewart's will give you clean water refills if you say you're on the way to the hospital, she's a sweetie, she understands. But buy an ice cream once in a while. You'll pass out. You can start giving cell slides, bits of your lips and cartilage and mucosa, after you've done blood ten times, once you're eighteen. Fitz arrives late, and finds Abigail by the grill fire, and she leaves Lilly and Jen to make plans for their injection lessons, for the hormones they need to donate eggs.

I didn't know you lived at Lake View.

Abigail blushes. Dad's great-uncle owned it. Dad turned it into permanent places, ya know.

I remember.

Oh, yeah.

My grandpa owned Lake-N-Pines Motel, down the road.

Really?

Sold it, yeah. But we still have the No Vacancy sign. It's hooked up over the kitchen table.

She offers him a jar of the juice. He grimaces.

Prepping for another donation.

I thought you just gave? He wiggles his sandaled feet.

It's not just fingernails you don't need. She hesitates.

Do you want to go somewhere? More quiet?

The ads call them to be bigger than themselves. The ads tell them to call now, book an appointment, that to donate with Cross Corp. is a way to give even when you think you have nothing. That you can transform your life and someone else's all at once. In tiny, gray print: compensation varies. When Abigail watches, her hands float to her ribs, she thinks of what they keep caged, like a crate full of jelly parts and fluids. Her hands float to her belly, to the little round of chub that has stayed there since she got her first period, the skin fold that presses sharp into the button of her jeans. She presses down and tries to feel the pieces of herself that she might give. She imagines taking them out, and if she'd even notice they were gone. \$7,000 would buy a lot of eggs and coffee.

Ma coughs and coughs and yells at the screen. Sure, give up your liver 'n' kidneys. So some rich blowhard can keep drinking and doing blow.

But that could be you. What if you need a new part?

Like they'd give it to me, of all people. Ma pinches tobacco into yellow paper. I made you myself. I kept off my feet and out of the fields for four whole months with you in my belly. Your Dad ate next to dust so you could keep growing. Don't you ever give nothing to nobody. Don't you dare.

The scrap field is quiet, oddly unoccupied. There'd been talk of rain, and the sour fug that came up on moist summer nights kept others away.

Was losing him hard? Fitz asks her from the bed of a truck.

Yeah, she tells him honestly, staring up at the fog of stars. The clouds creep west. There's a lot more laundry I do. I wash more dishes. She works more, is out in the field more. Not as much as when he first left us. But we manage. I can't imagine, he says.

She is not a widow's daughter but fills the role all the same. The weight of empty silences on the couch. The triangulation of gestures and needs, dropped down to a singular reliance, the pass of needs between one woman and another. So much of their time, given back to them once he was gone. They didn't know what to do with it. The girl dusts the urn of ashes on the living room table, and checks it once in a while, opens the lid to see if Ma has burned anything else more recently, if she's added to the pile. It's a ritual they don't speak of, but Ma started, burning the wedding photos and putting them in a coffee can. She brought home a black shellacked urn and flipped the can's content into it and nodded, and that was it. Abigail thought of what to add to it. Maybe a dry bundle of cinnamon. The last of the aftershave. But Ma added her own feelings, and the smell of its contents lingers in the living room after she closes it up. Bacon grease and burnt beans. Dinner remains from the grills on the lawn. Ma has never said it, but she can picture it. Your dad is done and dead. Dead and done.

She wonders what her father is eating, way away in the city, more than that she wishes he was here. She hopes he made it out okay. He'd been sad for such a long time.

A widow's daughter. That means something, even if she can't explain to him yet what that really does to a person.

Bassett sends Ma home with a half-empty orange canister, and promises that a refill might come by in a week. The little bottle is on the kitchen table when Abigail comes home from a walk around the lake. The bottle's label is worn, fuzzy, like it'd fallen into someone's sink. The label is outdated, says not to drive or operate heavy machinery. May cause severe drowsiness. Warning. Warning. She pulls off the top and the pills smell like brine, like the bottom of a shoe. A torn-open envelope sits beside them. The cost glares at her in gray ink. She can hear Ma in the bathroom. Globbs of fluid splash into their toilet. It flushes, and Ma emerges, pink-cheeked. Abigail stares.

Ma. What's wrong?

She says nothing. She opens out her hand, beckons for the little bottle. Abigail puts them in her palm.

It's my lungs. Big surprise, huh.

What's wrong?

Ma reaches into the cabinet, pulls out a pint glass. She pops open the bottle, pour its meager contents into the glass, squeezes a glob of detergent into the bottom, and before Abigail can cry out, she fills the glass up with water.

Those suckers do more harm than good. I won't do it. I won't.

Ma withdraws to her room. The glass foams and bubbles green and blue like the lake's edge.

Abigail curls on the couch at night, thinking for hours of how to explain Ma to Fitz. What he needs to know. She wonders if his searching hands can feel her hunger. She sits

beside him at bonfires and wishes he could tell her she's pretty, and supplies him with more gin. She thinks about the last time Ma or Dad held her hand. She thinks about their last happy day, the last time Ma is proud. In her daydreams, scrubbing out the tool shed, teasing kids' lost toys out of the waste bins in the back of the motel yard, she runs the diamond at Doubleday. The ball soars. Legs pumping. Heart whacking against her throat. Swallowing a clod of red dust sliding into home. Ma whooping up and down. Dad more subdued, but still clapping. Dad, more subdued, but still there. Then Dad, not there, and Ma, in the fields, and the teen leagues cost money, and soon, the bases at DoubleDay are lined with bussed-in city kids on field trips, scrawny and slow. She watches only once from behind the fence. The attendant chases her down with a fine. Widows' daughters don't run at DoubleDay.

Before she can put it together, tie it all up, this explanation, Fitz stops showing up to parties. It is hearsay that he goes to Bassett, gives a kidney, but soon after, he writes to the group text that he's taking a risk, moving out to the city. There's good work there. Flood recovery. He ends with I hope you'll wish me luck. Their group of friends does not. Abigail thinks of what to put in the fire. She tries to burn a bottle cap. It melts and twists and the ink snaps green into the flames. She scoops it out and puts it into the urn in the living room.

They sing "Jesus loves the little children" when the only three kiddos in the parish make their way down to Sunday School in the basement. The grandmothers watch on, eyes twinkling, waving their wrinkled hands, cooing when the one little boy, a thin and bleary-eyed child named Jay, waves back. When the pianist's hands grow quiet, Pastor Jacob raises his hands.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.

The ushers pass out worksheets, a punnett square grid with a house shape in the middle. In the margins are questions. The ladies in the pews pull pens from their purses and start scribbling in answers, like their salvation is a test.

Who are your neighbors? Fill in the block map below. Write down the eight closest home-spaces next to you. Identify each of your neighbors as a stranger, acquaintance, or relationship. Are you comfortable sharing your story and telling people about the impact Jesus has had on your life? When did you last share your story with someone? What makes it hard to do this?

We don't love our neighbors to convert them, Pastor Jacob proclaims. We love them because we are converted.

Ma is still sleeping when Abigail makes her rounds collecting rent. She shoulders the empty shotgun for show as Ma does, and walks from space to space. The gun is hard and stiff across her back, a ludicrous show for as soft-tempered she is, but she wears it all the same, since that one time, that one resident, and the cops over in town so far, far away. She looks at the list of late payees and climbs up the patchy lawn to the two-level. They're the smallest and the cheapest, and Ma comes knocking here every month, in the pre-dawn purple when night shifts end and the mornings spring awake.

Abigail knocks on unit 22. She does not know what to do with her hands. To hook her thumb under the gun strap is aggressive. To put her hand in her pocket means she takes this not seriously at all, youthful, ignorant. The door lock clicks and snaps. She holds her Ma's scratched clipboard out like a hymnal. The singular unfolds before her, reveals a cramping of boxes and cots, an air mattress puffing out beneath a sleeping head. A pale man with dark eyes blinking out sun.

I hate to do this, but I do need your payment. For June. Do you have this? He scowls. He turns back into the clutter, taps on the sleeping man's head with his toe, lets loose a drowsy sprawl of curses, then returns to the door. The dozing man holds out a fist full of yellowed government bills.

Abigail glances down at the list to cross off a name. She thinks of the punnett square. The little boxes stacked on top of one another, the belly of the motel offering up a checklist of converts, and she doesn't know if Jesus will help, but she thinks she know what might.

While I'm here, I wanted to ask your thoughts on becoming a Cross Corp. donor?

He puffs his chest and stands up straight, fills the whole of the doorway and narrows his eyes down at her. He asks for her pen, she obliges. She hugs the clipboard to her chest. He scribbles something straight onto the dollar bills. Abigail grimaces, knows you're really, really not supposed to do that, and can she even give it to Ma in this state? He holds out his stack. She takes it. He slams the door. Atop the margin of the dollar: *HERE'S MY MONTH'S MARROW, BITCH.*

From the hilltop, the ever-spreading lake is still and bejeweled, and Abigail imagines the easier days, when little white boats lazed on its surface like in the paintings Ma kept in the living room. People used to come here for fun.

At the parish a grandmother surprises Abigail with a tin of rum fudge, with raisins that glisten like little gems. She wonders where the woman got them. Just for you! You shouldn't have. The grandmother looks at her with seeping eyes. *God bless the lamb on the stone who lays herself open so freely.* My youngest needed a lung, you know? Died before anyone would stand up and give him that chance. She returns to her pew. The sermon begins and the fudge goes unopened. Abigail stares into the hard grain of the wooden bench as the sermon unfolds.

There is not much to do at home once Ma cannot work in the field, though she tries and tries until the foreman has to cart her home, and she's left wheezing, gripping the couch cushions in wide-eyed fury and panic. Abigail makes tea, offers to apply for painkillers, and Ma glares for she cannot catch breath to holler and howl. But when the panic stops, and the night settles, and Abigail finishes cleaning the lawn, washing the laundry, dusting off the urn Ma calls Dad, it's calm, and quiet, they sit and watch the television. Close, shoulders nearly touching. For the first time ever, they skip the big town cleanup, the lead up to Baseball Hall of Fame weekend, and cannot attend the parade. They pirate a signal, and watch from the couch. The village, only six miles away, is another planet, festooned in red, white, and blue banners, the shop windows lined with cartons of violets and poppies, the shades betraying

none of the foreclosures, the dusty bakery, the fractured ice cream shop. The villagers cheer as a big-grinning man drives through the village in a bright red Supra. Zooming through the crowd, the cameraman zeroes in on the few children he can find, lingering on their awestruck faces, their mouths glistening with the rare treat of a popsicle.

I did want to be around to meet a grandson, Ma says. Abigail stares.

Can we not think about that?

I'm just telling you. Got no one else around to tell these things.

I'm not even pregnant. I'm not even married.

The camera pans to the man in the shiny red car.

I used to watch him play as a little girl, Ma wheezes. Abigail pauses, leans her head gingerly against her Ma's shoulder. Ma squirms.

I miss playing. Do we still have those old game videos? The ones Dad put together? Do you wanna watch them?

Sweetie, I don't know where the hell those got to.

At the red brick building with wide, green double doors, the Supra stops in front of a rolling, red carpet. The Hall of Fame royalty steps from the car. There's a bit of commotion at the corner of the screen.

Did you ever hear from Dad again?

Ma purses her lips. She watches as the camera lingers one stray moment on the crowd to the left of the street. A big sign flashes, then blurs.

Sell your ♥ to NYC.

The seeds of faith need tender planting! Pastor Jacob lowers himself to his knees. The seeds do not fall from wanton hands. The fields do not bloom from the hands of one or two, but the whole of a village. What abundance can we find in the plantings of many? You can pour out your love twofold in folding others into Christ's body. Encourage others to give, and they will do right by the lord unto you.

At the closing prayer, Abigail holds the pan of fudge out flat, the contents quivering in crinkling parchment paper, sliding despite her best efforts to stay still. She files out to embrace Pastor Jacob and wish him a blessed week. He keeps her there a moment longer, his arm around her shoulder. And how is your mother doing? She...she's...it's not good. Well we will be happy to have her. You'll bring her here next Sunday. I'll try. Dear lamb, the lord will find his way to her in one way or another.

She comes home to find the cat yowling from under the couch, low on his haunches. He will not come out. He will not. She fetches a small plate of canned food and waits on the floor, on her aching belly, her eyes on Mowgli's. He emerges, huge chunks of fluff in a cloud of disarray. She knocks on the bedroom door. What happened to the cat? He's fine. What happened to the cat?

Ma starts to cry. There are tufts of gray fluff on the floor by the bed.

He sat on my face, could have killed me, so easy-peasey, no big deal, you'll find me dead with lungs full of dirty hair. Killed me. Killed by a cat. Her voice is no more than a guttural hiss, the flap of the blinds against an open window.

Abigail brings Mowgli to Jen's house. She whispers through the crate, to his yowling, that she'll be back soon, he'll come home soon, but it is a lie, she knows it as she says it, that she has no inkling of when he'll be back.

At the tenth visit, the nurse looks at Abigail expectantly. She knows what frequent visitors want. She is required to ask anyway.

Why do you want to donate to Cross Corp.?

Abigail looks up from her second glass of fruit cocktail, her hand in a bag of stale animal crackers.

So that they may see my good works, and give glory to Father in heaven. The nurse taps on her tablet screen and scrolls through a questionnaire.

We have open appointments next month. Were you aware when you signed up that you can opt to give more than eggs? We offer several competitive compensation packages.

That night on the couch, Abigail lays with her hand on her stomach, kneading the fruitful lump of it, faltering out of sleep as Ma coughs and coughs. She coughs and coughs until it turns to a moan, a gargle. Abigail does not know when she falls asleep. She wakes with pink scratch marks across her navel.

Lily comes over crying, and pours her heart out into Abigail's lap on the lawn, tells her everything her boyfriend Jimmy would not tell her. She hears from Jen, who hears from her mother, who hears from a staff person at Bassett. He's the first of the town to give his face, the muscles of his chin and cheeks. Half the town is furious. Half the town is in awe of

his generosity. They all wonder what he'll do with the money. He is picking out a mask, one dappled with black and white smears that matched and dulled his sleeve tattoos, and his brother reports he eats protein shakes and vitamins from the throat of a needle. The Otsego County grads want to see for themselves. And for months and months, they will search for who put on Jimmy's face. They wonder about a man in the city who walks in another's skin like a kind of Halloween, and they eagerly hunt for attempted homicides, failed suicides in the news that match. Some do joke. Who wants *Jimmy's* freckled mug? They find an essay in *New Good Homekeeping*, a success story, a recovery narrative, a woman who leaves her abusive husband, survives his shotgun to the head. And Jimmy's bloated face on a thin, scar-marked woman is no longer funny. They stop searching for where the parts go when they're given. No one is keen on giving faces in whole, until Patricia wades back in, and gives grafts of cartilage from her nose, then the fat from her cheeks, and they tell her if she gives any more she will not qualify. The village finds out when she shows up for the fall carnival in a pink mask swirling with painted rose hips. There are conversations, hushed, then louder, about what they will or will not do and where that line falls.

Jen calls. Mowgli found a critter, got messed up with something, I don't know. Come quick. Mowgli, with his naked, fist-stripped shoulders on that metal table, his tummy wrapped in a dark, stained towel. Maybe he went into the woods to be alone, the final kind of alone. Something sharp found him first. His breath comes in and out with a hiss. Jen doesn't have means to pull a trigger, doesn't have the stomach to pull a knife. Abigail understands. Abigail applies for a donation from the vet. It's the kind of shot they have in bulk. Abigail

rubs his matted ears gingerly and the needle goes in at the scruff of his neck, and his eyes close fully, high in the mercy of God.

She signs a lot of paperwork in her crinkly blue gown. There are a few hours of reading to do. She does it carefully. Holds the literature and forms on the tablet up like a hymnal. The Cross Corp. writers fill in all the blanks. It is done laparoscopically. You will be provided with all necessary post-operative hormones and pain remediations. You will revoke all custody rights to any children successfully birthed. You are doing a good, good thing. You are joining a select, special community of women. You are a mother to many. You opened up the door to the world and gave life to so many families. Abigail's stomach growls. She flips past photos of new families in kitschy galley apartments. She thinks of the sailboats on her living room wall. She thinks of the spare bedrooms on the hilltop, the punnett squares rented out to hunters and tractor drivers and women with poppy-stained fingers. The hospital air is dry, clean, free of spliffs and dirt and the rising lakewater. She remembers her Dad, telling her of playtime at the dock, which was once upright which was once whole.

Once the packet is read, the packet is signed, the button is pressed, the nurses come in and hold a nozzle to her nose. She breathes deep. The air is easier. It probably costs a fortune. She wonders if she can buy one for Ma. She wonders if they rent out these things still.

Okay, Abigail, we want you to count backwards to ten. Can you do that for me? She starts, ten, nine, eight, and there's a ringing, a chirp of a machine, seven, somewhere sings, Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Abigail goes to her mother's bed, watches her glassy eyes flicker back and forth across the ceiling, not sleeping, but not seeing either. She pulls a blanket over Ma's failing body, tucks it under her armpits. She holds Ma's thin and pulsing hand, squeezing her thumb, willing her to know she is not fractioned. That when she goes, her daughter is still whole.

3. FLOTSAM

Frankly Senators, you would not be here today if we did not need the help of the Federal Government and the direction of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Erosion and flooding is certainly endemic to our State, with nearly all of our communities having some type of a flooding and/or erosion impact, as I would venture may be the case in many of the communities in each of your home states. Where the problem in Alaska differs is where Native communities, primarily in what we refer to as the Unorganized Borough (no regional government or county-equivalent exists), are most at risk. A few villages have no room for gradual retreat--the moving back of homes and infrastructure as is occurring in numerous communities throughout our state.

Retreat is no longer an option. For a few villages complete relocation is likely to be the only viable alternative. We cannot fund this daunting task on our own.

Prepared Statement of Edgar Blatchford

Hearings before the Committee on Appropriations, Senate, 108th Cong. 2 (2004)

At the crank, Dave's corded arms shuddered at the haul, his simple routine for simple government pay. The task was straightforward enough: pick up the trash, push the right buttons. Open the boom that stretches its long arms out behind the stern. Deploy the nets extending from the boom. Let the rig drift and drag the nets deep below the surface; let the boat get pushed here and there; let it idle or cut the engine; and let the current catch you. Stay still and seated on the wide deck. That was important. The hardest part was to wait. A junkman had to brace for the shudder of the junk that might hit the keel or pull hard at the net, tug at the boom cable, or try to take you with it into the filthy open water. Do not deploy in rough weather. Do not deploy closer than 3 nautical miles to shore. When sensors beep and nets are full, tug back hard on the pulley. Switch to manual crane control.

Another beep, sharp and loud, rang out. Dave checked his watch. It was the third alarm he'd set. He'd delayed the inevitable long enough. The nets had filled up enough. He still had four days until he was due at Diomed Station, had a day's ride out, a day's worth of collection.

Ruth's time was up, and she had nowhere to go but out here.

*

Aunt Ruth had arrived at the docks from the hospital in Candle far too early and completely alone. Coming in along the sound, Dave could see her from the captain's seat. He didn't know how long she'd been standing there, how long the nurses had stayed waiting with her. No one had called from the marina. The harbormaster would have noticed an ambulance. Dave, squinting, could see a stuffed maroon lump, a duffel, plopped across her feet like she was cold and decided she'd drape all her things over her toes like a last ditch blanket and there was nothing left elsewhere, the sock drawers dumped over and the cupboards cleared and the dog given away and the front doors locked for good again. He rolled over the quell from the bigger departing ships, and shuttled his wide trash tug around the buoys and sifters that sucked up grit and choked on trash and splashed busily in the foam. Dave pulled closer. Ruth waved wearily. She wobbled lightly on the floating platform, the floats bobbing and rubbing on the pilings, and Dave was scared she would fall into the water before he could get to her. But she stood as if her world had always rocked this way, the earth churning up and down. She waved at other boats passing through and out into the strait, only stopping her weary gesture beneath the sleeves of her cardigan when Dave knotted Rum

Runner to the side, and he heaved himself up onto the slick wood, his deck shoes slipping and his heart letting up a hiccup of panic.

“Hello, muppet,” she said, her voice as loud as snow.

He held her, cold and damp, and felt her bones through her clothes. Ruth had always been a wafer of a woman, lean with skin salted and flecked with scar dots from the cannery. But she felt more sweater folds and dress seams than arms and ribcage now, like she could rush away across the water, a plastic bag in a gale. Her hair, thick and dark like an eagle’s nest in his boyhood, was roped with grays, pulled at some long past point into a braid, loose and looping around her shoulders.

“How long have you been here?” he asked. He rubbed her shoulder in soft circles with his thumb.

“I’ve been here,” she sighed, her gaze passing through him, her eyes searching and untangling some unknown spot in his grizzled, misty beard. She offered a smile, and Dave knew that she was elsewhere, her mind flush to the horizon. He knew to play along. It was a small gift, at least, that she recognized him. He looked down at her feet, expecting to find a box of supplies, a tank of oxygen. But there was nothing but what she’d brought to the home, now all that she’d taken out. He anticipated the overflow, the spill onto the bed—the last knots of a ragdoll made of ship’s lines; a colony of burnt orange canisters with a week or two of pills; a dirty inhaler; salted, water-logged photo albums, persons bleeding and bloated, blots of happy faces. He wished they could have saved the pages sooner. Pilip would have liked them.

“We’re gonna go meet up with Jimjim, okay?” he said. “I’ll bring you in for some tea and we’ll push off?”

Aunt Ruth nodded, her smile almost a grimace, at the thought of meeting with her dead husband. It was a cozy lie that would fizzle with sunset, curdle over dinner, when his empty seat broke her heart, but she would forget in her dreams that he had been gone for six slow years. Ruth started to cough, her thin cheeks puffing pink, and she pulled at the matted ends of her scarf to tighten it.

“Let’s go then?” she wheezed. “Can’t keep him too late.”

Dave grabbed the walking plank from the edge of the dock and plopped down a path to the boat. He hoisted her bag onto his shoulder, her earthly possessions the floppy body of a seal pup, poked and churning with plastic. Ruth shuffled down the plank and onto the deck, sniffing.

“You got something cookin’?” she asked, nose wiggling. “Clams?”

“It’s just boat smell, Ma.”

“I smell,” she said, pointing to the galley door. “A hint of lemon and rosemary?”

“It’s just the disinfectant, Ma.”

She sighed.

“Jimjim makes the best clams,” she murmured, ducking into the cabin. “Lemony garlicky clams.”

*

There were simple rules aboard Rum Runner, or any vessel of its kind. There were rules for entering this wild, open space, a churning, sour bathtub of sea. There were the

statesman's rules and the junkmen's rules for navigating the northwest coasts off Alaska.

There were Pilip's rules and there were Dave's rules and they only rarely misaligned:

Do not leave port for 2 weeks without 2000mg of water purifying capsules.

Do not leave port for 2 weeks without Siba's salve for your pulley arm.

Do not forget the extra packets of tea.

Pilip's painkillers.

Do not leave port for 2 weeks without consulting the harbormaster and completing offboard protocol checklists 1-7.

Do not leave port for 2 weeks with warts in unsavory places.

Do not leave port without sending hourly GPS pings back to the central dock command.

Do not leave your knots hanging loose.

Do not leave materials unattended or untied or unclicked or unhinged and rolling around on the deck.

Do not dive in after what falls into the sea.

Do not walk about the deck without a life preserver.

Do not stripe your life preservers with duct tape when they've torn and expect them still to float.

Do not sink, keep paddling and fighting to the surface

Do not leave Pilip to steer the ship. Pilip cannot pilot a ship.

Do not neglect your waste tank.

Do not neglect your alkalinity gauge.

Do not delay return to the gyre, but if you catch rough waters, notify the commander, provide your coordinates, and deliver your carry as soon as possible.

Do not expect a full paycheck for missed deadlines. Diomedes moves every month. It won't wait for you.

Do not leave port without Pilip. If you have to leave port without Pilip, at least, do not leave port alone.

Don't tell the harbormaster the truth about Pilip. Tell the harbormaster he's aboard, he can't make it out of bed, and the harbormaster will nod in understanding, pat your shoulder, wish you well, fish around his pocket, and then push a totem into your hand.

Do not keep the totem. It's too heavy for a breast pocket.

Do not keep the totem. Pressing on the heart, too cold in the mouth and full of the memory of pine and water and that color, that forgotten glacial blue.

Do not keep the totem.

Do not feel guilty tossing it overboard.

Do not overthink the pleasure of the plunk into the still night water.

Do not dwell on where the sinking things go.

*

When she sat at the stern, hunched against the wind on his sagging bench, looking out across the water, Ruth seemed completely fine. Her greasy hair floated and sank heavily in the open ocean wind, her eyes low, perhaps searching, distracted by the rare gull or the wide arms of wreckage that bobbed and reached for the sky from the curl of a wave. Dave glanced at her as he moved about the deck. Ruth didn't seem to mind the tether at her waist, the

just-in-case measure for choppy days. Every now and again, she nuzzled her cheek against the coarse flap of the lifejacket as if it were a pillow, and she'd nod off and snap back into the moment, a smile on her lips. They pursed as she contemplated the reef debris that Dave spilled onto the deck. Did she know what was next? Did she know what was coming? The wind swallowed her small murmurs, her mouth forming soft "O's." She sipped a third, then fourth cup of tea, and didn't ask for Jimjim more than a couple times. She paid little mind to Dave, and only startled when the crunched half-remains of a bicycle clanked down in front of her, the rusty crumbs shattering and spilling in the flotsam. Hadn't it been just last year that she couldn't sit without fretting, screaming, hiding from the other residents under her blankets? Coaxed conversations out of flower pots?

"How *lean* you are," she said as he knelt in the last of a pile, the crumbs of wires and car parts, seaweed and woodslime, searching for the smallest and most precious scraps of metal. "Too *skinny*."

"Sorry, Auntie," he said.

"So much like my Jimjim," she replied, reaching into her empty cup and pulling out a soggy thimbleberry. "A big pot roast would do you both good."

"That sounds good," he replied. His aunt's cooking was lackluster, the food plated in meager portions with tough game meat and dented cans of beans and salted salmon. He remembered Thanksgiving, one of the last, when the sugar bowl emptied and the cranberries, tart and habitually sour from habitually poor harvests, puckered their mouths and no one could stomach another bite more without ten swigs of lager. Dave couldn't recall the last time she'd made a meal. Her fretting and frantic fears certainly had made her a fire hazard at

the home; had she even sat in a kitchen the past five years? He took her mug, tucked it beneath the console, and kept at the work.

An hour passed, Dave started to pull up a new net, and saw a slender flap of lime green something, a glint of white. It wasn't always clear what they would find. It wasn't always garbage. There were many days a find would render Pilip pale and useless, and he would excuse himself to the stern, wretch over the side, breath in deep gulps, and raise his hands weakly to the sky. He didn't have Dave's stomach. You learned to tough out so much growing up in shifts at a cannery. Dave paused to move Ruth, guiding her to the cabin despite her protests.

"I rather like the breeze, muppet," she said, the open wind snarling threads of her hair beneath one of Dave's chunky knit hats.

"Let's just get you some warmth, Auntie, yer blue-lipped," he lied. "You'll come back out. We just need a minute." Dave wrenched open the cabin door and pulled her inside, still cold and damp but calm. He settled her into the little booth table and pulled a blanket over her lap, tucking it around her stomach. At the tiny galley counter, he unwrapped a snack cake, put it on a heavy plastic plate, and placed it in front of her with a cloth napkin and a spoon. She frowned at the squat disk of carrot and nut.

"Not Pilip's best work," Ruth murmured, poking at the clotted icing with a finger.

"Don't use your hands, love, it's not clean," he instructed gently. She started to cough. He made her another cup of fireweed tea with a splash of the medicine, clicked on the radio, and excused himself.

"Stay in here, okay?" he told her.

Back on the deck, the wind blew hard. Dave tried not to think of the growl in his stomach or the empty crockpot Pilip used to always keep full. He didn't know what to put in it anymore. He'd let the spice rack go empty. He didn't call up the harbor in protest when the provision packs stopped sending meat, as Pilip might have. Pilip might have thrown the cans, beans and rice and all, into the ocean.

On the deck, he looked up at the hazy white sky and wished for rain. He settled back into work. Lower the crane jaw into the water. Hook the L knot and load your haul onto the compactor deck.

Sifting and searching for items of note was an important element of the job, one not easily replaced by the seabins that floated manless at the eastern pacific gyre, sucking up water and plastic-logged sluice. The seabins ingested, compacted, and boiled everything in their riptide indiscriminately—the smallest plasticine toxins, the jellies that fed the tuna and sharks, the human remains from fallouts on the coasts.

Dave pulled on his thick canvas gloves, picked up his bow rake and started to sort. Department headquarters gave each rig a list, a table of classifications of materials and corresponding manuals (stored under the pilot console) for how they should be lumped into the compactor below the deck. The seven types of plastic. The two families of metal. A secretary at the headquarters proudly told them these were printed on old, recycled license plates. Positive thinking. We can do this. There's an application for everything. You can reuse anything. The blonde strips of seaweed flung onto the shrinking shore. The soaked logs and planks hauled from the storm-torn harbors. The plastic we toss into the reaches of the rivers and streams and bays will melt in special factories and reshape themselves into tide

pools and coral caves and hideaways for fleeing fish hoping to spawn once again off the coast. You can do it. Give them a home. You're building a new world. You're pulling second chances. Pull that net. Coat those lines. Pull. Pull. That massive archipelago of garbage in the gyres will shrink in your hands, in the belly of your ship. You can do it. Pull. Pull. Without you, we will submerge. The crumbling land will dissolve into a sea of garbage and gather around islands of shredded takeout boxes and torn tire swings, the splintered bones of houses and harbors and docks and lost sails and capsized tankers all sloshing around in the fury of a storm, no debris too heavy for the wrath of the hurricanes and squalls.

Dave loosened the knots of nets and lines that twirled and choked clumps of weed and waterlogged wood. He gently pried plastic bags from the mishmash and put them in a separate pile, pulling out the fish they caught, half-smashed and lacerated and flaked from the toss of debris. He'd have liked to toss the carcasses back into the ocean, where they belonged, where they'd return to where they came from, dissolving into bits and gels and marrow and salt. Pilip would have tossed them back. But it was protocol to keep them in a separate container, a special lidded space for chemical testing and biomatter. The smell was not kind to newcomers, even with the chalky citrus tablets the labs would give them to slow and mask the rot. The flash of green he'd seen in the net and that glint of white was the corpse of a young turtle, its shell smashed and its skin near-bleached. Its mouth hung open, and Dave could see a knobby copper hook savaged down its throat. He yanked open the biomatter bin, the glorified chum bucket, tossed in the fish bones and the young turtle. The odor wafted up and about the deck, overcoming the salt of the open water. He yanked opened a packet of cleaning tablets and tossed them into the tank. For a moment, David stood in the

reek, watched as the cakey lump fizzled an evil brown, the breaking chemicals streaming over the loose, dark eyelid of a sturgeon and pulling at the skin and scales and bones as though the fish was simply melting.

*

Open ocean stretched on and on. They pushed fast through the waves, and even when the wind flapped and whipped at their cheeks, they just seemed to float, the ocean yawning out deeper and deeper every day. Land grew smaller and smaller. At night over tins of sardines and macaroni, the radio chortled and choked on new reports of crumbling shelves and toppling seashores and tossed-over towns. Pilip's childhood town, Shishmaref, had been one of the first to crumble into the waves, its cottages and tin-roof salting shacks shuddering, tipping sideways, reaching up into the air or collapsing into the shrinking coast, while the water reached out and reached until it seemed to take giant gulps at the mainland, almost overnight.

Before Pilip's death, Dave would pull close to shore, anchor Rum Runner, pop out the evac. vessel, and motor them to the edge of the land, a plastic jug of sliced limes and moonshine at their feet. It was strongly discouraged, if not in some places illegal, to navigate the coast on foot, lest the soil and shale give way, the new water lines ebbing with debris. But they couldn't keep away.

They broke protocol every now and then. They took walks on solid land, made love at the roots of the trees, and fell asleep in the absolute quiet, the cottonwood fluff falling to their feet. They followed the forgotten trails that wound up the ridges, clambering over ruptured and overturned boardwalk tracks and looking with hope for bear tracks or at least hoping

they kept well enough away from the loggers, the mining blasts, those workers hungry and cold. When the winds were softer and the woods dead-still and silent, they pulled the same well-read books from their packs and read them again, quiet, the rush of familiar words a distraction from the absence of the constant rush and hiss of the waves. They ignored hunger and downpours and humidity thick as cream and watched light fade from the mouths of grottos and stumbled their way back with a wide carry lamp. They thought of Rum Runner struck by hidden rocks and crags and sharpness under the dark surface, and Pilip wondered aloud many a time, “What if we just stayed?” When the cancer crawled into Pilip’s chest, it was an even heavier dream. Abandon ship. Take the books and the little pots and the slender survival kit to shore, make a tent of the life raft and scrap tin and waste until they built a cabin from stolen timber, and keep each other warm until the deep winter overtook them both one night. But winter was a dream, growing more and more distant, a childhood reverie. The preservation lands shrank and the wide canyons rattled with drills. Their hunting game fled. They held each other until sundown and returned to Rum Runner tired and aching.

Dave had only set foot in the forest one time since. On that one day, in the morning, when the home called with the news about Ruth, the bright, bleached sun reduced the thinning corses to skeletons, their shrinking numbers naked without the cover of rainforest fog. He scanned the branches. He hoped for recognition, a familiar spot, a cozy knoll or tilted tree, an anchor, like they’d once said of the cave, the pond, the tree on Gulch Rock. You couldn’t get lost in the way you could on open water. They held hands in the forest. They could never get lost in the forest. Then the clouds returned and the drizzle came down through the dry canopy in a hiss and the thirsty earth seemed to groan, earth stretching out,

paws on the undergrowth, but nothing else stirred, no birds or squirrels or deer or wandering bear. Dave had never felt more alone.

*

Doctor V. had warned him. A few days after Aunt Ruth had come aboard, her end-of-life rally began. More and more the old Ruth with the old Ruth ways.

“I can help,” she insisted, bundled in her cardigan and hat and boots and a wide dark blanket like a cape. “I can help.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said, holding up a shard of windowpane. “It isn’t safe.”

But without expression or response, she tottered over to the piles and shimmied small fragments around in her fingers. At Dave’s pleading, at the very least, she put on a pair of safety gloves. His work was slower while he kept his eye trained on her, but she couldn’t lift too much before tiring, and she drank tea when she fell to more coughing, and was much less frantic in the open air. The cabin shuddered and rattled violently when the compactor started to chomp chunks of trash into cubes at the other end of the boat, and Ruth was hard to console when this had happened the previous days, slapping her thin palms against the portholes and screaming. That morning she laughed.

“Like a dying cow, that is,” she snickered.

He was due at the Diomedea Deposit Station in just two days, and there were quotas to fill, and an endless body of garbage to yank from the water. He wanted to ask her so much.

“Makes me think of the moose,” he said quietly.

“Speak up?” she said.

“The moose? Do you remember?” he asked. He held his breath. And Ruth giggled.

“*Jim, there’s a moose in the screen porch!*” she cried in recollection. “Gosh. What a *day*. That poor, poor idiot.”

“I thought Uncle J handled it pretty well.”

“No, no, not dear Jimjim, the *moose!* The moose! Never *seen* something so big and dumb. Right through it. That damn screen.”

Near sunset, she slowed and grew quieter, and they didn’t speak more of the sad, confused moose or the antler-punctured porch. He would have liked to ask her about the kayakers, the crews of bright boats dragging through the fjords. He would have liked to ask about her first lift in Jimjim’s seaplane, and the day it trundled into the harbor, one wing dipped, the propeller snapping clear off, and Jimjim smashing his head into the cockpit and nursing a black eye and a bottle of moonshine for months and months after. He wanted to tell her how much it meant, those nights on the busted-up porch, looking out at the water and the trees and listening for the owls. Dave would have liked to settle down there in that house. He wondered the kind of life they might have had if it hadn’t been boxed up, pulled apart, with the backyard elms left to drown.

Pilip had so often tried to make him feel better. Let me hold you, he’d say. Let me cup in my hands the loss, the anger. He was always pressing his lips against Dave’s salty forehead, the brim of his knit cap. The foundation’s a grotto now, Pilip would say. Something will grow there. Something’s gotta grow. There are always the weeds ‘n’ jetsam, scuttlers, tiny beads of life that would huddle in the moldy corner of Jimjim’s basement. It’s all gotta go back. Back to the earth, back to the land. The paternal ocean reclaimed them. Pilip said this often, great pain lining his dark eyes. It would reclaim us.

With tangerine clouds streaking the horizon and the long dark approaching, Dave began to scrub and lock down the deck. He ran a large brush of coarse steel wool over the lines and the straps, the ties and the buckles, and wiped away the lime and cerulean scum clotting at the pulleys. Citrus cleansers mingled with the odor of dead, bleached saltwater—bits of orange, of lime, a strawberry fluoride kind of taste, composed of backlogs of flavors left at the commissary in the harbor. There weren't orchards fat enough for aerosols and candles and soaps. Dave tried, arms pumping and pushing into the grime, to recall the smell of home. Wood smoke, Jimjim's tobacco, pepper steaks and venison, a pan of potatoes with mushrooms and parsley and powdered cheese, Ruth boiling a pot of fireweed jelly. He knew the names and the dishes and could picture the steam, the plates, the place settings on the holiday table, but the thought conjured nothing to his dry tongue. He couldn't taste her cooking. Hash brown casserole with expired ketchup and brown sugar. Salmon and bitter greens. He remembered dad's chew under his teeth, the tart reek from his breath, and that he begged him to stop and stop until he picked up the habit himself and Pilip had to nag the habit out of him, mixing a pulp of seeds and fruit pulp and mint and stuffing the tin full. Conversations of the cold and its taste, like river water and pine, recalled mornings when they went into the yard and seemed to stomp into the harbor. From childhood, he had a vague sense of dust. Under his fingers. In the creases and wedges of books and corners of shelves and circling the jars and cans in the pantry. Softness encrusting the house and trapping thread and strands of Ruth's thick, graying hair. Jimjim's dog would choke on them and cough them up onto the rug.

Dave poured a bucket of sudsy water across the deck. He wasn't supposed to do this often, lest the chemicals leak out through the hawse hole and seep into the Pacific. He could only take out, not put in. But the smell of decay washed over everything and lingered, never leaving, always clinging to the fabric—it was heavy and tiring to carry the smell of perpetual death. Ruth paused her thumb-tapping on the rail of the ship and sniffled.

“Lemon chicken?” she asked, raising a hand to the air.

“No, Auntie,” he said.

“Do *they* have lemon chicken?” she gestured towards the horizon. Dave looked up, eyes peering at a muddled shadow coursing closer and closer. A soft beep came from the console, and he drew a deeper berth on the port side. A grumble of the tides, the sound of the cruise ship, rolled across the ocean, drawing closer, adding to the chorus. There was the short warning blast, a deep horn bellow, then the clangs and blasts of the ship's steel bow charging against the trash and naked timbers and corpses of wayward tugboats, then the hiss of the water parting from the massive floating town that arrived well before it pulled parallel to Rum Runner, then the drumroll and sin that spilled across the decks—screams and shouts and whoops and ten-man bands. Across its keel read *Majesty of the Seas*. Dave watched his aunt crane her neck up at the towering ship. Hundreds of windows beamed silver light into the ocean, and the decks above flashed a riot of purple and violet, and under the din, Dave could make out the revving of tiny, hoarse engines from the go kart track that snaked around the top of the ship, or so he'd been told. He'd read the news about the extra efforts they'd had to take after a drunken cruiser had toasted his way off the stern, the kart flying off into the ocean like a downed rocket. Dave wondered if anyone ever found him, his smashed helmet,

his crooked body. The waves rocked Rum Runner and Dave urged the boat forward, pushing through the surf and curling foam. From the stern of the ship, no go karts torpedoed off the bow, but loops of oil and trash leaked in a trail. Chicken carcasses floated out in clusters, released from a bobbing bucket. Stringy, holey beach towels flapped and unfurled and then sank with a swirl, down, down into the dark. Pieces of fruit bobbed around, buoyant and flashing their single bites and double-slices. The garbage splashed happily in its sunset swim. From the top decks, a glint of something as they flew, perhaps glasses of champagne from passengers' hands, a toast of absurd luxury, off and up and into the darkening abyss of air and sea. Ruth sighed.

“He’s not coming back for me,” she said.

“Who’s not coming?”

“My Jimjim,” she murmured. She began to rock back and forth with the swell of the deck, and sang. “My dear. Jim, Jim, Jim, Jim...”

“You miss him too,” Dave whispered.

“All day, all day,” she moaned, tapping her bony hands on the side of the boat.

“Where is he? Dave? Where’d he get off to? He wouldn’t leave me, not me, not without a note.”

Her drumming fingers halted on a worried smudge on the boat's railing and knelt to the ground. Ruth pushed brown puddles across the deck in a wide arch with her sopping glove. In her witching hours, her mind would often peter off into a faraway fantasy, and she murmured singsong notes to the deck grout. Waves gently rolled her side to side until she toppled forward into the wet.

He reached down and whispered, “I think it’s time for bed.”

Ruth let out a groan as he placed a hand under the crook of her arm to roll her over. The copper light of late Alaskan sky cast the shadows under her eyes in an eerie rouge. A dribble of dark phlegm trickled at the corner of her lip.

“I’m going to lift you up now,” he instructed. He hooked his arms under hers, steeling himself, and when he pulled her up, she gasped.

“No, no, help, help,” her voice rushed out in a desperate wheezing.

“We’re going to bed now,” he whispered, wrapping an arm around the back of her shoulders. A sudden sharpness flashed across his cheek and she started to flail against his embrace, her fingers clawing at him like a cat.

“No! No!” she gasped.

“Ruth,” he spoke softly, feeling a trickle of warmth run towards his chin. She looked up at him, eyes wide, terrored.

“I cannot!” she wheezed. Her hands flipped up to the sky and struck Dave in the bridge of his nose and he took a step back, felt his grip on her waist slip, and she stepped backwards, looking side to side, twisting her gaze left and right, not knowing where to go, like the sky and the sea had mingled, left to right, and she must have stepped into the water, because she slid back and her body folded over the siding and her feet flew up and splashed drops onto his face as she tumbled into the ocean. Her body thwacked against the side of the Rum Runner and he dove for the emergency stop and drew the ship to starboard and saw Ruth’s head bob under the churning surface and not come up. His chest ached and he called out for her as he pulled her safety harness, hand over hand, tugging the little lady’s body and

the detritus of the world and the rip tide of the passing ship and its garbage roiling under the surface and towards the depths of the bay and back up again, relentless and roiling and blackening.

*

They never talked about what would come next. It was always he's her dear boy, her dear Dave, don't you worry, it'll be alright. Once, there was hardly a world without Jimjim, and they didn't like to speak of what that world could be beyond the fretful tidying of his effects, then the packing up of china and antique rifles and hunting knives for extra ration money, shipped off to Montana or Idaho or somewhere safe and dry and where a wealthier man would never know the stories of the divots in the handle of the Colt or the elk scratch in the Remington. After Jimjim's makeshift funeral, the cost of his cremation draining their life's savings, Ruth had planned to keep working at the cannery well into her 80s, chipper and fine so long as she could keep the house so long as the shoreline didn't advance up too far, but they were well up on the hill. Then, she'd said, she'd take the refugee subsidy and go inland somewhere, they'd be fine. But when it came time to pack there too came the forgetfulness, getting lost in her own living room, half-packed, and hollerings of terror from neighbors at the door, and then there was never a lucid enough moment to talk about the end. Ruth at the home in Candle was either frantically hiding or fretting or in some cases clear enough to collapse into Dave's arms, weeping, my boy, my *boy*. And he would pat her back and kiss her forehead and calm her and she would cry herself to sleep or arrive at a place of quiet, and she would emerge from this spell, look up into his eyes, and offer some thanks.

“You’re a very kind young man. Let a lady like me blubber. Oh, it’s been a *day*. What’s yer name?”

On the cabin cot, Ruth’s eyes were half-closed and glassy green, her skin dotted with gashes and bumps of bone puckering her arms. Flecks of red and orange glass from a taillight gleamed in the creases of her elbows. A broken doll, skinny and vacant, her ropes of hair drying and coarse like baleen on the beach. She was so thin, so small, so crooked and out of place for all the world. What would he do? He pictured her mouthing one last request. A full cup of tea. A pinch of hazelnuts. Where is JimJim? He’s here. There, there. What to do with the body? Where would she go? Dave thought of the forest, dry, then crackling and all aflame in the funeral pyre. Dave thought of the gulping up bones and pulping them back into the ocean, spatters of purple and black coat and tattered red hat. He thought of a hole in the ground on the tops of the mountains where the tide couldn’t lift her from the ground, rotten and ugly.

When I go, Pilip had told him, tie me to a whale bone.

“A big ole rib.”

And Dave asked, where am I gonna find a whale bone? And Pilip told his love to loot the old naval museum if he had to and he laughed.

“It’s how I wanna go down,” he said.

“Go down where?” Dave had asked. And Pilip explained.

By the time the cancer had spread across Pilip’s sternum, a streak of tar and hideous bruises on his skin, reaching its fingers toward his collarbone, Dave had had some time to plan and scavenge and pull together Pilip’s anchor. It was not made of bone, but would hold

him down and do it with dignity. He found a tangle of line, threads still coral blue, some foam pale, and he threaded scales of spoons and glittering shards of butter knives. He found propeller blades—some were small and ship bottom white, others jagged and fringed with rust. He arranged them in a pattern of new and old, painted and fading. He wove knots of salted black trash bags around fat, round rocks from the coast. Pilip watched him marching the heavy stones to the deck and wrapping them in the trash bag flaps, and told Dave that the lumps under the plastic looked like manta rays, drying up on a faraway beach. Pilip would often doze while tracking Dave's haul from his folding chair on the upper platform on the deck, wincing in sleep when his weary head hit his tumor-hardened shoulder, never commenting on the funeral pile that curled up in the corner of the boat, a monstrous shroud.

It went through his skin to his spine and his skull and his eyes and until death, Pilip stared into the dark, crying out, I'm falling, I'm goin', I'm lost, I'm falling, grabbing for the walls and smacking his hands against the cabin.

A whale fall, Pilip said. It's called a whale fall.

When Pilip went still and quiet, and started to gray under Dave's palms, Dave brought him to the deck and tied his body to the makeshift bone, tucking cords to his ankles and gloved hands and knotting a limp necklace around his throat with a piece of seaglass at his adam's apple. Dave heaved at the pile of makeshift bone and shining, salted garbage and Pilip atop it, his arms screaming, hauling, then spilling into the ocean. He couldn't look away fast enough, and through the flecks of paper and cellophane like scores of jellies, Dave could see Pilip's pale body rush towards the sea bottom, limbs flapping and untenable. Pilip wanted to be the snow, the blubber and dactyli and carrion and scales flaking off and across the dark

ocean bottom, the particles of matter drifting down from the surface. He wanted the fish to come from hundreds of miles away to feast on the layers until even the bones were nibbled and pockmarked, the snailfish and goblin sharks once ravenous, now full and satisfied. Dave had looked out at the hungry water and howled, fingers slick and bleeding from shards in the big ole rib.

Dave cupped his hand to her puffed, purpled cheek. He rubbed his thumbs over her eyelids and they slid open, her gaze searching the thin, midnight light from the cabin porthole. He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, removed his hat, and pulled it snug over the flap of blood and sharp bone that peeked from a hole above her temple. Pilip's quilt and worn-out sheets were soaked in her blood. He wrapped her up in them tight and peeled the rest of her from the cot. He reached under the bed and pulled out all the mottled blankets and stringy sheets he had, cocooning her, cradling her, a moth with a beet-red hat and purple face. He held her against his chest, tucking her head under his chin. The hat under his nose smelled of wind and battery acid and chalk and berry-fluoride, mingling with the copper tang of ocean-scrubbed wounds.

On deck, the ocean was calm and still. Rum Runner bobbed quiet and still, and there was but little rumbling of cruise debris popping against the strong sides. Dave placed his aunt's body down on the deck, her frame knocking against the frame a surprising and solid comfort. Her half-opened eyes searched for the last pearl of green light on the horizon. Clouds congealed around the bright half moon. Dave stared. He picked up a knot of rope and looped it in his hands and put it down. He sat down and tracked the stars and wondered how far he was from Diomedes. He tracked the moonlight on the dampness of the deck. He tracked

the path from the gyre to the gulf and the coast in his mind, charting back to Candle like he'd thought he would. He placed a hand on Ruth's thin shoulder, sunken under the bedsheet pall. He willed himself to cry. He cursed the cannery days. He cursed Jimjim's habits. He cursed Pilip's parents and the tar in his chest. Ruth rolled with the rocking ship.

He picked her up and cradled her one last time. He went to the stern. He placed the body into the tide. It bobbed and the sheets unfurled ever so slightly like moths wings, uncurling in the surf, and he watched her dissolve into the dark and the moonlight and sink, just a little, just enough, and roll over to face the depths.

Dave turned to the center console. He lifted the anchor. He plotted a course. The engine revved. In the dark, the water and trash slapped and popped against the keel.

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