

Light

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And as we were saying before, visions appear to us even when our eyes are shut.

–Aristotle, *De Anima*

1.

I, the shadow, was born of her mind. I was not alone. She wished us to her and so we appeared. For a long time, it never occurred to me that this was how it happened, but the more I thought about everything, the more I remembered; one thing at a time materialized. First, myself, freshly out of medical school, then my beard, my sweater, my chinos, my loafers, and my office not long after, books in a bookcase in no particular order, chairs, filing cabinets of charts and notes, coffee brewing on a side table. A passing freight train rattled my windows. The vibrations on the floor and walls, my “Welcome;” the swathes of milky grey clouds, my “Enjoy your stay.” As a tourist stepping off a ferry, I took in my surroundings, and regarded my itinerary.

Yes, I had an itinerary. It said something like, “You exist because she willed you. You are nothing but filaments to the great, spooling cashmeres of her brain.” She wanted someone to talk to, and since no one would listen, I, and others, arrived. Then her darling Emily came along, and after I fulfilled my purpose I slowly faded out of her life, while Emily faded in, until I was gone and Emily was whole. I still hang on, a sliver, some part of me still real. Still, at the last moments, I believe I’m real. I must be. I write this now. I speak, or I am willed to speak. And so, even though she made it, this office, this dark room, has come to be my own, as she lives in hers. These writings are all anyone will have to know I existed, if only for a short time. But she, my fate, had plans, and although I couldn’t see them until after they happened, I still wrote everything down, in case I forgot.

The room: I worked out of a small space on the upper floor of what used to be a warehouse, converted to a multiplex of offices, in south Seattle. I had my assignment, and, as far

as I knew, had had it for a while. To explain: when someone asks you what you had for lunch yesterday, and though you can still taste the meal on your tongue, try all you might you cannot remember until later; this was the state of my existence. Presque vu. Amnesia. Alzheimer's, maybe. What am I doing here? Oh yes. It all made sense again. I was a doctor. What kind? Something to do with the brain. Psychology? Neurology? A combination of both? Such a thing doesn't exist. Nevertheless, I had patients. I still wonder if she made all of them as well. I worked for The Institute, a place grown far beyond its means, which is why they rented this space a short drive away. Not even enough money for a receptionist.

They forwarded the calls to me anyway. The Institute assigned me patients. Most were very sick, too sick. I saw many inoperable brain tumors, and many minds degenerated too far to communicate the memories and ideas of the person that once commanded the body so skillfully. For the most part, my job, how to explain it, consisted of consulting home-confined patients, those that wanted to be near family or who couldn't afford the best, and determining if they required referral to hospice care. Sometimes they can improve or recover, sometimes not, but The Institute always encouraged hospice. Whatever hopes arising from referral, it was still a terrible thing to do to families living in the same home for generations. The look on an elderly mother's face when I recommended her daughter be taken from the room where she was born, where she had her first kiss, where she opened her eyes one morning and saw nothing; it was heartbreaking.

I saw many hallucinations. I would get an assignment from The Institute, including detailed notes from the patient's practitioner or nurse concerned about the patient's safety, often describing intense panic or terror at visions no one else could see, brought on by a giant lump pressing against their brain. Being new in both the profession and the world constructed at my

feet, I'll admit I wasn't prepared for the responsibilities thrust upon me, the responsibility of being present. As I watched each fully conscious, mostly capable person crumble like dry cake at an invisible thing standing in the room, I saw my own potential things in the room with them. I wondered if my own hallucinations beckoned at the door. What would they be? Would one appear as I was driving my car, scaring me so bad I would leave earth torn to pieces by metal, glass, and physical force? My selfishness and melodrama haunted me after I left patients' homes and returned to my apartment. People sometimes forget doctors have feelings, that they have irrational fears and childish emotions behind a façade of professionalism and the "smartness" their mothers and fathers openly brag about at parties. These feelings took over the first year; "my year of waiting," I called it, as if feigning affection could make it pass more quickly.

Once creamy and rich, the grey skies became dull, and rain brought no smell or refreshment, only cold wet. Buses wheezed as they rolled by, and my teeth hurt when I listened. Occasional visits to the mountains and lakes in the east, where I ate, slept, expelled among animals, alleviated my ache but only for a short time. The whole city curled around me in pain, but after a while, my sharp new senses blunted, hardened to the cries of the poor and desperate, like a cheap pocketknife covered in sap. By the end of the year of waiting, during which I had completely forgotten my itinerary, I learned to approach each case with more detachment, until, after a while, all the faces I ever treated appeared as one, and even the most unusual cases defined my version of normalcy. Then I met Elizabeth.

My many notes on her comprise most of this collection, somewhat out of order, which became more of a pseudo-biography than a groundbreaking case study in hallucination, or an autobiography as I maybe had planned in the beginning, but the two of us are intertwined in many ways, and so by sketching one of us, maybe my plans were carried out. I found her on a

cool, autumnal day in Seattle. It was the early, still time, after the bars and clubs empty, before the coffee shops and other businesses fill, a cold, stagnant spell wrested in the quiet. I went downtown earlier than usual to enjoy what might be the last September day without rain. The sun hadn't made it over the mountains just yet and the whole city swam in gunmetal blue. I bought a coffee and a croissant from the place nearest my bus stop and I walked to the park next to Pike Place market. I sat on a bench facing the water and the decorative totem poles, ate my breakfast, and looked across Puget Sound where nothing moved, not even gulls. The hazy silhouette of Mount Rainier hovered like a giant golf ball and I thought about the next time I would have free for a hike.

Then, without sound, a quick, dark figure disturbed my daydream. As a loose eyelash taken by the wind, it flashed in front of me, and I realized it was a young woman, not too much younger than I was, in a black coat and hat, sopping wet, even though it hadn't rained since the day before. She walked without disturbing the fluidity of the air, and when she came to the iron railing overlooking the water, she put her bare hands and face on the bars. Through the bars, she watched the water. The unimpeded air kicked up little waves as it skipped along the surface. I watched with her. She read the bends and curves throughout the sound as a poem, stopping to admire its enjambments and abruptions. The salty air flooded my nose, and she shivered. She wiped her cheeks with her sleeves and headed toward 2nd Avenue. The whole scene happened in one, uninterrupted moment and left me as quickly as it started. I didn't even get a very good look at her face and she seemed to walk without looking where she was going. I threw my nearly empty coffee away and gave chase. What possessed me to do so? I don't know. She must have. Piecing in the puzzle.

Some significant time must have definitely passed because the streets suddenly seemed crowded. Shops along 1st Avenue were already open and a line formed at the original Starbucks. For a moment, I was adrift in the sensory bombardment of that marketplace. The men and women in crisp suits scooting past, tourists in bright shirts bobbing around, musicians twanging broken guitars and whooping band saws, red and sweaty tomatoes splayed out in vegetable stands like young breasts, salty fish and mussels chilling on ice, sweet yeasty bread—hot, golden bread, crackling—and red balloons going pop-pop-pop, it all made me so dizzy. When I finally climbed the hill to 2nd I thought I lost her in the crowds, but the little black flag of her luffing coattail waved me through a group at a stop waiting for a 100-something bus pointed south. Skirting past shoulder after shoulder, I saw the flag board a waiting bus and I followed, not far behind.

A few people in front of me paid, and when I was finally far enough inside to see down the hollow vein of the bus, it became too crowded, and people began packing the middle and gripping aluminum handles. An old woman using nickels in front me was too much, and I jumped off the bus and ran to the rear door, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but just as I reached the door the bus lurched forward and coughed away into the heavy downtown traffic.

It was just past nine in the morning and I was late for a meeting with some nurses at a home in Beacon Hill, so I gave up and took my own bus and resumed my day. I went back to the same park bench and then to the same bus stop every day for a week but never saw her there again.

Weeks went by and life stayed the same. I met a paraplegic woman who reported seeing shapes, squares and triangles, in the peripherals of her vision since her third spinal surgery. A

nursing student from a local university was looking after her, before, between, and after classes and on weekends. The woman wasn't in any immediate danger, but this was an unusual case, and if her hallucinations intensified the nursing student would be unprepared to calm her down, and she might have an anxiety attack. After an MRI, The Institute found a tumor the size of a grape pushing on her occipital lobe. Since her family couldn't afford much more than a nurse, I recommended hospice, and she appeared fine with it, she didn't really like her apartment anyway, and she didn't have any children. It seemed like the right decision. That's how my decisions were made: quick, painless, right.

When I returned to the office that afternoon to file her paperwork, I got a phone call. The voice was quiet, a woman's, not any Institute receptionist I knew. The muffled background noise told me a station of some kind, bus or train; I could barely hear a voice on an intercom calling out times and destinations too garbled to understand. The voice gave me the softest, most polite introduction, "Hello," and asked for me by name. Being the type of doctor one can't exactly look up in the phone book, I was a little surprised. She fought back the slightest stammer, said her name was Elizabeth, and asked if I was taking patients. I had to explain to her that I didn't take them, that they were given to me. They came from The Institute, through many levels of care and evaluation. I was sort of a last stop, though they emphasize treatment, not a comfortable deathbed.

But she persisted, and asked if she could make an appointment to come see me in my office. So many cases of delivering bad news, I couldn't say no. I thought if I saw her, it would be a short consultation, and I could then refer her to the right people, hiding somewhere in the index of The Institute's directory. I certainly wasn't the right people. I told her it would be better if I went to her home to see her, since I had such a small office, and I normally had appointments

all over the city each week. She hesitantly replied that she was between homes at the moment. I asked her where she was staying, but she said nothing other than “well’s” and I uh’s.” I pitied her but there really was no room in my office to do a proper evaluation, so I told her to have her caregiver, which I assumed she had since that’s how she might have found my name, find some temporary housing, and then give me a call. Then I said if she still hadn’t found housing in two weeks to call me again and I’d see what I could do. She agreed and thanked me and hung up as the tinny voice on the intercom called out another destination somewhere over her head.

She called me again a week later. I asked if there was anything wrong, and she said yes, but that it wasn’t urgent. She wanted to describe some of the hallucinations she was seeing, so I listened carefully.

“I can never tell what I’m going to see next. When I’m walking the streets, I see faces of people that aren’t there; at least, I think they aren’t there. They look at me with such cold, terrible eyes, and they’re so frightening I can’t believe no one else notices how mean they’re looking at me. When I first got here, I used to walk through crowds hoping another pair of eyes might land on mine, you know, like they would know me, like a sister.

I mean, for a long time, I didn’t have another pair to look at, and when I came here, I was hoping I could see someone looking back at me, or at least feel it. I felt shoulder hugging mine like old friends while we walked the streets, but I never felt like one pair of eyes would ever find another. Maybe they were scared of what they might find, like looking in a mirror. Anyway, the other day I came home from work—oh I didn’t tell you, I got a job and a place to stay, for now, but don’t come over just yet, I don’t want to scare my roommate, doctor and all, you know—and I started seeing things again.”

Remembering everything she said was quite the challenge. I took out a pen and pad and wrote along.

“It was raining, and I got soaked when I walked from the bus to my door. I was looking around in my purse for me key, a bronze one with dull, rounded teeth, and when I found it, the key just flopped over, limp, like a tiny dead trout. I could almost see a face, with empty, bulging bug eyes and a flimsy mouth gulping down air. I had to use both hands to force the key into the hole in the doorknob, but it fought back. The harder I squeezed the more it slipped through my fingers, like trying to thread a squid tentacle through a needle. Then, like it didn’t even happen, the key was solid and metal again, and I stumbled through the door, as if I was some clumsy burglar.

“I live on the middle floor of an old building. I can hear the neighbors, upstairs and down, all day and night, but there is about an hour in the afternoon, right when I get home from work before everyone else, when the whole building is quiet. That’s when I sort of slip away from the world. For a few minutes, no one knows I exist, and I love it.

“I get really bad headaches, like hot lightning behind my eyes, so the first thing I do when I get home is shower. I love the feeling of the water from the showerhead pounding away on my skin and hair. I like to close my eyes, cover my ears with my palms, hold the back of my head under the stream of water, and let the noise get louder and louder until its bouncing all around in my head like a flooding river in a cave. I stay there, deep under the water, until I float away.”

I had to interrupt.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth, but what did you call me for?”

“What?”

“I mean, I can’t diagnose you over the phone. I can only take notes, speculate. We’d need to do an MRI, maybe more to begin to know what you have. I can speculate all day but we won’t know for sure until you get proper tests.”

“I don’t have any money, or insurance. I just thought you could help me deal with them. You wouldn’t really have to do much of anything. Just talk to me, help me work through everything.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not a therapist.”

“I didn’t ask for one.”

Rain pattered on my thin office roof.

“Now, I am interested to hear more about your headaches and the things you’re seeing, but I need to at least see you in person to do some basic physical tests. Normally my patients can’t get around on their own, which is why I go to them, but since it seems like you can get around pretty well, would you mind coming into my office, and we can discuss things further?”

She gave me a timid yes, and we made an appointment for that next week. From her first reserved phone call, I wasn’t expecting her to tell me so much. The perceptiveness and hope in her voice stayed with me long after I hung up. I couldn’t place her accent, a hint of southern emphasis on the first syllable, with a northern delicacy to each breath in the pauses.

Elizabeth never showed up for our appointment, however. She also never gave me a phone number, no way of getting a hold of her at all, so I waited. Every day I grew more concerned, since it seemed like Elizabeth might be a serious case, especially if she was seeing such complex hallucinations as detailed, differing faces. The realization that I was to be one of those faces hadn’t surfaced yet, but I knew I had to see her as soon as possible.

Then, regular as the tides, she called again a week after we last spoke, this time from somewhere quiet, maybe her home. She apologized softly, but gave no reason for missing her appointment. Instead, she asked that I come over right away.

The appointment: that evening, the rain came down in thick, cold sheets and I drove to Elizabeth's apartment in southeast Seattle. It was, as she said, an old building, weathered at every corner and slumping down over a big hill. I rang her apartment on the intercom, which gave me a little shock when I pressed the button, and a few seconds later she buzzed me in.

The inside of the building was a disaster. Mold painted every corner of the ceiling, and a different kind of bug ran out from under every door I passed. Some doors were left cracked open but I dared not look in any of them, and sometimes the smell painted a vivid picture all by itself. Elizabeth's place was on the top floor, the third, and as I climbed so many creaky stairs my worries were subsiding as each floor looked cleaner. Elizabeth's closed door looked as beaten as every other door I passed, but no bugs ran out from under it.

When she answered my knocks, the world fell asleep. Hers was the same I saw in the park, who I chased like a young boy in love. I smiled after a second of paralysis, and she smiled as if she recognized me instantly, yet she didn't look me in the face. I thought she must have been shy and embarrassed, maybe nervous that the roommate would find the new cotenant's doctor examining her like a sickly goldfish. Her face, however, was calm. She wore gray nightwear, a tank top and flowing pants that tickled the floor around her unpainted toes. Gently, familiarly, with relief and a touch of coyness, she invited me in.

The apartment divided into two main rooms, separated by a hallway. To the left, she led me into her half. The room contained everything a small home needed, all of it large and antique,

impossible for her to have brought with her. The previous tenant must have left all the furniture, or maybe the roommate gave it to her. She sat me down and offered dinner, which was simple and quick, rice and a little chicken. My manners compelled me to accept. It wasn't much but it was food and it was warm. She sat in a white chair, upholstered in blue velvet, at a desk-like half table near the foot of her bed and chewed slowly while her silverware clinked on the china. I still wonder if any of that stuff was hers.

She looked around at all of it as if the room was empty, and I felt like it was since almost everything was white. A large bed set in a royal white frame, the half dining table, a few more blue velvet chairs, a blue velvet chaise lounge, a roll top desk, some marble Romanesque statues here and there set into tall hollows in the walls.

After she took our empty plates to the kitchen sink, she came back running her fingers along the walls, and waded slowly into the room. Maybe it was the white of the room, the walls, the ceiling, the furniture frames, the linens and tablecloths, the statues, everything looking drowned in bleach, too clean, more than any hospital I'd ever seen. And then, there was the one tall, black doorway, to what room I don't know, directly across from the bed, staring back as if trying to wrench some kind of affect from me, but the more I stared the more I lost myself in the grasp of the towering black.

The room did look nice when the dusk light washed the white away in blue. She sat down in the middle of the bed and I pulled up a chair next to her.

“So tell me about yourself, Elizabeth. About your health.”

Staring into the doorway for some time, she drifted between worlds. I wrote down a few observations about her and her home, conditions, liabilities, things I would weigh out later in determining her referral.

“How about your visions? Tell me about the things you see.”

Her pale eyes closed, and for a moment, it seemed like she allowed her skin to usurp her mind. Little bumps prickled up, sending waves of shivers up from her ankles through to her breasts and neck, and she wrapped her arms around her chest.

She began to sweat. Her skin appeared to caress and cradle the wet, as the ocean cradles a body, sousing it with little streams, and I felt uncomfortably guilty as I silently watched, stock-still. I heard whispers. But then these things faded away she returned to the room. The whispers fizzled into obscurity.

Finally she spoke.

“I’m sorry. It’s a hard thing to talk about with other people. You’re the first I think. Thank you for helping me by the way. I really needed it, and I never thanked you. I’ll tell you about the most recent thing that happened. One night, after dark, I was laying here on my bed when I heard a noise. Most of this stuff isn’t mine, so I didn’t know what all was in this apartment, but I did hear a noise coming from a shelf.

I felt around, and found a stack of books. The sound sounded like someone slipped a speaker in between them. I pulled the middle book out, and it spoke to me. It had been a long day, and I was sorting out the all the memories, ones I believed happened and ones that I had imagined. I was stressed, more than usual, but I’ve never imagined anything speaking to me before. I heard a voice, not one I recognized, muffled like a whisper, and it was coming from a random page in the middle of the book, so I opened to it.

“‘Who are you?’ it said, bright and with real curiosity in the voice. And not only was it speaking to me, but I could see the page. I saw the book just like I had seen books when I was little. It was the first time I had seen something that I could also physically feel.

“The words were even on the page. Ink from nowhere puddled and streaked in rivulets on blank spaces, and the question wove itself into the fabric of the paper. I flipped to another page but it happened again.

“‘Who are you?’ it asked me again, this time coming together from different strings of letters and words from across the page.

“I wasn’t even sure what exactly the book was asking me. I supposed it was asking for my name, so I started to say ‘Elizabeth,’ but I couldn’t get past the first two syllables before the book interrupted.

“‘That’s your name,’ it said, ‘I asked, Who are you?’

“I was more confused. I thought maybe it meant what I do, my job; I work at an accounting place, just doing odd jobs and paperwork. I started to say the words ‘accounting assistant,’ but the book interrupted me again, a little more impatient this time.

“‘That’s your profession. I asked, Who are you?’”

“I couldn’t figure out what to say. But the mystery of what I might discover about it, or about the author, or about myself; that was a lot to think about. It didn’t even occur to me that the whole thing might have something to do with the things I imagined seeing. I still don’t know if that’s the case. I opened to new pages, flipped through it backwards, turned it upside-down, and tossed it in the air, but the book repeated, ‘Who are you?’ I bet that I could outwit the book and speak faster than it could, so I blurted out quickly, ‘I read, I go for long walks, I want to learn to sail but I—’

“And the damn thing interrupted me again.

“‘Those are your interests,’ it said, ‘I asked, Who are you?’

“I shut it tight, and it sent up a cloud of book smell— grass, tannins, must, vanilla— and it smelled so nice. I looked down, and my chest reminded me of something else to try. I started to say, ‘I’m a woman,’ but it cut me off again.

“‘That’s your sex. I asked, Who are you?’

“I didn’t want to play the book’s game anymore, but I didn’t have a choice. I knew the little question would stay with me in the back of my head for a long time until I gave a satisfying answer. No, the book wanted something more from me, as all books do, but I was afraid I would never come up with an answer even close to what the book wanted. I put the book away and tried to forget about it.

I went to sleep and dreamed of exploration, of illuminating places and things never illuminated before. The orange of a streetlight outside my window stirred around the room, built intensity as a few minutes passed, burned almost all the way out, and built its orange back up again. It wasn’t much light, but I’m better than most at seeing in the dark.”

After listening to her fascinating descriptions, it finally occurred to me that she was completely blind. Her staring into the black, navigating the room like a cat, letting her touching and smelling senses wash over her like the surf, each was suddenly clear to me. The pale blue of dusk made the empty, pale blue of her eyes imperceptible. I felt foolish for not recognizing it before. Finalizing my notes for the day, I asked, as calmly as I could without indicating anything unusual in her condition, if she would meet me again. I did tell her that it was rare for people who hallucinate to also hear voices, but that it was nothing to worry about.

She agreed and appeared relieved to finally talk with someone about her visions. Although I didn’t have plans to treat her, I thought I could at least record her symptoms and compare them to well-studied cases, then maybe send her in the right direction. What I didn’t tell

her was just how exciting the nature of this case really was, and she didn't tell me just how much I would come to question my own eyes and ears, how one day I would come to be one of the very things that she described, as atoms coalesce and ponder other atoms.

2.

So began our relationship. Things fell into place as they were meant to after that. I gave my visitation notes on Elizabeth—a collection of many in a short history of patients, all somehow having materialized in my filing cabinet—to the Institute. Despite my insistence that the entire meeting was professional and responsible and necessary, they put me on probationary leave for breaking protocol. The patient must always be registered in the system, insurance and all. The notes must be thorough, which, of course, they weren't, since I had remembered them all after the fact. As I hadn't prescribed any treatment, they didn't really punish me, and a slap on the wrist was all they bothered with for the time being. Another thing in place.

When I got home from the probation meeting, I went through my old textbooks for a condition that matched Elizabeth's descriptions of what she saw, but no perfect match appeared. This much I knew: she saw faces, sometimes only shadows, and heard voices. I remembered one similar condition, only recently being revisited in the neurological world, known as Charles Bonnet syndrome.

Charles Bonnet was a scientist in the eighteenth century, one of the first to describe hallucinations by people losing their sight. His blind grandfather told him about seeing simple things at first, like a handkerchief, then more complex, like people. Bonnet, too, later developed his own hallucinations when he began to go blind. Even with the resurgence of interest I still wasn't very familiar with it. I couldn't let her go untreated, though, and since I had plenty of free time while my probation was under review, CBS seemed like the strongest lead, so I followed it, and I followed her.

I knew it was unfair and underhanded, to become one of the faces she hated, but I had to watch her, to watch her visions develop naturally and record her reaction to determine their severity and, if anything else, the reality of their existence. Every patient reacts differently when confronted with a hallucination. Most know immediately that something isn't right, that Donald Duck isn't sitting across the aisle in the train. Some forget for a few seconds, remember, and then sort of put it away, ignoring it like elusive eye squiggles. Others don't realize they're having one, and the moment of realization can be frightening and, sometimes, violent. I had to see how Elizabeth handled it, and I had to make sure she didn't know I was there in case the presence of a doctor exacerbated the incident any more.

Keeping my probation to myself, I brought up my plan to her one day on the phone. She only said two words, "Why?" and when I explained that it would help in my examination of her, she said, "Okay," after a long pause. I told her it was pro bono and that I was taking a vacation from my practice, a little white lie, but before I could say much more she hung up. What I didn't get to tell her was when I would observe her.

She went to different points around the city every day, skirting around, feeling her way through it as if painting a map in her head of every building corner, every crack in every sidewalk, until she could walk the entire area without even using her hands, smelling and listening for every person passing by yards ahead of her. At around six in the morning every day, she explored a new part of the city. She walked more slowly, especially on rainy days. If the air was too noisy and smelling of rain, she skipped that day and returned the next. At eight, she went to work at an office building in Belltown, and didn't emerge until just after four.

I spent that time reviewing my notes on her, studying similar cases, and eating lunch. A woman in Ohio with microphthalmia reporting gray, shadowy figures in her periphery. A young

Nigerian boy with river blindness reporting soccer balls in his otherwise dark vision, and when he tried to kick one his foot sailed through it and the ball vanished. These were interesting by themselves but no single case mentioned the compounding of symptoms Elizabeth experienced. I read case after case during that time and felt no closer to her. After she left work, she hopped on a bus and went home. I took a cab on my first day watching her and followed the bus to make sure she went nowhere else, and after that, I followed her to the bus stop and ended the following there. She always boarded the same bus and I knew where she was going.

I watched her, secretly, for about eight weeks, until she caught on. As days passed, she walked more quickly, and, in public, faded as best she could into backgrounds, playing nervously with her hair, feeling it with her lips. I never once saw her move unusually—jump, stare, any reaction that would indicate she was seeing something not in the room. She walked, sat, and looked out windows as anyone else does, as I do sometimes. During the mornings, she turns and leans her chin on her curled palm and points her face toward the window. The sun hits her cheek and I can tell she feels its warmth and I think she is beautiful. I could never have said it aloud, even alone, until now, when it doesn't matter.

Then one afternoon as I walked to get coffee from a cafe near my apartment I found her sitting at a table, waiting for me, her legs crossed. When I walked to her table, she looked down at my feet. I sat down across from her and said hello. She sipped coffee, black. A black record spun on a player in the corner of the room, and her face told me she was in the music. I listened with her for a minute until the song finished, and she tucked her hair behind her ear and said, "How does it feel to be followed?"

"Not sure," I said. "I didn't even know."

"I'm pretty good, right?"

“Yeah, but tell me something, how do you follow me when you can’t see?”

“I follow signs.”

“Signs?”

“Yeah, you know, your smell, that’s hard to forget. Little things like that, I guess.”

“You’re very good. You might as well have been invisible.”

“Thanks.” We ordered more coffee and I decided it was time to tell her about my observations.

“Listen, Elizabeth, about me following you, normally I wouldn’t ever follow a patient like that. Normally my patients can’t get out of their home without some help. You’re a special case. Why? I haven’t determined that yet. I needed to observe you ‘in the wild,’ so to speak, to find out the nature of the things you’re seeing as they happen.”

“You mean to watch how I act?”

“Yes. It would help me narrow down what you might have, how you might have gotten it in the first place. Here’s the thing, though: in all the times I watched you over the weeks, I never really saw any evidence that you might have hallucinated.”

“You mean you don’t believe me.”

“No, of course I do. But it’s just that, you don’t react?”

“I’m used to it, I guess.”

“It’s impressive.”

“You could’ve just asked me.”

“I know but—”

“I’ll tell the truth. I swear I will. But all the watching, like you think I can’t see you. I asked for your help. I need you. And all you’ve done is watch me. When are you going to start helping me?”

“I’m trying. But I can’t help you without observing you.”

“I’m not a plant that you’re watching grow. You can’t look me up in a book and know everything about me. You are in my life because I need someone to talk to about what I’m seeing. Now are you going to help me or not?”

“Yes. I am sorry. I’ll just ask you. Have you hallucinated in the last few weeks?”

“Well, that’s why I followed you here today. I wanted to talk to you about something I saw.”

I took out my pad, but she stayed quiet, so I put it away, and then she began.

“It was about a week ago. I work at an accounting firm, doing the busy work nobody really has time to do, taking papers back and forth between people to sign, and shredding old documents. Things like that. I told them I was an intern when I applied, and I guess since I’m blind they didn’t really bother to even check if I was going to school. It’s nice when you can choose when to be vulnerable. But I still needed something from the college for them to sign, so I went to a library and had some kid make me up a form and Ripley—that’s who I work for; he’s the Ripley in Ripley-Stoddard-Harris—he just signed it without a word. I’ve been there about two months now. You knew that.

“It’s okay, I guess. It pays rent. It does get stressful in there sometimes, the phones ringing and people trying to talk over each other. They tell me it gets even worse once tax season is in full swing. I hope I can find something better by then. Anyway, one day, about two weeks ago, I was shredding some stuff at my desk when I saw another shadow. I don’t really know

what to call it actually, a shadow, a figure, a ghost. Specter, maybe. It looked like a person without actually being a person. They all do, until this one. I saw it come in through the door to the main office and it looked right at me, like the rest of them. Usually I see them riding with me on the bus, or sneaking around corners in a store or in a crowd, always staring at me, like I'm the scary-looking one. This wasn't the first "hallucination," as you like to call it, that I've seen in the office. Sometimes I see shapes, like a rectangle floating in the air and down into my hands, and then somebody hands me a paper, like I saw it coming before I touched it.

"Sometimes I hear the computer talking to me. You know how it clicks, like on the inside? Like a whale. I can understand it sometimes, and I can talk back to it by tapping on the keyboard like Morse code. We talk when I don't have anything to do, but when I try to remember the conversation later, I can't remember any of it, and it's as if it didn't even happen. I don't think anything of it until it happens again, and it's just normal by now. But this was the first time I saw a shadow in the office, and they scare me. I try my best not to look scared, but they make me feel cold inside, like my chest is a cold, wet cave. This one was no different, at first. It glided in, in a pattern I knew went around the desks, looking at me the entire time, until it got to me. I kept an eye on it, but I pretended not to notice it was in the room.

"Then my boss, Mr. Jenkins, came over. I should tell you about him. He's just about the worst possible person I could imagine: pushy, rude, loud, the opposite of the men who raised me. It was someone's birthday. I heard the singing from the break room. 'Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Barbara. Happy birthday to you! Make a wish! Deep breath!' It sounded kind of tired, almost sad, and some people singing a little off-key made it even sadder. There's two or three birthday's every month, and they love to have an excuse to eat and do nothing for a little bit.

“The first Monday of the month, they elect a party organizer, who convenes a party committee, which notifies the entire office of that month’s birthdays, decorates the break room with streamers and balloons, and gets a cake. It works the same way for everything in the office. You practically need to make a committee to empty out the trash. Everything needs paperwork, training, updating, retraining, and debriefing, no matter how far up you are, which is why I think hardly anyone in there is over thirty, except upper management and executives. It’s as if the older they get, the less they wanted to put up with updating rules and technology. It just isn’t worth the same pay, the same people at work every day.

“But everybody knows the rules, the procedures, the dress codes, and nobody breaks them, only works out a way around them. You can see how much I like the job, not that I have a choice. I need to eat, to pay bills, at least for now. I can’t leave here, right when you’re finally helping me understand what I’m seeing. If it were up to me, I’d rather be travelling my whole life, being in a place where nobody knows my name, and where everything is new and wonderful. I wish I could see it all again, and all I haven’t seen.

“But there I was, sitting at my own 4’x4’x4’ beige half cubicle just like everybody else’s, with my computer, stapler, yellow highlighter, ruler, calculator, and blue gel pens, all exactly like everybody else’s. To get around the regularity, everybody puts stuff up on the walls of their cubicle with pictures of their kids, or posters of bands, or calendars of cats and horses; at least they tried to show me before they realized I was blind.

“I guess they’re little reminders that this world, this office, exists in another universe entirely, separated from the rest of their worlds, and that their kids, music, and cats and horses are only a short drive home at the end of the day. It’s comforting I think.

“I was tapping on my space bar talking to the computer when Mr. Jenkins came over. He brought some other men with him, and as they talked, the shadow peeked from behind their voices, looking at me, and then looking at them, with cold, dark eyes. Mr. Jenkins offered me a party hat, and I said no thanks, but he put it on my desk anyway. I hoped they would move away, but Mr. Jenkins started a story, a long one. He says,

“So this one time at a conference in Tampa, me, Bill, Dave, and Al decide to go out one of the nights that we didn't have any meetings with clients. We look up titty bars in the phone book. Back when they had phone books, right Bill? We find one near the hotel and go check it out. So we get there, right, and they seat us right near the stage. Lemme tell you, we couldn't be any closer to the stage, you know what I'm sayin'? So there we are, we're throwin' twenties and fifties, right, and the other girls see our girl getting a bunch of money, so they run over to us. Before you know it we got ten girls dancing on us, two to each man.

“Or, wait, yeah two to each man. No, wait, ah you get the idea. You shoulda seen Bill here, you were sweatin' up a storm, weren't ya, Bill? So after about thirty minutes, the manager owner guy or whoever he is comes up to us and he says, “Mr. White?” Well, I thought, hey, we're only here for another day, once in a lifetime. Why not? So I said, “Yeah, good to see ya, have you met my friends?” He said, “I'm sorry sir, you should've said something earlier! Come with me, we got a special, private booth for you, gentlemen.”

“I know, right? I know! Relax boys, you're getting cake and frosting on your ties. Here Bill, here's a napkin. Now things are really getting' wild. Al's drooling, Dave's lickin' his lips, and Bill's just about to have a heart-attack, weren't you Bill? So I'm having the time of my life, Mr. White, right. Sure, I'll be out a couple grand tomorrow but it'll be worth it, right. Then out of nowhere, I feel a big friggin' muscle hand tap me twice on the shoulder. Like Hulk Hogan

hands. Well, I'm too busy with what's goin' on in front of me, you know what I'm sayin'? I thought it might've been the manager owner guy, so I yelled out, "What? Whaddya want?" He doesn't answer, so I turn my head, and I see, this huge friggin' truck of a guy. He looks like, three-fifty, four hundred, easy, in a silk suit with these bulging monster-size arms and big friggin' hands, knuckles like rocks with gold rings on em'.

“And he looks at me all serious and says, “Mr. White? That's your name? Funny, ‘cuz I just dropped off Mr. White at his hotel. He was gonna change and then call us when he was ready to bring him over here. I just came over to make sure that his private suite was ready, that everything was good to go.” Then I see two other guys just as big as this guy step into the room behind him. The girls all left the room in a big hurry, and then this guy walks around the booth we're at and is staring at me, like, less than a foot away, right in my eyes.

“I don't even look at the guys, cuz I'm just about ready to shit my pants and I know they probably already have. Then the truck says, “Well, guess what? It looks like everything isn't good to go. Right now, it's just business. But you give us any trouble, and it'll get personal, and I don't mind getting' up close and personal with you. Got it?” Well I don't know what got in my head, but I decided to be an asshole. I stuffed a hundred in his belt and shouted, “Why didn't you say so? Nobody told us when the real entertainment was getting here!”

“Pretty good, right? I pay attention to people's voices so I do pretty good impressions. Anyway, while the men all laughed and laughed around my desk, the shadow just kept staring at me from behind them. I kept ignoring it, like I had all the others. Then Mr. Jenkins spoke to me again. He said,

“Ah, Elizabeth, hey Elizabeth this is our new afternoon intern, Emily, Par— Parrot. Parrot, am I saying that right? Parrot.’

“He was talking about the shadow. He knew it was there, he saw it. He pointed to it. Then the shadow spoke. It said,

“‘Close enough. Parét, it's French, you don't pronounce the t.’

“‘Right, sorry about that, Emily. Ha! Parrot, that's funny. Parrot! Caw! Get it? Parrot! Caw! Anyways, Emily, Elizabeth. You'll be working very closely together to reconcile some old stuff on the Dickinson account.’

“‘Hi, nice to meet you,’ it said. She said, I guess it's a she. She actually spoke to me. That's the first time that's ever happened. I mean, not only did she speak to me, but someone else saw her. Mr. Jenkins actually saw her and even introduced us.

I don't know if he saw her as a shadow like I did. I don't think so, or he would've been just as scared as I was the first time I saw one, when I was little. But there she was, real in every way I suppose, and I could see her. For the first time in years and years, I saw the same thing as someone else saw, even if she was a shadow. I think it's kind of interesting. A shadow: the form of something there, not the actual thing. I still don't know quite what to make of her though.

“Anyway, after Mr. Jenkins left, the shadow, Emily, settled into the desk next to mine, close enough that she could ask any questions if she needed. She didn't talk at all but it didn't really bother me. I think I was too shocked that someone else saw what I saw. I kept my eyes on my computer for the next few hours, maybe a little scared to look up. When I finally did, Emily was already looking, staring at me, still. I jumped a little inside and looked back at my computer. When it was time to go home I got up and left without looking at her. I just threw her a “bye” and that was it.

“I don't know what it was, but something about the way she was staring at me was different from the other shadows I see. Most of the time, the shadows remind me of something

I've already seen. It's a long story, what that is. The other shadows have faces I thought I put out of my mind a long time ago. I thought I snuffed them like a candle. They're black, beady, lizard eyes, terrifying. And they watch me. Almost like you watched me. But Emily's are different; they're dark and big, like smooth rocks from a river, not in a scary way, but a curious way. She wasn't looking at me like I'm the devil. She was looking at me like she was trying to figure out something about me. Maybe like you thought you wanted to do.

“And you've wanted to for a while now. I felt you the first day I got here, in that park. I waited a while and then I followed you after you thought I got on that bus. And I've followed you more. You've figured that out. I thought you said you were on vacation, but I've seen you sneak into your office after the receptionist leaves, and you come out a few minutes later with a stack of books. I called her one day and asked for you, and she said you weren't available. I asked when you'd be back and she said at least a couple months, if at all. Is there something you're not telling me?”

I was stunned, not just by this last question but by everything she had said. Then it somehow made sense. She continued.

“It's okay. I don't care what's going on. I think you're a good person. If you weren't you wouldn't have listened to me babble on all day about my craziness. I just hope whatever is happened wasn't because of me.”

Elizabeth had something on her cheek, a feather maybe, or an eyelash. I fought back with all of me not to reach over and brush it off.

“Elizabeth, I thought at first I might have pinned down your condition, and I was planning to tell you what it was as soon as I knew with some certainty that I was close, but what you've told me today complicates things. I won't even tell you what the name of the condition

was, because I don't want you to obsess about it only to find out later that it might not be right. I also don't want you to feel discouraged or anxious that I don't know what you have. It seems as if your mind has it under control. You don't panic; you're aware, obviously, of when you see something, and you're aware that it isn't real, except this last one, of course. I'm impressed by how resilient you are against whatever is causing these hallucinations, and by your control of your natural impulses to be frightened or confused by suddenly seeing, and still managing to go about your day. I'm not concerned. I'm fascinated. I'd like to hear more about the history of your hallucinations, not just the ones in the last few months since you arrived here, but the first ones you remember, especially the shadows and faces you mentioned earlier. Would you mind that?"

She thought for a few seconds and nodded. It was already after dark, so we agreed to meet in the same place that weekend, when we could meet in the morning.

We met, but I learned she didn't like it when I took notes. Instead, I let her talk, and just listened. The following is a transcript of an audio recording of Elizabeth telling the story of her first hallucination.

Where do I start? The first thing I remember is sitting in my parents' car, watching an orange neon light that looped and swirled. I was eight, I think. This was when I still could see, and I thought it was wonderful. I guess when you're little everything is amazing. Some people can keep it that way longer than others. The sign said, MacGravy's Food, Fun, N More! I haven't seen any more anywhere else, just there.

The sign flickered a lot and made a buzzing noise. I don't know why I remember things like that. I guess they stand out to me more now. It's funny

sometimes how things change; some stay the same. Anyway, we went inside, and it smelled bad, like old grease. When we sat down at a table, my dad said something, and my mom started talking, too. My dad said something like:

“This is bullshit.”

And my mom said, “What?”

“I saw a booth by the door.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A booth. I wanted a booth. I told them I wanted a booth, and I saw one by the door and that— that girl— brought us all the way back here to this half-booth-thing.”

“Well we're already here, I don't want to get up again. Sit down, Biff.”

That's what my mom called me: Biff. She said it was because when I was little I couldn't say my name right. I used to say Biff. My dad just called me Elizabeth. He sure was strange, but my mom was stubborn and always stayed on him, like a shadow to a man that wouldn't shut up.

He had just gotten out of work and I could already tell he was mad, because when he got mad he tugged at his collar with his fat, pink finger. And when he pulled his collar down I could see a thick vein, and a bunch of red lines from where his shirt was pressing into his skin like a heavy table on soft carpet. But my mom didn't care, she planted herself in the seat next to him and snatched a menu from a stack tucked behind the ketchup and mustard and things. There was a little bit of mustard on the menu she grabbed and I tried to tell her.

“I have something to tell you,” I said, trying to be nice, but she didn’t hear me.

“I don’t know what to get, everything is just so fattening and greasy. Maybe I’ll just get a salad.”

So I said it again, “I have something to tell you.” But nothing.

“Yeah, I think a salad. Oh, but what kind of dressing? And chicken or fish? Biff, you like chicken, right? I’ll give you my chicken.”

So I said, “Okay.”

She wasn’t listening so I looked around. It was such a weird place, McGravy’s. There were posters and other things all over the walls, covered them up like raggedy wallpaper. There were so many things looking like they were just tossed at random nails on the wall and left there forever. I could’ve stared at them for hours while my parents looked at their menus picking out what they want to eat. I think the posters were supposed to be paintings, because they were framed as if they were in a museum, only I thought to myself later, why would this restaurant in the middle of nowhere be displaying expensive art like that? I figured out they must have been copies.

I don’t know who the artists were. Some of them looked like comic books, if you zoomed in really close to the character’s face. She was a girl, the character, blonde, with dark red lips and long, black eye lashes. She was smiling with perfect teeth and holding her hands together sort of softly, showing off her red fingernails. I always thought it was funny that she was zoomed in on so close that you could see the different dots that made her up, just like looking closely at a

comic book. It just didn't make any sense why a restaurant would hang this up on the wall. Then there were the other posters. I mean, there were so many, but I really remember these few. There was one of a girl who kind of looked like the comic book girl, blonde, white teeth smiling, only what was really funny about her was that her face was in four different boxes, and they were painted in wild colors. In one box, her hair was blonde, in another, it was blue, and in another, it was green! It was the damndest thing. It made a little more sense to hang this one up in McGravy's though, because of how colorful it was it fit in with all the colors in the place. But the weirdest poster in the whole place was one of the smallest, I almost missed it. Oh and then my dad said something, keeping on about the table.

“This is bullshit, though. We're paying good money, to come out to a nice restaurant, and that girl sits us here in the back at a half-booth.”

My mom was getting more upset. “I just want to eat. Can't we just eat?”

He said, “No, this is fucking bullshit. I want the manager. I make too much money to come out to MacGravy's with my family and have them sit me in the back at a half-booth when I ask for a full booth.”

She said, “Fine, you don't have to eat. We'll eat while you go looking for your fucking booth.”

My dad wasn't loud, not like Mr. Jenkins loud. Don't get me wrong, he was always getting mad about something, especially when it came to something he just bought that didn't work, or food he didn't want to pay for; he was just a pushover about it. When it came down to it, he always backed down from a fight,

and took it out on me and my mom later. I did my best to ignore the two of them fighting, so I kept looking at the posters. Then a waitress came by.

She said something like, “Hi folks, welcome to MacGravy's Food, Fun, N More, can I getcha started with something to drink?” in that high, happy voice.

My dad was grumpy, so he said, “I guess I’m not allowed to eat, so just water.”

And my mom was upset too. She said, “Jesus Christ. Water, also.”

Then the waitress asked me. “Okay, and you, Hun?” Well, I was too interested in the posters to bother answering, and I knew my parents would order for me anyway, but they still bothered me about it anyway.

“Biff, the girl is talking to you.”

“Elizabeth.”

Then both of them: “She'll have water.”

“Okay,” she said, and she walked off.

The little poster I was looking at had these people figures on it, kind of like cartoons, brightly colored in reds and yellows, only they didn't have any faces. They were dancing in the poster, too. At least they looked like they were dancing.

They had lines around their arms and hips to make it look like they were moving, and even though they didn't have any faces I could tell they were happy, so they must have been dancing, in their little poster world. I thought it was too bad that the only music they had to dance to was my parents' voices fighting back and forth about nothing. Then my mom noticed me staring at the poster.

“Biff? What are you looking at?” she said, but I was still too into the poster, so my dad added on.

“Elizabeth your mother is talking to you. You see? She’s just like you: fucking stubborn.”

She said, “Oh, shut up, for Christ’s sake.”

Then my dad said, “She’s like every woman in this family. You, your sisters, your mother, my mother, all of you do the same thing.”

I was a woman in the family, little as I was, so I asked him, “What do we do?”

“Nothing,” he said, “Keep coloring your menu.”

My mom asked me again, “Biff? What are you looking at?” But the waitress came by and asked for our orders so my mom just dropped it.

My dad said, “I’ll have the, uh, Christ I can’t see anything in this light.” He needed glasses but he wouldn’t admit it.

My mom said, “You can’t see anything, period. You need glasses. Look how far you’re holding it from your face.”

Still looking at the posters I said, “You can’t see anything, Dad?”

And he said, “Shut up, I can see just fine. I’ll have the, uh, Double Deluxe MacGravy Bacon Cheese-inator,” or whatever it was called, “with, extra Sweet-n-Saucy sauce. No garlic, please. Hold the garlic. Ex-nay on the arlic-gay.”

He thought he was really funny all the time, but I never thought so. I guess my mom used to think so, but by then I think she was fed up with him. When he didn’t get a laugh out of somebody, which was most of the time, he got upset.

What's sad is I can't remember my dad ever being different. I mean, it'd be something else if he was happy when I was little, but I was already little, and if he was ever happy I don't remember it. It's like when you get a certain age you forget everything behind you and almost start over new. And you start to notice things around you, things that were around you a long time ago. It's funny how that works, isn't it?

Anyway, while my mom was ordering, it happened for the first time ever: the faceless people in the posters started dancing for real, at least to my eyes. They moved and looked just like cartoons on T.V., and then they jumped out of their poster and onto the walls, dancing the whole time, jumping into other posters. I wasn't scared. It wasn't a scary thing. It was all sort of, I don't know, weird.

The air felt weird, thick like soup. I almost drank it in. I felt like swimming in it, but I would've drowned, since I didn't know how to swim. Sorry, I just get a little emotional thinking back on it, and it's been so long since I remembered. I've never told anybody about it. This is very hard, but I'm trying. Anyway, I think I kind of knew the dancing poster people weren't real, somehow. I mean, even at that age I knew what a normal child could imagine. I was eight years old, a kid, not a fool. I knew my parents were fighting, even when they pretended I didn't know, and when they kept me in the dark about just how bad their marriage had been, about how bad everything was. That short moment when the people started dancing made my whole world seem magical, suddenly, as if I was the wizard and made it all happen.

It was so beautiful, and everything was perfect. I wanted to jump into the walls and dance with them until my legs hurt, until my face hurt from laughing. I didn't care if it wasn't real, I needed it to be, you know? But then, just when it almost felt real, it all went away. I think I blinked, and the little people were back in their posters, as if they hadn't moved at all. Normal air, parents fighting, stinky greasy smell, it was all as it was minutes or hours before, however much time had passed. My parents were still fighting; I don't know about what. I didn't care. I was still in shock, I think. I can't believe I haven't told anyone about that for, gosh, what's it been, almost fifteen or twenty years. The world is so much colder now, with everything I've seen, so much darker. And yet I don't think I've ever been able to see better.



The light goes out and the pupils dilate, so that when there is even the smallest flicker of light, the whole room and all its little details come alive.

This is all I could think of to explain Elizabeth. She was, up until the last time I saw her, the most perceptive person I've ever met, even among the disabled. She didn't show it, but she noticed every movement in the room, ones I couldn't detect.

Despite the scarring on her retina, clearly visible even without my ophthalmoscope, her pupils still constricted in bright light, and dilated in its absence. I often forgot, even after knowing her for as long as I did, that she was blind. She navigated the world with complete mastery and grace; she must have had a remarkable photographic memory. I suppose she did, as she was able to recall so much, whole conversations word for word, nearly every vision she ever had, all with utter clarity and ease, unless she was making it all up, which I doubt. And then,

other things, somewhat important things, she seemed to forget too easily, like how old she was at certain events (“I was eight, I think...”).

Her sense of time was different. She feels as if she’s been alive for years and years, much older than she actually is. I suppose living in darkness might contribute to that temporal illusion, but I’ve never heard of it in any journal or anywhere, really, except maybe in some prisoners, whose confinement lengthens time beyond comprehension. As far as I could tell, though, she was no prisoner, except to her own fascinating mind.

I dug deeper into it every time we met. By the second month, I was up to my knees. Her early life wasn’t unusual. Children all over the world have rough, less-than-capable parents. Many have it much worse than she had. I found no evidence that her parents hit her, or excessively verbally abused her, though “excessive” is subjective, and each child responds to abuse differently so from the beginning Elizabeth was hard to pin down (suddenly I found myself digging through my undergrad psychology book; good thing I didn’t sell it). Her response to her parents’ behavior though was different. Not only was she very observant and aware of the tension between them, the loss of her sight as she approached nine years old heightened her powerful imagination. Here is another audio transcript at another meeting we had a week after the first, talking about her parents at a birthday party.

My mom attracted the wrong sorts of people. I think she had a radar on her head for that sort of thing. My dad was bald, and had no idea about anything. The world was slowly going black by then. I still had patches here and there, but that’s like seeing a few brush strokes on a painting. You could never get the whole idea. And I wasn’t even nine.

I hated parties. I hated how all the women screamed when they laughed, and the men spat and choked on cake or chips or whatever they were eating. It was so ugly. I hated that slobbery black dog, licking crumbs off the floor and waiting for plates to be passed around carelessly in case some food fell. And I really hated the other kids, the ones my age or younger. The youngest one cried for no reason. The older one cursed at his parents. The twins ran around waving their skirts over their heads, screaming as loud as they could. It was awful.

I did my best to avoid all of them by sticking close to adults, usually my parents if I could find them. I always had to meet third aunts and fourth uncles and fifth cousins, and my dad would say something like, “You remember your cousin, Linda? You know, Ben and Martha's daughter. You remember Ben, my mother's sister's husband's little brother.” It almost made me dizzy, like vertigo the way I’ve heard it described, but I just had to smile at my cousin, who I was sure I’d never seen before in my life. As hours went by I felt like tears were boiling behind my eyes and I had to keep stirring them down. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, but I kept a smile wide across my face as I took in more and more noise, more and more faces.

Oh, those faces. More than anything, I hated those parties for the faces. They started at the front of the house. The parties and occasions were different, but the front of everyone’s house was always the same. The front living room, parlor I guess, was separate from the party and was always unlocked.

No one ever greeted us when we came into a home where a family party was going on. When we walked into the house, my parents each had a hand on

one of my shoulders, as if I was the one leading them around. Like I said, the first room at the door, living room, parlor, whatever, was always empty, except for usually white couches draped with coats from people at the party, so many wools and furs it looked like a bear was asleep right there on the couch. The place was always dimly lit by scented candles and humming with jazz. Since no one greeted us, we had to try to join the party in the other part of the house, sometimes the kitchen or the dining room, but even after we tried, we still had to be invited, accepted even, not by the hosts, who were always nice enough, but by the rest of them: those strange, strange faces, sitting together, huddled around a table. Strange and scary.

These were what frightened me the most. The moment I breathed in that air around them, their black, horrible, eyes, like lizards' eyes, like I told you about before, flew up to me, to us, scanned our faces and our clothes and our arms. It felt like all those eyes dove into my own as we were standing there together at the doorway, me waiting for someone, anyone, to come to my rescue. Finally, the host broke the silence and ran to greet us, eventually saying something like, "Eat up, serve yourselves, there's plenty!" Then they turned us loose again in seas of whispers.

The party went on anyway. This one wasn't any different. A lot of drinks were poured, and all kinds of voices were echoing from around the house, hollering for my dad. It must have been at his parents' house or something. Before this party I always remembered seeing my parents standing together side by side, standing like trees in tall, messy grasses of people, even if they were always

fighting at home, but as soon as the eyes at this party looked them over, they fell apart. I tried to hold on tightly to both their hands, but they split up and went opposite directions. My dad made his way around the table kissing every aunt and uncle, and my mom found somebody she knew, not in the family, somebody else. Anyway, they left me standing there alone, the kids running past and shoving me aside, so I got out of the kitchen and thought I'd explore the rest of the house.

There were pictures in frames on tables and walls in one of the hallways. They made me so nervous, I felt like telling them, "I know you're watching me, I see your eyes moving, all over me, but I don't care." I tried to show them I was brave by keeping my head forward like I didn't care they were looking at me. They definitely weren't as scary as the faces in the kitchen, so that was better. In fact, they seemed kind of friendly. Then I found some stairs. The carpet was so soft and warm; it must have just been vacuumed. I love that feeling. So I climbed them on my hands and knees, pretending I was scaling a big mountain, watching out for a lion, or a bear. That's the child's imagination I was talking about. I knew what it was and how to control it, how different it was from whatever visions I was having. I was having so much fun, even if I was by myself, in my own world. I ducked into a bedroom for cover in case there were any more dangerous animals.

I played those imaginary games because they were almost all I had to entertain myself. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and my mom and my dad said they were too old and too busy to be play with the toys and little things I loved. Friends didn't come easy either. Maybe it was in my head, but most kids

my age seemed to move away from me, inches every second, while I tried to talk to them, and by the time I finished what I was saying they were eight feet away. I didn't mind all that much. Sure it bothered me, but I learned to ignore it eventually. My parents bought me all kinds of toys and things, to keep me distracted I guess. Funny how you don't think about this kind of stuff until years later.

Anyway, playing in that room I realized it belonged to my cousin. She was a little older than I was, and I always kind of looked up to her, but I hardly ever saw her. By then she was eleven I think, and had just gotten her first period, so my parents tried to talk about when they thought I wasn't listening, and suddenly she was too old to play with any younger kids. She was suddenly tall, too, and she had training bras stuffed away in her chest of drawers. I pulled one out and held it up to my chest. I knew as long as she lived my mom would never let me see one, she hid hers in folded towels when she walked from the washing machine to her bedroom, so I wouldn't see. And my dad pretended like they didn't exist. With my failing eyes I didn't know if I would ever get to see what I looked like in the mirror in a bra, or with breasts, or as a grown woman at all. This might be my last chance. I thought it looked funny up against me, and I wondered what it was like to walk around all the time like that. I guess I figured I would find out soon enough what it felt like, just not what I would look like, and I put that worry away for a while.

For as grown up as my cousin acted, she still was just a kid in a lot of ways. There were plastic dolls and wooden blocks spilled all over the floor, and I

remember being so happy, I don't think I've ever had a bigger smile. I didn't have that many toys. I spread out the blocks and built them up into two towers in front of the bed, and I made the dolls dance around the towers in pretty poses. They were so nice to one another, very friendly, no glares from beady black eyes. I was impressed with their manners. They bowed, gave kisses on the cheeks, and danced around in big loops on an invisible dance floor. I even hummed a song I heard in a movie once. I don't remember the movie, but the song was so pretty I never forgot how it went; kind of sad, slow, but so pretty, a waltz.

I heard screaming from the kitchen downstairs. That's how they laughed, the women in our family. They screamed. It made any baby in the room start crying, but they didn't care. They did it again a minute later. I looked at the door, scared that someone would walk in on me playing with my cousin's toys, wearing her training bra over my shirt. Imagine? Anyway, I let go of the dolls when I looked back at the door, and I know it's hard to believe, but when I looked back at them to keep playing, they were standing there in the air, on their own, looking at me. I wasn't scared at first. They were just looking at me, nothing more. It was like I had paused a video, and they were waiting for me to press play. They were waiting for me to let them dance, so I hummed the waltz. They danced on their own, so perfectly, like fish swimming in circles with each other. I could almost hear the music playing with my humming, and I lost myself in that room. Then, another scream came from the kitchen, louder. It went straight to my heart, and as I shivered, the dolls crashed to the floor, toppling over the blocks. There they were, those poor little dolls, buried, drowning under the wreck of towers, reaching

out with wild hands for air and light. They were so still. I've never been so frightened in my life. I think for that moment, I had forgotten to separate my imagination from my visions, and what was real and unreal became completely unclear. What was true was untrue. That was the first time I couldn't tell the difference. It was so horrible, I ran. I tore off the bra and ran out of the room and into the hallway. Just when I made it out, I ran into the back of my mom. She had just come out of another room, her and another man, not my dad. They were fixing their clothes. All these years keeping me in the dark about sex, but more importantly about love, all to end with my mom not even knowing what those things really meant, herself. Even that young, I knew whatever they had just finished was wrong. I could see it in their faces. They looked down, not at each other, and when they saw me, the man nearly ran out of there. I called my mom, and she tried to hush me by saying something like, "Hey Biff! Were you playing with your cousin? What were you playing?"

I think everyone in the family, or just about everyone, knew about it, or maybe knew it was going to happen, because a couple minutes later we left the party without a word to anybody, all their eyes staring as we left. I think my dad was already waiting for us in the car, and he and my mom didn't say a word the whole drive home, not until I went into my room and shut the door, then the world blew up. They screamed and stomped and shook the whole house. I must have forgotten English because I couldn't understand any of it; it all sounded like gibberish with the volume turned up. "Bang! Blah-blah-blah! Wha? Blah-blah-blah-blah-*blah!*" Even though they seemed to dare the world to bring them down,

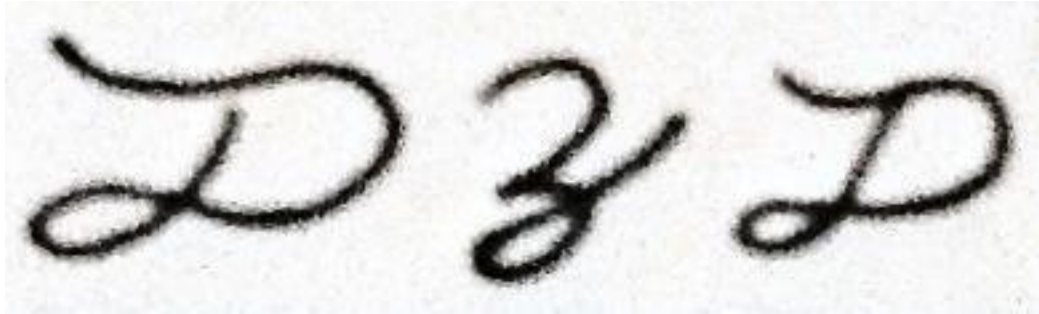
their falling apart was something I thought I'd never see. I didn't want to see it, but there it was, in my face. I had to tune it out. I turned on the T.V., which turned out to be the last time I would ever watch it. Through the large patches of black which almost totally covered everything, I saw that the Olympics were on. Swimming. Gosh, it was wonderful. I'd never been swimming; my parents said they didn't have the time to teach me or take me to lessons, so watching the Olympics was something else. I'd never seen bodies like that, still haven't, obviously. So hard, tight, but so flexible, like rubber snakes, they were beautiful, stretching before jumping in, whirling their arms around like propellers, flexing their big, barn-door backs. They were perfect, and for a long time I obsessed about them, about hitting the water as they did, like dolphins out of a gun barrel. It would be years and years before I would get to a body of water big enough to swim in. But it didn't matter, I was totally inside that T.V., and no amount of yelling from my parents could rip me out of it. I fell asleep that night and dreamed of water, of floating and breathing it in and becoming entirely new again, no sights or sounds or smells, just feelings, inside and out, under my skin, in my hair, and through me altogether. It was only a dream though, and I would feel it again in my life only two more times, and not in dreams. When I woke up the next morning, the patches took over, and the whole world was a cold, empty black. I thought I might've woken up in the night, but after rubbing my eyes and reaching out at nothing, I knew it was real, maybe forever. For the rest of my life I would live on the edge of knowing and not knowing, what was coming, where or who I was. And I cried.

There was no end to Elizabeth's ever-deepening mystery. If I used a brighter light, maybe asking her more questions or pushing on one line of thought, to navigate the dark passages of her mind, I only found new ones—tiny cracks that opened up into huge rooms, promising crevices that led nowhere, and impossible to tell one from the other. The detail and skill with which she described her hallucinations sometimes made me question if they were hallucinations, that maybe they really happened, or at least that something similar might have happened and her heightened senses sculpted them into something larger and more complex in her sensitive mind. Or she could have made them up completely. In any case, I realized I was painting a much larger picture of this woman than I had anticipated, one that didn't center completely around her neurological disorder, whatever that might have been. Too long I was focusing in on her hallucinations. I was, as she said once, zooming in on one brush stroke of the painting. Treating her condition required much more than recording her symptoms and prescribing medication. I had to truly know Elizabeth, her fears, her joys, if she was to ever end her treatment feeling like a complete, mentally healthy person.

When my probation was over I took some vacation time, and when that ended the Institution let me go. I wasn't worried, most of my student loans were paid, thanks to help from my parents, and I had enough in my savings to last a little while, at least until I figured Elizabeth out. We met more frequently and my pile of notes grew out of its manila folder. One day she saw it and asked me how many pages I had. I told her I didn't know, that I just marked especially important ones with post-its so I could go back to them, but I kept everything in case I found something I'd overlooked. She said she wished she'd remembered to do that once. I asked her why, and she told me a story that happened years before her blindness. She was four or five, she

thinks, and both her parents were out of the house. I mentioned how I found that strange, leaving a five year old alone. She said it wasn't for that long, twenty minutes at most, and that turned into more than an hour. It was early in the day, a Saturday, and she snuck into her parents' bedroom, as all young children do I'm sure when they're not allowed somewhere. It was orderly enough; she could tell which side of the bed was her father's and which was her mother's, hers neat and made, his rolled around and messy. She looked under the bed first, then in the drawers of both night stands, but she found nothing unusual. Then she looked in the closet. It was apparently normal at first, obvious to her which side belonged to which parent, same as the bed. Her mother had boxes of shoes, dozens she made seem like, and, naturally, she wanted to try all of them on. She described the heels pushing up on her calves and testing her balance, and the way her feet swam in the flats, more like clown shoes. She made her way through all of them, box by box, until she opened a box that didn't have shoes, but letters. They were each in their own blank envelope, and each was addressed to her mother, her first name. The box was at the bottom and the back of the stacks, and was almost certainly meant to be hidden from Elizabeth's father. She probably figured he would be too oblivious to notice, and Elizabeth too obedient to be so curious. How wrong she was. There were at least fifty letters stuffed into the box, the lid held down with invisible scotch tape, and Elizabeth read every letter. The oldest from five years earlier confessed a love and pleaded for reciprocation, straight out of a romantic drama, I thought. The letters escalated in passion, some sexual in content, some platonic. It was obvious her mother was writing back, and that she loved this man as much as, if not more than, her father. The most recent letter mentioned something about meeting soon, and then a year after that again, and again every year, forever. Elizabeth must have stumbled on the beginning of her mother's affair, and the end of her marriage. The writer, Elizabeth said, never signed his full

name, only his initials. She put a torn corner of paper on the table and slid it toward me. This was it:



She kept it with her at all times. She said she didn't learn his full name until years later, but that she didn't want to talk about it any more, and she ended the topic there, abruptly. I suppose she wasn't ready to talk about it, because some meetings later she eventually did.

I persuaded her to stay and talk longer by changing the subject and asking about Emily. She wasn't much more eager to talk about her. She shifted in her chair and folded her arms. Do people know instinctively what to do, what gestures to make, at happiness or discomfort when they have no visual clues telling them what to do? Maybe Elizabeth saw enough as a child to know. She really did take it all in, as they say, like a sponge. After squeezing her dry with my silent patience, she gave in. She said she still saw Emily as a ghost, while everyone else saw her as a normal woman. They complimented Emily on her hair, or her earrings, so at least to the world this mysterious new woman was corporeal. Meanwhile Elizabeth tried to figure her out, much like I do to Elizabeth. She watched Emily when she thought the ghost wasn't looking, but seconds later the ghost caught her looking, as she had caught me. When Emily asked her for billing amounts or account numbers, Elizabeth stated the digits and nothing more, until the day ended and she could go home.

Then one day, after the work was finished and Elizabeth walked swiftly to the door, Emily stopped her and spoke. She calmly asked if anything was wrong, if she had done anything to upset her, all, to Elizabeth's "eyes," without a mouth, just words emanating from a black, faceless face. Emily apologized, and told her to come to her if anything was wrong. Then Emily did something unexpected: she touched Elizabeth, on the arm. Elizabeth shuddered as she told me about it; in fear, anger, I'm still not sure. No hallucinated figure had ever touched her before, and yet she felt it, not cold as almost everything she described, but warm, like a nearby fire. I wondered why she shivered at warmth, and if it would happen again while I observed her. She said it rippled out from the spot on her arm where Emily touched her, up her neck and all over her back. Then, something else new: as Emily walked back to her desk, as she hadn't finished her own work, Elizabeth saw her change. While she still appeared as a haunting black figure, a momentary flutter in Elizabeth's periphery, as she turned to leave, left an echo of an image behind. For that instant, Emily had hair. It was brown, and straight. It was also the first time in many years Elizabeth had seen hair. She had forgotten what her own color was, or if it was even that color still. It happened so fast—she had hair, she didn't, she was gone—but Elizabeth clearly remembered its shine, its grace like the flowing leaves on a willow. She leaned in close to me when she talked about it, holding the invisible hair as she would hold a delicate piece of fabric, stroking its smoothness without breaking fibers apart. I looked at her and said nothing. I wasn't sure what she was thinking, and I was too busy speculating on this development to notice. Was it possible to regain vision without consistent ocular treatment? Surely not; without intervention the body peaks and enters entropy at a certain age. Elizabeth was very near that age. What was this then? Another hallucination maybe. She could have imagined Emily's hair after she touched her, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of her, of the hallucination, and I learned later that

Elizabeth hadn't been touched by anyone for a long time, not even a handshake. Prolonged isolation, physical and mental, sensory deprivation, begetting or aggravating visual hallucinations. That's a real condition. It's called The Prisoner's Cinema. It still didn't explain the auditory hallucinations or the fact that she could see Emily as a humanlike figure, but it was another strong lead to follow.

3.

After her parents divorced, Elizabeth went to live with her uncle in southern New Mexico. They all kept the girl as far on the fringe of the divorce proceedings as possible. Everything happened in the background. I don't think she even remembers the exact date they finally did the deed, like when she can't remember other important dates in her life. Regardless of dates and other specifics, her case was very unusual. Whereas most parents fight desperately for custody of the child, neither seemed to want little Elizabeth, as they wanted this or that appliance or piece of furniture. Her mother loved the leather sofa and chair with its matching ottoman, and her father loved the big T.V. and matching stereo. They clutched onto these things, immaculate as they perfect day they bought them except for a thin film of fuzzy grey dust all over, even as their own daughter drifted back and forth between her own invented worlds.

One early morning, while it was still dark, she unknowingly left her parents forever. She half-woke in the passenger's seat of a pickup truck with a bench seat, with nothing between her and the driver. She liked the warm interior of the truck more than the cold of her mother's apartment, by then stripped down to only the leather seating, a green camping air mattress which they shared, a few of her mother's things, her little toys, and a mini-fridge her mother bought at an office supply store. But that was gone, replaced by the interior of a strange vehicle. She had never been in the truck, and thought it might have been a dream. She lay her head down on the middle of the bench and wanted to stretch out, but she was just a little too tall, so she let her legs hang over the edge of the seat. She told me she could smell orange juice in the fabric, making the spot where her cheek rested just a little bit more rough than the rest of the seat, and she fell

asleep again imagining how long ago the juice was spilled, how much was spilled, and exactly how it happened. Some time later, the warmth of the sun woke her up completely, and a strange voice said, “Good morning.”

The voice belonged to Elizabeth’s uncle. She had never seen him before, never heard his voice, or smelled his skin, and so she could never have been sure of precisely who he was, whether he was from her mother’s family or her father’s, or if he was related at all, but the man seemed to know so much about her, about her parents, about every dynamic in their huge extended family, that Elizabeth felt compelled to believe everything he said, not that she had a choice. He was older, she deduced from his voice, than either of her parents, and the air inside the truck told her that he was an occasional smoker, and a heavy coffee drinker, and that he spent much time outside, in the sun and dirt. And that he drank orange juice, at least once. It didn’t go so well, she guessed. As much as she should have been frightened, terrified even, she was calm, and enjoying the ride. She listened to the country-western music on the radio and reconstructed her new surroundings in her mind. The orange juice stain under her cheek, the rubber floor mats under her feet, the early morning sun spilling in through the windows and onto her eyes, one by one these felt details brought her world into clearer view, and the gravity of the situation in which she found herself suddenly weighed heavy. This man, her uncle as he claimed, had Elizabeth completely under his control. At any time he could have pulled off onto any dirt road on their way through wild, uninhabited New Mexico where he could have done anything to her. But he didn’t. In her nearly ten years living with him in that sparse part of the country, he never did any truly malicious, atrocious harm to Elizabeth; she was adamant about that. She simply woke up one morning in his truck, and began a new life in a new place with a new guardian, and she thought one was better than the none she left behind.

She called him “Uncle,” or “my uncle.” I don’t think she ever learned his real name, and she only vaguely guessed at what he looked like by piecing details together years later. But there they were, kicking up dust on a warm morning on a road in nowhere, and from that moment he took care of her. She loved him because he loved her, because he took the responsibility of raising her without any hesitation, and that was the expectation implied between them: that in exchange for his home and care and guidance, she would give him everything. She lived with him for ten long years in a cabin sitting on the bordering steppe between the desert and forest, on a large piece of forgotten land just north of a small town surrounded by failing quarries and modest ranches, where hills began and mountains were just beyond.

“We drove a long time, and when we got to his house, I remember he told me, ‘Welcome home.’ His voice sounded like cream and black pepper. It was so warm, strong, I felt comforted for the first time in a long, long while. Right away, when I stepped inside, I fell in love with the smell. It was spicy, and beautiful; I don’t know, there’s just no real way of describing it. He said we lived in an adobe cabin, but I didn’t know what that meant. He put his big hands on my shoulders—his hands were thick like gloves—and he pointed me away from him, told me to go and feel the walls. They were rough, like a road, bumpy and full of ridges and things I’d never felt on a wall. I asked him to describe the house, the inside, since I knew it would take me awhile to learn my way around without help. I wasn’t as good at it as I am now. He told me where the couch was, and the coffee table, chair, desk, all handmade he said, and I think that was it in the main room. It was pretty small, and it had only these basic things, and shelves around the room with all sorts of things. My uncle led me around and showed them to me. I mean, he picked them out and let me hold them. There were desert roses, kachina dolls, arrowheads, kokopellis, things he had collected out in the desert, things I didn’t understand then and only now I’m starting to

know what they mean. One by one, he told me where they came from, how they were made, or how he found them, and he let me hold them in my hands.

“This wolf is ironwood, hand-carved by the Mescalero-Apache, from wood in the hills around Sierra Blanca. It watches over us on the high shelf, and disappears in the night to run with the pack. And here, this old oven, it burns wood. It belonged to my grandmother. I remember visiting her house when I was younger and when they started making electric stoves, she had my grandfather, my father, and me move it to the cellar. It probably weighs three or four hundred pounds. And she kept potatoes and onions in the bread box, and old Montgomery Ward catalogues in the oven. When she died, I ran over to the house before anyone else got to it, anyone that would just throw it out or scrap it instead of putting it to good use.’

“Everything had a story, even the rafters. He lifted me up and told me to hold my hands out, and I felt them right away—thick, smooth—so brown, he said, almost black. They ran along the whole main room, bulging out from the low ceiling, and he walked me their entire length so I could feel them all. They smelled so good, they blew a woody smell all over the house. It always seemed dusty no matter how much I cleaned, like there was a beach nearby, but it didn’t matter. After smelling the home for the first time I fell in love with everything: the rafters, the wood-burning oven, the spicy wool on the furniture, the dust; it was all perfect and I returned to a place I hadn’t ever been.

“The first night was cold, but the house was warm inside. Uncle kept the fire in the oven going for a while after I said goodnight. As I walked toward my bedroom through the hallway I heard him sigh like he was comfortable, and I knew he hadn’t moved from his chair all night, a wood-and-wicker rocking chair in front of the open oven door, where he watched the fire. I bet the light from it was dancing all around in that hallway. As I fell asleep, I wondered how long he

sat there, tossing smaller and smaller bits of wood into the glow. Some time in the night I woke up and could still hear the little crack-cracks of the fire trickling around the house, and I knew he was still there, so I dove into another dream.

“The next morning I heard birds whistling through my window. It was like they were calling out the names of the plants they were sitting on.

“Ocotillo, ocotillo... Ocotillo, ocotillo!

“Pine pine pine pine pine!

“Willow, willow, willow...

“It was really funny. I didn’t even know what kind of birds they were, but they sang beautifully, even if I couldn’t see them. By sun-up—and what hot sun gushed through those windows and sloshed around in that little room! Makes me tingly just thinking about it—I got to know my room a little better. I had a bed, a twin, with nice soft sheets and a big wool comforter, years old probably from the little frays here and there, but it was still wonderful. The bed sat in a wood frame, sanded down smooth. I also had a desk that felt like it was made from the same wood as the bed frame. I’m not sure if my uncle made every piece of furniture in that place, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. He knew everything about each little part of that house, and the forest was right there. I’m sure he could’ve. When I moved in, the walls were empty, but by the time I left they were filled with shelves like in the living room, and then my shelves were also filled with all sorts of things. Over the years, I brought everything I ever found on that big piece of land into my room, or I just sort of corralled things that happened to drift into the house somehow, and there were so many: razor-sharp arrowheads, glassy-smooth river rocks, snakeskins, even a wooden box of cactus needles, with fine thread and tiny thread-dolls no bigger than my pinkie nail; they all lined my shelves and window sill, and arranged themselves

like pieces of some kind of chessboard in the middle of a game. I absolutely loved my new home. Every day I woke up early, long after my uncle left for work but early enough to feel the first hot sun hit my skin in that cold air. I dressed, ran outside, and waited out front of the door for just a bit. If I waited long and quietly enough, I could hear the scuttling of lizards in the dirt or on the walls, or I could feel the wind from little birds' wings fluttering near my head, settling on the window sills of the cabin outside, then whizzing back and forth in the air again. When I felt like something was really close, a lizard maybe, I let it get as close as possible then chase after it as fast as I could run, out into the tall grass tickling at my armpits and farther and farther into the hills until I ran into the stick-and-wire fence hundreds of feet around the cabin. I always stopped right when I got to it after I ran into it hard the first time, and I counted the steps after that. I always ran out of breath but I'm a graceful loser and I always told the lizards and birds, 'Good race,' and I always reached out to shake hands but they were too far beyond the fence, so I skipped back to the house for some breakfast.

"My uncle usually left some oatmeal for breakfast, warming on the stove as the embers died down. He left so early because he was a park ranger, and he had to get everything going, inspecting tourist caves and opening all the gates to the forests. The park basically began at the edge of our land, right at our fence, which is probably why he was living in this cabin, so close to work. Before a park ranger he was a border patrol agent, and before that he was in the Army. At least, I think it was the Army. He always just said 'the service.' 'When I was in the service... When I was in the border patrol...' that kind of thing. That's how he started most his stories about how he found the stuff all over that house, never about what he actually did, just about what he found. 'When I was in the border patrol, we found diamondbacks all the time. It's a rattlesnake; poisonous, it can kill you really fast. We'd find one, catch it in a bucket, cut off its

head, and bury it. The head could still jump up and bite you. So we buried them deep. Watch out when you're out there. They're all around here. You and your good hearing will catch the rattling when you get near. It sounds like a baby's rattle going a hundred miles an hour. As soon as you hear that sound, stop and back away. If you get bit, you'll feel it, and more than likely I won't be anywhere nearby, and the nearest hospital is in Carlsbad, over an hour away. Keep an ear out, okay?'

“He was very mysterious, and sometimes he outweighed the loveliness of that house. He talked sort of stern, like a soldier in a movie. Made sense that he used to be in the Army, I guess. Unlike a soldier, though, he had a thick goatee hanging off his chin, long enough to grasp in my fingers and shake back and forth if I wanted to. It must've been gray, being so old. How I knew he had it, I felt it one night by accident. He was drunk, had been for hours. He drank a little more every minute from a glass, and then just straight from the bottle until the whole thing was almost gone. The bottle changed every now and then, and I got used to it after a while, but that first time I was so scared. I'd never seen my parents that drunk, but Uncle was especially bad. He sat on the ground, and his hands moved wild, like he wasn't controlling them. Then he rolled around, trying to keep his shirt covering his belly. I knelt close to move him to bed or at least to the couch, but when I pulled at him he smacked me good. I don't think he did it on purpose, or that he even knew he did it. But I fell over on him and grabbed onto his goatee, and I felt its smoothness, its thinness that only made me believe more that it was all gray and that he was an old man.

“When he hit me, he never spoke about it and I pretended it didn't happen. It was a problem, sure, but at the time I didn't think there was anything really wrong with him. Drinking and hitting once in a blue moon isn't the worst thing you can do to a kid. I had to go on; we had

to go on. It's the longer things that are worse, the things that leave a mark no one can see. The thing is, I felt him at weird times, when I thought I was alone, or knew I was alone, and I knew he was fifty or a hundred miles away in the forest somewhere, or maybe in the caves, thousands of feet down, lighting up the darkness. Even then, it felt like he was right behind me, watching my every move. I'd turn around and see nothing, thinking it might have been a hallucination, but no. Every time I turned around, nothing moved, and everything was quiet. Only the birds chirped or the wind blew in the grass. In fact, now that I think about it, my hallucinations stopped for a while after I moved in, maybe a year or two. That time of peace and ordinary life only added to the way I felt about the house, that it might be the best home in the whole world. I mean, it was. It was the most wonderful, comfortable home I'd ever lived in, but the invisible shadow of my uncle crept in everything I did.

“Don't go past the fence.’

“Stay in the house after dark.’

“Watch out for snakes.’

“I heard him wherever I went, whatever I did. It just hadn't set in at the time; I was too in love with that house, that land.

“I guess I was kind of a dumb kid. You can imagine what would happen when a kid gets their own new world. I didn't go to school. I read whatever my uncle brought into the house, usually books about the area, ‘Legends and myths of the Southwest,’ things like that. We did have one bible in the house, and my uncle read it almost nightly, but I never touched it. He left it on my bed every now and then hoping I'd read it, though. I was just too interested in the outside to care about reading. When leaving those kind of hits didn't work, he tried retelling the bible stories like they happened to him, like he was there when Jesus did this or that. He slipped them

in so nicely in between his stories of the service and the border patrol and exploring the park, I believed him, at least the core of what he was trying to say in those stories. After all, he was my uncle, my caregiver, provider of everything. I loved him. He could never lie to me, or keep anything from me. And there's evidence if you ever needed any that I was a dumb kid.”

Elizabeth never took herself too seriously. She laughed whenever she thought about her younger self and the mistakes she made. Her favorite ones were typical of the naivety of youth, the energy and curiosity to figure things out on her own. The sun, the wind, the magic of the natural world, and the warmth of that home, those things he took very seriously. Serious isn't the right word. They were the most important things in the world for her, since they entirely made up her world, which was encompassed in darkness. They were her her happiness, her tragedies, these were the birds and lizards she chased in the black. I could tell she missed them dearly as we sat in a cafe in the big city, surrounded by building and car and person for miles and miles around.

I could tell it when she talked about Emily, which, whenever I asked her, was when she seemed upset that I changed the subject. She told me nothing had changed, that Emily still talked with her. Over little chats here and there she learned much more about Emily than she expected. She was, unexpectedly, a child prodigy in music. She played many different instruments and mastered complex music theory at a very young age. Unfortunately, for a many child prodigies, including Emily, the career opportunities slim down when they reach a certain age, after they peak and achieve relatively the same abilities as aged, lifetime-practiced musicians. Some don't. Some go on to do amazing things, create music never heard before, ultimately reaching immortality for their works of art. These prodigies have names like Mozart, or Du Pré, and still so many even in old age develop tragic flaws. Emily was still relatively young, but already

reaching her peak. She was blessed with a gift, but she also needed more than just talent. She told Elizabeth she needed to make more money than occasional playing brought her, so she went back to school. She was only twenty, younger than when most people even get their first degree, and Emily already had two: one in piano performance and one in music theory. After playing in several symphony-orchestras and sometimes touring the Midwest's high schools and colleges, her local symphonies closed and the musicians of normal talents and low ambitions returned to the normal working life, and since Emily had known no different she didn't know where to turn. She took a temporary job as a bank teller after her time in music school and found it interesting, the way strangers exchanged money, the trust in people to hand over their entire lives to an eighteen year old bank teller. She wanted to know more, to see how far the trust went. Then, in her second year in her program, she was an intern for the college working toward her accounting degree when she finally met Elizabeth at Ripley-Stoddard-Harris.

I think Elizabeth was impressed with her résumé, but she didn't let on. She was only concerned with the hallucination Emily, ghost Emily, at least during our conversations, by then turning into long walks through unexplored neighborhoods without names. She asked me why she could see Emily as a shadow, why she had seen her hair for that brief flash of a moment, why she hadn't seen it again in other encounters. I said that I wasn't sure, that it probably had something to do with her mind filling in the gaps of what she knew and what she couldn't see. However, despite the detailed visions, I told her not to get her hopes up for her vision being restored at all, and that I was pretty sure the damage was irreversible, especially without medical treatment for so long. She stayed quiet. We were walking east down John street in Capitol Hill, and she put her hands behind her back as I talked, rubbing her elbows with her hands.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I don’t mean that there isn’t any hope at all in your life. Look at you. You’ve made it this far without any sight, except for what your mind has constructed, and you did it so naturally. So many people need help. You need so little. You’re an inspiration to a lot of people I’ve met, and I wish they could meet you too. Do you understand that?”

We kept walking.

“Elizabeth, if you’re hoping I can cure you, I’m afraid you’re hoping for too much. If I’m wrong in thinking that, I have to ask, what exactly do you need from me?”

She lifted her head up and stopped in front of an apartment building, and, as if I wasn’t even there, she said, “Those bushes, they’re raspberries. They smell good. They’re going to bloom soon. Maybe a week. I think less.” And with that we continued walking.

I wanted to tell her something reassuring, but she shrugged off my attempts. I wanted her to know that no hope was a good thing, that the nothingness that encompassed her life shouldn’t be lamented but celebrated, and that others might get through their own health challenges no matter how trivial or far removed from her own. I didn’t understand why she resisted, what she held onto. What scared me was if I found that same thing, would I hold onto it as strongly as she did? Would I fall as deeply into my own world as Elizabeth fell into hers?

My own worries and insecurities were once again put on hold when, one morning, Elizabeth called and said we needed to talk. She saw more of Emily, not the ghost, but the person everyone seemed to see. This time, while she was eating lunch at her desk, Emily walked past her, put her hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder, and walked on. As the ghost of Emily left the room, floating toward the door, Elizabeth saw her hair return, long, brown; she could see every detail, every light that bounced off every strand. She beamed as she told me. Her unusual interactions

with and hallucinations of Emily developed a consistent emotional reaction from Emily, unlike any of her other hallucinations she had, by then, grown too used to.

Every time they met, it was as if she was discovering her condition all over again. Then just as Emily was almost all the way out the door, she turned a little bit, maybe moving around to face Elizabeth, but she stopped, turned back and she was gone. Elizabeth told me she saw her skin, her eyes, that little part of her face above the lips that almost looked her right in her own eyes. As she spoke, I've never seen her so excited and yet so disappointed at the same time. I imagine she had the same series of looks on her face when Emily turned away. I didn't know what to tell her. I only listened as she told me over and over the exact color of Emily's skin, her eyes, what went through her head as she took all of this newness in. She held her hands up while she talked, as if she was sculpting her face from a piece of clay, and when she'd get really excited she'd clench her fists and laugh, with heavy breaths. She was adorable. And then as fast as she spoke she quieted down remembering how Emily didn't turn all the way back toward her. Her face was a dead plant, withered in the sun. There was no way to save her by then, nothing I could do anyway. Only Elizabeth could do that, or maybe Emily, I hoped.

Another audio transcript of Elizabeth, revealing more about her uncle:

Once every few months, we hiked the mountains on the other side of the hills. I wasn't allowed to hike by myself, obviously, no matter how much I wanted to. He drove us through the gate and out into the wild, and I after we crossed into it I never knew where exactly we were, whether we were five minutes or five hours from the cabin. He parked in a lot still in the desert, and we

had to hike through a canyon and into the mountain forests. That first part of the canyon was completely dried up.

It had been years since the river flowed through it, my uncle said. He guided me with one hand and told me what was coming up, a little rock here, or a short step-up there. When the canyon got narrow enough I could feel both sides of the sandy rock walls with both hands. Building that world of twisting rock and dried up river bed all over again in my head was pretty hard. I mean, I'm pretty sure I'd seen the Grand Canyon on T.V. when I could still see, but that's so much different, not just the size of it but all the little details. My uncle did a pretty good job of describing it to me. We stopped often so he could have me hold things, figure them out. We even explored a cave once. It wasn't that big, but Uncle lowered me in by holding onto my hand, and we walk around inside it for almost a half hour. I don't think there was much in there; the floor was pretty flat. Not even bats used it. It was still fun though. Another time we stopped because Uncle found a beehive.

Well, I found it, because I said, "What's that buzzing sound?" He spotted it and told me to wait where I was. About a minute later he came back and told me to hold out my hand. He put something about the size of a quarter in it, round like a rock, but soft, like a strawberry. It was sticky all over. After I carefully turned it over and around in my hand, he finally said what it was: honey from the bees dripped down onto a little prickly pear. He said he picked all the thorns off it before he gave it to me. "Go ahead," he said, "eat it. The pear is oozing juice." When I popped it in my mouth, it was like wow! I've never tasted anything so

sweet and perfect in all my life. Uncle was showing me so many amazing things, even if I couldn't see.

After hours of hiking, I'd start to feel more and more shade, until before I knew it we were in the forest. I'd never been in the forest before Uncle took me. It was so much cooler in there than the desert, especially after that long hike up. Once we got to the true forest, we only went a little farther before Uncle decided to set up camp. He carried everything on his back: tent, poles, blankets, food, water. The only thing I carried was my sleeping bag, which was pretty light, and whatever I could fit in my pockets, like band-aids or things I picked up along the way. Even though I didn't carry much, Uncle still had me do a lot of work, helping him set up camp. He didn't let me slide by.

I think it was good for me. Sure, I'd end up with cuts and scrapes, but I knew better for next time. Later our hikes were easier, and we could go that much farther because I finally got the hang of what we were doing. But getting going that first time was tough. That first hike and sleeping out there in the mountains was something else. Back at the cabin, we were out in nowhere, and I heard sounds carrying for miles, and on nights when it was about to rain, I heard things even farther than that. You ever hear a coyote yelping in the middle of the night? How about its pups squeaking away in a hole nobody will ever find? I have, right from my own window.

But in the forest, sounds don't carry far. You can only hear what's right there, and in my mind, that meant if there was a bear or something bad it would be too late to do anything. It was scary, especially since I hadn't seen a bear or a

wolf or anything else up close in real life, and I wasn't sure exactly what kind of noises they made. I think Uncle could tell I was scared, so he waited until he heard more stomping right outside the tent, then he whispered in my ear, "Deer." I knew what that was. I'd seen them on T.V. and knew they were gentle, nervous most of the time, and that they ate grass like a cow or a horse. After a few minutes of them roaming around our tent, sniffing everything, I heard little stomps, so small you could barely hear them. Baby deer. I wanted to see them so badly. Then they left, just like that.

I couldn't go back to sleep after that. I stayed sitting up in the tent listening for more, in case they came back, but nothing. I waited and waited until I started to get sleepy again, then I heard leaves brushing around past some trees nearby. I held my breath and waited, and then I heard it again a few seconds later. It was softer than before, not the muffled stomping like the deer made. I guess it saw something because then it ran off through the woods. Uncle leaned in again and this time whispered, "Mountain lion." I gasped but covered my mouth, in case it heard. I was so scared. Then Uncle spoke louder.

"Don't worry, it's not coming back. It's just as scared as you are."

"Really?" I said. "How do you know?"

He said, "It's after those deer." And I think he could tell from me staying quiet that I was upset about the deer, so he said, "Cheer up. The lion has to survive, too."

I thought for a bit, and asked him, "Uncle, does everything have to die?"

"Yes."

After some more quiet he said, “Let me show you something.” He unzipped the tent door and stepped outside. I was too scared of the mountain lion so I stayed where I was, but a few seconds later he called out, “Are you coming?” I slipped my shoes on, put on a sweater, and went out there. “Follow my voice,” he said. I turned toward him and walked until I was almost on top of him, and he said, “Stop. Lay down.” He had spread out a blanket on the ground and was already laying on it. I got next to him and we both looked up toward the sky, but only one of us could see it.

He said, “Do you remember what stars look like?”

“Yes,” I said. “Like dots of light.”

“How many do you remember there being when you looked up at them?” he asked.

“In the whole sky? I don’t know. A lot.”

“How many, do you think? If you had to guess.”

“Fifty maybe.”

“Is that with planets?”

“What do you mean?”

“Planets don’t twinkle. Stars do. Do you remember how many planets you could see on a normal day?”

“Not really. They all looked like stars to me.”

“There are nine planets—” this was before the news about Pluto— “There are nine planets, and you can only see five of them without a telescope,” he said. “Even if they were all in the sky at the same time, which almost never happens,

that means five of the stars you saw in the sky were planets. And that means if you saw around fifty stars, only forty-five of them were actually stars.”

“Oh.”

“Count to forty-five on your fingers. When you get to ten, start again.” I did, and when I finished he said, “Now do you have an idea of how many that is? Can you see them in the sky?”

“Yes.”

“Now,” he said, “Imagine twice that. Imagine a hundred stars, and five planets, all over the sky in different places. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Now imagine fifty times that. What does it look like?”

“I don’t know. That’s so many. It’s like they’re painted on. There’s hardly any sky. I can’t even count.”

“That’s what’s up there, right above your head. I’m looking right at it.”

I couldn’t really believe it. “How come I could only see fifty back home?”

“I told you,” he said, “this is your home. You used to be in the city. The lights from streets and cars and houses brighten up the sky. They even make it a little purple. Do you remember the purple?”

“A little, I think.”

“Well out here, except for the stars, the sky is all completely black, and each star has its own little color. Some look red or yellow, others look blue. And right through the middle of all of them is the Milky Way, which looks like clouds of stars all lined up like a giant crack in the sky. That has a purple shadow to it.

Everything has its own color. Amazing, the things you can see when you find yourself in total darkness.”

I couldn't help but think of my old home, even if my uncle pretended like it wasn't even a home, just a place I happened to live for most of my life. I figured then was as good a time as any to ask him what happened. So I said, “Uncle, why did I leave?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean, why did I leave my mom and dad? I know they weren't living together, but I could still see my dad sometimes if I wanted, and all my things were there. They weren't much but that was home.” He stayed quiet, so I tried to explain. “I mean, don't get me wrong, I love it here. This is the most wonderful home I've ever seen. Well, you know, not seen, but been in. It's so beautiful, even if I can't see it. I wouldn't trade it for the world. But what happened? Why did I have to leave? Why did you have to take me away?”

Without any pause at all, even almost interrupting me, he said, “Your parents didn't want you.” There it was. Out in the open. I was too shocked to say anything. Then after a second he added, “They did love you though. They loved you more than anything, but neither wanted the responsibility of raising you. This is hard to explain. You're young. You'll understand someday.”

Something inside me stirred around. I was getting angry. I wanted to know more, about what exactly he was saying. So I said, “I want to know today.” I heard him turn his head to look at me, as I was staring up at the stars I couldn't see. Finally, he gave in just a little.

“They both wanted you, just not then. Neither could really afford to keep you, along with their things. So during the divorce, your father tried to file a special clause that your mother couldn't leave town, in case she took you with her. They wanted to raise you when you were old enough to help them, almost when you were already an adult. But it was the little things. One wanted to take enough from the other to show the judge that you couldn't live with them. They really tore at each other. By the end of the whole thing, both of them had hardly anything.”

“Why? Why would they do that?”

“For you. They wanted to give you everything. They just went about it all wrong.”

I never figured out why both of them were willing to do so much for something neither of them ever really understood.

“What's wrong?” he asked, after sitting there for some time.

“Nothing, I just don't know what to say, or what to feel.”

“You should feel proud. Even after all that, after seeing all that you've seen, when your parents didn't think you were watching, you are strong, and smart, and you will learn everything you can about your new home, better than anyone alive with perfectly good eyes. I will teach you. Just do everything I say.”

That's how one of our first night hikes went together, and when dark thoughts started to creep back into my life after such an amazing beginning there. Uncle revealed something my parents wouldn't dare tell me as long as they lived. Every day I thought more about what I didn't know, about the stars, about my

parents, about who wrote those letters to my mom. In the months between our hikes, while I was confined to the cabin and to the yard, I thought about swimming. All those years I worked hard to grow a body just like the swimmers on T.V. had, even though I had never been in water deeper than a foot. Every night I balanced on my ribs on the floor. I stretched out like a surfboard. My shoulders were finally broad and my waist was still thin. I measured my body across the floorboards and wood panels on the walls, so everything was accurate. I practiced the backstroke standing up every morning. My arms moved like the propellers I saw on the Olympics years earlier. I was sure that as soon as someone had the chance to throw me in the water, I would dive in and flick my spine like a whip, just like those swimmers. All I needed was the water. The only body of water I ever found on that land was on those hikes we took. It was the shallow river that used to run through the canyon. Its course changed every year, but uncle kept track of it, and knew where to find it when we came to the old bed, dried up. We'd walk farther up until we found the river. I'd listen for it and point us in the right direction. The first time we did this, my uncle introduced me to a ritual he started. We never stopped at the river on the way to camp, only on the way back to the cabin as kind of a reward for going so hard in the hot sun. We'd walk along the river until we found a quiet part diverting away from the fast-moving middle. Usually it was hidden behind a little island of trees and bushes, my uncle said. He put down his pack, had me kneel down with him at the water's edge, and dip his entire head in the water. When he lifted it out, he took my hand and let me feel his head, cooling down in the boiling heat. I learned for the first time then that he was

bald. I felt his cheek and could tell he was smiling really big. Then he said, “Your turn.” My hair in a braid, I took off my hat and dunked my face, then lowered my head in up to my neck. The feeling of hot skin dipping into ice-cold water is the best. I almost gasped when I did it but stopped myself, since I would’ve drank in a big gulp of water. My eyes were closed but I think, for a moment, I had another hallucination, the first in a long, long time. It could’ve been the heat, or the fatigue of walking for so long, the new environment of the forest and the outdoors, or just my imagination, but in the dark and silence under the slowly flowing river water, I thought I saw myself swimming, as if I was entirely submerged, my hair floating up and around me, feeling completely weightless in a way I’d never felt before, a feeling that I would dream about for years and years in perfecting my body to prepare for water, real water, whenever I would find it again. The water found me. I think that was one of Uncle’s unintended consequences of taking me on those hikes. He didn’t count on me holding onto something so small, so simple as the feeling of water on my skin and in my hair. He didn’t count on me chasing it.

The brain needs not only perceptual input but perceptual *change*, and the absence of change may cause not only lapses of arousal and attention but perceptual aberrations as well. Whether darkness and solitude is sought out by holy men in caves or forced upon prisoners in lightless dungeons, the deprivation of normal visual input can stimulate the inner eye instead, producing dreams, vivid imaginations, or hallucinations[...] At first test subjects tended to fall asleep,

but then, on awakening, they became bored and craved stimulation—stimulation not available from the impoverished and monotonous environment they were in. And at this point, self-stimulation of various sorts began: mental games, counting, fantasies, and, sooner or later, visual hallucinations[...]

–Oliver Sacks

Prithee, see there!

Behold – look – lo, how say you?

Why, what care I? (*to Ghost*) If thou canst nod, speak too.

If charnel houses and our graves must send

Those that we bury back, our monuments

Shall be the maws of kites.

–Macbeth

It is proposed that normal perception, imagination and hallucination can be integrated in a perceptual continuum. This perceptual continuum is reconstructed as a representational system in which the perceiving person is embedded in his/her environment. Incorporating the characteristic hallucinatory feature, i.e., the experience of a real perception without adequate stimulus, hallucinations are interpreted as misrepresentations in which the subjective reality judgement and the objective reality status are, when seen from a third-person perspective, discordant.

–Kai Vogele

Patients with psychosis seek help because of disturbing experiences: odd beliefs, altered perceptions, and distressing emotions. Clinicians using DSM-IV characterize these patients on the basis of phenomenology. Thus, at a clinical level the doctor-patient interaction proceeds mainly at a “mind” or “behavioral” level of description and analysis. On the other hand, the preeminent theories regarding psychosis and schizophrenia are mainly neurobiological, and the centerpiece of intervention is pharmacological. Thus, theorizing and therapeutics proceed largely at a “brain” level of description and analysis. So, when the patient asks, “Doctor, how does my chemical imbalance lead to my delusions?” the doctor has no simple framework within which to cast an answer.

—Shitij Kapur

I didn't know what to tell Elizabeth. After our last meeting when she described hiking with her uncle, I didn't contact her for weeks, not only trying to find a way to present the complex workings of her own brain in a layman's terms-theory to this poor girl, but trying to find the theory itself. I was just a kid, fresh out of med school. Over the months and especially since losing my job, my own insecurities piled up all around my home in the form of dirty laundry, empty banana peels, extra flab, and an unfortunate little jelly bean succulent that perished on the top shelf of my bookcase. I even named him which made it all the more tragic. Farewell, Fred. So it goes.

Given that she hadn't bothered to call me, I suspected she was okay, and I used these weeks for “me time.” I cleaned, exercised, and enjoyed being outside again. I left the city and

hiked some familiar trails in the Cascades, where I ran into some old friends from undergrad. We talked trails and sports and women and other things, to each his own, that were escapes from the worlds back home, and the problems that those worlds contained, waiting. We talked into the night, slept at the same camp, and then, as if we had only seen each other yesterday and not half a decade earlier, we parted in opposite directions headed for different mountains, trailheads, and challenges. It was nice seeing them, though. It reminded me that people still functioned outside of their chaotic lives, that they had hobbies and distractions pleasant enough to forget, temporarily. If they could, so could I. I could, and probably should have, distanced myself from Elizabeth. I was getting too close to her. Through all our calls and meetings, the urge to hold and comfort her at her most vulnerable became stronger than ever. This time to myself was necessary. I felt much better, until she called again.

Even though she was vague about her reason for calling, I was too eager to see her to say no, and we met the next day. I didn't have anything prepared to say to her, but that didn't matter, given her natural inclination to speak almost without end (I think it's endearing). Waiting for me in Elliott Bay's cafe, she looked beautiful. She smiled as I walked to her table, and I thought it might finally be the time to give in and tell her how I felt. She didn't need comforting, clearly. She looked energetic, excited, like in those moments she remembered seeing bits of Emily and just before they vanished. I was confident, in better shape, closing in (sort of) on the cause of her condition. Things were going very well, between the both of us.

I asked her how she was, and she said much better. She still talked with Emily but hadn't seen any more of her in detail. The hair stayed, but the face hadn't. They were growing closer, and Emily revealed a little bit more about her own life. Her father was an artist, making light and water installations. She described as huge pieces of mechanical masterpieces that took up whole

rooms or warehouses, looking like incomplete constructions in the light, but in darkness they came alive as illusions of floating water backlit by colored glows and shimmers. Elizabeth said she had a hard time imagining what they might look like, but she was excited by the idea nonetheless. Her face lit up as she spoke. She raised her eyebrows high thinking about the lights and water swirling around the room, and a smile crept in as she talked about Emily. Then she said what I had hoped all along she wouldn't say.

“I think I like her.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, pretending not to know as my world fell down around me.

“You know.”

“Oh, well, have you told her? Or let on?”

“No. We work together. It wouldn't be right. But I've never met anyone like her before. She's told me almost everything about her. Her dreams, her family, her past, her dreams, her secrets, everything, she's shared it with me. And here I am wanting to tell her everything about me but I can't.”

“You do with me.”

“You really think I do? Gosh no. I couldn't share everything. You think I'm that simple? That you can reduce me to a case study and that's all? I'm sorry but there's so much more.”

“I know there is. I didn't mean it that way.”

“You're my neurologist. More like my psychiatrist. You only know a fraction of what's inside my head. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were against what I have with Emily.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don't know, just that you're against it. Maybe you can't handle the idea of two women together.”

“What? No. That’s not true.”

She turned her coffee in her hand. I was sure it was cold by then.

“I’m not even sure if you know what that means,” I said.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“You said I wouldn’t even know what that means. That’s what you said. Are you talking about sex? Because I sure as hell know about that.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Besides, you’re just a kid, not even twenty-one yet.” I said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I do too,” she said. “You think I’m a virgin? Look who’s crazy now.”

“I said that wasn’t it.”

“What is it then?”

“Some people call it intimacy.”

She stopped turning the mug and lifted her head, as if she stared right at me. Several frightening seconds of this and she walked out, with my calls to her splashing on the walls of the cafe.

She disappeared again for several weeks. Another houseplant died. Then another. One by one, my garbage bin became a mass grave for houseplants. I didn’t realize I had so many. The decaying soil in the bin began to stink in my kitchen, but I was too afraid that if a neighbor saw me carrying the bag out he would look at me like the Hitler of houseplants. I discarded them, perhaps a bigger insult. I must have given up on finding her condition in my old textbooks, because those seemed to disappear along with the dwindling flora.

She called me one last time. It would be the last time I heard her voice, and I remember most of the conversation from memory. It was a long one.

“Don’t talk,” she said, “Just listen. Let me tell you about intimacy, okay? In those six weeks before we met last time, I had sex with three different guys, and not one of them even got near to looking at me the way Emily almost did that day. Not one of them would ever tell me anything about themselves I mean really about themselves, things you don’t just say to anyone. Emily doesn’t just tell me about what she does, her interests, her father. She tells me things no one would ever tell me, not even you. Oh and I didn’t tell you, but I saw more of her again, this time her whole face, and it stayed there. I see it all the time now. Everything from the top of her head to the bottom of her neck, I can see every little thing. Sometimes, if I focus hard enough, I can see her hands, and they’re as wonderful as every bit of her face. Whatever is with you when it comes to me and Emily, you have to understand that I can’t let go of this. You understand that, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “I would never take that away from you.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I got so upset. I didn’t mean to hurt you, if I did.

“Summer is lunar in the desert. We were exploring the cave one time. My uncle found a little passage opened up when some boulders fell from the ceiling and knocked a whole wall down. The passage went a couple hundred feet back into the cave. He went in front of me with a couple flashlights, one in his hand and one on his head, while I trailed behind really close. I didn’t need a light. It was just as dark on the surface as it was in the deepest part of that cave. When we got to the end of the passage we stopped and ate a snack.

“How many caves are there around here?”

“‘Hundreds,’ he said. ‘That we know of. Many more, I’m sure. They probably won’t find all of them.’

“‘Are they like this one?’

“‘Technically, yes; they all formed the same way.’

“‘How?’

“‘Well, most form because a river cuts through rock, like a river through a canyon, only underground. The caves around here formed from gas leaking up from deep, deep underground, and when it found water near the surface, it made acid, and ate away at the rock until it finally saw daylight.’

I drew in the dirt with my finger.

“‘It took a long time, though, millions of years.’

“‘Why won’t they find them all?’

“‘Not all reach daylight.’

“‘How do you know they’re there, then?’”

“‘Well, they found one cave by listening to the rocks, and digging down until they found one of the most beautiful caves in the world. It’s not far from here, but they don’t let anybody in, so it won’t get destroyed. That’s how they found it though, by listening for wind. If there’s enough cave and enough cracks in the rocks, the wind blows through it. You have to lay on the ground with your ear to the rocks for many hours, but if you listen hard, you’ll hear the wind, and if you’re lucky, the drip-drip of water somewhere down in the dark, where nobody’s ever been.’

“‘How many have you seen?’

“‘Caves? I don’t know. Dozens. There’s some good ones in the Franklin mountains north of El Paso.’

“I tried to draw a map in the sand, to give me an idea of where everything was.

“‘We have family out there,’ he said. ‘You’ve never met them. Well, once when you were three, maybe four, but I don’t think you remember it. It was only for a couple days. I haven’t talked with them for a long time.’ He finished his snack and balled up the wrapper in his hands before stuffing it in his pocket. Then with a mouthful of fruit bar, he said, ‘Besides, you don’t want to go there.’

“‘Why?’

“Total quiet.

“‘The border can be dangerous.’”

“I didn’t want to bother him anymore, so I finished my own bar while he turned us around. Not another word was said, and we left the cave, climbing out the same way we came in. He was so strange sometimes. He was set in his ways, and I never dared defy them, mostly out of fear of losing that home I came to love. But I didn’t have a choice. Everything I knew before him was gone. That’s the tragedy, isn’t it? That after it happened, the divorce I mean, my parents’ and my uncle’s ideas about family and loyalty and love, everything they believed in, weren’t shattered. They were strengthened. That’s something a lot of people can’t figure out, or can’t accept, just like those same people can’t accept any other way to live.

“You want to know something funny? From the second night after I arrived and continuing for a while after the divorce, I noticed my uncle settled the both of us into a weird routine. I hadn’t seen anything like it. Every night, Uncle came home, took off his tool belt with his work phone, flashlight, and multi-tool, and we listened to the news on the radio, for hours

and hours. I sat quietly and played with a toy or other things while whoever it was on the radio yelled himself hoarse. While it was on, I wasn't sure if I was allowed to say anything. Uncle seemed so engulfed in whatever had just occurred, in a place he had never been to and never would visit, to people he would never meet, all reported back to us through a man on the radio. And Uncle, he prayed for those people, softly to himself. I could barely hear him whisper it. He'd even tear up a little sometimes. Then, when they ran out of news late at night, some ads came on for exercise machines like "The Ab-literator" or something like that, and Uncle abandoned the for a record player he'd had since the seventies. He'd play the saddest songs he could find in his stack of records as loud as the player could go. I think it was kind of like a memorial for whoever just died on the news, whatever little girl went missing.

"Bye, bye, Miss American pie.'

"I always wondered if any little black girls went missing. Or little boys.

"Hello darkness, my old friend.'

"I like that one. So slow and sad. I still listen to it when I can.

"For a while I thought he was an expert in everything: music, art, history. But for every sentence about that, he had another closing the subject altogether when I started asking more about it.

"Politics are complicated. There are things you just can't understand, yet.'

"Don't go past the fence without me; you can't trust neighbors. That's why we live out here, alone.'

"You have enough things here. Don't ask questions.'

"Don't ask questions.

“His voice rang around in me like a bell in rickety bell tower. I thought I was going to be swallowed whole. I thought, how was it possible that a place I could finally call home, a place that sung to me when I woke up and perfumed my lungs with sweet and spice and cradled me as I slept, could be so flawed? How was it that a man that I was sure loved me and would cherish me as long as I lived, a man that was so wise and on the surface so welcoming, could be wearing a veil? How was it that a feeling unlike any other I had ever had, coursing hot in my hands and face, could be cold? ‘Don’t ask questions,’ he said! This was what I was saying about there being worse things than drunkenness or hitting. I was heartbroken.

“Anyway, the nightly ritual, which went on for weeks or maybe months, wore me down somewhat. I joined him in listening to the radio, and in listening to the music, and remembering the people I had never met. Sometimes I cried along with him, forcing myself. Not that their far away stories weren’t tragic. It’s just, I lived there, so far away, with my uncle, and I had to cry hard, or hide in my room and pray and flex my cheeks until tears finally dribbled from my eyes and it was okay because I had suffered inside and cried alone. About a year after the divorce, after the ritual finally died down, when the smells and colors and textures of that tiny corner of the country swelled in me like a bright balloon, I was more comfortable than ever, but no less curious about my uncle. One night, he sat at the oven and flipped through a magazine. While he read, we talked about when we’d go on our next hike, how long we’d be gone. It was almost May. Uncle said the high during the day was already in the nineties. Inside, the cabin was cool, but it still got really cold at night in the desert. I almost always had my blanket around my shoulders, especially since he got the chair right in front of the oven. I didn’t mind, though. Sitting there in that room with him, surrounded by all the warmth and smells and textures of the house, made the worst of my past seem so far away, almost invisible. I finally decided to ask him

again about my parents, about why they hadn't tried to call or find me since, and that maybe they wanted me now that things were different, and I was older.

“He said, ‘Your parents loved you. And they loved each other, very much. Never forget.’

“‘But I always saw them fighting,’ I said.

“‘You were little. You didn't know what fighting was. You still don't know. And besides, a good fight every now and then is healthy.’

“‘But it wasn't every now and then,’ I said, ‘It was all the time.’

“‘Trust me,’ he said, ‘I know a lot more than you, and it was fine. They loved each other, until evil tore them apart and took you away from them. Evil is everywhere, and you have to keep a close watch. Thanks to him they're gone and you'll never hear from them again. So you can't ever forget. That's it, end of discussion.’

“‘Who's, “him?”’

“‘End of discussion,’ he said again.

“‘You said, “Thanks to him.” Thanks to who?’

“‘I said that's enough,’ he rumbled.

“I stopped arguing and went to my room. I guess it was my age or a number of other things, but I cried, most of the night actually. I scribbled in my notebook, too, the same thing over and over: DZD. DZD. Different styles, different angles, they all spelled the same thing. I knew some overlapped and some fit inside the others, even if I couldn't see any of it. I reached the last page and flipped the notebook over, starting again on the undersides of the pages, until it was all filled up again. I wrote and wrote until I fell asleep.

“The next morning my notebook was gone. I always remember exactly where everything is in my room when I leave or go to sleep. I just know when something is half an inch out of

place, or sometimes even when it's been picked up and put back down again. Something is different about it. But this time, the notebook was gone entirely. I didn't know what to do. He already left for work and wouldn't be back for hours, so I sat in the living room and waited. I made sure to sit in his chair by the oven, so that he would know I was mad. A couple hours after sunset, he came home. Funny, I still don't remember which park he exactly rangled for.

“Anyway, when he showed up I didn't waste any time in asking him, ‘Uncle, my notebook has gone missing. Have you seen it?’ He didn't say a word, just walked right in, put his bag down on the couch, and went about starting the fire for the oven. I heard him shoving the wood in, the scraping and pounding of stacks, and I asked him again, ‘Have you seen it?’

“Then he said, ‘Yeah.’ That's it, just ‘Yeah.’

“So I said, ‘Well, can I have it back?’ but I already knew the answer, because underneath his silence I knew he had looked inside, read all those scribbles of initials that he obviously recognized as the man who wrote to my mother. The whole time I'm thinking this and he's just stacking and stacking wood. Sounds like blocks falling. Then I knew what he was doing.

“I shouted from my chair and grabbed at his shirt, “‘No, Uncle, don't burn it! Please! Don't burn it!’ But it didn't matter. In his mind he had already done it. It was just a matter of getting the flames going, of keeping the match lit as he stuck his arm halfway through that black oven door. I cried and begged him to stop, and a minute later the fire was going. Then as I stuttered for breaths he took me by the arm and said, ‘This is something you don't need to know. This is evil you should never have to see. I told you, that part of your life is over. This—here, me, us—is all that matters now.’ Then he tossed the notebook into the oven. I wailed like a baby all night, until I had no tears left. My uncle sat there drinking all night. When I had the energy, I finally asked him, ‘What was his name?’

“In a sloppy, almost happy way, he said, ‘You wanna know? Okay. I’ll tell you. D is for Dave. Z— Z is for Zimpert. Z-i-m-p-e-r-T! And the last D— that D is for DeThaw. Duh. Thaaaawww. Dave Zimpert DeThaw. He’s the one you should hate, not me. He’s the one who broke up your parents. What a fucking idiot, sending your mom those letters, fucking her at parties, as if nobody would know. I was a thousand miles away and even I knew. The women in our family talk. They’ll find a way to tell me something like that. They always do. Dave! What a fucking idiot! Ha-ha, you’re a fucking idiot, Dave! Elizab— Elizabiff— E-Liz-Uh-Beth! You believe me, right? He’s the one that’s responsible for the shitty life you had. If it wasn’t for him, your mom would’ve loved your dad, and you, and everything would’ve been fine. You would’ve never had to leave, never would’ve have to come out here, never would’ve been through half the things you’ve been through. I tried to protect you from all that. I made your home perfect. Perfect! You have everything you could want here. And when I die, you know I’ll love you whatever you do, but in my heart, I hope you take good care of the house, and that you remember everything I taught you here. You know that, right? Course you do. Now forget about him. Don’t bother figuring out who he is. It’ll just bring you more pain. Don’t even think about it. Now go on, go to your room. I have to work tomorrow. I’ll be gone all day. Then, day after tomorrow, we get to go hiking. Bet you’re excited for that. But you gotta sleep now. Go— oh no. I spilled my drink. And this shirt’s still clean. Yet here’s a spot. Go on, now. Go to your room.’

“He took his own advice instead, wobbling across the living room, and he slammed his bedroom door behind him, leaving me there on the floor, clutching on the wall. My hands were shaking so bad. That was the last time, well almost the last time, that I talking with him about my parents, and definitely the last time I mentioned Dave’s name out loud until today. Gosh it’s been so long. I’m sorry. It’s just that for the longest time, I thought my uncle was right, that Dave

ruined my life. For the most part, everything made sense when he told me, and it followed that Dave was the worst, most terrible man in the whole world. From the moment I saw his initials and smelled his flowers in the books from my mom's closet, he haunted me. I had more visions, sometimes two or three a day. The ghost of DZD floated far out along the hills past the stick-and-wire fence, or in the corners of my room that would disappear the second I looked. Sometimes I fell asleep and all I saw the whole night was his dark shape, outlined by a bright light like some horrible eclipse, and I knew he was staring at me. On the quietest nights, I heard his voice, maybe from somewhere behind the cracking of the fire in the oven. 'Go,' he said. 'Go, now.' I never knew what that meant. I didn't care what he had to say. I hated him. Even his name.

"Dave. Zimpert. DeThaw.

"I rolled it around in my mouth, and it tasted terrible. Like rotten lemons.

DZD.

"I still hear it sometimes.

"He became my new hallucinations, my ghosts, and my terrors. I'd never even met him, and he was as much a part of my reality as my imaginations. Because I could never tell how he fit into my life, he fell in that in-between space, and I hated that space because I couldn't tell what was coming. As far as I knew, in the reality he was the man who ruined my parents, and the man who ruined me. In the imaginary, he was a shadow I knew behind my nightmares. Either way he almost destroyed my life, and I never forgave him for it. My uncle was right about everything. How could he be wrong about this? I told you I was a dumb kid."

I could hear it in her voice that our conversation was winding down soon, but I tried to keep her talking as long as I could.

“By the way,” she said, “my hallucinations are getting worse. I mean, they’re happening a lot more often, more than ever. They’re also getting scarier. Riding the bus is almost unbearable when a horrible monster appears out of nowhere, and nobody else can see it. I’m sorry we won’t be able to continue my treatment in person.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “We’ll never see each other again?”

“Not right now. I can’t say never again, but not right now.”

“So you know how I feel then?”

“I have an idea. I’m so sorry, but you can’t know where I am right now. You understand.”

“I do. I can’t say I’m not disappointed.”

“I know. You’ve been so kind, and one of the best listeners I’ve ever found. But you must have known from the beginning that after I finished telling you my story, we could never see each other again.”

“Why?”

“You listen, but like I said, I haven’t told you everything.”

It’s all about what you don’t say, right?”

“Now you’re starting to understand.”

She laughed and I remembered how much I missed the sound.

“I used to love movies,” she said. “Uncle used to watch Stalag 17.”

“I know that one,” I said.

“I loved it. It was so funny, and really sad at some parts. I was just a little kid, though. War, sex, prison, those things meant nothing to me. I didn’t understand just how sad the whole thing was until I got older and understood everything. Then the sad parts got even sadder. That’s

kind of been my life. The older I got, the more I understood everything. Here I am and I still don't understand *everything* about what I've seen, what I've done. But talking to you and to Emily has really helped. I feel like I'm not the only one out there. Being able to see Emily has also really helped. Her eyes, the first time I saw them, so blue, the bluest blue, really woke something up in me I hadn't felt in a long time. Hopefully I'll be seeing more of her soon, until eventually she's an entire person. That would be wonderful."

"Does that mean you're not leaving the city?"

"I wasn't planning on it. But I wasn't planning on leaving the cabin either, and look how that turned out."

"How *did* you leave it? I mean, what made you leave?"

A car horn honked somewhere in the distance wherever she was, and she stayed very quiet. I asked her again, "Elizabeth, what made you leave?"

"I'm sorry. I haven't told anybody about it, not even Emily, yet. You have to promise to never tell anyone. I don't know what would happen, or what I would do if anyone found out. Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"One evening, my uncle came home very tired. He took off his tool belt as usual and, after eating a little dinner, fell asleep in his room. I stayed in the living room, brushing my hair and stretching out my legs, when his work phone on the belt started ringing, something it had never done before. It rang and rang but I didn't answer it. I hated the idea of picking up and having the other person stay quiet waiting for the voice they wanted to answer. It rang eight or nine times and finally stopped. Then a beep said that whoever called left a message. I ignored it

for a while, but then it rang again some hours later. Uncle still didn't get up, so I went over to it. Feeling the plastic of the phone, I felt helpless that I couldn't look at the number and recognize it. I doubt I would even if I saw it. I let it keep ringing again, until it stopped and the person calling left another message. The rest of the night passed silently and the phone never rang again.

“Next morning, my uncle slept in because he didn't have to work. The birds woke me up as they always did. I was about to do the little chase I always did with them in the mornings, when the phone rang again. I waited, and still Uncle wouldn't get up to answer it. The ringing was so loud in my head. I thought somebody could hear it ringing miles away. I don't know what got into me. I guess it was all the times he let me touch his things on his shelves, everything in the house really. This felt no different. It was calling out to me to touch it, and I listened. I opened the phone, put it to my ear, said, 'Hello,' and heard the clearest, brightest voice.

““Hey, Biff.’

“The sun came in through the windows and hit my face. I heard the birds taking off through the grass and past the fence, where they waited for me to join them. The day and my mother waited for me to speak. When I opened my mouth to greet them, my uncle burst into the room, grabbed the phone from my hands, and threw it against the adobe wall where it shattered like glass. Ten long years played in my mind like a movie, in a few seconds' time. I saw every memorable moment with my uncle burn up into a false negative. He was a black blur in frames of film with beautiful scenes in the expansive background. For almost ten years he had me believe I was unwanted, hated even, like a nasty, crawling bug. If he wanted me to remain sealed here in this little jar of a home, alone, abandoned by the fantastic, dangerous world beyond the fence, he had another thing coming. He treated me like a helpless orphan. Fine. I would orphan myself, from him.

“I ran into the fields. I also ran into the fence because I wasn’t counting my steps, but I climbed over it and kept on running. I ran and ran and ran, before I fell into the cave. The same cave I explored many times with my uncle swallowed me up. I burned up my knees, elbows, and palms. Then, as I tried reaching out toward nothing in the dark, I heard a rattle. It got louder and faster, and I knew what it was, even though I never heard it in my life. I remembered to stop, but backing away my heels and hands touched the cave wall before I made it an inch, with the snake right in front of me, no way of knowing when it would leap out and kill me.

“I hoped with everything the wall I felt was one I could climb. Every second I didn’t move felt like a year, and the rattle rang louder than any bell. Finally she climbed out and limped back to the cabin. When she got there, her uncle was waiting.

“Bloody and full of bruises, I burst through the cabin door and found my uncle sitting there in his chair by the oven, bottle of something in his hand. I waited for him to say something, but instead, he got up and slapped me harder than ever. But I’d been through enough that day; nothing could scare me anymore. He shook the room as he yelled, “Where were you?” I held my head down to the ground, biting my lip I was so angry, and I wiped some tears from my eyes and nose. I very calmly said, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” he said.

“I’d had it, and I screamed as loud as I’ve ever screamed, “Why didn’t you tell me?” I screamed so loud my chest and throat hurt, but I kept going. “My mom called,” I said. “She called me Biff. Only my mom calls me Biff. That means she’s looking for me. Why did you say they didn’t want me? Why didn’t you tell me they’ve been looking for me?” He stood very quiet. I turned to the closed front door and screamed again, pounding my fists on the door, “Why didn’t you tell me? You knew the whole time! I hate you! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I heard him take another step to hit me from behind, so I moved out of the way just in time. He stumbled forward and crashed into the wall, knocking all sorts of things from his shelves. I felt the heaviest one land near my foot, and I stooped down and grabbed it, holding it close to my chest. I begged him to stop, but he kept coming after me. I heard him tripping over the things that fell, trying to grab at me, and falling over at every swing. I was afraid. I didn’t know what else to do, so I gripped harder onto whatever I was holding in my hands, and I realized it was the ironwood wolf. One more growling leap at me, a heavy crack, and it was over.”

“You killed him.”

“I don’t know. I ran. I was too scared. I grabbed just a few things, took his truck, drove out the gates and down the one road that led to the cabin until I made it over the Pecos to Carlsbad. I know it seems crazy, me being blind. You want to know how I did it? I drove really slow through on that dirt road, feeling every little bump, and when I went into the weeds I turned back onto the dirt, the whole way. The road went straight to the highway, right where the sign is: Welcome to Carlsbad. It’s sort of raised, made to look fancy, so I felt it with my hands until I could read the whole thing. Carlsbad.

Before I went any farther, I backed up the truck down the dirt road a little bit and turned off of it and into the field. I figured it would look just like some rancher was out doing work out on the fence, or maybe that it was just a junker. It would be forever before they found it, and by then the dust would take care of them ever finding anything about me inside the truck. I walked the rest of the way to Carlsbad, 20 miles. Took me all day. I liked Carlsbad, even under the circumstances. It reminded me of my own city, where I lived with my parents: pretty as any small city, but a lonely place. And the river was much bigger than the one that ran near my little

canyon out on the edge of the mountains. I said to myself, I can't believe you're already missing that place. But then again, who wouldn't?. Or they'd just steal it. I didn't care. I left it there and walked the rest of the way into town, a couple miles. When I found the bus station I bought a ticket for the next Greyhound to leave. It was headed for Los Angeles. It could've been headed for Alaska for all I cared. I just wanted to get out of there. Then I remembered something my uncle once said. I knew the bus would take me through El Paso. I decided I would stop there and look up the family we supposedly had. Even though that was all I had in the whole world, I didn't know what to believe anymore."

"My god," I said. "Elizabeth, I mean, nobody came looking for you?"

"I don't know. If they did, they never found me. I made it to L.A., barely, and El Paso was its whole other thing, but that's another story. Somehow I ended up here, where you found me, and no one else has. I guess my uncle never reported me missing. Or maybe he died, and it probably looked like a robbery: a fight inside, car was gone. Or since I'm eighteen, maybe they figured I moved out by then, off to college or wherever. Who knows. All I know is I had to get as far away from that desert of lies. And I'm loving it here."

"Speaking of here, are you sure I can't persuade you into another meeting with me? It doesn't have to be long, I promise."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Well, then can I ask, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know, keep working, figure things out. I finally feel comfortable to counsel myself, and for once I'm not alone. But I'm sorry that our last meeting had to be the very last one. I promise I'll call again soon."

We said our goodbyes, and with one more “click” she ended the call. Lucky for me she was she would call me contact me one more time, and everything would finally fall into place.

4.

Elizabeth never called me again, but she did write me a series of letters, months after our last phone call. Actually, I suppose she dictated, and someone else wrote, maybe Emily. They are all I have left. Most of my office has faded away, and my body, too, is slowly disappearing. I'm nearing the end of my purpose in her life, but her letters, her thoughts, will always be here. They must have been meticulously constructed over those long, long months she disappeared, and they showed up in my mailbox in beautiful handwriting. Here are the letters almost in their entirety, transcribed by me. Some parts were cut, but I tried to edit them so they would appear as one, continuous story. I think she would like that.

My favorite listener,

I'm sorry it's taken so long to get a hold of you again. You have to understand, but I'll never call you again. What I'm about to tell you can't be told over a phone call. It's taken me a long time to remember it all and to summon the courage to put it on paper, for just anyone to see. I understand if you need to show it to someone else, if they needed just as much help as I did. Just make sure they listen to you as well as you listened to me. You did such a good job, and I hope I can thank you properly someday. But for now, thank you so much, for everything you did for me. Anyway, let's pick up where we left off.

You remember that I left with my uncle's car to Carlsbad, and then to El Paso/Los Angeles on a Greyhound bus. Well, wouldn't it be my luck that an hour into the first day on the bus, it broke down. Greyhound sent over a mechanic in his own truck to work on it, and about thirty minutes later we were on our way again. Of course, it broke down a second time, and a third, so the mechanic followed us all the way to El Paso. I bet I heard the clanking even before the driver did, not that I could tell him how to fix it.

Anyway, I didn't really feel like talking to anyone, after what I went through. I didn't talk to anyone that entire first day, and it took an entire day to get to El Paso, when it's only supposed to take a few hours. At least that's what the ticket seller at the bus station told me just before I left. It was terrible. Most of the people on that bus were old women, or girls with their own children, in the middle of summer. It was over a hundred, no clouds, no air conditioning while the bus wasn't moving. Everyone was fanning themselves with whatever they had in their hands. All those magazines and newspapers flapping sounded like a bunch of birds loose. It made me uncomfortable, and I was already nervous. After the excitement of leaving wore off, panic set in.

Any minute I thought my uncle would be coming up the road behind us, like the way a puddle shimmers in a road at the top of a hill on a sunny day. He'd be driving his truck, bloody, and terrifying, and he without a word he'd drag me out of the bus by my hair, kicking and screaming, and lock me in the cabin forever. My favorite place in the whole world would become my prison. I think it already had. I had to distract myself or I would start panicking. That horrible

crack—I don't know if it came from his head or from the wolf I hit him with—was still loud in my head. I was listening for the truck the whole ride over. I didn't know what I would do if he did show up. Hundreds of miles of nothing in any direction, over a hundred degrees, no way I could run. I would've died in less than an hour, less than that even, the state I was in. Nothing is worse than when you're alone and scared, and for the first time in a long time I found that I was both at the same time, not just one or the other. It didn't last long though.

A girl sitting next to me on the bus wanted to talk. I guess she thought I was looking at her magazine because I happened to point my head that way. She said to me, "I'm sorry. Am I turning the page too fast?"

She had a very thick accent. Thick like soup. I think she was Mexican, not just Hispanic; I think actually *from* Mexico. I said, "What? No, I wasn't reading."

"Oh, okay," she said. "My mistake."

Her voice was high. I couldn't imagine she was more than sixteen. She was quiet for a little bit more, then she spoke again.

"Do you want to? I mean, you want to read with me?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't."

"Oh, it's okay. I mean, I can't read English. I speak some, but reading, no. I try, *tú sabes*, but I'm not very good."

She didn't know what I meant and obviously didn't see my eyes, so I just told her, "No, I mean I can't. I'm blind." She stared at me a few seconds and then apologized over and over, touching my shoulder and laughing like a little kid. She *was* a kid, even to me, and I was only eighteen.

“How did you get blind?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I saw a patch of black one day, it got bigger, and more patches started, more and more over a year or two until I couldn’t see at all.”

“Oh. That happened to my *tío*. More and more and then like that it’s all gone. *Pobrecito*. One time, he put on different shoes, totally different colors. It was so funny. You do very good though. You walk around, you do things, I saw you. No one could tell. I couldn’t tell.”

“Thank you,” I said. She was playful. It was a thousand degrees outside and she was making jokes. I liked that about her. But there was something else in her voice underneath the playful that I couldn’t place.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What do you mean? I mean, I know it’s going to Los Angeles, but where are you going? Family? Work?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have any plans when I got on this bus.”

“What, are you running away?”

“No.”

“Okay, good. It’s never good to run away. You seem like you wouldn’t run away. You look like a fighter.”

“Yeah. So what about you? Family? Work?”

“Work. I just had work in Carlsbad, but that ran out. I heard there’s work in California, so that’s where I go.”

“But shouldn’t you be in school? You’re pretty young.”

“I know, but my parents really need money. ”

Her voice lowered to a whisper, and I had to lean in to hear her.

“We’re not from around here. We need the money, so I help them. I do what I can. Now that I’m older I can work longer and harder, for a little more money.

“What do you do?”

“Depends on the time of year. Sometimes a farm, we pick the food. That’s hard in summer. We just got done with that. Sometimes a maqui— you call it ‘factory,’ I think. We put things together, and they go out for the people to buy.”

“What did you call it?”

“Maqui. It’s *maquiladora*. You know what it is? There’s a bunch around Juárez. Not too much around here. They don’t pay much, but they don’t ask questions about where you’re from, like in the United States.

“Have you ever been to school?”

“For a little bit. Middle school. That’s where I learned English.”

“You’re pretty good.”

“*Gracias!* I don’t get much practice anymore since I left school.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“Texas. Actually all over, but mostly in Texas.”

“East or west?”

“West”

“I’m from around there. I mean here. We’re still here, technically.”

“Oh *si? De dónde?* I mean, where?”

“I couldn’t say. Around here, really.”

“I love it here. It’s so pretty.”

“It is.”

“You are very lucky. You get to wake up and see this every day. *Que bonita.*”

“I love it too. But I won’t be seeing it very much longer. Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Well, someone once told me I had family in El Paso. So I’m going to look them up, see if they’re still there.”

“So you visit?”

“No, not exactly. It’s just that— I can’t go home.”

“I thought you said you weren’t running.”

“I’m not. I’m looking for family. I just happen to think that it’s not worth going back. There’s nothing for me there.”

“But what about the place? The air, the water, the sun? *La tierra.* It’s in you, all inside you.”

“I know. I’ll miss the sunsets.”

“*Aye si,* the sunsets. I love the sunsets.”

I loved the way she touched my arm when she agreed. Even if it was something insignificant, it was like she reminded me she was listening, that she was still in the room.

“But if I find that family in El Paso, maybe I won’t have to say goodbye to those.”

“No, that’s true. *Y también*, you find more things to love about it. You find this and that and soon you don’t want to leave there, like your old home.”

“Yeah.”

“You make a new home.”

“I’ve done that before.”

“See (*si?*). Again will be easy. It wasn’t so bad the first time, *verdad?*”

“No, it wasn’t. Actually, it was much better in a lot of ways.”

“So how do you know El Paso or wherever will be better or worse than the last place?”

“I don’t.”

“And okay, maybe El Paso is bad. Maybe it’s so bad you want to leave again. Then what? You go to a new place with new things to find. You find new air, new water, new sun. *Nueva tierra. Tú sabes es cierto*. That place will be your new home.”

“You’re right.”

“*Ya sé, Loca*. I know I’m right. I’m good at it now. I’ve been so many places with my family. This whole place, from Los Angeles to Laredo, is ours, our, *cómo se dice*, territorio.”

“Territory?”

“That sounds right.”

“So you just kind of roam around here, free, back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico?”

“Well, not free. We go where the work is. We need to survive.”

“That makes sense.”

“It’s getting harder now, though. *Mi papá dice* the United States doesn’t pay as good anymore. It doesn’t pay good and we’re always looking out for “*la migra*,” immigration. And then, not to be mean, but if we go to a white town, forget it. People call us names, and look at us so ugly. You don’t know what that’s like.”

“No.”

“It’s so scary.”

“Wait. Let me ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“Am I white? I mean, I never really noticed when I was a kid. My parents never explained that to me, and I didn’t— I was homeschooled. Am I white? I would hate to think someone like me was being so ugly to you.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about that. Everybody is different. I met really nice white people, but those towns where there’s a lot of them are the bad ones. They don’t think about what they do. But you? I don’t know. Let me look.”

I felt her hand holding my chin and turning my head slightly left to right, then up, so gentle.

“If I saw you walking in the street, I would think you were white. Your hair is lighter, and you’re skinny, a little taller. But your skin, that’s harder. It’s not white. But it’s not like mine, either.”

“What’s yours like?”

“Brown. Well, kind of red. In-between.”

“And your hair?”

“Black. Or brown. In-between, *también*. But a lot darker than yours.

We’re both kind of in-between. We’re from different places, and we’re looking for a home, while we’re riding a bus right on the border. Isn’t that funny?”

We laughed, and I savored every second she touched my arm. Then I realized that, after ten years, it was the first time someone other than my uncle touched me. It kind of overwhelmed me, and she caught me staring at her arm. I guess she thought that I was offended or something, because she right away let go and said, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” I said, “It’s okay. I just haven’t talked to anyone like this in a really, really long time. Come on, tell me more about where you’re going.”

“Los Angeles. Maybe Tijuana. I’ve been to Los Angeles when I was little, but I haven’t been back there since. Everywhere in between, lots of times, but L.A. only once. *Mi mamá dice que* we have family there, but she said if I find work on the way that I should take it.”

“Where is she? They—your mom and dad?”

“Back in Carlsbad, well, the outside, still in the farms. We saved up enough for this bus so I can find better work, and I’m going to call them when I find it, then they’ll come too.”

“Isn’t that pretty dangerous though? I mean, what if you don’t find it?”

“I’ll find something.”

“But what if you don’t? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll find some way to make it. I always do. We always do.”

“Seems pretty scary to me.”

“*Yo también. Pero* I don’t have a choice. If I can’t find anything here I’ll go to Mexico. There’s work there, even if it doesn’t pay good. It’s hard here anyway. The last city we lived before Carlsbad, the mayor and the people in the government told the newspapers that Mexicans crossing into the United States only came over for private schools, that their parents were paying for everything and it was okay, and that they always went back to Mexico at the end of the day. Ha, bullshit. But they couldn’t fool the white people who lived there. They knew better. They saw us every day. They saw Mexicans sharing cars, and five or six broken cars all sharing the same apartment with two bedrooms. They knew Mexicans lived near them, and to them, Mexicans didn’t pay taxes. Well that’s true, but only because they couldn’t afford to be citizens. If they got paid better, treated better, they would pay taxes and all that, I think. But those white people, they’d rather die than pay their taxes so that a Mexican can have a free lunch at school. No, no, a nice new fence for their huge yard was much better. And hire some Mexicans to fix it. Can you believe that?”

“I had no idea. I’ve sort of been in the dark about all that. I had no idea it was so bad.”

“It is. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to get so mad or to scare you or anything, but it’s just crazy what they’re doing to those people who just want to work. *Pero* no, instead I’m out here on a bus, maybe going back to Mexico. I don’t mind that part as much though. It’s always good to go out, walk around, talk to people.”

“I’m still trying to get used to it. Not that talking with you isn’t lovely. I like you. I haven’t talking like this with anyone in many years. In fact I can’t remember a time. And I’m having so much fun.”

“*Muy bien*, I’m glad. I am *también*.”

“Good. You’re making this trip that much better.”

“*Oye*, what’s your name?”

“Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth. Very nice to meet you Elizabeth.”

She took my hand in hers and shook. Hers was thicker than mine. I could tell right away, even so young, that she had worked years in the fields, or like she said in factories, doing hard work that toughened her skin. It broke my heart a little that she had the hands of a forty year old. But she shook strong, making me feel close and familiar with her right away. I appreciated that. I tried to grip just as hard, but I didn’t come close. It was okay though. We laughed at our new friendship, and I hoped it would be a long one.

“And you? What’s your name?”

“Christina.”

“Christina. Very nice to meet you, Christina.”

“*Tú tambien*.”

Her full name was Christina Hierro Madera Lobos. She and her parents, Maria and Jose, crossed into Arizona when she was a baby. When she turned one, they had to go back to Mexico, to escape the local sheriff who decided to crack

down on aliens. They spent many years in the desert in border cities, her dad looking for work and her mom taking care of her at home, and then they returned, this time into Texas, when she was twelve. She didn't know any English, but within a year, middle school like she said, she was already speaking well. Her parents weren't as quick to learn. I don't think they knew any English other than simple words. She went to a few different public schools over a couple of years, in McAllen, Laredo, El Paso, and Carlsbad, but she hadn't been to school since she was fourteen. She was still very smart though. She paid attention, and knew a lot about different school subjects. I guess she learned about things by listening in on conversations, or watching the news when she could. In that area of the country, the news spent plenty of time covering immigration, and you couldn't go very long without hearing about some border patrol agent getting in a shootout with Mexicans, or about Mexican drug cartels killing someone and dumping the body in the desert. It's mostly what I heard on the radio news Uncle made me listen to, and for the rest of the hour or sometimes the rest of the day, the people on the radio argued about what should be done about it. Arguing probably isn't the right word. They mostly agreed with each other, that they should throw the Mexicans out. When it was on the radio it seemed so far away. I had no idea it was as bad as Christina said, and I felt terrible for her.

She seemed cheery enough, though. She loved clothes, and complimented mine, touching the fabric, twirling it in her fingers. She said she was reading a celebrity magazine, because she liked to look at what the girls were wearing, but she said not one of them was dressed half as pretty as I was. I didn't know what to

say, just “thank you.” I didn’t even know what the patterns on my clothes looked like. A shirt, a long skirt ending past my knees, some old boots, that’s all I wore. But Christina loved them, couldn’t get enough. She said the colors matched perfectly and that I had a real eye for fashion, and we laughed together as she grabbed my arm again. Then she complimented my hair. She said she loved how light it was, and wished hers could be that light. I said I brushed it every day, and she said it showed. Then I asked if I could feel her hair, and she said sure. After she undid the braid, I could feel that it was long, almost all the way down her back. It felt heavy and coarse, not like mine at all. I tried to imagine it very dark, like river mud. I imagined it was very beautiful, and I told her so. She said “thank you” and asked if I would braid it up tight again, so I did. Right in the middle of braiding, the bus broke down again. Five minutes of sitting still the driver peeked his head in and announced it was going to be a while, so we should get comfortable as best we could. Just then, some clouds came along and covered the whole bus and the road in a shadow. Christina and I went outside to enjoy it while it lasted.

We walked just off the road to a few big, flat rocks, close enough to where we could still see the bus. Christina sat on the smaller rock and I sat on the bigger one, so I could keep braiding. All that talk about her leaving her home, even if it wasn’t really her home, and quitting school all for a job she didn’t want and had to work really hard at worried me. I wanted to know more about where she was going and if it was worth the risk. I thought maybe her answer would help me think about what I was doing too.

“So, what kind of job are you looking for?” I asked.

“Anything.”

“What’s anything?”

“Anything that pays.”

“A lot of things pay. But what do *you* want to do?”

“What I want doesn’t matter. I’ll take whatever I find. Besides, they would never take me for what I want.”

“And what is that?”

“I want to be nurse. I heal people. I love healing people.”

“You could do that!”

“Are you crazy? No, I couldn’t. You have to go to school, and not just high school, college too.”

“So? Who says you can’t?”

“Nobody says I can’t. I think my parents would want that, but where we are right now, I just can’t.”

“Well sure you can’t do it right this minute, but soon. They have classes so you can get your GED. That’s like a high school diploma for people who didn’t go to high school. I’m going to get one as soon as I figure out what I’m doing, where I’m going. You can too. Then once you have that diploma, you can go to college. We can do it together.”

“You’re saying too many good things. It’s not that easy.”

I finished braiding her hair, and she walked a few feet and sat in the dirt. When she spoke again I knew she was facing me.

“Where I come from, you have to do everything to help the family first. You come second. The family is more important.”

“But going to school will get you a better job. You’ll make more money and be able to help the family even more.”

“But while I go to school I have to pay for college. That’s money that could be feeding my family. I can’t let my parents go like that. Look what they did: they put me on a bus and sent me across the states just to make enough money so we can all eat. Maybe, not even for sure.”

“I know it would be hard at first, but they have scholarships. It’s different than what you’ve seen at white towns. I heard on the radio about Hispanics getting all kinds of scholarships. Sure the guys on the radio didn’t care to hear that, but it doesn’t matter. They exist. And once you have a degree you can do anything. You can even be a citizen. Imagine that. You can do it.”

“You really think they’d give a scholarship to a *Mexicana* who can barely read and has only worked in the farms and factories her whole life? Who knows nothing else?”

“Nothing else? You know tons of stuff! More than I do about a lot of things!”

“*Verdad?*”

“Yes!”

The clouds fizzled up and the sun washed over us. It felt like opening an oven door and I could feel myself shriveling up like the pale weeds I heard rustling in the wind behind my rock. I thought of the days at the cabin that seemed

to slow themselves down to match the rhythms of lizards baking on the walls of the house. That empty, arid corner of Texas felt like another planet. We sat on that blank roadside near a rusted bale of barbed wire, either forgotten long ago or just lazily wrapped around some splintered fence posts scavenged from scrap branches of mesquite like at my old home. I heard it creaking as it dared to topple down the little hill, while we waited for the bus to be fixed by the clueless driver and the upset mechanic, mumbling to himself in Spanish and the bus ticking itself cool while Christina wrote in the dirt with her finger.

“I told you that there used to be jobs here. Not good jobs, but jobs. But now, we don't have choice. We have to move back now. I've seen cousins and uncles and aunts all move back, and I never hear from them again. I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want to have to keep quiet about who I am, or where I live. We always had to use the address at a friend's house in town for the school, so we leave a paper trail that could lead them to us. I don't want that anymore. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of living in shadows.”

“I know what that's like.”

“You do?”

“Well, not exactly. But I've been living in shadows my whole life, and I'm tired of it too. But we can do something about it.”

“What? What can we do?”

“We can fix you not going to school, not doing what you want. We can fix that problem.”

“While there is this idea of “you and me,” I mean, “us and them,” there will always be a problem.”

“I know. I can’t fix that. But we can give you chances you’ve dreamed of. It’s a start.

“What are we going to do then?”

“Get off with me at El Paso. Help me look for my family. If we find them, they might help us, both of us.”

“What if we don’t find them? What if they don’t want us?”

“We will. I have this.”

I pulled out the torn piece of letter, marked “DZD,” the same one I showed you, all those months ago. I hope you remember.

“I have a name,” I said, “and that will lead to a phone number, an address, something. But I need your help. I’ve never been to El Paso. I don’t know my way around, and finding my family will be a lot faster if I had your eyes to read a phone book.”

She was quiet, then finally she said, “Three days. If we don’t find them, or they turn us away, I have to look for work. You can come with me if you want but I have to work for *my* family. *Tú sabes*. They mean everything to me. We are a pack.”

“I know. But you have to let me find my own.”

The mechanic slammed the lid of the bus closed and the driver yelled out that it was good to go.

“Okay,” she said.

Then as we left a gust of wind blew away whatever she had been writing in the dirt.

We finally arrived in El Paso. It was a Saturday evening, a wonderful day. It wasn't as hot as earlier and the city was still very alive. The bus station was downtown and Christina thought I would like to walk around for a bit. We only had to walk a few blocks north and we hit the market. She called it a swap meet, but I've heard it was called a flea market. She said there were hundreds of booths, all with people selling different things. Some of them sold old electronics, radios and things. She said they looked like they didn't even work, but that didn't stop the salesmen and sales ladies from trying to get us to buy. Others sold all kinds of food. Oh the whole place smelled so amazing. Corn on the cob roasting on fire, sweet breads baking and frying, fruit ice creams, it was magical. But the best smell of all came from the chiles. They were cooking in the center of the market and Christina took me to go smell. She said they were "Hatch chiles," chiles from Hatch, New Mexico. Every Saturday, all over this area, she said, they brought out these huge metal barrels, like big hamster cages, built a fire underneath, threw the green chiles in, and turned the big barrels to roast them away. When they turned black, they were done. People come and buy them black on the outside like that, and they take them home and peel them to the green underneath. Whatever they did, it was the best smell I've ever met, ever in my life. I wish everyone could smell it at least once. I had a little money on me that I picked from my uncle's truck, so I bought a huge brisket burrito that I shared with Christina. It had just a

little bit of Hatch chile in it, but that was more than enough— just a little spicy; hot, smoky, juicy brisket; and that amazing, amazing chile taste. I'll never forget it. We both ate slow and savored every last bit of it, even sucking the juices off our fingers. You would've thought we hadn't eaten in years.

That night we stayed in the YMCA. We got the idea from the song, can you believe it? It wasn't far from downtown, and we thought it would be a good idea to stay in the area since that's where most of the buses ended up at the end of the day. We were too exhausted and full to talk much. I fell asleep so quick, and when I woke up I thought I had been sleeping for days. Christina was already up and getting ready to go.

“Listo?”

“What does that mean?”

“Are you ready?”

“Very funny. I just woke up.”

“I know, I'm just playing.”

“What time is it?”

“Nine.”

“I slept twelve hours?”

“Mhm. So, I say ‘Are you ready’ but I don't even know ready for what.

What are we doing first?”

“Well, like I said, I have that name. We can look that up. I have a feeling he lives here.”

“Que?”

“What? I think he lives here. We should look him up.”

“What do you mean ‘you have a feeling he lives here.’ You don’t know for sure?”

“I think, a long time ago, when I was a little kid, that I was here. And I remember seeing him once. I’m almost sure it was here.”

“Almost sure.”

“Yes.” I put on my boots and brushed out my hair as I talked. “He’s not family though, but he *knows* my family. Look, all we have to do is look him up. When we find him we’ll find out where my family is.”

“I thought this name, this man you know, *was* your family. Now he just kind of knows them? *Maybe* we find him? Maybe not?”

“We will, alright? Come on, let’s go.”

I left my things in a locker at the Y, but Christina brought hers along. I asked her if we would look suspicious at all, two young girls looking like they skipped school. She said no, that I was tall and blind so they would leave me alone, and that she looked older than she was. We would be okay. We went to a gas station and used the phone book to look up the name, Dave Zimpert DeThaw. I spelled it out for Christina while she looked it up. Still tasted rotten lemons. Sure enough, with such a weird name as that one, there was one listing in the book. It only gave a number, no address. After Christina wrote the number down on the back of the same scrap of paper that had his initials, we asked the gas station man if we could use the phone. The man said only if we bought something, so I bought a bottle of water. My money was dwindling down fast. I’d have to think of

something at the end of those three days, and it was already day two. Christina dialed the number and handed the phone to me, but then I froze up. It rang and rang and I suddenly thought if he answers, I'm going to be sick. My throat felt like a rock and I prayed he wouldn't answer. Lucky for me, he didn't. It went to a robot voicemail and I hung up right away.

We were at another dead end and Christina became more impatient.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Let me think.”

“Think. All you do is think. Never actually do anything.”

“Okay. What about utility companies? They have phone numbers filed for certain addresses. We could call the electric company or something and ask them what address they have.”

“They'd never tell us.”

“You don't think?”

“I have a better one. Cell phones. They don't care, they'll tell you anything, as long as you have the right number.”

“What do you mean?”

“We call the cell phone people. We tell them our address changed. We ask them what address they have for that number, and when they ask for the new address we hang up.”

“That could work, but what if that number isn't a cell phone?”

“We say the cell phone is dead, and we're using the house phone. I think they keep that too.”

“This could work. It will work. It has to.”

When I reached for the phone again, I felt the gas station man’s hand over the buttons. He made a little “nuh-uh” sound and opened the cash register with that little ring. Another bottle of water, a little less money.

We called five different cell phone companies. One by one they told us they didn’t have a record of DZD’s number, until we finally got to the last one. Sure enough, it was a house phone, so we had to use Christina’s little trick to fool them, and they bought it. We got an address, and with some good luck finally the address ended up being about a half hour away by walking. It was in an older neighborhood. Christina said brown signs around said it was called “The Montana Avenue Historic District.” There were big, old homes, two or three stories tall, with huge front porches. Some had columns like the White House. She described each one as we walked by. A lot of them were turned into lawyer’s offices, which I thought was weird. One was so badly taken care of, it had holes all over it, and each hole had five pigeons flying in or out. Poor house, I thought. It needs just as much care as a person does. That was one bad apple though, most of the houses were very nice, Christina said. Finally we got to the one we were looking for. It had a little gate to a tiny front yard. There were rose bushes growing just in front of the porch. Gosh it had been so long since I smelled a rose. We climbed the steps up the porch and to the front door, where Christina said she saw three mailboxes hanging on the wall next to the door.

“I guess that means the house has three different apartments,” I said. Just when Christina tried to knock the door flew open. Someone was coming out.

Christina said, “Oh, I’m sorry.”

The voice, an old man by the sound of it, said, “Oh no, it’s okay. What can I do for you?” Christina told me later he was a kind of goofy looking man. He was gray and scraggly, with a loose front tooth, wearing a fishing hat and carrying buckets of paint.

“Hello,” I said, “We’re looking for someone who lives here.”

“What’s the name?”

I had to steady myself to even say the name. “Dave Zimpert DeThaw.”

“Well I’m sorry ladies, but Dave doesn’t live here anymore. He moved out about a year ago.”

“Would you happen to have his new address?”

“He didn’t leave one.”

“Well, how about his old one?”

“No, he lived here for around ten years. Best tenant I ever had. Never lived anywhere else. I’m sorry.”

“Wait. What about an emergency address. He had to leave one of those right?”

“Oh, I don’t think I can give that out.”

“Please sir. He was a friend of our family’s. Our uncle died. They were very close. It’s important that we tell him. Please, we’ve come all the way on a bus from Carlsbad to tell him.”

“Oh alright, I guess. Let me put these cans in the shed out back. I’ll be right back.”

Our luck ran out because that emergency address was hours walking away from Dave's old apartment. By the time we got there the sun was low in the sky, and much less hot on my face, but my skin still burned. I was soaking wet and I knew Christina must have been too. But after so many stops asking for directions or just stopping in gas stations and fast food places just to get shade, we made it. I heard it in Christina's voice as we turned onto the right street.

"We're here! We're here!"

"Where's here?"

"The street! This is the right street!"

"What's it like? Describe it."

"I don't know, ordinary. We're walking on a little bridge right now, over a canal. It's dry though, no water. It looks more like a ditch. There's trash in there. There's a bike! It's all rusty but it's a bike! We should come back and get it."

"Come on. We won't have to when we get to this house. They could never turn us away, the way we look and probably smell."

"There's a school over there."

"What kind of school?"

"The smallest one, I think. 'Elementary' I think you say."

"That means there's probably a high school nearby too. See? I told you this would work out."

We walked a couple blocks through the neighborhood, down the street that we knew would lead us to some shade and some lovely, welcoming people.

We reached the long driveway.

“This is it,” Christina said. “7913.”

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to the house. Maybe when I was four or five. It was noisy then. From what I *could* remember, the driveway was always full of cars. The neighbors' pool was always alive with splashes, laughter, and mariachi music. And the dogs in the neighbor's yard never shut up, running to the chain link fence barking and howling at anything that moved. But now, even if the dogs were still alive they would have nothing to bark at, because nothing moved.

The grass was thick and brown, Christina said. There was a shriveled, old tree trunk leaning over a rock-wall dividing the left neighbors' house, and the base of the tree was buried in a pile of little brown pits. Peaches maybe, or apricots, I'm not sure. I ran my hand over the old trunk, feeling every ridge and bump that poor thing had grown over the years. The wind blew a little, and the ringing of a wind-chime hanging on the far corner of the overhanging roof cut through the silence. I was a little spooked, and I think Christina was too because she squeezed tight onto my arm, but we walked on toward the front door.

I had never seen another screen door like the one at this house. It was iron, and heavy. It had twisted bars running up and down in front of the mesh screen. I ran my hand over this too. Christina pushed the doorbell button a few times, but nothing rang. Then she knocked on the big window to the left of the door. Nothing moved inside.

“No cars. And I can’t see too good inside. Too much dust on the windows, but it looks empty. I reached for the handle and Christina tried to stop me.

“No. Don’t. There could be someone.”

I knew she was right, but I had to see what was behind that door, if I remembered it at all. I clicked the handle and the door creaked open. But then as I pushed the main wooden door open and stepped into the house, I felt something happening. The dust of smells—rose, lilac, cumin, leather—rushed through the doorway and kissed me in the face. I shut my eyes and took all of the dust in through my nose. Then I had another vision. At least, I think it was a vision. When I opened her eyes again, I could see. My body was different. It was small. I wasn't any taller than the doorknob. My hands were little and soft, like a doll's. My hair was long, and in my face. The living room where I stood glowed with orange light and heat coming from nowhere. I heard a T.V. somewhere, someone laughing, and someone else whistling. Three notes: up, down, up. I wanted to gasp, but then my tongue flicked my front top tooth and I felt the thing wiggle around in my gums. I had never been so scared in all my life. I felt tears in her eyes, but just before one could drop down onto my cheek, the wind outside blew the wind-chime on the porch alive, the room shrank into darkness, and I felt my body back as it was when I arrived: long, lean, and hard. Like a swimmer. I tried to slow my breath and my heart, and I strummed my teeth with my tongue, making sure they were all there and strong.

Christina reminded me where I was. “*Esta bien?*”

“Yeah.”

Together, we walked around the house, the both of us clinging on to each other like walking through a graveyard at night. You never know, someone or something could've jumped out at us. The living room was empty except for the molding running along the floors and ceilings. Christina said it looked like nobody had lived there in years. The quietness of the place made it seem that way. I touched the wallpaper and it crumbled into shards and dust under my fingertips. There was nothing here, I thought. But then I was drawn for some reason into the kitchen. The tile was pink, and cracked in many places. Christina flicked the light switches several times but the lightbulbs had long burned out. She opened the blinds on the window above the kitchen sink and I felt the sunlight burst into the room and splash on the far wall. I moved toward the window, but I realized with each step I took I was getting smaller. By the time I reached the wall I looked down and saw my feet were standing on a chair. My little doll hands were back and touching the wall, which was suddenly much more than just a wall. It was painted, and sculpted. It was a landscape, with big green mountains and rolling hills, an adobe cabin just like mine! Only, there were multiple levels, three or four of them. And there were Indians peeking out from around doorways and carrying baskets of food, wolves in the hills howling at the sky, and beautiful cactus shrubs, made so carefully in little strokes of paint. It was a work of art. A sort of mural. My little hands, which I guessed must have been four years old, moved on their own, combing the grooves in the house and the textures of the land and trees. It was like touching my old cabin walls that first night. Then a cloud covered the sun outside and the light streaming into the kitchen became dim. I turned around,

wondering what had happened to the light, but when I turned back I was myself again, still touching the wall, but not standing on a chair anymore. Whatever had just happened, I felt much better. I wasn't scared, and the whole thing only made me want to explore the rest of the house and wait for it to happen again, only this time I would welcome it, whatever it was.

Christina didn't see anything, and I kept it from her. She left me in the kitchen and went off on her own, looking for any sign that someone might come back. I kept one hand on the wall and wandered to a bedroom. I knew it was a bedroom when I felt the empty doorway that once was a closet. Touching every wall and counter in the house made me realize everything was covered in dust. It caked on my hand. I coughed when I slapped my hands together, getting it off of me. Waving the cloud away from me, I bumped into a big dresser still against the wall, what I thought the only thing left in the entire house until I bumped into a nightstand. I opened the nightstand and found a couple of ancient sticks of Winterfresh gum. They cracked like dry leaves. One of the sticks had been torn in half in its silver wrapper, saved for later. Christina went through the dresser. She found a jewelry box buried in empty little bottles and containers that all said Avon on the side. She took the jewelry box with her to where the bed used to be and sat down cross-legged on the bare floor. She opened the box and found gold rings and gold bracelets and gold necklaces and gold earrings.

“She loved gold,” she said.

She put everything back in the box and laid down as if she was laying on the bed. I lay next to her and tried to remember anything about the people who

lived here. The woman who loved gold and Avon. The man who saved sticks of gum in his nightstand. I closed my eyes and tried hard to remember. When I opened them, she was four again. This time I was waking up on the soft bed, tucked under a comforter with smiling, yellow moons knitted all over. I rubbed her eyes and made out green glow-in-the-dark stars stuck all over the ceiling. Then, pretending to sleep, I heard voices coming from the living room behind the cracked bedroom door.

“Is the baby asleep?”

“I think so. It's way past her bedtime, and she had a big day.”

“I'm sure. She really liked her presents, and her cake. She ate a huge slice.”

“I hope Mom and Dad will be here a few more years for when she starts kindergarten.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“We're going to have to eventually.”

“I think they will be.”

“Maybe it's just me, but do you feel like they're acting a little differently since Irma died?”

“I was gonna say the same thing. I think since Irma was so much younger than Mom, you know, I'm sure they've been thinking about themselves. What's gonna happen to the house, and to each other, and everything”

“What *is* going to happen?”

“Who the hell knows?”

“They own the house. Dad built it himself. All those things in there. They’re one of a kinds. Everything from the bookcases to the countertops were made for that house. They’re not going anywhere.”

“Can’t we talk about this some other time?”

“When?”

“Any time but now.”

“They want to talk about it. Why can’t you?”

“Because I’m not ready.”

“Well you better get ready pretty soon. Catch up with the rest of us.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll be around for a while.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. They’re just as much my parents as yours, you know. You should feel lucky you have parents.”

“How do you know they want to talk?”

“Well, one day Mom told me, ‘Mija, I hope I go first. *Porque* if Rito goes first, well, *tú sabes*.’”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She said, ‘Well, Mija, I’ll end it.’”

“I mean, what can she do? She’s over eighty.”

“I’m not sure. She could stop taking her medicine. She could quit using her oxygen.”

“Stop. Stop talking about this.”

“You know what they say about old couples, that they usually go within a few months or even days of each other. And they've been married for over sixty years now. Sixty. Even if she does go first, I don't think Dad would last much longer.”

“And what's going to happen to us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Us. The kids. As soon as this party is over, everyone's going back home, all across the country. We don't see each other until there's a party, or someone dies.”

“What are you saying?”

“Well, what's going to happen after that?”

“Who's seriously coming back? Who's moving into the house? Is anybody going to?”

“Well, nobody speak up at once.”

“We could take care of it, until someone needs it.”

“Who? We all have our own houses.”

“Maybe one of them.”

“Elizabeth?”

“Or her cousins. I don't know.”

“They won't remember this house, or Mom or Dad.”

“I think they will.”

“So we'll take care of it then?”

“Okay.”

The voices faded with the orange light as I closed my eyes again. I held them tight as she cried, and Christina held me in the pale shape of the bed on the hard floor. I hardly knew them, and I knew them well. Their love demanded none in return from me, and it was for that dead and undead love I wept like a four year old.

After a while I calmed down, wiped her eyes, and was reminded of my permanent darkness. Christina wanted to look around a little bit more in case there was a stray number or address. She found some things I had missed in the closet: an old, oily baseball mitt holding a brown baseball, and a wooden bat. She moved them aside and pulled out some wrinkled shoe boxes tucked far in the back. Inside those were tons of faded receipts, bills, Christmas cards, and glossy pictures, waiting to be framed and hanged in the hallway of loving faces. She found one she loved more than the others and she described it to me: a little girl in a white dress and shiny white shoes. Fine, light hair. Pale eyes staring into the camera and flashing the biggest smile. Christina turned the picture over and saw something written in blue ink. She read it aloud.

Little Biff, Little Biff,

Have you seen

my little bird?

Little Biff, Little Biff,

Where's my little bird?

Little Biff, Little Biff,

Oh have you heard?
Little Biff, Little Biff,
You're my only
Sweet little bird.

The landscape of El Paso, tucked into the far western thumbnail of Texas, faded into waste. Cormac McCarthy was inspired to write *The Road* after a road trip with his son through El Paso. The apocalyptic eco-film *The Day After Tomorrow* prominently features El Paso as the last gateway for Americans escaping to Mexico before the storm of storms destroys what's left of Earth. Since modern development, the wild west that El Paso once echoed from years before disappeared, replaced by not only by strip malls and fast food as most other American towns, but by an invisible emptiness, a void where things never moved after dark, and one's stillness was only greeted by more stillness. Where had the wolf gone? The mountain lion? The mule deer, the gila monster, the rattlesnake? They fled, wandering.

Little Biff wandered the city's streets as the sun fell behind a haze of smog. Christina led her by the hand around the unfamiliar downtown. Elizabeth bounced off racks of sunglasses, displays of clothes, things meant to attract tourists that never came, and Christina picked up after her. Christina looked for work, any sign of it. She dipped her head into every store and only found confused, scowling brown faces staring back at the overcurious wolf and her blind cub. The ran around town until dark, skipping all the places looking for professionals or licensed so-and-so's, but in the end they found themselves where they arrived: the bus station.

After looking at the schedule, we sat on a curb near the bus station and waited for the next bus at four the next morning.

“We’ll get our stuff before we leave. Okay? Hey, you okay?”

I couldn’t talk.

“*Lo siento.*”

“Thank you.”

“*No problema.*”

“What’ll we do now?”

“Look somewhere else. There’s nothing here.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“We go to Neuva Mexico. Then Arizona. But first we go to Juárez. Just to check. Okay?”

“Okay.”

It must have been cold, but I couldn’t feel it. Christina rubbed her arms and her teeth chattered. Amazing how the hot desert can cool down so much. I can only tell when it gets dark outside by how much it cools down. But sitting there with her, after finding nobody in that lonely city, I didn’t know what time it was, what day, or what year. I knew only the ground where I sat, and Christina, and the quiet air.

Then I saw faces. They approached from the street. I tried to look away, and I thought about hiding, but they saw me. They rumbled in their crowd, and I could only see their eyes, glowing with the orange of the street lights. Then one of them said something.

“Hey! Whatchyou two doin’ here?”

I wanted to pull her hair toward the curb and hold her face there, but I couldn’t lift my hands.

They slithered toward us, slowly. Some of them coughed.

A few of them talked to Christina in Spanish. I couldn’t understand. Then she told me what they said.

“They ask us if we’re looking for work. I told them I was, but I don’t know about you. What should I say?”

“Something’s not right.”

“No, it’s okay. They say they work at a *maqui*. The factory. Come on, they can help us.”

Then another said something else in Spanish to her. They talked back and forth, and Christina became excited.

“They say they know my cousin.”

They talked some more.

“They say they can give us a ride to Juárez.”

“I don’t know.”

“We don’t have a choice. We don’t have enough money for two bus tickets. I was hoping we could find something today but no. We don’t have a choice, Elizabeth.”

Then she walked to their car, parked across the street. Two of them went with her, one stayed with me. When she got about halfway in the middle of the

street, I heard her stop. I think she was looking back at me. But she got in, doors slamming on all sides, and the car drove away.

“They’ll be back,” said the one that stayed with me. “Now why can’t you come along?”

“I just can’t.”

Some seconds went by. I could smell him, like bad smoke. I could hear the air move. He came at me. I ran toward the bus station behind me, but a hand grabbed my shirttail and pulled me back. I screamed and screamed, but then another hand covered my mouth, and dug its fingernails into my cheeks. I bit and snarled. This is it, I thought. I’m going to die. I’m going to die, and not quickly. I’m going to die. My body fought but I cried inside.

Then a man, an angel, arrived. I could see him. I guess you, him, and Emily are the only real people I’ve seen. His huge boot crashed into the head of one of the thugs. The head cracked into the sidewalk and the guy dropped, hitting the ground like a wet bag of sticks. A few seconds later he got up and ran at the man, with a noise as if he was swinging his hands like big rocks, but the man hugged him around the waist and brought him down. Then he pummeled away at him on the ground, until blood covered his knuckles and splattered on the concrete around his head. When the thug finally stopped trying to block the blows with his forearms, the man stood up and wiped his hands on his pants.

The man, who I could barely see, looked much older in the face, and he came toward me. He had deep lines around his cheeks, and his forehead, making

his brown skin look much more like old, scuffed leather. Most of his teeth were missing.

“*Vayate. Rapido,*” he said. Nothing else.

I ran from the alley and into to the station, to the booth where an attendant was trying to stay awake. I shoved two twenty dollar bills through the slot and through tears and snot asked for a ticket on the next bus. Two minutes later and I was alone on the bus, sitting on a seat, waiting for the driver to finish filling the tank with gas and start the engine. I closed my eyes and cried.

I slept all day. I still don't know what western New Mexico or Arizona look like. When I got to Los Angeles I bought another ticket with the rest of my money.

I waited at a McDonald's across the street from the bus station in L.A. The people working there must have felt sorry for me, the way I looked, so they brought over some apple pies from the night before. While I ate, I heard two little boys playing together. One spoke English, the other Spanish. I thought that was really funny, them not knowing what the other was saying, yet somehow they played together there. They yelled and laughed when they were meant to, like they knew a long time ago this is what they're supposed to do. I loved those boys. Then my arrived and I had to leave them playing, crawling around in the playpen, playing monsters, hiding from their mothers and fathers and uncles.

When I woke up I was somewhere in Oregon. I smelled something I had never smelled before. It was salty. Ocean.

It was so wonderful. I don't think most people remember the first time they smell it, especially if you grew up near it. I'll never forget it though. It took me a while before I remembered I was on a bus, by then full of people. So I called out to the front.

"Do I have time to go to the beach?" That was a silly question, wasn't it? Of course the driver said no, even laughed at me a little. The next time we stopped for gas, I ditched the bus and ran towards the smell.

Hot, so hot. It was beautiful, but so hot sometimes, there in my corner of the world. The air melted my hair and boiled my brain. But I pushed forward through a canyon, in the dry riverbed, with my uncle every month as usual, past fields of spines, thorns, and Ocotillo, deeper into recesses of sandstone cliffs pocked with holes. Running my hands across them as I walked, I wondered where some of them went, how deep, if they ever ended.

"Where are the animals?" I asked on one of the first hikes.

"Keep still, they'll come out," he said.

Suddenly it got cool. The slightest breeze goes over most people's heads, but it makes a big difference for me. I felt the air cooling off and stirring up, rustling up trees. Then I knew we crossed into a forest.

"Beautiful," he said.

"What is?"

“The light. It’s coming through the trees, red, green, and orange leaves.
It’s beautiful. Like stained glass.”

“I wish I could see it.”

We found the coursing stream and ran to its edge.

I kneeled—the stone seared my skin.

I cupped my hands and cradled freezing water in my unsteady palms.

I splashed my face, gasped.

A squirrel cracked a nut on a nearby rock.

A fish in the water glided along my fingertips.

A deer chewed on bushes on the other side of the river.

A Banded Gecko tasted the air and invited me on his rock.

I heard it all.

My father dunked his bald head in the water, and smiled at me

The shore was lined with huge rocks. I could hear the waves crashed on them, and the closer I got the slower I walked. There was no way I could’ve walked into the water, but there was nothing I wanted more than feeling the wild water taking hold of me. I invented lots of things to see, but the feel of the water was something too special to make up. I had to jump in. The rocks were rough, skinned my hands if I tried to get a grip. I climbed down and out, farther and farther until I could feel the spray hitting my face. I’d been waiting for this moment my whole life and here it was, staring at me in the face. I jumped in, took a deep breath.

I fell and fell, for years. I felt them pass through my chest like a wind. Halfway between life with my parents and life with my uncle, I remembered none of them taught me how to swim. It didn't matter though. I couldn't have cared less about anything. The water stabbed me in my heart. It was so cold. I tried to suck in air and open my eyes, but I couldn't at first. Then things came together. I could see. Everything bathed in blue, and blurry, then clear. My body flailed wildly, I guess by instinct, to try and bring it up to the surface. My body begged my mind for air. It failed, but I relaxed. Everything was calm. I floated. I felt bubbles in the water floating up around and along my face. Then darkness took over my new eyes.

I woke up some time later on a beach, not far from the rocks where I jumped. That's what the EMT's told me as they treated me. I felt fine, I told them that, but they checked on me anyway. The older couple who found me gave me a ride to Seattle, and that's where I met you, my wonderful listener. You see? You did do your job. Emily can take it from here. But thank you for everything.

Yours forever,

Elizabeth

[...]

My last moments with Elizabeth. I was nothing but a thin film of materials with a pair of eyes, invisible, even to her. It was colder outside than when they went into the café after work. Elizabeth pulled her scarf tight around her chin and squinted at the icy winter wind that whipped around the corners of buildings. The clouds that usually kept the warm air close to the ground had cleared. A few stars even managed to poke through the downtown sky. They passed an old, bearded man sitting cross-legged in an alley next to the sidewalk, taking shelter from the wind. He was buried in a mass of ratty wool blankets, undoubtedly with newspapers crinkled and stuffed underneath his clothes for extra warmth. He held a cardboard sign: “Why lie? I need a beer.” Emily and Elizabeth thought it was funny and honest, so they gave him a few bucks each.

“Thank you so much, ladies! You have a wonderful evening, enjoy the clear skies while they last!”

They walked to an old brick building just south of the café. Elizabeth passed by it every day on the bus to work. Once or twice she wondered if there were apartments in that building. Maybe she could live there. It was closer to work and downtown. Then again, the thought of being closer to work made Elizabeth reexamine the consequences of that decision. She shrugged it off and put her hands in her pockets.

“Here we are.”

Emily entered a code into a keypad and a loud buzzer sounded as she pulled the on the door. It opened into a long, dark hallway of more doors latched shut with big, rusty padlocks. The wood floorboards creaked below each footstep. They climbed a wrought iron spiral staircase to the third floor of the building. When they reached the top, Elizabeth saw a lone door at the end of another dark hallway. This door was different from the ones on the first floor. It wasn't latched

and padlocked. It was larger, and, after she looked closely, carved with intricate tree branches, all intertwining and forming an arch over the top.

“This is it. I don't think he's here.”

“How do you know?”

“There's no light.”

Emily pointed to the bottom of the door.

“He usually likes to work during the day, anyway.”

She turned a key into the knob and opened the door. Elizabeth thought it looked like a hole in the universe, a pit into nothing. It was so dark, she couldn't see where the floor ended or where the walls started. Emily walked in as she had done many times before, and disappeared into the black. Elizabeth felt around the inside wall near the doorway for a switch, but didn't find one.

“Come on in, close the door. Oh and if you're looking for a light switch, you won't find one.”

Elizabeth followed and closed the door. She may as well have shut her eyes completely. She remembered the times her father took her to Carlsbad Caverns, when they turned off the lights on the special tours. It was the same kind of darkness as it is in all caves: total, almost palpable. Then, in the cave of the studio, she heard the rushing sound of Emily tugging on thick, enormous curtains. Pulled back, they revealed a cathedral of glass and steel in the studio, spinning foils and winding ribbons of materials seemingly floating in the air above and around her, backlit by the sparkling white lights of downtown.

“Dad doesn't like working at night. He says that the only lights to trust are the natural light, or your own light. The least difference is between those two, and only those two.”

Elizabeth was taken aback by the sculptures, as well as the surprising size of the studio. The windows and black curtains ran floor to ceiling and towered over her. She noticed a twin bed in one corner of the studio.

“Dad brought that in when I was little. I wanted to watch him work, but I'd get tired, so I needed a place to nap.”

Elizabeth also saw a black grand piano in the other corner.

“Oh, yeah, that too. So I could practice. He said it helped him when he was working. He said it helped him concentrate, but I like to pretend it inspired him. He even used a sound sensor and timed one of his works up with a piece I played. Wanna see it?”

She nodded, and Emily walked to her, smiling. She took Elizabeth's hand in her own and led her to a round clearing in the madness of glass and metal. Then she stopped and turned, facing Elizabeth.

“This is where you stand.”

Emily then took both of Elizabeth's hands and held them tight. Elizabeth realized how close they were. She could smell her. She breathed in deep breaths of Emily, and closed her eyes to remember the subtle scent. While her eyes were shut, she felt Emily's warm, wet lips touching her own. Elizabeth felt the blood in her arms becoming lighter. It lifted her hands like balloons filled with helium, and they drifted toward Emily. One hand wrapped around Emily's waist, the other cupped the back of her head while the thumb stroked the peach fuzz on Emily's cheek. They took deep breaths and touched eyes and foreheads. Then Emily turned her mouth to Elizabeth's ear and whispered.

“Wait here.”

She slid her fingers along Elizabeth's, feeling her skin. Then she walked toward the window, and knelt to a black box on the floor. She pushed a few buttons and moved just to the side of the huge curtains where, Elizabeth realized, there was a large metal lever in the wall that was pointed downward in the "OFF" position. Emily used both hands to push the lever upwards. It clanged into place and sent a quick, whirring buzz of electric noise through the walls. Emily then slowly closed the curtains and tucked them into each other, engulfing Elizabeth in the ocean of black again. She listened close and heard Emily carefully moving along the edge of the wall, trying not to make too much noise. Then she heard the sliding of soft wood coming from the corner where she saw the piano. She calmed her breath, slowed her heart, and waited in the darkness.

Emily began to play. Elizabeth recognized it: Chopin's Nocturne No. 20 in C sharp minor. The first phrase echoed in the dark by itself. But when it repeated, each pulse of the keys brought faint movements of blue light around Elizabeth's head. The light wrapped itself around her. With each bass note arpeggio, rippling pulses of blue glowed from the floor and bounced off the walls, while the trebled melodies and chaotic tumbles sent bright fountains of light shooting up and over her head. At the Major shift, the light suddenly turned into water; brilliant, clear water that seemed to move freely and carelessly. She wasn't sure how it was doing it. Maybe it was in some kind of glass. But the water, glowing with the blue light, moved like streamlined schools of silvery fish: smooth and effortless. Each trill of the keys sparked more silent shimmers of water sparkling up through the air. Then she felt her arms moving. They took large, slow strokes in the air. She felt weightless. Her wrists twisted and flexed. Her hair began to float. She kicked her feet and drifted upward. Her movement scattered flurries of tiny bubbles around the room. They followed her toward the ceiling, which she saw was pierced with long shafts of white

light undulating in the blue, glassy surface. Before, she tried desperately to reach that surface. This time, she looked around at the effervescence of the air floating with her, and she let it carry her into a deep sleep. She listened to Emily reach the diminuendo ending of the Nocturne. The lights dimmed with the quiet, slowing rhythm, and Elizabeth closed her eyes to the past.

I waited until the morning light to leave her forever. Elizabeth woke up, and Emily stayed asleep. It had been two days since she last went to work, preferring the warmth of the bed with Emily. The two ate and slept and swam in the sun while the light danced around them off the beautiful sculptures. Finally she woke. The two lovers greeted each other with “good morning’s,” and Elizabeth rubbed her eyes.

“So what are we going to do?”

“Do?”

“For money? We probably can’t go back to Ripley.”

Elizabeth thought.

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.”

[...]

She left the apartment, and returned to her own only momentarily to pick up what few things she owned to take to Emily’s. Then the book called out to her from the shelf.

“Who are you?” It asked.

I'm nobody. Who are you?

I'm nobody too.

The phone rang, and the last words I heard.

“Hey, Biff.”

“Hey, Mom.