BEDAZZLER

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by

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Abstract

My thesis has two components: a novella and a brief critical essay. In the essay, entitled *This Place is a Circus: Juggling Voice, Parody, and Silence in* Bedazzler, I explain my artistic goals and some of the difficulties I encountered in writing the creative piece.

Bedazzler is a novella in ten chapters. At the centre of the story is a diamond necklace, originally given to Ulysses S. Grant by the emperor Maximilian of Mexico. Celie, the current heir and owner, has four granddaughters: Lucy, Claudia, Gwen, and Devorah. When they are children, their grandmother tells them: The first of you to sing professionally will inherit the necklace. They grow up to be writers, however, not singers. Celie makes an adjustment. She will hold a different kind of contest: A short story for the necklace. She imposes only one restriction: Each story must begin with the same sentence, selected by her.

The novella opens with Lucy, the protagonist, having lost the contest. Knowing she will never inherit the necklace, she steals it. *Bedazzler* is her story – the story of the people, places, and objects that bedazzle her, and of her struggle to become heroic – and bedazzling – herself.

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I would also like to thank the English Department at Memorial University for permitting me to embark on this unconventional project. I hope I am the first of many to benefit from this fiction-friendly academic environment.

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Bedazzler

I have barreled down a mountain on a plastic saucer at five AM, collided with a small tree, carried on, a little bloodied, to the bottom, stolen away with a stolen necklace, in a stolen truck, stolen away from *that boy*, still sleeping at the top of the mountain, while my fairy grandmother slept on, in a land called Santa Fe, not that far away.

How many can say this?

That I was bitten by a thousand spiders, and now, like Spiderman, I'm a little leggy, a little sticky. I could scale the side of this building, if the windows opened and I could get out.

Or that I fell out of the sky, onto that mountain.

That you can expect me in the next phone booth, transforming.

The necklace is my talisman. To think I thought it might be kryptonite. To think I thought it might weaken me.

High high in a hotel window, I am framed. I make a picture of something.

Las Vegas dazzles me truly. Gwen would see God in those lights. Celie would see hell. She once likened Las Vegas to Dante's Inferno.

Yes, well. I see hot jewels, winking. I see a place I want into. But once you hit ground in Las Vegas, it's all smudges and rhinestones. I know it, but forget it, twenty-five floors up.

I learned this on a plane once: You can descend into a city, but not *that* city.

Over the Atlantic Ocean, I'd asked Celie: Will the plane crash?

She replied, Unlikely.

So we flew towards Toronto trailing that unlucky word: *unlikely*. I felt sick until I saw the lights in the distance, orange like the embers of a dying campfire, but brightening as we approached, gathering into strings of diamonds that were roads you could pick up with your hands.

I swallowed and my ears opened. God said: You cannot go there. Meaning that city I saw.

For my birthday, I'd asked for the Bedazzler. I'd seen it advertised on TV. I wouldn't get it. Celie disapproved. With the Bedazzler, you could bedeck your clothes (your furniture! your curtains! anything at all!) with jewels. The Bedazzler was God's instrument. Clearly he had used it to make cities you could see, but never get to.

Celie leaned over me. Pretty.

I pressed my forehead against the glass. This plane cannot crash.

I do not believe in God. Just that one lapse in judgment. That one flight. Years later, on another flight, I would know for certain he did not exist.

I lean my whole body against the window, airplane window thick. On the other side Las Vegas makes no sound.

Behind me, the bed is a stage. I can see it in the glass. My bag, front and centre, awaits its cue. Open it, Lucy. Begin.

I'm afraid something will crawl out of it. I'm afraid it will hurt.

Inside, there are dirty clothes, mostly mine, but some are Darren's. There's the Whirry Free machine. And at the centre, a certain t-shirt sits bundled like a black heart. I lift it out, unfold it. A snake of diamonds uncoils in my hands.

This is all I have to my name: Dirty clothes. A machine that I sleep by. A necklace worth millions.

I take it to the window. Let's see how real you are. I cut into the glass. I write: I AM NOT SORRY.

By the time I hit Taos the sky was bright blue at the edges. I had that sick feeling that comes from mixing big decisions with dawn. Illegal acts should be well-planned, executed in increments, with lots of sleep in between.

For instance:

Day 1: Go to Santa Fe. Hang out with Celie. See an opera.

Day 4: Steal necklace.

Day 5: Return to Angel Fire.

Day 10: Leave Darren, gradually, in a series of diminishing returns.

Day 20: Leave by bus, not by stolen vehicle.

But I'd done it all in twelve hours.

Dawn came and my powers waned. I thought: Stop and get some coffee. Write down some steps. It's not too late to get organized.

On a paper napkin I wrote: Step 1: Get down off this frozen altitude. Step 2: Turn left. Step 3: Drive till you hit Las Vegas.

This was my plan.

It was seeing the necklace in the light of the dashboard and knowing she would never leave it to me.

Celie swept me down the mountain in her rented Audi and we were a car commercial. The dashboard glowed like a cockpit. I'd forgotten dashboards could glow like that.

She took me to dinner in Santa Fe. She said, Do you love that boy?

The restaurant was all white adobe, the tables tucked into cavernous indentations in the wall. It was like eating inside a skull. Our table sat in an eye socket, a single candle at its pupil.

These walls are like bone.

Listen to me Lucia.

You look so beautiful, I said. With that necklace. Your eyes. Your hair.

In the car, she'd unwound her scarf and there it was, the diamonds glowing green.

She'd felt me staring. She'd said: Well, I couldn't leave it in the room, could I?

Now I asked her: Why did you come?

On the phone you said you were sick.

When I didn't answer, she said: Are you sick, Lucia?

I counted on three fingers. Chlamydia. Human Papilloma Virus. Sarcoptes Scabiei. The first two are STDs. Sexually transmitted –

I know what STDs are.

I held onto the table cloth. One, two, three, and I could yank the whole thing towards me, leave everything intact on the table, or upset it all, topple the candle, set it all afire. Magic or arson, which would be more satisfying?

Sarcoptes Scabiei, I said, are mites. Scabies mites. We got them from a bed in San Francisco…we think. You can't see them. They get right under your skin. I showed her the scars on my fingers and wrists. They migrate to where the skin is thinnest –

She looped a long arm across the table, reaching for my hand. I slipped it under the table.

She said: Don't talk to me that way.

I waited a moment. They're part of the arachnid family, I said. We saw a doctor. It's been taken care of.

Celie had ordered veal-something-something with gruyere cheese. It arrived, all its baby bones sticking out, a decorative arrangement. People don't eat veal, I warned her.

Apparently they do, she said.

I was having almond-encrusted halibut. Hali-but but but, I said. I don't think I can finish this.

You're too thin, she said.

And she was so lovely. Her jaw looked stronger than I remembered it. She could crack my arm bone – what's it called, my *ulna* – in that jaw.

Did you come to take me home?

I'd like to.

When are you leaving?

Monday.

Why Monday?

She was chewing and lifted a finger for me to wait.

I played with my napkin. She didn't bring the necklace on a trip whose sole purpose was to rescue me. What's this weekend? I asked. What's the performance?

Lucia.

Did you come for me or an opera?

She put down her knife and fork. I can't abide this.

I agreed to spend the night with her at the bed and breakfast. By implication, this meant I'd agreed to go home.

I couldn't sleep without my noise machine. I couldn't sleep for her breathing. I got up and walked around the room. I felt feverish, fat; my hands were like wedges.

Fortune tellers are a dime a dozen in Santa Fe. Couldn't I find one and simply ask: Toronto? Is it in the cards?

What was happening?

Not Toronto. Toronto was not happening.

Around and around the vanity table. I was circling. That's what was happening.

Do you love that boy?

If time is a circle, it has already happened. Just look across the diameter and see what is already there.

Not Toronto.

Okay, then. You're going to need a little money.

Yessir. But that's not why I want the necklace.

It doesn't matter. Just go. Go.

The decision made, my hands tapered down to fingers and neat little nails. A zookeeper's hands. They lifted the necklace carefully, expertly, out of its case.

Celie slept on.

The Whirry Free sleep machine has five settings: White Noise, Ocean Tides, Summer Night, Heartbeat, and Stream. Stream is the only one I can sleep to. White Noise is like that perpetual storm over Jupiter. It leaves me cold. The others are too fractured and repetitive. Waves, crickets, heartbeats – the symmetry is unbearable.

Heartbeat is the worst because I wait for it to stop. There are only so many heartbeats in this life, and Whirry Free checks them off. A fixed number of beats. And a year, a season, a day of the week I will die on. This is what I think about. They will not invent a new day for me to die on. It will be a Wednesday or Thursday.

And whose heart is it?

I never sleep on the Heartbeat setting because, if the power went off, someone might not wake up.

Whereas Stream just burbles. Arrhythmic. It carries on, and if it stopped, I wouldn't.

But it won't stop. I have a theory that Whirry Free has tapped into some distant stream, has placed a hidden microphone there, is recording real sounds, night after night. I plug in and swim back through the wires. I swim upstream to the source, but I'm always asleep before I get there.

On this, my first night in Vegas, on what should be my first night of real sleep since I left Angel Fire, I turn on Stream and hear something new. Someone is sitting on the bank of my stream, wherever it is, and weeping.

Whirry Free would not choose a high traffic stream for their sleep machine. They wouldn't risk lovers, picnickers, boys tossing stones into their customers' sleep. No, it is somewhere remote, this stream. And yet someone has made the trip. Someone is crying.

I sit up in the dark.

I called Charlie Hustle's that night, but they were closing and Darren had already left.

Pete was there, and Rose. It was Rose who answered. Where are you, Lucy?

Santa Fe.

With that woman?

That woman.

Yeah. How long ago did Darren leave?

Half an hour. You need a ride?

No. I don't know. I was in a phone booth, shivering, a diamond necklace under my shirt.

How long would it take to walk to Angel Fire? Twelve hours? Twenty-four? On half a piece of halibut.

Want me to ask my dad?

No.

Wait. I'll ask him.

No. I'll try Darren at home.

Try him, and if he's not there, call back.

The gas station sold coffee. Rose and Pete arrived as I started my fifth. I could smell the restaurant on them. I'm sorry I skipped out tonight, I said.

It was real busy, Pete said.

It was *fine*, Rose assured me.

Pete drives a Ford Expedition. A small planet. I thumped my door closed. Inside it was too quiet. I sat in the front seat, my legs miles from the glove compartment. Rose lay down in the back under the skylight.

Rose is Pete's daughter. She's my age, but seems younger. She's named Rose after Pete Rose. The restaurant is named Charlie Hustle's, also after Pete Rose (his nickname). It's a happy coincidence that Pete's name is Pete. He named his daughter

Rose so that their names, together, would make a picture of this other person, this famous baseball player.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this.

On our first day at the restaurant, Darren made the mistake of asking: Isn't he in jail?

He's been out since 1991.

We were in the kitchen, on a greasy slanted floor. Pete was giving us the fifteen-minute new employee orientation.

Don't get him started, said Rose, though Pete didn't seem about to get started on anything. He just cast Darren a look that felt like a warning. I'm not sure Darren noticed.

It was Rose who came to her namesake's defense. He was caught betting on games, she said. But not baseball games. He never once bet on his own game. Right, Dad? And how is betting on a basketball game any different from betting on a horserace?

Right, I said. And don't people bet on the Super Bowl? I glanced anxiously at Pete. All the time?

Absolutely, said Rose. Anyway, he went to jail – she lowered her voice, as if the great one himself were somewhere in the kitchen – for tax evasion. But only for a little while.

He's going to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Any day now. Even Bill Clinton wants it.

Which isn't doing him any favours, grumbled Pete, marching us back out to the dining room.

A basketball game *is* different from a horserace, Darren said.

We all looked at him. Not really, I said.

Yeah, it is. Horses are animals. They can't be pressured to throw a race, or race when injured –

Don't be an idiot, I said. Their jockeys can.

Still it's different.

Nobody said anything. I looked at Pete and shrugged.

Framed over the Exit was Pete Rose's famous line: Somebody's gotta win and somebody's gotta lose and I believe in letting the other guy lose.

Exactly, Pete.

Who is she?

Who?

Rose sat up in the back seat. The woman, with the accent.

My grandmother.

Wow. Rose slumped back.

Pete said, Oh, don't be so impressed by fancy clothes and an accent. There was an edge to his voice. But then, there usually was.

Rose said, She looks like an actress.

She was a singer, I said foolishly.

What kind of singer?

Opera.

Pete snorted.

I said nothing. When he glanced over at me, I said, Pete, thanks for coming all this way.

Thanks for coming to get me.

He checked his blind spot for no reason. I was forgiven. He said, Well, what was she trying to do? Kidnap you?

Maybe.

Picture it. Celie, all six feet of her, striding into Charlie Hustle's Bar and Grill and asking for Lucia. *Who?* I was out back, smoking with Rose. Darren was assembling the salad bar. He must have put two and two together.

Pete poked his head out the door. Sweet Home Alabama spilled into the parking lot. Luc*ia?* he said, crushing the last syllable. There's someone here. The wind lifted his hair; his face looked skeletal, unfamiliar. I dropped my cigarette. He pointed at it. Pick that up, he said, and went back inside. I bent down, my skirt too short and too tight. No one but Celie calls me Lucia. And Claudia, of course, but only to my face, to taunt me.

Rose said, Who?

I hesitated at the door. The sky was running out of light. The snow squeaked under my feet. We were outside in the cold because Rose liked to smoke under the sky.

I thought: Either Celie is real or this is real, but not the two, not together.

Not Darren, making up the salad bar.

Not Pete, his long hair lifting, my name in his mouth.

Not Sweet Home Alabama on the stereo.

Not this sky.

Not this skirt.

Not Angel Fire.

That Celie had slipped in the front door was unimaginable. But hadn't I already imagined it? Hadn't I asked her to come? Hadn't I asked.

On the phone, after months of covering my tracks, I'd told her exactly where I was. I'd implied I was in pretty bad shape. I wanted to see what she'd do.

These are the kinds of games I play.

The Pikes were spending the winter in Mexico. We'd met them only once, when they tossed us the keys to their mobile home and said, See you in April! They were trusting people, or else they really trusted Pete, who'd recommended us.

They lived on the top of a mountain in Angel Fire. A one-bedroom rectangle, not quite level. Darren and I were recruited to take care of it, and their two dogs, for the winter.

Naturally we christened it Pike's Peak. It felt about that high. The road up was treacherous. More a trail than a road. We had to park at the bottom and hike up on foot, through deep snow. It was hell. But worth it for the exhilaration of descent. Darren bought us two plastic saucers. One minute twenty seconds, top to bottom. I held the record. The trail zigzagged through trees and emptied into the narrow space where we parked the truck.

We got pretty good at steering the things. Swoosh, swoosh, down the mountain. Boots out to brake at the bottom. We had to be careful not to skid onto the main road, where traffic was the scarce but unstoppable kind, semi-trucks toting lumber.

I cursed the walks up, carrying my saucer. Until the little house came into view, electric heat coming off it in waves. The thing shimmered like a toaster. We were never cold. The floor sloped back towards the bedroom.

It all felt like ours.

Do you love that boy?

He loved me.

Rose was asleep when we pulled off the road at the bottom of Pike's Peak. Darren's truck was in the usual spot. Pete gave it a dark look. Rear-wheel-drive-piece-of-shit. Darren had to put a concrete block in the back to keep it from fishtailing. A car in truck's clothing.

The clock on the dashboard said 3:28 AM.

I undid my seatbelt.

Pete asked: You two alright?

I wasn't sure who he meant. Us two?

You and Darren.

For some reason I put my seatbelt back on.

Why?

Because he hung around drinking after his shift. Then he went out somewhere, to another bar. That's not like him, is it?

No. I glanced back at Rose. Was she asleep or just pretending?

I gave you both jobs, I got you that house, you know why?

Because we're like second children to you?

He didn't smile.

Okay. Because of Rose, I said.

She's soft-hearted.

I know. The night of the blizzard, when we'd stumbled half frozen into their house and they didn't know us from Adam, it was Rose who'd insisted we stay, who'd given up her bed.

And lonely.

Why are we talking about this?

He said: Because I want you to promise me that when you go – and I'm no fool, I know what's coming – promise me that when you go, you'll go alone.

Alone.

Without Rose.

Why would Rose –

Because she'll ask.

I remembered the trophy on Rose's windowsill, shedding gold. And the way she'd talked about Wyoming. The sky in Wyoming, she'd said. Wait till you see it, Lucy. Just assuming I would. The stars right on top of you.

I looked up through the skylight and thought: Why shouldn't she go?

Who's the soft-hearted one? I said. Who's lonely?

Pete didn't answer.

I tried to close the door gently, so as not to wake Rose, but really, there is no gentle way to close a door like that.

Rose and I never talked about what she saw that night she and Pete took us in.

The truck was stuck on the pass between Taos and Angel Fire. Darren and I were trying to walk the rest of the way to Angel Fire. We weren't even sure where it was. On the other side of a mountain, that was all we knew. A little ski town, the motels cheaper than Taos.

We'd been to see a doctor in Taos. There were so many things wrong with us by then that I'd finally said, Screw it, and we'd pulled into a clinic, no insurance, and said, Please be kind. They were. They cut the fees in half.

I ran through the list of symptoms. Darren sat mute beside me.

The doctor took notes, wore latex gloves to examine us. In the end, he diagnosed us with our own little trinity.

You're monogamous? he asked. Well, yes, I said and looked at Darren. Okay, he continued. The first can be treated with antibiotics, the second, not so easily. There are certain topical applications.

Okay.

Sarcoptes Scabiei – he'd been saving the best for last. Scabies mites.

Darren crossed and uncrossed his legs.

Where have you been sleeping? the doctor asked.

Everywhere, I said.

Likely you picked them up from a mattress, he said.

I knew immediately which mattress. San Francisco, I said.

Darren nodded, his eyes closed. Mites, he said. Like termites?

The doctor explained that no, these were *human* mites. Though, like termites, they were invisible to the naked eye. They lived on skin. Given a chance, they got under it. Burrowed, built tunnels, reproduced mightily. Entire civilizations rose and fell within a few weeks.

I looked down at my hands.

They prefer places where the skin is thinnest, the doctor said. Delicate, fleshy places. They don't live in hair, fortunately. In fact, they don't travel above the neckline at all.

Hey, that's good to know, Darren said.

I looked at him. Travel, I said.

Tell us what to do.

The doctor wrote a prescription for a special cream. Cover your entire body, chin to toe. Leave it on for half an hour. One application should do. Wash your clothes in hot water. Put what can't be washed in the dryer for ten minutes or longer. The itching won't stop right away. It'll last until decomposition occurs.

Nice, I said.

We stood up to leave. Darren said: The itching is so much worse at night.

The doctor snapped off his gloves. Mites are nocturnal.

The snow started as we left Taos and got heavier as we wound our way up the mountain.

A sheer drop to the right. A sneaky road, erasing itself. We came around a turn and nearly fell off the mountain. Darren stopped the truck just in time. When he tried to back up, the wheels spun.

Too dangerous, I said.

I'll put the chain on, Darren said.

The chain?

There's only one.

Jesus Christ. One chain on one tire. That won't help, I said. We're stuck. And even if we weren't – we don't know this road. We don't know what's coming up.

So we stay put and wait for it to clear? Darren said hopefully.

I tried to see behind us. The next car through might very well knock us over the edge. We should get out, I said.

And leave the truck?

I wiped the fog from my window. We'll push it, I said. Out of the way.

Out of the way – where?

Over the edge. The idea made me giddy.

Are you serious?

Put her in neutral. I opened my door.

Wait, Lucy. He turned his owl-eyes on me and I was almost sorry. You're not making sense, he said. What about all our stuff? What if there are houses down there?

I grabbed my bag. Fine. Leave it here. But I won't sit in it and wait to die. We're better off on foot. How far can it be? I slammed the door.

Far.

He was following me. What's wrong?

We walked for an hour. I couldn't feel my feet.

Darren said: Are we still going up, or coming back down?

He took off a glove and scratched under his jeans.

I looked up. The sky was white but lightless. It was dark.

They're waking up, he said.

I kept walking.

But soon the itching under my own clothes was unbearable, the road endless, the snow unabating.

Talk to me, Darren said. Please.

I turned and whacked him hard in the chest with both hands, pitching him into the snow. You promiscuous *fuck.*

Oh Lucy. Not since you.

I fell on top of him and reached for his throat. I would commit murder, yes I would, but first I had an itch. I had a thousand itches. I pulled off my mittens. I'm a walking disease, I said.

He looked up at me. I know. I'm sorry. He reached up under my clothes to help me scratch.

Damn the delicate fleshy places. The doctor was right. The friggers migrated to where they could get an easy feed. Under my boobs. On the undersides of my wrists and arms. That thin, webby skin at the base of my fingers.

Darren stopped me before I drew blood. I flopped onto my back, exhausted. If I could have anything in the world right now, you know what it would be?

Longer nails?

We lay still. Snow was already piling up around us.

Lucy, next time you're mad at me, don't take it out on the truck, okay?

Shut up.

We looked at each other. Our noses almost touched.

Please don't say we have to get up now, he said.

We have to get up now.

He moaned.

We can't just lie here. This is how people freeze to death.

Angel Fire. His breath was white. Sounds like paradise.

Maybe it is.

It's a long way to Angel Fire, he said.

Is it? I got to my feet. You don't know that. It could be anywhere. It could be around the next turn.

It wasn't, but something else was. Lights through the trees. The cliff on the right had become a slope. Now, on the slope, was a house.

Darren and I stood a long time in the driveway, weighing our options. Keep walking. Knock and ask to use the phone. Knock and ask to spend the night. We were up to our thighs in snow.

Darren got to the crux of the matter: We can't infest a perfectly clean home.

No. But I have a plan.

This was how we met Pete and Rose. How our wet clothes were taken from us and put in the dryer for longer than ten minutes. How Darren and I slathered on the poisonous cream, chin to toe, in Rose's bedroom. How we stood naked and shivering for half an hour. How we got hysterical and tried to keep our laughter down. How I forgave Darren for loving other Chlamydia-carrying, HPV-ridden women before he

loved me. How, when he asked me to dance, I didn't say no. How, cold and waiting for the invisible monsters to die, we turned circles in Rose's bedroom. And how, when I finally thought to turn out the light, I looked out the window and saw Rose, in a nightgown and boots, watching.

The next day, after the plow came through, Pete drove us back up the pass to get the truck. Miraculously, it was right where we'd left it.

My super powers derive from two sources: The necklace, which makes me brave and alluring, and the Sarcoptes Scabiei experience, which makes me, well, a force to be reckoned with.

We're in comic book territory. Girl bitten by not one, but a thousand microscopic spiders. Generations of spiders. Grandparents, grandchildren, great grandchildren – all tapped, briefly, into my bloodstream.

They were bound to produce something remarkable in me.

Perhaps when they died, their little mite souls fused to mine. Perhaps I inherited their restlessness. Perhaps my appetite became my strength. Perhaps I can sense where people are delicate. This allows me to hurt them, and to save them.

Did they do the same for Darren?

I became a superhero on the night I left him. Did he?

The last night I hiked up Pike's Peak, wearing the necklace, I felt no pain. It was 3:45 AM. A full moon. The snow sparkled. I could think only of diamonds.

Diamonds are this girl's best friend. Lucy in the sky with diamonds. It was comical, really.

I reached the house in record time and let the dogs rush into the silence. For thirty seconds, they did acrobatics around me, then tore off into the woods. I followed them to the edge of the trees and waited. I could hear them, and then I couldn't.

Daphne and Diana, Springer Spaniels. We'd made the mistake, once, of using the saucers in their presence. I'd never seen dogs do somersaults before.

I felt like Rose, standing in the snow, alone and waiting. I looked for a fallen tree and sat down.

What I'd seen, when I turned off her bedroom light, was someone wanting to climb through the window. Any window, not just the one we happened to be dancing behind – any window that would put her under a different ceiling. Or sky.

We'd transformed her bedroom – I think that's what it was.

A few years ago, she'd spent a year in Wyoming. She'd worked at a bar and become the town's first female Mechanical Bull Riding Champion. It sounds crazy. But to hear her talk, you know it mattered. A *champion.* She's still got the trophy to prove it. Then she fell for a married guy, and it ended badly. She came home.

But Pete was right. She would leave again. No one who stares at the sky that much is going to *stay.*

One night at the restaurant she'd told me: Everyone said how hard it was going to be to stay on. But it was easy. I watched the cowboys get pitched off left and right, but I could hang on till dawn.

Is there a Mechanical Bull Riding circuit?

She looked at me.

I pointed at her. You should find out.

She burst out laughing.

The dogs came galloping back. Diana full tilt, Daphne at her heels.

Diana is the goddess of the moon and war. But Daphne just turned into a tree. Someone loved her and chased her – Apollo? – and when he caught her, he made sure she stayed put. There's a famous statue of Daphne somewhere in Italy. Celie brought home a print from one of her trips. She pulled it from its plastic sheath and unrolled it like a warning: The panicked arms, the hands sprouting leaves, the legs fusing into trunk. Daphne in mid-metamorphosis. Daphne, not yet a tree, but no longer a woman.

Daphne or Diana. An easy choice. If I can't be God of everything, then I choose goddess of the moon. Everything else celestial we must share: Sun, galaxy, universe. But the moon orbits us.

And if war comes part and parcel, if I must be goddess of that too, then I accept that. I do not balk from that.

I called the dogs, with their unequal names.

The hardest part about making a decision is clear-cutting the space you need for it, opening up that space so you can walk in a new direction. A lot of trees must fall. And without a shield, a talisman, something to harden your heart, you're liable to fall down with the fallen and make your unfinished decision your bed.

I got to my feet. That wasn't going to happen to me.

On this, the last night that I loved him, Darren woke when I climbed into bed. He pulled me on top of him. He shivered. He said, You're so late. I was scared.

His mouth tasted sweet and old.

I thought you weren't coming back, he said.

I called. Where were you?

Out drinking.

And you drove, you idiot.

But you love me.

It was the first of April and I thought: Love is so March.

I waited to be sure he was asleep. I packed the contents of the laundry basket. I couldn't risk opening drawers and rattling hangers. Why such stealth? Would he have stopped me? Turned me into a tree? Maybe. Who knew what powers he had now. They might just rival mine.

He was asleep on his back in the dark. There was just enough moonlight to make him silver. He was a photograph, that glossy and sharp.

I stood at the foot of the bed and cast a spell to protect him. An easy spell. I'd known it forever. It goes like this: Love someone else.

And then I was out the door. I grabbed a saucer from the porch. There was only one. The other was still in the truck. I ran with it, my duffel bag flapping like a

broken wing on my back. I had no need for wings. I threw myself down and jumped on.

There is a black and white photograph of Celie wearing the necklace, a studio portrait. She is in her twenties. Satin straps loop over her bare shoulders. She is looking to one side and not quite smiling. Her lips are very dark, her eyes bright. How is it that I can *know* the colours without seeing them? The redness of her lipstick stains the image. I've never seen the gown she's wearing, but I know it's blue. Not quite as blue as her eyes. I have no memory of her hair being anything but white, but here it is gold. I know all this, I see it, even though the picture is only shades of moonlight.

In that picture, how cosy the two of them seem, she and the necklace, how well-suited. The startling sharpness of diamonds against the smooth slope of her chest. All those beveled edges made harmless, made beautiful.

They have collaborated, Celie and the necklace, to make me what I am.

Twenty-five floors up in a hotel that doubles as a circus, I am Lucy in the sky with diamonds. Diamonds are this girl's best friend.

All superheroes need a name. I'm thinking of going with the Bedazzler.

On a floor somewhere below me, a pony, its fur dyed soft pink, trots in a circle. A man eats fire. This goes on indefinitely.

Murderer

Imagine a moment, like a seed, that contains a blueprint. Four lives uncoil from this single moment. And in this moment, all the words I will ever write are written, are *present*, and all the words the other three will write. And the people we will love, or be unable to love. And those we will damn and damage and save. All present. All lined up, off-stage, ready to go.

The operas, every last one of them, pack the room. The arias we will never sing.

The music we will never conduct, or be conductors for.

Even this very night in Las Vegas is mapped out more than twenty years ago in Celie's dressing room. The necklace is present. It knows, long before I do, that if I cannot be its heir, I will be its thief.

A moment such as this should bear the name *conception.* Not the soulless congress of x with x, or x with y. No one is present for that. *No one*. It is the loneliest thing I can think of, conception.

We were summoned. In skirts and blouses with painful elastic cuffs, we trod across the bedroom carpet. Through Celie's closet and out the other side. This was the only way into her dressing room.

She sat at her movie-star-mirror, framed by bright lights. We stood back, quiet and careful. We were not usually permitted in here. Celie was wearing a red gown.

Perhaps it was Christmas. Her hair was a snow drift, curling at her shoulders. She looked at us in the mirror and lifted a hand. We stepped forward.

She opened a black velvet box.

Celie has many, many jewels. I knew them all by heart. But this I had never seen. It gathered all the light from the room and winked it back at us. The velvet grew blacker behind it.

I clasped my hands behind my back.

The first of you, Celie said. And we lifted our eyes then, from the necklace to her face in the mirror. To *sing*. The first of you to sing, professionally, will inherit it.

My throat closed.

Would one of you –? She lifted the necklace.

Claudia, swift as always, was at Celie's back, pinching the ends, fumbling with the clasp.

Devorah, the youngest, did not understand.

It means I'll give it to you, Celie explained. It means you'll have it, when I die.

The necklace closed around her neck and seemed to claim her. Claudia stepped back.

I have rarely seen Celie without jewelry. But even without it, she glistens. Others could drip diamonds and not catch a single ray of light. Me, for instance. But Celie, on a dreary day, will make you look for a setting sun because some light is touching her that is not touching you.

I looked at my cousins in the mirror. Only Gwen met my eyes. Devorah, I saw, was crying.

Gwen whispered: Because Celie said she will die.

Celie heard her and turned around. Oh darling, she said, not soon, not any time soon. She opened her arms. We moved aside to let Devorah through.

Where did it come from? Gwen asked. Outer space?

Claudia laughed.

It was secret a gift, Celie said, from the Archduke Maximilian of Austria to Ulysses S. Grant. She lifted Devorah onto her lap. We were about to hear a story.

Ulysses S. Grant was a general in the United States army. You've probably never heard of him. Later he would become president. Maximilian had been named the emperor of Mexico, which the Mexicans didn't like very much. He thought his life might be in danger – rightly so, it turns out. He gave Ulysses a diamond necklace as a gift – a bribe, really, which means a kind of secret payment – in exchange for protection. Grant had a very great army, you see. He accepted the gift and gave it to his wife, Julia, who then gave it to her daughter, who married my grandmother's brother.

Only Claudia nodded as if she understood. Celie looked at each of us and smiled. It's complicated, she said. To answer your question, Gwen, the necklace came from Austria, not from outer space. It's very valuable. So valuable that most of the time, it lives at the bank.

How much is it worth? I asked.

Claudia rolled her eyes in disgust. The wrong question to ask.

Celie said: Millions, I should think. If we could prove where it came from.

Millions, Gwen gasped.

I nudged her. His name was Maxi-million.

I wore it, Celie said, the first time I sang at Covent Garden.

We were silent a moment, picturing it.

Did everyone love you?

Celie laughed. They didn't hate me anyway.

Which meant they'd loved her.

Did Maximilian live? Claudia asked.

Celie sighed. Grant was a bit of a bastard, I'm afraid.

So he didn't save him?

No. Maximilian was executed. A few years later Grant became president.

He murdered him, I said.

Well no, Celie said. Not exactly. And it hasn't been proven, about the necklace. We know it came from Austria, but that's all. It's a family story.

Claudia nodded. Right. She would spend her life trying to prove it.

I suppose, said Celie, putting Devorah down, there's a little bit of blood on it.

A song for the necklace, Celie said. And when, after twenty years, no songs were forthcoming, she conceded. Okay. A story, then.

Because we became writers, not singers. The contest shifted gears. A story for the necklace, she said.

But make it music to my ears.

Jogger

She runs like a grown-up, pony-tail swinging, invisible reins in her hands.

The revolving door has put me on the sidewalk. There's a breakfast buffet down the street with my name on it. Now here comes this child. It takes me a moment to believe in her: a child jogging down the Las Vegas strip at dawn.

There is a way children run – barefoot around the edge of a pool, down the street to an ice cream van. This child does not run like that.

I feel like I've landed on the sidewalk instead of stepped onto it.

A soul to save.

From what? A little exercise? Please. Nonetheless, I look around for a phone booth. To become the Bedazzler. Stop her. Stop everything. The spinning circus that is my hotel. The dice perpetually falling. The sound of winning coming through every wall and floor.

The world feels very weird. I remind myself that:

a. I need sleep.

b. Last night the Whirry Free inexplicably broadcast tears.

c. I am wearing a diamond necklace under my t-shirt to a $1.50 buffet.

d. Darren's truck, which only three nights ago sat snow-covered at the bottom of Pike's Peak, now bakes all day in a parking lot where people bungee jump from a crane in the corner.

e. This tired little truck still has, along with a concrete block, two plastic saucers in its open back – and that I worried yesterday these might be stolen but have since realized they belong to another weather system and time. That they can't even be seen here, let alone stolen. And what do I need them for now anyway?

The jogger is just one more thing to process. The jogger is part of this sidewalk, the way the pink pony is part of my hotel. The jogger is f.

I can add her to my list of things not to break my heart – or I can save her.

I sleep, finally, despite the crying. I leave the Whirry Free on and try to swim to the source of the sound. I'm asleep before I get there, before I can reach her, the weeper.

But I dream of Devorah. I dream she is shoveling the road up to Pike's Peak – the entire road. I try to stop her, to tell her no, this isn't necessary; we park at the bottom. She keeps shoveling anyway. I break off a diamond from the necklace with my teeth and give it to her.

I wake just before dawn. I turn on my side. The sky looks like yesterday.

Celie took me to operas, to the finished productions but also to the dress rehearsals. I watched her face, and I listened. This is how I learned to distinguish the sound of failure and the sound of flight. The sound of a voice stuck to the runway and one that is airborne, or soon will be – the sound of a voice on its way. Becoming.

My voice, I knew, did not have the muscle.

My cousins knew it too. We were not to be Celie's heirs. But we pretended. We tried. We put on family performances of Gilbert and Sullivan. We threw nervous voices after runaway music. We modified *Three Little Maids from School* to *Four Little Maids from School*. Celie applauded heartily.

We made her almost happy.

But Gilbert and Sullivan is not serious opera. In fact, it is not opera at all. And it was not what I longed to sing.

When I was nine, I saw Bellini's *Norma* at Covent Garden.

Celie went to England every summer to visit her sister, Isobel. Usually she left me behind with Claudia and Gwen's parents. But that year Isobel's husband had died, and Celie said that she, Isobel, needed cheering up, and would I be willing to be a little ray of sunshine?

Yes, yes, yes.

Covent Garden. Celie spoke of it with such reverence that I imagined a religious space (for years I thought it was *Convent* Garden) where exotic flowers bloomed. Those blue hydrangeas Isobel sent for Celie's birthday – surely those had come from this garden where Celie loved to sing.

This was my Covent Garden: Wobbling at the edges with blue hydrangeas. Moonlight, a blue beam, trained on a young, even more lovely Celie (was such a thing possible? *No*). Diamonds looped around her open throat. An audience, rapt.

Aunt Isobel lived in Lemington Spa. I thought that too sounded delicious. There would be lemons hanging from trees, bumblebees bouncing from flower to flower. A world in technicolor, like Oz. Toronto, by comparison, would feel like Kansas.

But it was nothing like that. We arrived to find London grey with rain, Lemington Spa greyest of all. Aunt Isobel was depressed, her garden neglected. We stayed mostly indoors.

It was my first time meeting Isobel. Her voice was Celie's voice. If I heard them talking in another room, I couldn't tell who was who. And she looked enough like Celie to make me feel worried in her presence.

To see them side by side felt to me like a warning.

Isobel didn't like me, I was sure, because I'd thrown up in her car on the way from the airport. I was in the back seat, jet-lagged – and here was this other-Celie, speaking in Celie's voice, driving the wrong side of the car. The hands on the steering wheel were Celie's, but they were wearing the wrong rings.

Celie, the real Celie, sitting where she should be driving, but wasn't, was unusually quiet. I slid from one side of the back seat to other – no seatbelts! – trying not to look at either of them.

I feel sick, I said.

Celie turned her head sharply. Do you want to stop and get out?

Yes.

Aunt Isobel said, That's really not convenient just now.

I threw up, then, all over the black vinyl of the back seat.

Oh Lord, said Isobel, glancing over her shoulder.

Sorry.

Oh Lord.

Watch the road, Celie directed her. Then, twisting in her seat, she rolled down the back window. Look outside, darling, she said. Look as far away as you can. At the furthest thing you can see.

I tried, but the rain kept getting in the way.

Celie told Isobel to pull over at the next "petrol" station – since when did she call it that? – which Isobel did, and I was pulled out of the car and told to breathe the fresh air, which didn't smell so fresh to me.

I smell petrol, I said, and Celie gave me a funny look.

You don't feel too badly then.

Nope.

Meanwhile Isobel, who'd been mopping up the sick with a rag from the trunk, suddenly started backing out of the car, retching, adding some of her own vomit to the mix before the rest hit the pavement.

Oh Lord, I said.

Lucia, Celie said.

What?

Isobel? Celie put a hand on her back. Poor Isobel. I'm so sorry. I should have done that.

Isobel spat, wiped her mouth on her sleeve. It stinks something awful, she said. I really can't bear sick.

Few of us can, said Celie, and something in her voice made me feel that she was on my side, against Isobel.

We drove the rest of the way to Isobel's with the windows down. We arrived damp, two of us with bad tastes in our mouths.

So much for being a little ray of sunshine.

We brought the luggage inside.

Celie said: When I'm through you'll never know two people were sick in that car. She marched to the kitchen for cleaning supplies. I followed. I almost held onto her coat, but I was too old for that.

The car smelled worse when we were done with it – stronger. Pine trees and vomit. We came back inside and found Isobel at the kitchen table, crying.

Celie told me to go to my room.

Where's that?

She sighed like I should know.

Isobel said: Upstairs. Second door on your left.

I took my little suitcase and let it bang each stair on the way up. My room was ugly. No surprise there.

I found it hard to believe Isobel used to sing.

Was she as good as you?

Oh, better.

I shook my head, No.

Celie smiled. We were in the drawing room, playing Snakes and Ladders. Aunt Isobel was in bed. Another thing about her I disliked: Her bedtime was earlier than mine.

Did she ever sing at Covent Garden?

No.

Why not?

She had a family to look after.

I sighed and marched my man up a ladder. This was the kind of story that bored me. It felt like a lie. You had a family too, I countered.

Yes, but I started mine late. I had some time. She rolled the die. Anyway, your grandfather didn't mind me doing whatever there was to do musically in Toronto then, which wasn't much. Some radio broadcasts. We started the opera company. I've told you about that. It was exciting, but, damn – she slid down a snake – it didn't take much time away from my family.

Oh.

If Isobel had been successful, it would have meant travel. Long hours. Hard, hard work.

So she never had a chance.

She got married, Lucia.

For a moment we weren't playing the game anymore.

Right, I said.

The highlight of the trip was to be the performance at Covent Garden, all the more anticipated because Isobel would not be going with us. She wasn't up to it, she said.

I guess it makes her sad to go the opera, I said privately to Celie. Since she could have been famous and wasn't.

Lucia, Celie warned and closed the door. We were in her room, dressing for the performance.

What?

She frowned. Don't you like Isobel?

I looked at her, and had I thought that my not liking Isobel genuinely upset her, I would have said, I *love* Aunt Isobel, twenty times over, until she told me to be quiet. But her frown had a tiny smile behind it. I sensed how much she needed to be the *only* Celie, and how Isobel somehow threatened that. So I said, I don't know, in a way that made it clear I *did* know and was no fan of her older sister.

Celie shook her head, not quite disappointed. Listen. I want you to remember something, she said. Someone Isobel loves has just died. Remember how you felt when your grandfather died?

I nodded, when in fact, I remembered very little. I remembered I'd been shipped off to live with Claudia and Gwen for a week while Celie "made arrangements."

Good girl. She opened the door. Are we ready?

We certainly were. Celie in a black dress, me in a red one.

I love my long dress, I said happily, swooshing it around my ankles. I loved the words *long dress*, and I loved Celie best of all.

Covent Garden turned out to be neither a garden nor a convent. This was unexpected. There were no blue hydrangeas; in fact, I'd seen none since we arrived in England. And the moonlight, if there was any, stayed outside, diffused in fog. But what I'd forgotten, what my imagination had not accounted for, was the music.

I could imagine flowers, stages, diamonds. I could tell a thousand stories with Celie at the centre, singing. All that was easy. But what I could not do, what I knew I would never be able to do, was *hear* – to hear music in my story.

Music put me to shame. It always would. The stage that night was duller than Kansas. It mattered nothing.

Celie had told me beforehand: Your great, great, great grandmother was the very first Norma to sing at Covent Garden. When she sang Casta diva, her father wept.

Why?

Wait and see.

It is no good me describing it. Memory is a silent movie. What I recall is sitting very still, and at the same time leaving my seat. The voice pulled me up. The music said: Remember. And I did. The past was a pyramid, and I was the top. Everything had been so that I might be. Be, it said. Become.

But, but, but. There is a terrible silence in me.

Las Vegas is cheap, but not that cheap. I'm low on cash. I have a credit card that I don't want to use. I plan on leaving no trace.

I produce the necklace at the most reputable pawn shop I can find, which isn't very.

It's real.

$200, says the woman behind the counter.

It belonged to Ulysses S. Grant.

Okay. $250.

It was a gift from the Archduke Maximilian of Austria to Ulysses S. Grant. These are Austrian crown jewels.

How'd you get it?

Grant gave it to his wife, Julia.

And she gave it to you?

She's been dead for a hundred years.

So how'd you get it?

I stole it.

So I should be calling the police.

I guess so.

Obviously I didn't expect anyone to believe me. The truth is, I just wanted to show someone.

Are you or are you not Pete Rose?

He doesn't answer. We're in the off-track betting area. Horses spin in circles on all four walls. It's noisy.

Who you betting on?

No response.

Las Vegas is the only place in the country you can legally bet on baseball, I tell him. But I guess you know that. I'm proud of you, Pete.

He walks away. I follow. The only person I've spoken to in four days is the pawnbroker.

Listen, I tell him, I waited tables in a restaurant that's a shrine to your ass.

He swings around.

I carry on, undaunted. The owner, this guy named Pete, named his daughter Rose. You see what I'm getting at here? The restaurant's called Charlie Hustle's. I can quote you on any number of subjects. I've seen just about every photograph there is of you.

That so.

Yeah. I feel like I know you. So the least you can do is maybe sign a baseball. Give me something for the restaurant wall. Not that it needs it.

What's the most I could do?

The most? I falter. Are you coming on to me?

Look. Jesus. What's the most I could do, in your opinion, for these – restaurateurs who've made a family out of my name?

Show up, I guess. Have a meal at the restaurant.

Where is it?

Angel Fire, New Mexico.

Consider it done.

Are you serious? Wait. I grab his sleeve.

What?

Got any tips?

Thanks to Pete Rose, I've quadrupled the money I came here with.

I have dinner at a real restaurant (not a buffet) with Pete Rose. He explains what bunting is, and how, if you bunt the ball foul, with two strikes, you're out.

Whaddya know.

He grins. I amuse him.

So these people with the restaurant, they really worship me, huh?

Pete Rose turns out to be a bit of an ass, and not a very good conversationalist. It occurs to me, sitting across from him like this, that he doesn't look all that familiar. Or rather he looks too familiar to be *the* Pete Rose.

He tells me about the white tigers in his hotel.

Yeah? I dig into my lobster. My hotel has a pink pony.

Really.

Speaking of really. Are you really Pete Rose?

The genuine article.

Because the world is full people who might be you.

And the world is full of people who might be you.

The waitress, who has brought more wine, looks a hell of a lot like me.

Touché, I say when she's gone.

I ask him what it was like in jail. He's reluctant to talk about it.

I've always thought I'd do pretty well in jail, I tell him. The routine. The structure. The other inmates – we'd be close – all of us "in it" together. I'd organize group activities.

Group activities. He's looking at me like I'm from another planet. Like what? Escape?

Maybe. For those who are interested.

He resumes eating. Sounds like you've got it all figured out.

As long as I wouldn't have to share a cell.

I had my own cell, he says.

Could you hear the other inmates breathing?

What?

At night.

You could hear a lot of things.

I bet.

He laughs, and I don't like it. Keep out of jail if you can, he advises me.

If I can.

He looks at me. What have you done? he asks. A Canadian, broke and alone in Las Vegas. What's your story?

What makes you think I'm Canadian? What makes you think I'm alone?

By the time we part company, I'm feeling a lot less enthusiastic about him showing up at Charlie Hustle's. If he's not the real Pete Rose, I don't need to worry. Pete will sniff out a fraud in a heartbeat. But say he *is* the genuine article – and quite possibly he is – he's going to disappoint the hell out of them.

Together, Pete and Rose have created a second Pete Rose, certainly not this man, and what happens to that creation when the real one shows up and starts talking endlessly about genetic mutations in albino tigers? Or when he admits to betting on baseball games – even if only in Vegas?

Did you ever throw a game? I ask him point blank. Be honest.

No.

But do I believe him? I say: You weren't really serious about going to Las Cruces, were you?

Las Cruces. I thought it was Angel Fire.

Because a signed baseball would do nicely, I think.

He gives me a friendly punch on the shoulder. There's nothing more to say. I thank him for dinner and the tips on Blue Velvet and Carlotta's Gem.

Any time.

He heads off to his white tigers, I to my pink pony.

Now I kick myself for not just asking to see a piece of ID.

In the lobby of the hotel, I see the jogger, in full running regalia, stretching against a slot machine. It is 1:00 AM.

I lie on a bed that belongs to the whole world. Hotel beds do, you know, belong to everyone and no one. We try to make them our own and finally give up, check out, go home. Only I won't be going home.

Cold air comes through the vents and dives straight for my chest. I'm freezing.

I do something stupid. Darren. I curl up with the phone. I hold it so tight to my ear that it makes it hard to hear.

Lucy?

This is what I say: I'm sorry I stole the truck.

He says: I don't care about the truck. Where are you?

It's out there in a parking lot the size of New Mexico. It gets so hot in the afternoons. It must be so confused.

Don't cry, Lucy. Come back.

You won't believe this, but I met Pete Rose.

Lucy.

I can't.

Why not? Why can't you?

Do you love that boy?

I can't.

And I hang up, before I can.

I call Claudia next. Why?

Leslie answers and says, Holy Christ, it's Lucy. Where are you?

I need to talk to Claudia.

He puts Claudia on.

Lucia?

Is Celie back?

She got back yesterday. She's beside herself worrying about you. No surprise there.

Claudia is angry of course. I feel myself getting heavier. Fortifying. This is why I called her.

She asks, What did you do to her?

Nothing.

She says you ran out on her.

What else?

Tell me where you are.

It doesn't matter. Is that all she said?

We have caller ID. We've got the area code. And I'm not going to tell you what she said, Lucia. Call her yourself. Are you with that guy?

In the background, Leslie announces: Las Vegas.

Las Vegas, Claudia repeats. God. What are you doing there?

A reasonable question. I don't know. Gambling.

Are you looking for her?

Who?

Who else?

Who?

Your mother.

The words, like a flashbulb. It feels so absolutely untrue, that for a moment it becomes the opposite.

I don't know. I almost tell Claudia the truth, that I've forgotten. Forgotten she's supposed to be here. Forgotten I even have one.

Las Vegas. Celie's Inferno.

I'm leaving any day now, I say and hang up.

If asked, and Celie will often ask, which of all the operas we've seen is the most memorable, I will say *Norma*. I say it because it's true, and because it will please Celie, and because the others weren't there.

Claudia and Gwen will say *Aida*. And I will quickly agree that, absolutely, *Aida* rates a close second.

Claudia will roll her eyes.

And I will accuse them of loving *Aida*, not for Celeste Aida, or any of the celebrated arias, but for the Grand Ballet March, which is largely orchestral.

Celie will say kindly, Well, it is quite the jamboree.

Claudia and Gwen used to dance to it endlessly, in their black ballet leotards, marching and spinning themselves dizzy.

Celie took us to see *Aida* when we were quite small. In the car afterwards, she told us that when the opera opened at la Scala, Verdi was presented with a special conductor's baton, made of ivory, with a diamond star at the tip. Aida's name was spelled out in rubies, his own in other precious jewels.

Who has the diamond baton now? I asked. Does anyone use it?

Oh no, said Celie. It's in a museum in Milan.

I sat back, full of longing. To hold it in my hand, to trace patterns in the air. I'd once made the mistake of calling the baton a magic wand. Celie had laughed. Maybe all batons weren't magic wands, but Verdi's probably was.

Someday I'm going to Milan, I said. Wherever it is.

Italy, said Claudia, like I should know.

I stared at the back of her head. She was sitting in front. If I had an ivory baton with a diamond star, I said, the first thing I'd do is hit you with it.

Or make you disappear.

Devorah will say *The Elixir of Love.*

She was nineteen. Celie gave her two tickets, but Devorah went alone. This was typical of Devorah then.

She will give Celie the abridged version. She will say simply: The second act. Nemorino's aria. It was so unexpected. I'd never heard anything like it.

And Celie will nod and tell her again how Donizetti was criticized for putting it in there. A romanza, in a comedy. And in fact, he'd written it long before he'd written the opera. But he was so proud of it, he loved it so, that he couldn't resist showcasing it. Una furtiva lagrima. A furtive tear. It would become the opera's signature piece.

Devorah, if she has had some wine, may say: I was not prepared for Nemorino's earnestness. I was not prepared for his love.

What she will not tell Celie, but what she will tell me privately, is how she escaped to the bathroom during the first act and sat on the toilet. How she sat there, in porcelain silence, trying to slow her heart. How she felt weak just from pushing open the bathroom door.

She couldn't bear the first act, the drunken *silliness* of it. The elixir of love was too potent a brew, she will say now, and laugh about it.

She sat on the toilet and felt like she was falling in.

Then she heard the rustle of taffeta by the sinks and the sound of tears. She waited a moment and flushed.

From the other sink, she watched the woman in the mirror.

Can I do something? Devorah asked. No response. The woman seemed not to hear her, or to even register her presence. Something life-giving had broken. That much was clear. Devorah was here, but not here. Their paths were not crossing.

Where was the other half of this equation, Devorah wondered. Was someone weeping in the men's room?

The woman wiped her tears with a red silk scarf. I'm going home, she said to her reflection. Devorah nodded, as if this were absolutely the right thing to do. Where was home? A townhouse in the Annex, an apartment in Tokyo?

You should go, Devorah said. A fairy on the woman's shoulder.

And she did. On her way out, she crammed the scarf in the garbage.

Of course, Devorah didn't leave it there. She wrapped it around her own throat and returned for Act II, where she witnessed Nemorino break character and become someone else.

Those who love, he sang, cry. Una furtiva lagrima. A furtive tear. Those who love, cry. And Devorah, unable to cry herself, pressed the scarf against her chin, still damp with someone else's tears.

She thought, of all things, of a ladybug – the unexpected way its back breaks open and fragile wings appear.

You should go, she had said. Why?

Celie puts questions to us. They are meant to distill us down to essences. Elixirs.

We are what we answer. That I say *Norma*. That Devorah says *The Elixir of Love*. That the other two, in unison, claim *Aida*. These stand as tall as we do. They stand for us.

Questions, games, and murders.

One Christmas, Celie introduced the Kill Game. We drew names from a hat. The object was to murder the person whose name you drew. Murder meant getting your victim alone in a room and placing a black sticker, a *bullet hole*, somewhere on her person. Once you made a kill, you appropriated your victim's victim, and so on, until only two murderers were left, each trying to kill the other. The one left alive at the end was the winner.

That would be me.

Claudia wore her bullet hole affixed to her temple for days after the game was over, a kind of recrimination. She was my last kill.

You see, it should be mine, by rights. The bloody necklace. Because the others have parents. Because Celie raised me. And so it should come to me. Questions and games, aside. Singer, writer, murderer. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, richman, poorman, beggarman. Thief. It shouldn't matter. It should be mine.

We became writers, all four of us.

We met once a week at Claudia's to share what we were working on. I was not prolific. Not like Gwen, who could conjure a universe in a week. Or Claudia, with

her meticulously-researched, excruciatingly-footnoted novels. I wrote stories. Some of them were published. This was enough.

Actually, no it wasn't. Of course it wasn't.

Gwen I could listen to without feeling despair. Not that her stories weren't good. They were. Sleek, plot-driven machines that took you places. But they took you far enough away from your own street corner that you never felt she was encroaching.

Not that Claudia or Devorah ever encroached. Not that I had a street corner to encroach upon.

Gwen has this story about a man condemned to death. It isn't clear what his crime is, or where or when the story takes place. It feels like the past, definitely the past, but no past I know.

He's to be executed at the centre of this giant bowl made of mirrors. The bowl has a lid. When the lid slides open, sunlight floods the bowl. Light rays bounce off the sides and reflect back to a single focal point. (It's a parabola, though the criminal, standing at the focal point, doesn't know this.) All the sunlight gathers at his heart. He burns, from the inside out.

Kafkaesque, said Claudia, after Gwen had read it. So let me get this straight. The government's playing it off like it's the sun delivering justice – and these people worship the sun. The sun is their god. Are you capitalizing sun? Maybe you should. So they believe it's *God's* judgment, when in fact it's the government's, using its own creepy science. Speaking of which, is this all scientifically plausible?

Of course not, said Gwen.

You say public execution, said Devorah. How – if it's all mirrored inside? Where's the public?

The public could be inside the parabola, said Claudia. There's no danger to anyone else – right, Gwen? – so long as they're not at the focal point.

Or the bowl could be made of two-way mirrors, said Devorah. Like in dressing rooms. Then the public could be outside the bowl.

Like in dressing rooms?

Store dressing rooms.

Store dressing rooms don't have two-way mirrors.

If it makes you feel better to believe that.

Please, said Gwen.

The whole thing makes me think of the Sky Dome, said Devorah. What happens if you stand at the focal point of the Sky Dome?

Don't even go there.

Gwen said: The Sky Dome is *not* a parabola for Chrissakes.

Right. And it's not mirrored.

I interrupted all this to say: Gwen. It's the best thing you've written. It's so good, I'm afraid of it.

That shut them all up. I sat back. Really.

Increasingly, Devorah came to the meetings empty-handed. She would ask: Does the world really need another story?

And Claudia would reply: Do we really need to hear that?

But the truth was loose in the room. No. The world does not need another story. Unless it's Gwen's death-by-parabola story, multiplied in intensity by 10,000. Unless it can gather all the light from the sun and burn your very heart out.

And who can write something like that?

It was therapy, I realized, what we did. We wrote and read aloud to each other. We told the truth the only way we could, which meant telling lies. We were no different from any other support group.

I was trying to get better. But from what? Towards what?

God, there were people out there who did not sing. Who did not write. Who did not write because they could not sing. And it occurred to me that this was what I wanted most, what getting better meant: Not having to write anymore.

There are those who claim writing is their life's blood. Who would write in a vacuum. Who could not stop if they tried.

Oh really. What if you could sing? What if you could *say*?

If those writers exist, I'm not one of them. I wrote with the dream that I would no longer have to. I wrote because, in Celie's presence, and in the presence of my cousins, no matter where I was or with whom, even in line at the goddamn bank, I could not *say:* What I mean, what I am, what you are, what this is, what had been and what will come to be. What I believe.

Writers cannot speak.

Which is why a gathering of writers is so exhausting – all the dodging of *saying*. All the subtext yanking your chain, working your muscles.

Gwen has said: There is no greater torture than a poetry reading. And she's right. We used to go for the sheer agony of it, for the public spectacle and the relief of its being over.

It is torture because the poem paces the room behind the poet, making gestures the poet would never sanction. It's bleeding; it's asking for help. The poem says, and the poet does not. An awkward, messy business. As a preventative measure, the room is gauzed up with multiple introductions and summations by non-poets, with layers of non-language to protect you from the real thing. Because, let's be honest, it's going to make you feel like hell, to hear what the poet cannot say *said.*

So that when the lights come up, and she finally sits back down, and it's thankfully over, you can ask her about her flight or the renovations on her house. You can pretend you haven't been bloodied.

This would happen, to a lesser extent, at Claudia's house. Take Gwen's death-by-parabola story. All the non-talk that followed – two-way mirrors, dressing rooms, the Sky Dome (though I confess, the Sky Dome question occurred to me too) – until I said fuck it, and told her it was brilliant. She'd almost created the very god she'd written about. My very heart was burning. I'd almost said that, but in the end, couldn't. Not quite.

And Claudia – Claudia who feared that story most, I think – her eyes like Celie's when she says: *Don't talk to me that way.* Meaning: *Stop what you're saying.*

Claudia's eyes said: Stop what you're saying. There is no God.

And what came out was: Is this scientifically plausible?

Claudia's eyes, of all of our eyes, are most like Celie's.

She is the most strangled of us too. The least able to say. All her writing is a compensation, one voice upstaging another, footnotes qualifying narrative, until you can't hear for the clamor. Imagine reading *that* aloud, all the voices competing. It's no picnic to listen to.

If Claudia were a character, if I could write the essence of Claudia, I'd give her a second head, and the second head would provide a running commentary on what the first was saying – or rather, *not saying* – all the time. The two would butt heads, literally.

Actually, I've already done this.

For Christmas one year I gave her a ventriloquist's dummy. I had it custom-made from a photograph of her. It was not a bad likeness. The materials were cheap, I confess. I couldn't afford the good stuff. This may have been what she objected to most, the cheapness of the whole package. The chipped wooden face, the hinged jaw that didn't quite align, the mouth that wouldn't close. I said: You can use it for reading. You can be narrative – and little Claudia junior can be footnote.

She stared at me. You're a creepy person, Lucia.

I hate how she calls me Lucia – and how she overuses the word creepy.

I'm a creepy person, I repeated. But I bet the dummy doesn't think so. I guarantee the dummy thinks just the opposite. Ask her.

Claudia dropped the dummy on the floor and one of the arms fell off. I picked it up, reattached the arm. No harm done, I said, handing it back to her.

She refused to take it.

I spent a goddamn fortune on you, Clod.

Celie said, Girls, please.

You'd spend your life savings to mock me, Claudia said.

Not true, not true. I sat the dummy on my lap. But I'd spend a lot, I'll grant you that.

Claudia finally cracked a smile.

There, you see? You look just like your dummy when you smile like that.

On the third morning I see the jogger, I reach out a hand and catch her arm. I hold on tight. She has surprising momentum. I wonder for a moment if I will stop her or if she will carry me. But there is only one superhero on this sidewalk.

Let go.

I let go.

She touches her arm where my hand was.

I'm sorry.

She backs away like an animal. Any second she will pivot on her oversized sneaker and resume the run, but first she takes me in.

She says, Just promise you won't ever do it again.

I raise my hand, which means I promise, and also good bye, because she is going.

At the breakfast buffet, when I return with my plate, she is sitting in my booth, swinging her legs.

I slide in across from her.

I followed you, she says.

Why?

Because you look sad.

I look sad? I begin to eat, slowly, casually. So do you.

Don't you have a boyfriend or something?

No. You think that's why I'm sad.

I don't know. She's got an eye on my pancakes.

Want some?

She shakes her head.

I push my plate to the centre of the table anyway. So, I ask her, why do you run?

She casts a sneaky look at the buffet. She whispers: Obesity is an epidemic. In this country.

I put my fork down. My eyes creep up one bony arm. It bears the imprint of my hand.

My heart rate is 51, she says.

I finish my pancakes. She gets up. Tomorrow, she says. Same bat time, same bat place?

I'm not sleeping deeply enough. I know because my dreams are too bright, too thick. I wake and they press up against me for the rest of the day.

I dream Darren is with me. I'm wearing a baseball cap. I don't feel very clean.

We kiss. I feel scar tissue on his shoulder, and as I move my hands over his chest, more and more scars appear. I say, What are these? They look like cigarette burns. But he tells me no, it's just crazy glue. Crazy glue that burns.

He says, Marry me.

When I kiss his shoulder, there is white fur sprouting from the scar.

We have sex. It is perfect, but I can't remember it.

A few years ago, Claudia announced she was engaged to the guy who'd installed her new windows.

One of the Loveless brothers? Celie asked. Which one? They'd put in Celie's windows too.

Leslie.

Leslie Loveless, I said. Is this a joke?

You haven't met him? said Devorah.

Have you?

Shut *up*, Lucia.

I haven't said anything. Yet. I looked around the room. Am I the only one who hasn't met him?

Celie said, Well, I've only met him in his professional capacity. Not since he's become Claudia's fiancé.

I wish you wouldn't call him that, Claudia said.

Why?

The others had all met him.

I remembered Claudia getting the new windows put in. She'd had the downstairs done first, then a year later, the upstairs. The Loveless brothers – there were two of them – ran a shop called Real Windows.

As opposed to?

Virtual ones.

Of course.

Claudia had just bought herself a skinny little house in the Annex, drafty, with perpetually fogged windows. After the Loveless brothers installed the first batch, she would stand at the kitchen window, mesmerized by the clarity of branches, by the sharp little robins dancing on and off them.

It's like the house got glasses, she said.

A year later she said: I've saved up. I'm getting the upstairs done. So back came the Loveless brothers. This must have been when things developed with Leslie. Claudia, in raptures over the bedroom window. I could imagine it.

All I remember her telling me about the Loveless brothers – and we laughed about it at the time, as I recall – was that one referred to windows using the masculine pronoun, *he*, while the other referred to them as *she*.

So one might say: Well, *she's* a little wide. We're going to have to cut into the wall to give *her* some room. And the other would say: *He'll* give you a nice view, this one. Crank *his* lever to open *him* up.

I thought this was hysterical. So did Claudia, initially.

Now I asked her: Which one was Leslie, the *he* or the *she*?

She gave me a dark look. The *he*, she said.

I nodded. Well, I think you made the right choice.

You see why I haven't introduced you.

I, for one, can't wait to get to know him, Celie said. I'll have you all over for dinner – *both* brothers.

Fun, said Gwen.

I always thought you were gay, I said to Claudia.

Surprise, said Claudia.

Lucia, said Celie. Really.

Really what? One of us has to be gay.

Why? Celie wasn't finding me funny. Why does one of us have to be gay?

I'm not including you in this, I said. I mean of the four of us, one of us has to be gay. Statistically. Aesthetically. To complete the –

Celie got up and went upstairs.

Lucy, said Devorah. Please.

You've got problems, Lucia.

Why? Because I said what everyone's thinking? Everyone thought you were gay, even Celie.

What you don't get, dear cousin, is that I don't care. I don't care.

Leslie and Morris Loveless came to dinner. I kept leading them to the windows, but I couldn't get a pronoun out of either of them.

Morris would talk only about his plan to expand the business into landscaping.

But what's your favourite kind of window? I persisted.

He was tired of windows.

And Leslie prattled non-stop about Claudia's novels.

But have you really read them? I finally interrupted him over dessert. All of them?

He glanced nervously at Claudia. There are only two. Aren't there?

Claudia nodded tiredly.

Come on, I pressed him. The footnotes too?

Yes.

I'll quiz you later, I said, winking.

In the kitchen, Gwen said, You're not as funny as you think you are. Don't you want her to be happy?

I used my sleeve to wipe off the counter. What's she doing getting married? I said. She always said marriage should be outlawed. Was she lying her whole life?

Gwen shrugged. Who cares.

Either she was lying then, or she's lying now.

Gwen handed me a towel. *Who cares.*

Right, I said. I don't know why I did.

Celie: If you could be wealthy, intelligent, or beautiful, which would you be?

Claudia, age 10: Intelligent.

Lucia, age 9: Intelligent.

Gwen, age 7: Intelligent.

Devorah, age 5: Intelligent.

Celie: The four of you are on a sinking ship. The life raft only holds two, you and one other. Whom do you save?

Claudia, age 13: Devorah.

Lucia, age 12: Devorah.

Gwen, age 10: Devorah.

Devorah, age 8: —

Celie: If you could be wealthy, intelligent, or beautiful, which would you be?

Claudia, age 18: Intelligent.

Lucia, age 17: Intelligent.

Gwen, age 15: Intelligent.

Devorah, age 13: Intelligent

Celie: What do you fear most?

Claudia, age 22: Marriage.

Lucia, age 21: —

Gwen, age 19: God.

Devorah, age 17: Drowning.

Hardscrabbler

The jogger's name is Brittany. She is eight years old. She lives in the hotel. Her mother works in the casino. The pink pony's name is Powderpuff.

I learn all this at our next breakfast meeting. This time, she eats.

Listen, I tell her. When your heart rate gets down to 50, there's a danger of it stopping in your sleep. Did you know that?

You promised, she says.

I lean back in the booth.

We meet for breakfast the next morning, and the next. She comes in after her run. She drinks two glasses of ice water.

What's under your shirt?

Me.

She smiles and rolls her eyes. She can be just like a kid one moment, and the next–

She is reaching across the table. I catch her hand in mine. No.

She withdraws. What's under there?

A necklace, I say.

A fancy one.

Yeah.

Gold?

No.

Silver?

No.

What then?

Diamonds.

Oh. Her eyes widen. She leans towards me: Real or cubic zirconia?

Cubic zirconia? Please. It's real. It belonged to Ulysses S. Grant. You know who he was?

No. How much is it worth?

The waitress brings coffee, the only thing we don't have to get ourselves.

Coffee, Brittany?

Yes please.

The waitress gives me a look. She pours Brittany a not quite full cup and moves on. Is there a legal coffee-drinking age? I look around for a sign. Kids do not drink coffee, I realize.

Nonetheless. I watch with satisfaction as Brittany pours sugar and cream into her cup, filling it to the brim. Intent on this task, she says nothing for a moment. Then: So, how much?

A good question.

She looks up at me, sips the coffee without lifting the cup.

Millions, I should think.

Oh my god. She brings a hand to her chest. Exaggerated shock.

I laugh a little. You kill me, I say.

Let me see it, she says. *Please.*

No.

Why not?

Because I don't want the whole restaurant to know what's under my shirt, that's why.

But I'm lying. I'd rather go table to table, lifting my shirt, than show the necklace to Brittany. It feels radioactive against my chest.

At night now I think of her heart beating on another floor. Fifty-one beats a minute. One extra beat keeping her alive.

Her eyes are lightless, Claudia said once. Her eyes are nothing like the sun.

Devorah had gone home. Celie was in bed.

I wanted to come to her defense, but it was true.

Of the four of us – the five of us, including Celie – Devorah is the only one with dark eyes.

But Claudia didn't mean that.

They're getting lighter, I said.

She's not writing anymore, Gwen said.

Exactly.

On the dining room wall, opposite where Devorah always sits, there's a portrait of our great great grandmother. The first inheritor of the necklace. She is dark-eyed and serious under a black hat. A long feather curls down from the brim. She wears a black riding cloak, gloves, and carries a crop. The only colour is the red scarf, like a gash, across her throat. She looks uncannily like Devorah. Or rather, Devorah once looked uncannily like her.

When Devorah was little, Celie would dress her up like the girl in the portrait. The past stepped right out of its frame. That Celie's granddaughter bore an uncanny resemblance to her, Celie's, grandmother – this was no accident, was it?

I didn't know what it was. But I hated it. I would play outside. Let them have their fun. I was scared to death of Devorah, dressed like that. What I sensed, but couldn't articulate, was that she was becoming someone else's ghost. Becoming someone dead.

What was it like, then, for Devorah? Uncanny, people said, when they saw the portrait and stood Devorah beside it.

Others might be wealthy, intelligent, or beautiful. But how many were uncanny? It was so rare, it wasn't even an option.

Do you know what it means? she asked me once. It's more than eerie. It's the familiar made unfamiliar. It's *me*, made unfamiliar, unknown.

The rest of us grew up. Devorah did not. I see it now, in retrospect. The thing about the girl in the portrait – Devorah-in-the-dining-room, as she came to be known – is

that she is *just a girl*. She deceives you, at first. She blinds you, she's so romantic. Her eyes are so adult. But then you look, really look.

Devorah found a second portrait in one of Celie's books.

It can't be her, she said to me. It can't be the same woman.

But the book said it was.

A second portrait, by the same artist. Only this woman was big, buxom, twisting in a chair, laughing at someone we couldn't see. She looked nothing like Devorah.

Devorah produced the book that night after dinner. We were clearing the dishes.

Celie studied it. Oh, she's older there. She would be in her twenties, maybe thirty. In my portrait, she's eleven.

Eleven?

We all stood still, dishes in hand. I looked at Devorah. I was holding her barely-touched dinner, thinking: Yes, she could be eleven years old.

Only she was twenty.

I should look like that, Devorah said, pointing to the picture in the book.

Celie smiled. Darling, you should look like yourself.

Devorah walked over to the portrait on the wall.

This isn't myself, she said. She brought one hand to her chest, slapped the other flat against the portrait. *She* outgrew this.

Maybe Celie understood then. She wasn't smiling anymore. She said: I don't know –

Devorah sat down. I'm starving, she said.

Celie stood up. Have some more then.

Devorah looked at the rest of us. I bear no resemblance to myself, do I?

She had cultivated a likeness. What this cost her for twenty years, none of us really knows.

She says the portrait was only part of it. But it can't be just a coincidence – that when she saw the child on the wall become someone else, she became someone else too.

Because that's what happened. To see her now, you'd never know. She looks nothing like that portrait. Either portrait.

She is better, she says. Though she still can't always eat in Celie's dining room, I've noticed. She can't always eat in Celie's presence, period. But she is not starving.

And it's clear to all of us now, except perhaps to Celie, that the girl in the portrait *is* starving. She's wasting. Her eyes are smudges. She looks consumptive. And yet she got better. She must have. The second portrait proves it.

Whose picture was *she* trying to be?

Devorah tells us: Everything I ever wrote, I wrote hungry.

And thinking back, I recall huge gaps in those stories. It wasn't just that she left things out; it was that she never let them be. She could get you through a story, even a novella once, without telling you anyone's name. Without describing anyone physically. She fogged you in. In Gwen's stories, you traveled. You moved. In Devorah's, you stayed put and waited to see what came out of the mist. Never the rumble of an engine. Never so much as a cough. You got no warnings.

It worked, though. You started to believe it might be like that. That it was possible to become an idea of yourself. To carry no weight.

Death is furry, she told me that night at Celie's, drunk. I *know*. It turns up on your body when you start to get cold.

We were the only two left at the table. Devorah was on her third glass of wine. One glass was usually too much.

Death, I said. And I knew what she meant. Mold grows on that word.

She described a dark fuzziness on the periphery of her vision, encroaching. It moves in and makes everything small. Until you can only see the place where your feet are about to step next. It's like looking backwards through binoculars. You feel very far away from your feet.

You feel very far away from loving. Hating comes easier. You're dying and your body knows it. There is only so much life to go around, and those with an abundance are depleting your supply.

Remember the boys who chased us with the dead rat?

I nodded. Devorah couldn't have been more than six. The boys lived down the road from Claudia and Gwen. We ran. Devorah couldn't keep up, so she stopped. She turned around.

The rat dangled from the end of a stick. Maggots had already moved in. The boys threw it at her. It touched her shoulder.

It lasted a lot longer for you, she said, who were still running.

When I tell Brittany I'm from Canada, she asks if I have any coloured money with a queen on it. I say yes, in my room. The next day I bring her a twenty.

I thought you had purple and blue money.

We do, but those don't have the Queen.

Figures.

She holds up the twenty, studies it closely.

Your queen is beautiful, she says, lowering the bill.

Queen Elizabeth?

I've never thought of her as beautiful. Or unbeautiful. To me she seems an absolutely blank face. A queen of no place, of no age. Her eyelashes should be longer, or else her eyes not quite so open. She never sleeps, this queen.

I notice that Brittany, when she handles the bill, is careful not to put a thumb or finger over the Queen's face.

I tell her she can keep it.

I take the necklace to another pawn shop. They offer $500. I'm tempted.

If I took it to Chicago or New York? One of those auction houses. Christie's or Sotheby's. Maybe they'd give me what it's worth.

I have these moments when I really believe I will be able to part with it.

How long have I been here? A week? Did I really call Claudia?

It's time to go.

I tell Brittany: I'm leaving tomorrow, after breakfast.

Where are you going?

I don't know. A big city.

Las Vegas is a big city.

A bigger city. I'm going to sell the necklace.

And become a millionaire?

I wish. I'll never get what it's worth.

Why not?

Because they won't believe me when I tell them where it came from.

Where did it come from?

Outer space.

But she's not buying it. I don't think you should sell it, she says.

I need the money.

No you don't.

She's not eating, I notice.

The eggs are good today, I tell her.

She shakes her head, no.

I think about begging her to eat something.

Claudia envisions death as the blue walls of a swimming pool, necessary and circumscribing. It's what you push off, she says. It's why you can propel yourself through water. It is *why*.

I don't need a wall, I tell her. I can propel myself.

Not indefinitely, she says. You're always swimming *from* and *for* the edge you know is there. You put your feet flat against it. You push off. You slice the pool in half. You reach for the other side, hang by your fingertips from the rim. All is possible because death is there to hold it in place.

As teenagers, on Sunday mornings, we watched religious programming. Claudia and I were content to mock the theatrics. But Gwen got angry. One morning she called the 800 pledge number.

How much are they paying you to lie, bitch?

Claudia put a hand over her mouth, appalled.

Gwen listened a moment, then said, Oh go to hell, and hung up.

We stared at her.

Someone's praying for me, Gwen said. Someone named Lorna.

Can't hurt, said Claudia.

I laughed.

Gwen did not. She sat stone silent. Her face and neck were flushed above her pajamas. Shit, she said finally and picked up the phone.

Oh boy, said Claudia.

Transfer me to Lorna, please.

She's probably still busy praying for you, I said.

Hi Lorna. I called a few minutes ago. Right. That was me. Well, thanks and all, that's nice of you. But there's really no need. I called to apologize. I didn't mean to be so… mean. I just get a little worked up, watching your show.

I shook my head. I'm disappointed in you Gwen, I said.

She motioned for me to be quiet.

Well, if you really want to, and you're not too busy, I guess it would be alright. Sure.

When she'd hung up, I said: Let me guess. Lorna's still praying for you.

Gwen nodded. She flicked off the TV. Don't they scare you? she asked.

Who?

The saved.

Claudia shrugged.

I said, Not really.

Because what if that happens to me? Gwen asked.

Which of course it did. She found God everywhere she'd tried not to look.

Whereas I found him nowhere.

My death is neither furry nor chlorinated. I met mine at 30,000 feet, on a late-night flight to Raleigh-Durham. Devorah, Gwen, and I were flying down to see Claudia at Duke.

We made the connection in Atlanta and sat on the runway for ages. Then the lights flickered.

Good evening, this is your pilot speaking.

It was a woman's voice. Gwen and I looked at each other.

Someone, a few rows back, said: Finally.

Nothing happened on that flight. No turbulence. No smoke spilling out of the cockpit. Nothing untoward. I fell asleep. I don't know how death got into the cabin, but it did.

I woke and had no future. That's what death is, finally. The simplest definition is the right one, the only one. Most of the time, you aren't aware you even have it – a future; it's right there to step into. But on that flight, I woke and knew what it meant to have no *next*.

We were flying blind, into darkness, into nothing. It was my fault. I wasn't where I was supposed to be. Up front. I'd abandoned the cockpit somewhere over South Carolina.

Did that plane crash?

I looked at my reflection, doubled, in something stronger than glass. I didn't know my name.

There is nothing on the other side. Gwen, can you feel that? There is nothing.

Claudia met us at the airport. Or rather, we found her, asleep in a row of chairs. Our plane was late arriving.

We waited a moment before waking her. She looks like shit, Gwen said.

Her backpack was at her feet, a book open on her lap.

The announcement about not leaving baggage unattended came over the PA. I think that qualifies, I said, pointing at Claudia's bag.

I stepped lightly on her foot.

She woke slowly, grinned. You guys, she said. As if we'd been playing a joke on her.

It was supposed to be like *old times*. Gwen had lobbied for a three-day slumber party, but I'd said no and booked myself into a hotel. Devorah followed suit. So only Gwen stayed with Claudia, which was for the best, considering the size of her place, and the way Claudia and I were at each other's throats in only a few hours.

The funny thing is, I miss Claudia when I'm away from her. When she's out of range, I pledge never to harass or ridicule her again. Who was that person, I wonder, who said those horrible things?

I've turned over a thousand new leaves in the Claudia department. But the moment I see her, they ignite. Irony infects every good intention and turns it black.

Claudia was so obviously a wreck that weekend, I should have laid off. I should have felt sorry for her. She wasn't sleeping. She was homesick. She'd applied for the position at York. She just had to get through her oral exam.

She wouldn't talk about her thesis. She said: I need to *not* talk about it.

I walked around her apartment, took in the maps, the tacked-up pictures. This is the apartment of a stalker, I said.

Claudia laughed warily. I think she was still hoping we might be civil, grown-ups in a different country, literally – and away from Celie.

Maps are strange things. They rearrange themselves under the gaze of one who loves them. And Claudia loved them. Her scrutiny had left its mark the way a shaft of winter sunlight, year after year, discolours one arm of your sofa. Parts of those maps were so worn they were inhabitable. Other regions, neglected, had drifted into the corners, were collecting like ice at the edges.

She brought us beers from the kitchen.

I said, I know you don't want to talk about your thesis, but hey, it's the wallpaper.

She looked around the room like she was seeing it for the first time. Yeah, she said.

I like it, said Devorah. It's like you're some kind of an explorer.

Gwen, studying a map, said: So where'd he live?

Like she had to ask. Couldn't she *see*?

Claudia seemed reluctant. Lots of places. But – she couldn't help herself – see Jefferson Barracks? Here. He built a farm there, or near there, in 1855. He'd never built anything in his life, but he cut down the trees for lumber, put in all his own windows. He did it all himself and almost ruined his health. He christened the place Hardscrabble as a kind of joke.

She laughed and looked at us. He botched it, she explained. Julia wouldn't even live there.

Claudia had pinned open an entire country like a butterfly. We circled the room, satellites over Civil War America, so far away little could be seen with our naked eyes. But Claudia, I knew, had burrowed through. There were worm holes in those maps. Down into the farmhouse she'd gone, into those odd-angled rooms. She'd spent four years going through drawers, peering into closets. Looking.

She'd emerged haggard, dusty, empty-handed.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Finally Gwen said: Hey, we had a woman pilot.

No kidding?

For at least an hour I didn't antagonize her.

Until I couldn't help myself: Didn't he keep slaves?

Who? Devorah laughed. My Dad? That's who they'd been talking about.

I continued: Because what it comes down to for me, Claudia, is how evil was he really? I mean, after all these years, you must have some idea.

Julia did.

Did what?

Julia kept slaves.

But he didn't?

No, he did. But he disapproved.

Oh well then. Good for him. I lifted my beer. He's to be commended.

Gwen and Devorah exchanged looks like bouncers at a rowdy bar.

I saw that, I told them. And to Claudia: Why are you defending him?

I'm not. I just happen to know things aren't black and white.

Uh. Yeah. In this case, they are.

Devorah said, The man's dead.

Good point. Long dead. I think we can all agree that Claudia has an unhealthy obsession with the 18th president of the United States.

Fuck off.

I stood up. Let's take a vote. I enter into evidence these maps covering every square inch of wall, and the twenty-two pictures of Useless S. Grant I've counted, *so far*, in this apartment. I can't wait to see the bedroom.

For a moment there was silence. Claudia drank her beer like she regretted everything, particularly my existence. Then she said, to the others, not to me: Kids used to call him that, you know, to taunt him.

Useless? I said. Did they really? You see, what worries me Claudia is not that you *know* that, but that you seem near tears yourself when you say it.

Lucy, Gwen said, give it up.

I just want her honest assessment of the man. She should be able to give me that. A judgment. Because I'd wager, 500-page thesis aside, her examiners will ultimately want to know the same thing.

Whether he took that necklace, Claudia said. That's what you want to know. That's what you're asking. Did he promise to protect an emperor? Should he have? Did he sympathize with Mexican republicans? Should he have? Did he give the necklace to Julia, that she might become a little less unbecoming – that lump of a woman who'd given him nothing, who'd scolded him publicly for drinking when she needed a twelve-step program herself, who'd given him *nothing*, who wouldn't live in the house he'd built *because* he'd built it, who kept slaves *because* he opposed it. He took the necklace for Julia, that much I know, yes, because he loved her. God knows why. But read his letters and you'll know.

She pressed the bottle to her forehead.

I rest my case, I said and sat down.

Claudia?

She was sitting on the floor, against the wall. I'm almost finished, she said. Meaning what? Her doctorate? Her tirade?

She looked at me. He loathed music, she said. He hated it so much it almost kept him out of the military. All the marching bands and bugles. It made him feel physically ill. Music.

We aren't related to him by blood, I said.

He wasn't an evil man.

Of course he wasn't. Devorah crouched down beside her. There are no evil men or women. We could all of us be Ulysses S. Grant.

Or Julia, said Gwen.

Or one of their slaves, I said. Under different circumstances, we could be anybody.

This was several years ago. In the house Claudia now shares with Les, the windows take up too much room for all her maps. There are very few pictures on the walls. Though in the guest room, where I've slept on occasion, she has kept an imposing picture of Ulysses S. Grant. He looks a bit like Robin Williams, minus the mischief, minus the integrity. He looks dead inside.

Brittany slides me a large envelope. Cool as a cucumber.

What's this?

Money.

I look inside. Jesus Christ.

Take me with you, she says.

Kidnapper

I fear other people's sleep. As a kid, sleeping over at Claudia and Gwen's was torture. I had a cot between their two beds. If Devorah was there, one of us would take to the floor with a sleeping bag. I usually volunteered.

They would pledge to stay up all night, but after midnight, the silences began to lengthen.

Is anyone still awake?

I felt them come unmoored and drift away. I stayed ashore. I paced the beach. I wished them back. I wished them awake. And finally, towards dawn, ragged with wakefulness, I wished them dead.

Sometimes I took a sleeping bag downstairs to the dining room and barricaded myself under the table. I curled a hand around a chair leg and held on. Sometimes I slept.

But before midnight, when the lights had been off only a short time, and we talked like we would never stop, I could almost forget the long dark haul ahead of me.

We talked about becoming famous. The four of us on a stage. We called each other by our secret names.

You should be Lucia di Lammermoor, Claudia would say, knowing that *Lucia di Lammermoor* ends in madness and blood. It is an ugly opera.

No.

You were named after her.

I was not.

I knew this for sure. Celie will swear on a bible if you ask her. They just liked the name. *They.*

I was always Norma. Claudia was Tosca. Devorah, Violetta. And Gwen, Rusalka.

We knew our operas the way other children know fairy tales. We spun new stories out of them. We acted out our inevitable deaths.

Of course we die. It is opera after all. Norma by fire. Tosca by suicide. Violetta by consumption. Rusalka lives, but miserably, cursed by the witch Ježibaba, who has forbidden her to speak to her human lover. When she does finally speak to him, he dies in her arms.

Druid priestess, political prisoner, courtesan, water nymph. We forced them to inhabit the same tales.

So. We pray to the moon.

I am Alfredo at Violetta's bedside. I weep – but Devorah coughs and dies, coughs and dies. I put a hand on her forehead and announce: She's burning up. Or I withdraw my hand quickly: She's cold as ice. She's dead as a doornail. Sometimes I shake her, out of frustration, and she sits up to tell me not to do that.

Claudia is Pollione, my unfaithful Roman lover. How I hate the Romans. I incite war against them. Meanwhile Scarpia, full of lust, pursues Tosca through the streets with a silver dagger (a letter opener, Celie's, which I've "borrowed").

Rusalka struggles to become human. She is not allowed to speak – if she does Devorah will die – and therefore she develops an elaborate system of hand signals to make herself understood. Sometimes we end up just playing charades.

We trick Ježibaba and push her into the oven.

I am Cavaradossi, executed by firing squad. Tosca watches, believing it must all be an act, only to discover it's not. She has betrayed me, unintentionally. I am really dead. She sinks to her knees beside my corpse. I am really dead. She leaps from the parapet.

I am Maximilian of Austria, executed by firing squad. Ulysses S. Grant watches, believing it must all be an act, only to discover it's not. He has betrayed me, unintentionally. I am really dead. He sinks to his knees beside my corpse. I am really dead. He leaps from the parapet.

We leap. We burn. We are shot, stabbed, cursed. We plead. We do everything except sing.

On the trip out west, when Darren and I camped and there was nowhere to plug in the Whirry Free, I wore ear plugs to bed. I convinced myself he was still awake, and in sealed foam silence, I slept. Sometimes.

I've been tired a long time. That's how I feel.

At Claudia and Gwen's, when I couldn't fall asleep under the table, I sat alone in the living room and waited for dawn.

My stomach hurt. I felt so sorry for myself.

I remember how the sun made a hole in a bank of clouds, poked some light through, then withdrew. It didn't like what it saw. Me.

I drew my knees up, pressed them into my eyes. Fine.

I told the sun: I was pretending you were the moon anyway. I was pretending you were *a* moon. One of many, from a long time ago. I was pretending there were torches, and a man on the path named Scarpia. I ran for my life. The air smelled of horses and fire. I was alive.

Something was about to happen. Still is about to happen.

Brittany swings through the motel room door. I see her breath, briefly, against the still-starry sky behind her. She is wearing a t-shirt and shorts. Her arms and legs are red with the cold.

She tells me she ran past horses trotting in a field. Huge, huge horses, nothing like Powderpuff. Trotting in the dark, their breath like smoke. There are so many stars here, she says. More than last night even. How can there be so many stars here and none in Vegas?

They're over Las Vegas too, I tell her. But the city is too bright to see them.

She doesn't believe me. She says, The only stars I ever saw in Vegas turned out to be airplanes.

She puts on a sweater and pulls me outside. We stand in the parking lot. The sky here touches the ground. Rose was right about this place.

I ask Brittany: What do you think about when you're running?

I pretend stuff.

Yeah. Like what? What did you pretend this morning?

That I was riding one of those giant horses.

And I think: She's absolutely fine. She's a kid who loves to run, that's all. I can almost believe this, with morning on the horizon.

But at night now, I leave the Whirry Free off. For the first time, it's become imperative to hear the other person in the room breathe.

Brittany does a cartwheel along a yellow line. Surely someone who's dying couldn't do a cartwheel?

I look up. We are in this sky, not under it.

Gwen can hold a peeled orange in her hand and say: This is how I know there's a God.

How?

Because an orange is spherical, with slices built in. *Slices* for God's sake. Built in. There is nothing random – there is no chaos – in slices.

No. And she can hold the sliced sphere in her hand, and the promise the orange makes it fulfills.

But it seems to me that Gwen has considerably lowered her standards for proof of God. Now it's an orange. Not long ago, it was an earthrise.

An earthrise, she said, seen from the moon, might inspire true faith. If she could orbit the moon, like those astronauts in 1972, and emerge from its dark side to see the earth rise like a blue sun. If she could see the earth and *not be on it*, she said.

You can see that on TV, I told her.

Yes, but when you see it on TV, you're on it.

On TV?

On the earth.

What difference does that make?

All the difference, Lucy. Imagine seeing the earth and *not being on it.*

Easy, I said. Doing it.

I don't remind Gwen that as a teenager she feared becoming exactly this. A convert. A believer. Oranges, for God's sake. From the earth to an orange.

There's been some serious shrinkage, I tell her.

What do you mean?

I shrug. The orange makes its promise to you, Gwen, but not to me.

Only music makes a promise I can believe, before the final measure erases it from memory. Music is designed to do this, to self-destruct, and to build amnesia into its destruction. All you're left with is a longing for something you can't quite remember, something promised and never bequeathed.

When I asked Brittany where she got the money, she said: My mother.

She gave it to you?

No.

Okay. Will she need it?

She works in a casino, Brittany said, as if this explained everything. I thought of the movies I'd seen about Las Vegas. Maybe it's organized crime I should be worried about, not the police.

So far, we've seen no sign of either.

This morning, while Brittany was out running, I made a mental list of all the things I've stolen:

Money, from Brittany's mother (or the casino, or possibly the mob).

A truck.

A necklace.

A child.

There are more things, probably, that I'm not remembering.

But I'm not a kidnapper. First of all, *she* paid *me*. Second of all, she's not a kid. Somehow we reached an agreement about this.

So this morning all I could do was lie in that hotel bed, in the dark, and pray she'd come back. There are mountain lions in Wyoming, I thought. Aren't there?

If I were an adult and she were a child, I could stop her.

We stop at a gas station, and while Brittany's in the bathroom, I look through the newspapers. No mention of a missing child. How can nobody be looking? How can nobody have noticed?

I hate her mother a little more each day.

Wyoming in daylight is like Mars. Emptied out. A land that fell out of the sky. Even the truck runs more quietly. There is less air to carry the sound.

I ask Brittany what I have asked every day since we left: Do you miss your mother? Do you want to go back?

No.

Why did her mother give her such a breakable name? How can anyone be strong with a name like that?

One night in the toaster house, Darren asked me: Where are your parents, Lucy?

Like he expected me to say, On their way over.

He was dicing vegetables in the kitchen.

I'd been helping, but now I moved into the doorway. I don't know, I said.

What's that like?

It's like being Charlie Brown.

He looked at me.

I pushed my knuckles into the doorjamb.

Charlie Brown.

Take your Charlie Brown specials, I said. No parents, right? No adults. Christmas. Graduation. It doesn't matter how big the occasion. They're just not there. No supervision in Charlie-Brown-land. Just these not-quite-kids going about their business.

There's that box that's a teacher.

Doesn't count. It just sits and squawks and makes no sense. It can't even move.

Darren shuddered.

My point is, Nobody's freaking out. Nobody's organizing a search for the adult population. Nobody's worried.

Darren said, I worried. Charlie-Brown-land always freaked me out.

Yeah, see. Not me.

My mother may have been one of three women.

They came to one of Celie's parties, these three women with very long legs. I was supposed to be in bed, but I was hiding under the green sofa.

I remember they were cartoonish, and like cartoon women, they all had the same face and were distinguishable only by hair colour: Black, red, and gold.

They were at least as tall as Celie. From where I was, on the floor, they seemed to tower. I watched how Celie spoke to each one. Who was wealthy, who was beautiful, who was intelligent? Whom would she choose?

She didn't. And they didn't choose me. I never saw them again. They weren't my mother. But I got it into my head that one of them *must* be. In the absence of other candidates, why not these three? And even now, should the question come up (and it rarely does), these three step to the microphone like contestants for Miss America and make their unconvincing arguments.

Forgive me my mis-memory, for giving you all identical faces. And I will forgive you for not taking the competition seriously. For never once picking me up from a cold floor, carrying me out to a warm car, and taking me home.

I've been shown pictures of my mother when she was a child, but she looks suspiciously like me. In fact, if I concentrate, I can remember them being taken. So.

There are none of her as an adult. Celie has told me only that she left and didn't come back.

It's easy not to know your own mother. People wonder about this, but truly, I don't lose sleep over it.

As for my father, there are no contenders. He doesn't even get a stand-in. Celie says she never met him.

I don't lose sleep over it, like I said, only rarely. Sometimes I wake in the night with that horror of having forgotten something. You know, when you sit up in the dark and try to remember what, *who*, you've forgotten. Let down. Who is dying, or not living, because of you.

I cannot be the estranged child of an estranged child. I cannot be.

Multiple choice questions are such bullshit, Gwen will tell you. They trick you into thinking so small. There is always a missing alternative. The one answer you can't choose because it's not there. *Your* answer.

The life raft only holds two.

Wealthy, intelligent, or beautiful.

Why is that bullshit? I ask her.

Think, Lucy. Who's missing? What's your answer?

I've been dozing in the passing lane, and we are passed on the right by two guys in a baby blue van. Both are playing air guitar. The driver has neither hand on the wheel. Their heads bob violently with the music.

I slow down and let them get well ahead.

Brittany says, *What* were they doing?

Pretending to play guitar.

Oh.

You've never done that?

She shakes her head. It looks pretty easy.

I move into the right lane. Bad driving all around.

There are several lessons to be learned here, I tell her. One: Keep both hands on the wheel. Two: Never drive when sleepy. Pull over – which is what we're about to do – and get some coffee. Three: Don't get passed on the right.

Why?

It's humiliating.

Why?

It just is.

We stop at the next Mobil/Dunkin Donuts.

In line for coffee, I turn around to see Brittany doing an air guitar solo – or a parody of an air guitar solo – her hair a swinging mass around her head. The two guys from the baby blue van watch her, mesmerized.

Wanna ride with us? They call to her on their way out.

Don't think so, she says.

My bag with all Celie's music is still behind the seat.

There's something better than air guitar, I say as we climb into the truck.

What?

Air opera. I look through my bag for *Norma*. I pop it in the tape deck and fast forward to Casta diva.

Brittany claps her hands over her ears. Oh yuck.

I rewind it.

You'll have to hear it ten times to like it even a little, I tell her. But watch how it's done.

I lip sync the whole thing, with gusto, while I drive.

Brittany says, You're weird.

And I don't need to take my hands off the wheel, which, as you'll recall, is Driving Tip Number 1.

Right.

I glance at her. You wanna learn?

To drive?

To sing. To air sing.

And so I teach her the words, which kills the better part of two hours, as they're in Italian. I explain what they mean too.

Casta Diva, che inargenti… O pure goddess, who silver…

She recites them back to me.

Now. I play the tape.

The first time through, she laughs too much, comes in early, holds onto imaginary notes too long. But by the time we reach Omaha, we're mouthing the aria in perfect unison with Maria Callas, Brittany flailing her arms, which for some reason she thinks all opera singers must do, especially on the high notes.

You couldn't do that if you were driving, I point out.

It's the first time I've listened to opera in over a year. Who'd have thought you could find yourself breathless and exhausted from *not* singing?

The sky is green over Omaha. It will rain. We're out of wiper fluid. Bugs smear the windshield.

Driving Tip Number 4, I say.

Right.

You catch on fast.

I buy a gallon of wiper fluid and show Brittany how to pop the hood and pour it in.

Brittany drops the hood herself. Nice sound, she says.

Isn't it?

Back on the road, I say: What if I give you a driving tip every day, and by the end of the trip, you take the wheel.

Serious?

Sure.

Yes, yes, yes.

The rain comes down hard. Where are we? Brittany asks.

I think we crossed into Iowa.

Brittany opens the atlas.

Pick anywhere, I tell her.

She looks at me. I thought we were going to Chicago.

We are. Eventually.

So I can pick anywhere.

Within reason, I tell her. I mean, not back where we came from. But in the general direction of where we're going.

I don't know where anything is, she says. She bends over the book. Flips pages.

After fifteen minutes, she looks up and says: I don't feel good.

Want me to pull over?

She nods.

I hit the shoulder. We crunch to a stop. Brittany jumps out. The gravel is dark with rain. There is very little to throw up. Mostly she retches.

I drop my raincoat over her. You're carsick. That happens when you read in the car. I should've warned you.

We get back in the truck. She wipes her mouth on her t-shirt. Baraboo, she says.

Baraboo?

She hands me the atlas. It's right there.

I have to squint to see it. The tiniest town in Wisconsin?

Yup.

We pull back onto the highway. We may not get there today, but tomorrow for sure.

I think it'll be goofy.

Baraboo?

Yeah.

Goofy is good.

After a moment, she says: Driving Tip Number 5: Never read in the car?

The driver should absolutely never read in the car, I tell her. But passengers, it depends. Some people get sick, some don't. The thing to do is look out the window every few minutes. Then you won't feel sick.

What if I get sick when I drive?

You won't. You won't be reading.

What about road signs?

They don't count.

Are you sure?

I've never heard of a driver getting car sick from reading road signs. It just doesn't happen.

Competitor

After almost twenty years, the necklace makes an appearance.

It is Celie's 75th birthday. Keith's services are solicited for the party. Only Keith can take the reins from Celie's hands, pour her a drink and say, Leave it to me, love.

He is already at work when I come downstairs in the morning. I say happy birthday to Celie and give Keith a playful kick in the butt. He is halfway inside the fireplace, sweeping with a little black broom.

Lucia, really.

He backs slowly out. Good morning, Lucy.

No need to bow, I tell him.

For her birthday, I've given Celie an umbrella with a pattern like stained glass. She opens it right there in the living room.

Bad luck, says Keith, pointing.

Oops, she says and collapses it. I hope it rains today.

No you don't. Guests will be on the patio.

Oh right.

That's not your real gift, I tell her. Your real gift is Verdi's ivory baton. I'm having Aida's name replaced with yours, in rubies. It's being shipped.

I say this every year.

Oh lovely. But this will do nicely in the meantime.

I look at Keith. Where's your gift?

I'm offering my services for free today.

Celie says: You are *not*, Keith.

Yes. This party's on the house.

Not bad, I say.

Keith is a pre-party-must, not only because he's ridiculously efficient, but because he's a calming influence. I've never seen him frazzled.

Now, with a million things to do, he sips coffee with us in the kitchen and talks about auras.

Everybody has one, he says. Under the right circumstances, they can be made visible.

Really?

The three of us squeeze into the half bathroom off the front hall. Keith lights a candle behind Celie's head and turns off the light. We face the mirror. Fairy dust shimmers around her hair.

An aura is not an outline, Keith explains, but the erasing of an outline. It's the smudged space between what you are and what you are not.

Gold, I say. I see it.

Celie and I switch places. We are in very close quarters.

Keith holds the candle behind my head. My aura is a paler shade of Celie's. No surprise there. Pale mud, I say.

No, says Keith. Look again. We do. Red, says Celie.

There is a sound, an awful fast-munching sound that is hair catching fire. My hair.

For a moment we watch it in the mirror. Celie screams.

Then Keith grabs a towel and throws it over my head.

So it happens that on the fateful night of Celie's 75th birthday, I have only half a head of hair and a singed, sore spot on the back of my head.

I greet the guests at the door, most of whom are too polite to ask me about it.

Edward, Celie's oldest friend, a conductor, puts his hand on my neck and whispers, Is that on purpose?

No.

I never know.

To see Edward conduct is to see music pulled down from the sky. It moves through his arms like lightening. Where his hand was, on my neck, burns.

Claudia and Gwen arrive, looking mysterious, and pull me into the driveway.

Leslie is standing beside his truck, a towering box propped in back.

What is it? I ask

Celie's gift, he says. It's stained glass.

It would be.

For the window on the landing, says Claudia. Les took the measurements last winter.

The window on the landing, I say, is at least six feet tall.

It's Orpheus and Eurydice. He's playing his lyre.

And she's sleeping, says Gwen.

Or she's dead, we're not sure. But it's beautiful. Wait till you see.

Can't wait, I say. But I manage a smile. She'll love it, of course.

Hey, Gwen says on the way inside. What happened to your hair?

Don José. I extend a hand. His character's name. I saw him not long ago in *Carmen.* He wore black leather and had rings on every finger.

Call me Brad.

I'd rather not, if that's okay.

He laughs, takes my hand in both of his. Perfectly okay.

I look down. His fingers are ringless. A disappointment.

I'm a fan of your grandmother, he says.

We all are.

I'm a fan of *yours*, says Devorah from behind me. You were enchanting in *Carmen.*

I turn. Enchanting?

Thank you.

Will Carmen be coming tonight? she asks, all innocence.

Sandra? he says. Not to my knowledge.

Fabulous.

I step back and let her steer him away. When did she become so good at this?

Celie "opens" her gift from Claudia/Gwen/Leslie before dinner because Leslie wants her to see it in daylight. We all gather outside on the lawn. Celie keeps her hands over her eyes until Leslie says, Okay.

She uncovers her eyes.

There is only a little sun left in the sky, but it's the perfect amount. Claudia and Gwen hold the window upright. It is indeed six feet – more because it's taller than Celie.

Oh my. Leslie Loveless. She reaches out, not taking her eyes from the window. He places a thick arm under her hand. You did this, she says. There are tears in her eyes.

It was Claudia and Gwen's idea, he says. Here, have a seat. He produces one of the patio chairs. Celie sits. Now look.

From this angle the glass catches the last light of the sun. I sink down on the grass beside her. I've never seen such colours. How can Eurydice sleep like that, in their midst?

Claudia and Gwen make a frame with their bodies. I can't see their faces for the sun, but their hair – their *aura* – is gold. All they are missing are wings.

I look up at Celie, and there it is, the necklace. She's wearing it. I've been too busy greeting people to notice. It winks at me, a spectrum that swaps its colours with Celie's every breath. I swear, it is smiling.

Celie puts a hand on my shoulder.

Orpheus and Eurydice, she says, as though confiding a secret. It's beautiful. Isn't it beautiful?

I'll install him this week, Leslie promises, helping her to her feet. *Him.*

We stay for a long time in the blue light, drinking our wine. There are potted blue hydrangeas on the steps, sent by Isobel. If only Celie would sing now, I might believe I'd stumbled into my Covent Garden of old.

At dinner, I am seated next to Don José. This is no accident. Seating arrangements never are. He is meant to be a distraction. Celie's become nervous about *that boy* in Buffalo, the one I've not introduced. He hasn't even crossed the border. What's wrong with him? she's asked. Has he committed a crime?

Other than stupidity?

She thinks I am kidding.

After dinner, Don José leans in close. May I smoke?

On the patio.

Show me?

Don't whisper. It's rude. This from Celie, her hand on Don José's shoulder. She is helping Keith clear the dishes.

He wants to smoke, I say.

On the patio.

That's what I said.

He follows me through the screen door. We sit on the shallow brick steps. The garden is an opera set. Windless. Silk moon pinned to a navy sky. Cardboard trees.

Lucia.

Don José. Tell me some secret. Sing me some secret.

I don't really smoke.

Sing it.

He does. I don't really smoke.

Of course you don't. You're a singer.

Now you. A secret. For instance: What happened here? He places a hand on the back of my neck. The second hand on my neck this evening. Lucky me. My chin sinks under its weight.

My aura, I say. He really is very attractive.

Your aura?

Caught fire.

Does that happen often?

Yes.

Ah.

Edward asks that you to join him on the veranda for a drink, says Celie through the screen door. Men only.

Don José looks at me.

Yes, he does that.

To be funny?

No.

What century are we in?

He'll give you a cigar. A good one. If I were you, I'd smoke it.

What if I don't want to go? He touches my cheek.

I wish he'd worn his rings.

He leaves me alone on the steps. I walk down to the pool, a bright rectangle cut into blackness. Edward taught me to swim here. There are pictures of me – I can't be more than three – wearing those inflatable orange wings.

I walk the circumference. I ripple blue in its light.

I know Edward. I know why he stages the after-dinner retreats. Men only. Cigars, port. Smoke and mirrors. He doesn't fool me.

He stages her absence so that her reappearance can be bliss. So that she may materialize, finally, in the doorframe. So that she may slide a foot across the threshold, and dare him to stop it. Beckoning, blocking. The way in, the way out. A vision. Like Marilyn Monroe, had she lived to become beautiful.

We are cut from the same cloth, Edward and I. We are both in love with my grandmother. Only he has an unfair advantage.

Sometimes, watching him conduct, it takes all my strength not to scramble up over the backs of the seats, make a dash for the orchestra pit, to arrest his swimming arms. Stop it, Edward. Stop it.

And teach me. Give me wings.

The party winds down. Nothing will come of Don José and me. He kisses my cheek at the door.

Celie asks that Claudia, Gwen, and Devorah stay after the other guests have gone. She wants to speak with the four of us alone.

We help Leslie bring the window into the garage. In the dark, its picture disappears. Leslie props it carefully in the corner. He tells Claudia to call when she's ready to come home.

We take our drinks onto the patio.

Devorah produces her gift. One left, she says.

It's a framed picture. Celie holds it up to the light from the kitchen window. Oh. Her face brightens like she's found an old friend. Where was it?

In the Encyclopedia. Pressed between the Y pages. Devorah is forever unearthing lost pictures, forgotten pictures.

I step behind Celie to see. It's a photograph of my grandfather and me. We're in the little rowboat. He's ferrying us out to the sailboat. He's intent on the task, but I'm grinning, waving with both arms at the picture-taker. I've never seen it before.

I look over Celie's head at Devorah.

Thank you, darling, Celie says quietly, propping it on the table beside her.

I sit down. It's a funny feeling, to find evidence of yourself in a moment you don't remember, in a moment you might have sworn didn't happen.

Seventy-five is not young, Celie says.

This is unexpected.

Devorah's smile falls. She looks at the picture as if it's to blame.

Claudia is about to protest.

I'm trying to get things in order, Celie continues.

We say nothing.

You remember the promise I made. About the necklace and the one to inherit it? She lifts a hand to her throat. Well, we've hit a bit of a snag, haven't we? She is barely smiling.

She says: None of you became singers. This comes out like a question, and she waits, as if to be contradicted.

Gwen leans forward. I've been meaning to ask you if karaoke counts?

Jesus, Gwen.

I'm sorry, says Celie – if *what* counts?

Nothing, says Gwen. A joke.

Maybe none of us should have it, says Claudia. Maybe you should leave it to my mother.

That's convenient, I say.

Lucia, Celie warns. No. I want one of you girls to have it. I've always wanted that. But none of you became singers. You became writers. So.

On the table, my childhood self waves hugely at me.

Music can tell a story, Celie says. That's what opera does, after all. I've been thinking about this, and wondering if the reverse is possible.

Gwen says, I suppose poetry is a kind of –

I suppose, says Celie. But that's not what I mean.

No?

Celie brings her hands together. Here is what I propose: I propose you each write me a story. A story for the necklace.

For a moment no one speaks.

A contest, I say.

Whoever can make me forget that her story *isn't* music – or whoever comes closest – wins.

No, says Devorah.

We all look at her.

I wonder if it's a good idea, says Claudia. To compete.

Celie smiles. In art, the only person you compete with is yourself.

This is so untrue, I almost laugh.

You will each write me a story, Celie says. It can be about anything you want. Just one small restriction.

Which is?

All four stories begin with the same sentence, chosen by me.

I wouldn't call that a small restriction, says Gwen. The first sentence is the most important.

Is it?

No, Gwen confesses. Probably not. It depends. I don't know.

So you'll choose the winning story, I say, and then what?

I'll bequeath the necklace to the winner. In my will. But until then, I plan to enjoy it a little.

Enjoy it.

I've kept it in a vault all these years, and why?

Because it's dangerous to have it around, loose.

Loose?

You know what I mean.

Well, I'll have to keep it at the bank for insurance purposes. But on special occasions, why not –

This feels wrong, says Devorah.

Celie leans forward. What feels wrong about it? Write me a story that is music to my ears. Make me your audience. See what happens.

I haven't written anything in years.

There's the rub.

Quiet, Lucia.

I think it's an interesting exercise, I say.

You would, says Claudia.

Enough. Celie looks suddenly very tired. She says: There has been a lapse in judgment.

We wait. On whose part? I ask finally.

That's your sentence. The first sentence of your stories.

There has been a lapse in judgment, Devorah repeats.

Claudia says: That's not the beginning of a story.

Yes, says Celie, rising. It's the beginning of four stories actually. There has been a lapse in judgment. Now. Carry on.

When Celie has gone to bed, we discuss the sentence.

A story that begins with *There has been.* Claudia shudders.

I tell her to relax.

It's the passive voice, she says. Isn't it?

No, says Gwen.

So what if it is, I say. We're free to choose the point of view. We can make anyone we want the lapser.

Lapser isn't a word.

It is in my story.

Gwen says, I hate this kind of story.

You haven't written it yet.

It's writing itself. Already I can't stand it.

Devorah says: I can't do this.

Then don't, for Chrissakes. Forfeit the necklace.

Devorah says nothing.

That's what I thought.

Actually, lapser is a word. I looked it up.

When the others have gone, I take the sentence apart.

When?

By whom?

Is it already over?

The dictionary has many definitions for lapse. A temporary slip. A minor failure. A moral fall.

To fall down, then, morally, in judgment. But a lapse is only a lapse. It isn't forever.

But what if it was? What if we could spend forever there, buoyant in the in-between, a place where judgment is suspended?

That would be no story. It would end with its first sentence.

Lapser

I didn't plan to be a technical writer. My plan was to work part-time for a software company in Toronto while becoming a *real* writer.

The job wasn't exactly rocket science. It went something like this: Step 1: Double click your Encompass icon. Step 2: In the Last Name field, enter the client's last name. Step 3: In the First Name field, enter the client's first name. Etc.

I didn't mind it. Thinking in steps comes naturally to me.

Then my boss said he was taking a job in Buffalo with the biggest health insurance firm in the area, 500 employees, and was I interested? They needed a technical writer. Full time.

Celie was aghast. A waste of my talent, she said. And it would mean commuting to that industrial eyesore to the south.

Right. So I took the job.

My work at QualiCare went something like this: Step 1: Double click your ViewAll icon. Step 2: In the Last Name field, enter the patient's last name. In the First Name field, enter the patient's first name. Etc.

ViewAll. Appropriately named program. Omniscience was a mouse click away. Diagnoses, procedures, family history, employment history, mental health. The private lives of Buffalonians were mine to *unpack*.

It all seemed benevolent enough. QualiCare ads on billboards and busses featured a pair of young-looking but silver-haired boomers, clinking glasses of orange juice: To Your Health!

The first thing I learned was not to call it insurance. This was health *maintenance*. The place felt like a hospital (there were dozens of doctors and nurses on staff) – but a hospital to which no patients were ever admitted. Health was maintained from a sanitized distance, through constant scrutiny. Thank you, ViewAll.

Day after day, I clicked my way through drug addiction, fraud, terminal illness. Increased cancer rates in one neighbourhood, fire-related injuries in another. I came to recognize those who were on death's door, as well as those en route, a journey that ended, always, with a termination code in the Cease Coverage field.

Fascinating. But there is something about spying that eventually makes you feel spied upon.

I'd been there a few months when Human Resources sent out the warning. Please do not use QualiCare's email system for private correspondence, solicitations, dirty jokes, etc. Two employees had been let go for buying and selling ammunition over company email, *on company time*. Gentle reminder: QualiCare email is for business use only. Cheers and To Your Health!

Little was made of the fact that these ex-employees had been dealing in ammunition. I sat uneasily in my cubicle across from the elevators. Should disgruntled gunmen spring from between those doors, I would be among the first to be sprayed with bullets.

I became so preoccupied with the health risks of working in (of all places) a health maintenance organization, that it almost didn't occur to me to wonder how the company found out about those emails in the first place. Then on one of my

excruciatingly long drives back to Toronto, I saw a cop parked under an exit ramp, and I thought: *Someone is watching.*

I'd known it all along, of course, without really knowing it. Someone was up there, scanning subject lines. In a dark office, watching. Homing in on the subversive, the scandalous.

The next day, I sent an email to myself.

To: lucyladell@qualicare.com

From: lucyladell@qualicare.com.

Subject: Who are you?

Just a subject line. I sent it out. It bounced back. But who else had seen it?

I tried again and included a message.

To: lucyladell@qualicare.com

From: lucyladell@qualicare.com.

Subject: Hear me

Find me. Fire me.

No response.

To: lucyladell@qualicare.com

From: lucyladell@qualicare.com.

Subject: I believe

You are out there.

I waited for something. A gentle reminder that QualiCare's email system was not for sending cryptic messages to oneself. It didn't happen.

The QualiCare Christmas party was on a Friday night at a downtown hotel. Five hundred people, plus partners, crowded into the atrium. Outside a snowstorm, inside a rain forest. Fountains, ferns, an open bar in each corner. QualiCare is not cheap.

My dress was stunning. Studded with fake rubies. It held itself up with a single loop around my neck. My gloves, long and black, slinked up over my elbows.

I held my wine glass aloft and squeezed through the crowd. I could have done this all night.

At the sit-down dinner, our table (the young and partnerless) cheered the loudest for every speech made, every prize drawn. I felt glamourous and alone. A woman at the next table won a trip to Atlantic City. I stood up and hugged her like I'd known her all my life. She was crying. I handed her my napkin. That was the kind of party it was.

After dinner there was dancing. I danced with the woman who was going to Atlantic City. I yelled over the music: Take me with you.

Sorry hon.

That's okay.

Back at the table, a stranger appeared and touched my shoulder. He bent down and said something I couldn't hear. I assumed he was asking me to dance. I followed him to the dance floor. He took one of my gloved hands in his, put his arm around my waist.

He said my name.

Yeah. Do I know you?

Yes.

I do?

Yes. I hear you.

You hear me?

We were dancing out of time with the music. I slowed to almost a standstill.

This was Darren.

He was three years older than me, but seemed a boy. They'd hired him straight out of college. He'd studied technology, not business. He had no qualms, he said, about what he did. He didn't use the word qualms. He said: It doesn't bother me.

But there was something slow and frozen about him. Like a reptile in winter. No longer careful. No longer trying to move out of the way.

He read my initial Who Are You? message and deleted it. Later he said this was his first heroic act.

He said: I'd never been prayed to before.

I was his lapse in judgment. He should have had me fired.

This is no fun, but I do it anyway: I remember how we were. How Darren was, how I was. How it felt to sit at my desk and know he was up there, watching. To not be alone.

To drive to the converted house in Lackawanna. Up three flights of stairs. Past apartments with screen doors, screen doors *inside* (a Lackawanna phenomenon?). A shag carpet with a wet part down the middle.

Knock. Knock.

To let this boy put my fingers in his mouth.

To believe he is stupid and to not care.

To say: I will be going after this.

He nods. His eyes never close. He is a spotlight, trained on me. I swear when I leave the room he stops being.

For kicks, I say: You are a spotlight, trained on me. I swear, when I leave the room you stop being.

His tongue moves around my index finger. My index finger, pointing through his mouth, pointing at his brain.

I pull the trigger and back up to the bed.

When I get up to go he says: I baked cookies.

Do you think you can bribe me with cookies?

He waits.

You can, I say. Go get them.

We eat them in bed. They are still warm. I'm sorry I'm such a bitch, I say.

You're not a bitch. You're sweet.

You're an idiot.

You don't really think that.

No. What do you do when I leave?

Watch TV.

Anything else?

Sleep. He feeds me another cookie. What do *you* do when you leave?

I drive to Toronto. You know that.

Anything else?

I think about you.

Really?

This is not a lie. Yes, really. I think about you all the time. I can't stop thinking about you.

Stay tonight, he says. We'll go to dinner at the Cracker Barrel.

Do you think you can bribe me with dinner at the Cracker Barrel?

To roll on top of him, his stomach softer than mine. To slide my hand flat between our stomachs. To say: I'm sorry for all the mean things I've said and all the mean things I will say. I have these moments where I love you.

To go to the Cracker Barrel where it is always Christmas. To be asked, Smoking or non? and decide differently every time. To eat breakfast at night. To act like a cat and make eye contact with everyone. To have just had sex.

The napkins at the Cracker Barrel are thick towels with the silverware rolled inside. The menus unfold like maps, printed front and back. I turn mine over and over. What to have, what to have.

Stay tonight.

I say what I always say: Tonight may be the night your house burns down. Houses burn down all the time in the suburbs of Buffalo.

Not *all the time*, Darren has corrected me. That's a myth.

But in Toronto, we get the Buffalo news. And the news doesn't lie. A house spontaneously combusts every ten minutes in Tonawanda. In Lackawanna, every five.

I have three fire alarms in a one-bedroom apartment, he says. Stay tonight.

If I stay, I have to listen to you breathe.

Darren buys me the Whirry Free as a gift.

This city grows on me. The anti-Toronto. The snow makes white tunnels out of the streets. I feel warmer. The coffee tastes better. I want to snuggle in. I watch the Buffalo news on Darren's TV. I begin to recognize the street names where the houses burn.

The snow comes down hard. I drive down a one-way street the wrong way and meet a cop coming the other direction. He rolls down his window. I roll down mine. He says: What's wrong with this picture? But he is smiling.

The winner announced, the necklace bequeathed, I thought: At least I will never have to write again. At least I will never have to listen to an opera and feel like I'm falling to my death. At least I am free.

And full of hate.

It's over.

I ran upstairs. I packed clothes and music. Old recordings. Not because I thought I would ever listen to them, but because I didn't want Celie to have them. I ransacked every precious piece of music I could find.

The others were still outside, on the patio.

(Gwen: It's no surprise she reacted that way.)

(Claudia: She would kill for that necklace.)

Oh Claudia. I would kill you for less than that.

Celie intercepted me at the door.

Where are you going?

The United States.

Not New York or Buffalo or Lackawanna. But the whole country. Like I was pledging my allegiance to something else, right there and then. Adios. Emigration time.

Claudia was behind her. You're such a drama queen, she said, but for once there was no venom in her voice. She looked so sorry for me that I wanted to cry instead of beat her senseless.

I got in my car. Celie came out with her keys. Take mine, she said, holding them up. Please, take my car.

Because I'd been having trouble with mine, because I'd mentioned a persistent smell of gas.

I started crying. I never cry. But if you'd seen Celie in the driveway as I backed away, holding those keys in the air, begging me to take hers, take hers, take hers.

By the time I reached Lakeshore Drive, I had myself under control. I opened my window. The city at night came into focus. I tried not to be impressed. The CN tower would never be climbed by the likes of me. The Go Train went nowhere I wanted to go. The Sky Dome was not a parabola.

It smelled bad, Toronto, when you got right down to it. Everyone knew it. Nobody said it.

Thinking about where I was going made me want to cry again. Buffalo, its downtown empty and unlit. It always welcomed me back. It never turned me away. All the times I'd left it for Toronto – why?

Buffalo. I'm sorry for spying on you. I'm sorry for your deaths and your fires. For not taking them seriously. I will become worthy.

My car didn't make it. I watched the gas meter drop rapidly and did nothing. Kept the pedal to the metal until the thing simply died. I grabbed my bags, ditched the car, and walked to Grimsby where I knew I could catch a bus.

Leaving the car was rash. It was old but fixable. I told myself I just wanted to be rid of it. In truth, I was enjoying the thought of the police calling Celie and telling

her they'd found a blue Nissan, license plate C3G 1S5, abandoned on the QEW. Belonging to one Lucia Ladell. Did she live at this address?

Not anymore, Celie would say. And she would not know, would never know, what had become of me.

You see. They were right, my cousins, what they said about me – whatever they said, and were likely still saying, on the patio. That I am small and mean.

Leslie had installed the new window on the landing. I lived with that window for exactly three days.

At the bus station in Buffalo, I called Darren. There was no answer. I waited and tried again. I gave up and got on another bus. It took five city buses to get to Lackawanna.

By the time I walked down his street, a duffel bag slung over each shoulder, I was dragging my feet. I looked up and saw fire trucks.

The entire house was aflame. I counted houses to make sure it was his. I sniffed the air. If Darren was inside, burning, I would be able to smell him. I would *know*.

What's the termination code for burned alive?

I was sick. Between retches, I heard a horn honk. Darren's truck was coming down the street.

He got out and sprinted towards me.

I could smell you burning, I said.

What?

I pressed my face into his shoulder, wiped my mouth on his shirt.

What happened? I said.

The house is on fire.

I see that.

He walked me back to the truck. Channel 7 and Channel 2 wanted to interview him. He said no.

We sat in the back and watched the house collapse, black sticks and orange embers. It became beautiful, something you wanted to touch, not run away from.

Darren had come home from the grocery store and found the house alight. It happened so fast, he said. I was only gone an hour. Everyone got out in time. They'd smelled the smoke through their screen doors before the alarms even went off.

Good thing.

They don't know how it started.

It's Lackawanna.

Yeah.

It was this house's time.

He half smiled.

You've got renter's insurance, right?

I'm afraid, Lucy, it was something I did. Maybe I left something on. A burner.

I shook my head. Act of God.

He rubbed his eyes. Mine were stinging a little too.

Where's your car? he asked.

I left in on the QEW. It died.

That gas leak?

I'm not going back, I said. Ever.

He reached out. Oh Lucy.

Don't. Don't.

Okay.

Toronto's over, I said after a while. So is my car. So is your place.

I guess so.

Doesn't it feel a little bit good?

He looked at me sideways. It feels good if you're here. If you're staying.

Nobody's staying. We're going. I put myself between him and the burning house. I said, You've got some money saved. So do I. You'll get the renter's insurance check. We've got enough to make it.

Make it where?

Wherever. We'll go west. Isn't that what people do?

Madness, he said. But already he was changing. His blood quickening. He blinked a little faster.

Such things are possible, I said.

We drive all the way to California. We take highway 62 to a town called Twentynine Palms. It is dusty and dead. At midday, 29 Harley Davidsons roar down a main drag

lined with 29 palm trees. We count them out loud. It's hot and not quite sunny. We do three loads of laundry at the laundromat. That night, we camp in Joshua Tree.

This is the desert. There are trees like old hands, the knuckles hairy and huge. There are boulders like fevered fists. I can't decide which to look at. Neither makes me happy. It gets dark fast. We pitch the tent in the middle of nowhere.

We run into a group of astronomers. It is so dark that we don't know what they look like, or even how many there are. We eavesdrop but can't understand what they're saying. They know the sky too well.

The stars are amazing, Darren says. Someone laughs.

Darren warns me about fire ants when I leave the tent to pee. There are fire ants in this desert, he says, and scorpions and tarantulas. The stuff of nightmares. My flashlight makes a useless little circle on the ground. Anything could be scuttling in from the periphery.

In the tent I snuggle into Darren, who is not the same boy I left Buffalo with. Every state line brings a new state of being. They don't call them states for no reason.

I say: You're not the same boy I left Buffalo with. You're taking on flesh and personality.

The tent has a screened skylight. We lie under the astronomers' sky and understand none of it.

He shakes his head. But it's true.

Toledo: A thousand starlings alight near our picnic table. Darren throws sunflower seeds, but they can't be tempted.

I say, There's something delicious under the grass we don't know about.

Watching the starlings, he tells me, out of the blue, that his mother has been sober for ten years.

I didn't know she drank.

She's active in AA, he tells me. She's a mentor. He says this with such pride that I stop eating, out of respect.

He says: AA is proof that a bureaucracy doesn't have to be evil.

I've never heard him use the word evil before.

Iowa City: We browse the bookstores. The city smells overripe and familiar. I buy books I already own but left behind. On the sidewalk, Darren looks constantly over his shoulder. Finally he tells me: I know someone here. He won't tell me who. The sky gets heavy, pressing down. We walk faster.

It's a small city. Anyone could be anywhere, he says. So we leave. It pours hot rain. The truck steams. Darren is really shaken. I wipe the windshield for him with my arm.

Did you see someone? I ask.

No.

Then –?

Let's just say she doesn't love me.

Who? Why?

He won't answer, and I don't know what to say, what more to ask.

Denver: We stop at an internet café. When Darren gets up from his computer, he says: I just sent an email to staff@qualicare.com. I can still get into their system.

Staff?

Everyone. The whole company.

You did not. Saying what?

You are not trusted.

Grand Canyon: It is freezing at the top. From the rim, it looks like a hologram. The only thing real, that you can touch, is the evergreen beside you. Then, as you drop down into it, it becomes a strange and three-dimensional space. It gets warmer. The vegetation changes. The flowers get more exotic. Near the bottom, it is desert. By then you're thirsty. You're out of water. And it's miles and miles back up to the top. What were you thinking?

There are signs advising hikers not to attempt the whole thing in one day. Camp at the bottom, or don't go all the way down. Climbing a canyon is harder than climbing a mountain. It's reversed – the easy part, the descent, at the beginning of the day, the hard part at the end, when you're already tired.

We start at 6:00 AM and figure, no sweat.

The season changes eight times.

We work our way up out of the giant bowl. We stop every ten minutes to sit on a ledge or lean against the rock face. We soak up the shadow. The sun has climbed out ahead of us.

How many days have we been down here? How many years?

Darren tells me that when he was seven, he was taught to write the date in the upper right corner of his school notebooks. He learned to do this in October. On November 1st, he wrote October 32nd, and the next day October 33rd, then October 34th, and so on. Neither his teachers nor his parents could persuade him to stop, to shift months. It was more important to show them how high he could count.

What's today's date, I ask him.

October 8385th.

You lie.

Nope.

Needles, California: We camp at a KOA on the edge of the Mojave desert. We are the only tent campers. All around us, RVs are plugged in and lit up, satellite dishes hearken the sky. With the night comes a hot wind, strong and tired.

This wind's been everywhere, I say.

It feels old.

We are outside the tent, on top of our sleeping bags, wearing next to nothing.

Darren tells me about the perpetual storm over Jupiter. You can see it from space, he says, that's how big it is. You can almost see it from here, on a clear night.

You can't see Jupiter from here.

Sure. Some of us can.

Oh really. You have special powers.

That shouldn't come as a surprise.

Well it does. Tell me, then, how many moons has Jupiter?

Twelve.

Ha. Eleven.

There's one they don't know about yet. It's under the storm.

How can a moon be under a storm?

That's how big the storm is.

Jesus. Would you go there, if you could?

Of course not.

Now, in Joshua Tree, I say: What's so funny?

Nothing. It's just that it's you, Lucy. It's you who's been taking on flesh and personality.

I roll on top of him. I was pretending you were stupid, so I wouldn't love you.

Microraptor

In the newspaper I read that Chinese paleontologists have found the fossils of a four-winged dinosaur. It lived in the trees and used its wings to glide from branch to branch.

This is how flying began. Not from the ground up, but from the trees down. From falling not from lifting. There was never a miraculous first take-off. We fell. We alighted in slower and slower motion until finally we weren't alighting at all, but *traversing* the air.

I say we – because I remember this happening.

Flyer

There has been a lapse in judgment. I kidnap(ped).

I consider writing this on a postcard and sending it to Celie. Instead I write it on glass, with diamond, in a phone booth in Iowa City.

Brittany wants to make me a necklace. There is no shortage of bead stores in Iowa City. She wants diamonds, and I tell her she'll have to lower her standards.

But I want this necklace to be nicer than yours.

It will be, if you make it.

The city feels exactly like the last time. The same sky, the same heavy smell of fruit.

The store has a thousand tiny drawers built into the wall, each one filled with beads. I'm entranced. The owner helps Brittany find what she wants. I'm not allowed to see what she's choosing.

When we leave, Brittany says, She had a diamond beside her eye. She means the owner, who was elaborately pierced and tattooed.

Did she? I didn't see.

Right here. She points.

Like a tear, I say.

It made her look sad.

We step onto the sidewalk. Huge, warm drops splash our arms.

Let's get out of the rain.

Over there, Brittany says and points. There's a café across the street. I take one step forward and stop. Darren is walking in front of it.

He almost sees me. I step back into the doorway of the bead store. My heart rate triples.

Jesus Christ.

What? Brittany says. She follows my gaze. Who's he?

We follow him, stealthily. He is not alone. Rose. Rose is with him. He keeps looking back over his shoulder.

We duck into doorways. Though I know he can't see us. I already know how this ends. We follow them to a parking lot. I hover at the edge, on the sidewalk, watching.

Come on, Brittany says, pulling me away. The rain beats down.

We're in plain sight.

I'm invisible, I say.

A car pulls out, the windows fogged.

I stare. What do you mean I don't love you? I call after the car.

We drive back to the motel in a pounding rain.

Driving Tip Number 6, Brittany says. Don't drive when you're crying?

By the time we get to the motel, my stomach is cramped so badly that I can't walk upright. Brittany takes the key and opens the door.

I stagger into the bathroom. I can't shit. I can't throw up. I curl up on the cold floor.

I can hear Brittany moving around the room. Pacing.

Lucy? she says.

I'm okay, I say. I'm okay. But I'm not. I'm not. Darren and Rose. Running from my ghost.

Like I'm dead.

Brittany opens the door and sits down on the toilet. She pushes back my wet hair.

She says: You love that boy.

I look up at her.

Do I?

You *love* him. This time she says it like a kid, like she's going to follow it up with a tsk, tsk, tsk.

Darren and Rose. How had it happened? Had Pete Rose shown up at the restaurant and acted as a catalyst? Had Pete said: I'm closing the restaurant. And Rose: I'm out of here. And Darren: The world is full of mechanical bulls. Let's go.

No, no. I cast a spell, that's how it happened. That night I cast a spell and said make it be. I've no right to feel pain now.

I ask Brittany if they will be happy. I ask her because there is no one else in the world to ask, and because I know she will tell me.

That boy and that girl? She considers. Sometimes, she says.

It's not just a cliché, that children are oracles, that they possess secret wisdom. All you have to do is ask. Anything at all.

You just ask:

Will I? Will you?

And she will answer: Sometimes.

And she will know the truth.

I stare at her bare legs, crossed like a grown-up's. How old are you?

Eight.

No you're not.

Eighty.

She is not kidding. This is not a happy thing to say. She means: I am dying. She means it even if she doesn't know she means it.

In Pete and Rose's kitchen, the morning after the blizzard, Rose served us hot cereal and oranges and told us Pete was hiring at the restaurant. If you're interested, she said. Pete was not in the room to confirm this. He was outside shoveling. We had offered to help, but Rose had said, No, sit.

So we sat. Across the table, Darren scratched at his wrists. He was watching me.

It would be good to stay put for a while, I said finally, and make some money. We had been traveling for months.

Rose rattled on about Angel Fire, how busy it was this time of year, how you could make a ton in tips from the tourists. Most are from Texas, she said. Amarillo. We try not to hold that against them.

The mites were dead. My skin was silent. That murderous cream. I looked at my hands and wondered what it would be like to live inside them. Would the tunnels the mites built remain, like catacombs?

Viruses, bacteria, mites – linking a continent of strangers. I'd been a poor host.

I looked at Darren. He was still watching me. Rose was still talking.

So Darren. I thought you loved me. I thought you were a spotlight, trained on me. I thought you were shining into an empty dark until I came along. But there were hundreds who crossed the stage before me.

The night before, in Rose's bed, I'd asked him: How many were there? And did you love them?

Yes, he said.

It doesn't mean you love me any less. I understand that. But I could be anyone. The world is full of people who might be me.

I looked at Rose.

Did I cast her then as my understudy? Did I *know*? Pay close attention, Rose. You are next.

Did I love him? Yes, yes. That must be why I did what I did. Why I left. Because I knew someone else – Rose – wouldn't leave. Rose would stand fast, warm in the beam, and be grateful for it. That's how love should be, shouldn't it?

And if none of this is true, what harm to believe it now?

A few months later I would call Celie from the little toaster house on Pike's Peak and tell her exactly where I was. Healed and healthy, I would call her and pretend I wasn't. I would put the wheels in motion, knowing she was coming, knowing I was going – and tell myself I'd made the decision in a single night.

Alternately, this may be Darren's story, not mine. I may just be a net under him, should he fall.

Now I watch as he carries on, sure-footed, across the sky. I pray for three contradictory things: That he falls and hits the ground, next to me. That he stays up there, missing me. That he falls and flies, *flies*, and somehow it's thanks to me.

I want all these things.

Superheroes, it has only now occurred to me, get left behind, once their job is done. I had not accounted for this. That I could become God, omnipotent, but unloved.

At 3:08 AM, Brittany stops breathing. I wake from the half sleep that has become normal, from which I monitor this child's vital signs, *at all times*, and reach for her.

She wakes, and gasps.

I feel for her heart. She's alive. Stay awake, I tell her. Stay awake.

Her head under my chin. I'm okay, I'm okay.

I'm afraid, I say, I'm afraid you're not. I'm afraid we should be in an emergency room.

No, no.

Okay then.

For a while her breathing is ragged, like she's crying, only she's not. When it evens out, I ask her: Why did you want to leave Las Vegas?

Sometimes, she says.

That's the answer to another question. Answer this one.

Sometimes I just want to go.

You've run away before. Why?

I have to. I get scared.

Of what?

Something. Something.

You feel like you have to run.

Silence.

You can't stop.

She shakes her head.

If you don't stop, Brittany, you'll die.

Something's coming after me, she whispers.

Yes, it is.

I tell her to listen. There's nothing spooky going on. There are no monsters. I tell her that she's starving. I tell her that her body, instead of making her slow down, is making her speed up – because in the natural order of things, those who keep moving when they're starving are the ones who find food. Who *live*. The body says: If you stop, you'll die. Food doesn't come to you. So it won't let you keep still. It won't let you feel anything, except hungry. And you get used to the hunger. You don't even realize it's driving you, that you're out there looking for food. But every morning you go running in the dark, your body's searching, desperate. Trying to hunt. Trying to gather. Finding nothing. So you keep running. You run away from home – a hotel, a circus, whatever. Because if you can't get food there, maybe you can get it elsewhere. You run away because you're hungry, and no one's feeding you, and you don't know how – you refuse – to feed yourself.

I know by her breathing she's asleep. Just like TV, when someone finally comes clean, confesses love or murder, in a dark bed, and the camera stays on her too long, and you know, you just know, the other person is asleep – and missing everything.

Brittany is asleep. In one and half hours, it will be 5:00 AM. Please god don't let her get up and go out there.

Baraboo is a disappointment – a brief stretch of two-lane highway – but the surrounding area is not. Amusement parks galore in nearby Wisconsin Dells.

Something called the Biblical Gardens in Lake Delton. We check into Baraboo's Snug Inn, hop back in the truck, and follow the signs.

I read the billboards for the Biblical Gardens out loud.

Christians: This way.

The Bible: Don't just read it, experience it.

Jesus: 5 miles ahead.

The colon, I notice, has really caught on.

I think this is a must see, I tell Brittany.

Are you serious?

We follow the signs to an empty parking lot, surrounded by woods. I think the place must be closed, but the door on the little log cabin swings open. I tell the old man behind the counter that we'd like to experience the Bible. He takes our money and directs us out the back door.

We step into leafy green air. A stream gurgles to our right. And here is the Bible as promised – the highlights anyway – arranged in various scenes along a boardwalk. Old Testament and New, much abridged. Each scene consists of life-sized statues painted lurid colours. Beside each one there's a red button you can push to hear a man's voice recite the corresponding biblical passage. The three wise men are particularly garish.

The boardwalk snakes through the woods, crosses the stream, and eventually returns to the log cabin.

Brittany finds it boring.

I thought it would be funnier than this, I confess.

When we reach the last scene, where Jesus is supposed to be healing the sick (I look around for a crucifixion – there isn't one), Jesus is missing. The lepers and the blind men gather around an empty space.

I ask the old man, who is smoking by the back door, What happened to Jesus?

He'll be back later today. Sorry about that.

He needed some time off?

Brittany snickers.

The old man gestures upstream. Our property backs onto a camp for Jewish kids. This happens every summer, usually more than once.

What happens?

They come in the night and steal Jesus.

You're kidding.

No. He stomps on his cigarette. They sneak down through the woods and float Jesus upstream to the camp.

And do what with him?

Your guess is as good as mine.

I try not to laugh. You've got to appreciate the irony.

I don't have to appreciate anything, he scowls. It's a pain in my ass. They've got a hundred acres back there – and Jesus could be anywhere, on a diving board, in a bathroom, in someone's bed. It doesn't bear thinking about. The camp director's got to waste his morning tracking him down, which he's none too happy about. Then

I've got to rig him back into position. Meantime, paying customers like yourself get the shaft. I mean, you came here to see Jesus, didn't you? He's the star.

I came to see Lazarus, says Brittany.

I look at her.

Thanks. But I can tell you don't mean it. See, I just get mad. But my wife, it breaks her heart. To come out here and find him gone. She cries. Just stands here on the boardwalk and cries. It's to the point now where she wakes up in the night and says: I can feel it. It's happening. And she'll drive out here and, sure enough, he'll be gone.

Can't you chain him to a tree?

Now, says the old man, how would that look?

I look back at the blind and sick. I see your point.

I don't know if you noticed, he says, but I gave you a discount. On account of Jesus being absent.

On our way back to the truck, Brittany says, Wasn't Jesus Jewish?

Yup.

I don't get it.

The point is, we are not unique. Kidnapping goes on all the time.

At Noah's Ark Water Park, the mini "ocean" generates its own waves.

Brittany swims to the far end, a white corrugated horizon. I lie on the "beach," my hand a visor. The waves bounce with perfect symmetry. There are a few other kids, older, with flutter boards.

The waves get higher. I think at first I must be imagining it. But then I remember where I am, an amusement park, and I know everything begins this way, with some innocuous lulling motion that gradually exaggerates itself, until you're upside down, or plummeting to earth – or drowning.

I stand up. The "ocean" storms.

Brittany is thrashing and I can't get to her. The waves are too tall to swim through.

I think I am screaming. I think I am slamming into waves like walls.

Then it irons out like magic. Like nothing happened. Brittany swims weakly back to shore.

She coughs and spits up water. The pool is all innocence.

What was that? I ask.

A ride, Brittany says. I didn't know it was a *ride*. I nearly died out there.

Brittany works on the necklace in the evenings. It's almost done, she says, when I ask. I'm not allowed to see it. She wants it to be ready when I turn the other necklace over to the auction house in Chicago.

Is that what I'm doing?

Of course. I feel perfectly ready to unload Celie's diamonds. I feel perfectly ready. To unload what is not mine.

Brittany is sitting cross-legged on the bed, her back to me and the television, shielding her work from my view.

Brittany, I say, turning down the volume.

Yeah.

I stole that diamond necklace.

She looks over her shoulder. I figured. Whose is it?

My grandmother's.

She resumes her work. Then it's not really stealing.

Yeah, it is.

Maybe if you took it back to her, she'd give it to you.

I sit down on the end of the bed. That won't happen. She's giving it to my cousin.

Why?

She won it. In a contest.

What kind of contest?

I explain about the four of us, about Celie's promise to leave the necklace to the first to sing professionally, about the four stories that begin the same way.

What way?

There has been a lapse in judgment.

Whatever that means.

It just means the stories had to start that way but could end however we wanted them to.

What was your story about?

I hesitate. Not a hard question. Just answer. Love, I guess.

Claudia's was about betrayal. Gwen's was about God.

Who won?

Devorah.

So the necklace is really hers, Brittany says. What was her story about?

Me.

It's been four days since the night her heart hesitated.

Five AM comes and goes. I watch the clock while she sleeps. She has stopped running. I'm afraid to believe in this. What saved her?

We've spent four days in and around Baraboo. Water slides, go carts, wax museums. Brittany can't get enough of these places.

Today we check out and push on towards Chicago. I don't want to leave. There is something redemptive here. In the days of sun and chlorine. Our hair always in some stage of drying. We are so blonde now. We are so near beautiful. I keep my finger on her pulse while I sleep, but I sleep.

I am learning to believe she will live.

The tallest roller coaster in the world is in Cedar Point, Ohio. The Magnum. We hit Sandusky at dusk. We can see the park on the horizon, against the sunset.

Look, look.

I see it.

It is hot. The windows are down. We are driving for it. We'll find a motel later, I say.

Bruce Springsteen sings on the radio. Brittany plays air guitar without taking her eyes off the park in the distance.

It is a city of loops and jewels. It looks better than home. What can only be the Magnum rises like a Chinese dragon into the sky. It is insanely tall.

I don't know, Brittany.

Oh yes, she says.

We drove straight past Chicago today. Brittany didn't notice, or if she did, she pretended not to.

Did you like living in that hotel?

Which one?

I realize there have been many, all the ones we've stayed in, and likely others.

The one in Las Vegas.

She nods. Sure.

Where were you before?

She drops her guitar. L.A.

When she was six, she ran away to Sacramento with a man who lived on her street. He was losing his house. Brittany didn't know what this meant. The house wasn't lost, as far as she could tell. But he said he was losing it. He was going to go live with his daughter. Brittany asked if she could go too.

Who was this man?

His name was Clarence.

I turn down the radio.

My mom looked for me, Brittany says. It was on the news. Then we saw in the newspaper that they'd found me in the reservoir.

I look at her. What?

Brittany jiggles her legs impatiently. See, what happened was some other little girl drowned, or was murdered or something, and my mom went and looked at her body and told everyone she was me. You know, like when they say on TV, identify the body.

She identified the body as you.

Yeah.

And you went back?

I had to show her I wasn't dead. I told Clarence to take me home.

And he did.

Yeah. He was nice.

Cedar Point looms, more and more dazzling, and shifts to the left. We are circling. We are *flying*. I try to slow down.

Are you sure that really happened?

Brittany says: Remember when you asked me if I knew what it was like to be dead?

The Magnum climbs steeply for an eternity. I can't see or feel the track. Perhaps what we saw from the highway was just a path burnt into the air. The way you can write in the sky with a sparkler. Perhaps the Magnum has evolved beyond tracks.

But no. We saw the scaffolding, like lacework, against the sky. It is real. We are not flying.

But we are. We drop. We fall and fall. Brittany screams and I wonder, not for the first time: Is she tall enough? Is she heavy enough? Is her heart strong enough? Because this is a rehearsal for death, this roller coaster. And a body could easily take the whole thing too seriously. The Magnum makes you believe you are dying. Your body tells you, as you fall, no one could survive this. A body does not survive a fall like this. You are dying, you are dying, and then, whoosh, no you're not. Surprise, surprise, you're alive. And the elation you feel, because *you are not dead*, this miracle is what we come here for.

Saved.

And alive. We are corralled, wobbly-legged, down some stairs. Photographs of us, the latest Magnum survivors, light up a giant screen. They were taken during the longest drop. A camera in the sky went click, click, click. Nobody heard it.

Nobody saw it. Our hair points heavenward. Our eyes are closed, our mouths open. *No.* This is the word we are screaming, though we don't remember.

We can purchase a pair of prints for $12.95. Pictures of our almost-death. I figure it's worth it.

That night, as we fall asleep, I feel the Magnum climbing into the sky. When it drops, my bones snap straight.

I remember to wonder: Who was that other child Brittany's mother identified?

Gone from the earth, and no one noticed.

Sometimes I forget Darren. I forget the necklace.

The necklace stayed in the truck while we were at Cedar Point. I forgot to lock the doors. This would have been unthinkable three weeks ago, when I was still wearing it to bed.

I remembered it while we were in line for the Raptor, a low-flying coaster that traced its own name in the sky.

I left it in the truck, I said, horrified.

I'll save our place, Brittany said.

I started running back. It was dark, the park lit up like a dashboard. It took forever to get to the parking lot.

I groped around in my bag, frantic. My fingers closed around it.

But diamonds in my pocket brought no relief. The panic simply jumped tracks, now onto Brittany, alone in the park.

I started running back. There were so many things to keep track of. Brittany. The necklace. The truck. The saucers in the back – were they still there? When was the last time I'd checked? I couldn't remember. Should I go back and look? Yes. No. Brittany first. Saucers second. Necklace in my pocket. And Darren?

Gone.

I had to stop for a moment. A stitch in my side. I held onto my ribs outside the Demon Drop, a huge elevator that rises and plummets, rises and plummets. How do these torture devices save us? I don't know, but they do. They have.

I straightened.

Find her, find her. And if I can't? I'll never leave. Not without her. Her mother stopped looking, but I never would. Pray you're never in the same room with me, woman. I will tear you limb from limb – for deserting her, for passing her off as dead, for giving her a breakable name.

Pray you are never in the same room with me, woman.

Then I see her. She is out of line. She says: I had to give up our spot.

I can hardly breathe. Sorry.

That's okay. Where's the thing?

Which is what we call the necklace in public.

In my pocket.

I just want to get back to the truck. I tell her: We'll come back tomorrow, okay?

Okay.

Because when we're driving, the two of us together, the necklace in my pocket, the saucers in the back, these are the times when I feel like I have it together.

I stop the shower. I'm dripping, reaching for a towel, when I hear Brittany in the other room.

That can't be her.

She is sitting on the bed, working on the necklace. When she sees me, she covers it with both hands and stops singing.

Singing.

I make a motion with my hand. Keep going.

Brittany plies her voice to the aria. It is unthinkable – on a motel bed in the middle of Ohio – Brittany singing Norma. Not as I've taught her. She is not mouthing, but actually singing, Casta diva. Not perfectly. No. She doesn't have the dexterity, yet. But the range is there. She will only have to fall back, fill in the gaps. A voice becoming airborne.

I sink into a chair, still in my towel. Wet prints trace my path from the bathroom. I stare at the carpet because it hurts to stare at her – and to hear the past, *my* past, unfairly leap-frogging over me and into the throat of this eight-year-old girl.

I am outside. I am unrelated.

Look at her, Lucy. She is healthy.

Celie, if you could see her. God, if you could hear her.

It is the sound of her voice, when she sings what I can't.

Bedazzler

The necklace Brittany makes me has five types of beads, and they repeat. One looks like bone, but it's not real bone. One looks like diamond, but it's not real diamond. One looks like silver, but in fact it's pewter. One is larger than the rest. It's pale like ivory, and painted with a blue dragon. The last is solid black.

Brittany says: The bead-store lady said the dragon beads are magic.

Do you believe her?

I don't know.

Chicago is grey. The lake looks heavy and bored. It tips away from us. This, combined with a steady stream of joggers, makes me feel unsteady. We sit down near some chess players.

Are you going to sell it here? Brittany whispers. Meaning the necklace, the other necklace.

The hush of chess is oppressive, even outside.

Sell it, donate it, throw it in Lake Michigan, I don't know.

We have dinner at an English-style pub called The Red Lion. The sign over the door is a faded coat of arms, a pink lion rearing. There are two floors. The downstairs is packed with the after-work crowd, all right angles and business suits. We squeeze past them and follow the waiter upstairs. Chicago is weird, Brittany says on the stairs.

I order a Guinness and Brittany says: The same. The waiter doesn't bat an eye.

She's had a good day. She opens the shopping bag at her feet and pulls out the plush lion we got at FAO Schwartz. She loves lions. I didn't know this until today. When we passed this restaurant she said: That one.

Now she tells me: I'm a Leo. That means lion.

Maybe that should be his name, I say.

Ever seen a real one? she asks.

I don't think so.

The waiter brings two pints of Guinness.

Brittany grins at me.

It doesn't taste the way it looks, I warn her. It's not like Coke.

She sips it without lifting the glass from the table, gives me the thumbs up.

We had a lion in the hotel, she says, licking her lips. It jumped through hoops that were on fire.

I don't remember a lion.

It attacked Powderpuff and they had to put it to sleep.

Oh my God.

It wasn't his fault, Brittany says wisely. Lions should not live in hotels.

I watch her a moment, afraid she will make a connection, afraid she will look at me dead on and say: Neither should people. But she is absorbed in the lion. I pick up my menu.

It doesn't occur to me until we are outside Christie's that they will want some documentation from me, some proof of ownership. That they may not fall all over themselves to write me a big fat cheque on the spot. That they will likely *not* say, *But of course*, when I tell them that, really, cash would be more convenient. In fact, I may very well find myself under arrest.

Had I really imagined myself leaving Chicago with a suitcase full of American bills? Yes.

We walk around the block while I think about this. How is it that I am *not* under arrest? Auto thief, jewelry thief, kidnapper. How is that no one has chased me? I look down at Brittany, trudging along beside me. Or her?

Don't we matter?

Celie is not pining away. The Bedazzler has made several calls from phone booths across America. She knows. On three occasions Keith has answered. That means parties. *Parties*. The superhero scratches her name into the glass and hangs up.

At a library downtown I send an email to myself.

To: lucyladell@netscape.net

From: lucyladell@netscape.net.

Subject: Are you out there?

I will leave the truck in Buffalo, on the street outside your burned down house.

I pay for this hotel room with my credit card. We are at the end of something. I can be tracked. I am ready to divest. I am ready to atone. Of and for everything. Except the one thing that matters.

Tomorrow, I say, you feel like driving to Buffalo?

She is watching the news. We do this. We still wait to be the lead story.

Sure, she says.

No. I mean, do *you* feel like driving to Buffalo?

She turns her head sharply. Me?

That's right.

She pushes her hands in front of her and starts running around the room.

What are you doing?

Driving. Air driving.

You know we could get arrested.

She checks her rearview mirror, comes to a stop, puts it in park.

So?

I get us out of Chicago.

We stop for breakfast at a gas station. We carry our coffees out to the truck, and this time we get in different doors.

In the parking lot, I run through all the driving tips.

Brittany nods, starts the truck like a pro.

For the first ten minutes, she is too nervous to speak. I say nothing and let her drive. I look out my window to show her how relaxed I am, how much I trust her. This is not an act. I drink my coffee.

She drives beautifully. Stares into the far distance. Keeps to her lane. Checks her rearview mirror every thirty seconds. Maintains her speed, five miles an hour over the speed limit. Just like I taught her.

She has to perch on the edge of the seat in order to reach the pedals.

Comfortable? I ask.

She nods.

Okay.

She passes her first car, a Cadillac with Pennsylvania plates, within the first hour. Checks her mirror, checks her blind spot, flicks the indicator, moves over. Checks her mirror, checks her blind spot, flicks the indicator, moves back.

You're a natural, I tell her.

She laughs a little.

Unbelievably, Brittany drives all the way to Buffalo. Nobody stops us. I don't know why I'm surprised.

I take over when we get into the city. It's dark by the time we pull into the Nantucket Inn. Brittany is dropping.

Tired?

My eyes won't stay open.

We check into a room. I call Celie, but only let it ring once.

You're taking it back, aren't you? Brittany asks sleepily. She is already under the covers.

I don't know.

You should give it back to the winner.

But it's not hers. Not yet.

She won it, didn't she?

She did. But the winner only gets the necklace at the end.

The end of what?

I don't answer. Brittany doesn't notice. She's too near sleep.

I turn out the light.

I dream I am on the veranda with Edward. Celie is in the doorway. Edward says to her: Don't you move. But what he means is, don't close the door.

She will never close it, Edward. I have something she wants.

Celie takes me to a little restaurant she likes for lunch. There is no off-street parking, but for her they make an exception. A small space in back is reserved especially for her. The entire wait staff grows two inches when she steps through the door. I know because I come through the door first. I witness the transformation. They lift. They became long-limbed, lively.

Celeste. Eugene, the owner, enjoys her name a little too much. He springs to her side. He takes her coat, he takes her elbow, he'd take her pulse if she'd let him, and leads her to the very best table. I hang up my own coat and follow.

How do they know your first name?

It's on my credit card, darling.

So is your last name.

A halogen lamp no bigger than my thumb makes very sharp shadows on the table. Celie glances up and blinks like she doesn't understand it. She does this every time we come here.

It's halogen, I tell her.

I know. I can't make up my mind about it. Anyway, I call *them* by their first names.

It's different.

How?

It just is.

You're a terrible snob, Lucia. She picks up her menu.

Later, when the waitress brings the check and Celie is in the bathroom, I say: I'll be paying for this. Jody.

Okay, sure.

She hovers while I calculate the tip. She says: We all just love Celeste. God, her accent.

Excuse me?

She's so cute. She's my absolute favourite customer. She's *everyone's* favourite customer. All done? She reaches for the check. I seize her wrist. It is very thin.

She's my grandmother.

Jody looks down at me bewildered. Her lashes cast spiked shadows on her cheeks. Will she cry?

I release her. Sorry. Jody. Can you give me a moment here?

Sure, she says meekly. She retreats.

I can hear the click of Celie's heels behind me.

You're not paying for this, Lucia.

Too late, I say.

Naughty. But she is smiling.

At the bottom of the bill, I write: *It's <u>Mrs. Ladell</u> to you.*

When I tell Gwen about it, she says: You assaulted the waitress?

I shrug. It was her lack of respect.

You're one to talk.

Since when is a six-foot-tall woman cute? Since when is *Celie* cute?

She's not, Gwen agrees. But she's not six feet.

About six feet.

She's maybe 5"8. On a good day. In heels.

That can't be right.

Gwen says, You're as deluded as she is. How tall are you?

I don't know.

You don't know? Come on, Lucy. Anyway, check the next time you're standing beside her. You're taller than she is.

But I know exactly where Celie's eyes are, in relation to mine.

People shrink as they get older, Gwen says.

Maybe some do, I say.

She's getting smaller.

No.

I picture the witch in the Wizard of Oz, dissolving. I know what getting smaller means. It means taking up less space until you take up none.

She has always told me she is six feet tall.

We are parked on Darren's old street. There's a new house where the old one was. Everything feels swallowed and gone. I know this stage. When I remember just enough to know I'm forgetting. And to care.

Brittany has not realized Toronto is in Canada. I explain that we have to leave the truck here. Because it's not mine, and because I might have trouble getting it across the border.

So how will we get across?

The bus.

Canada, she says. With the coloured money? With the Queen?

Right. Canada: We've got coloured money and the Queen.

My mother lives in Las Vegas, she says suddenly.

This, out of the blue. Do I dare say, So?

So?

So, if I go to Canada, I won't be able to get back.

That's not necessarily true, but even if it were, do you *want* to go back?

She nods.

For the first time since I've known her, I see tears in her eyes.

You want to go back, I say again.

She looks at me.

Please god say no.

Silence.

So I say it: No, no, no. *I* want you. She doesn't.

This is the wrong thing to say. The wrongest thing I've ever said. The meanest, the most selfish. The least becoming of a superhero. But I blather on: She hasn't even bothered to look. I would look until I died, Brittany. Until I found you or died.

Brittany says nothing.

She hasn't even tried to find you.

That's okay.

What's okay? That she hasn't tried to find you?

Yeah.

No, no it's not okay.

Why?

I shake my head. I will not, cannot, tell Brittany that she is unloved.

As Devorah got better, she developed a healthy animosity towards the dining room portrait. I dream of throwing darts at it, she joked with me, privately. The new Devorah looked and spoke nothing like the old one.

I'd seen the inside of her apartment maybe twice, when she'd first moved in. Not since. She lived downtown, across the street from the video store where she worked. She would turn up at Claudia's for meetings, and at family gatherings, but other than that, we rarely saw her. We were never asked over.

Now she agreed to let me pick her up and drive her to Claudia's. On the phone she'd said, Come early and we'll have a beer before we go.

Devorah's apartment was warm in the late afternoon sun. I took off my sweater. We sat at the kitchen table in tall-backed, mismatched chairs. Through the window, we could see people coming and going from the Video Vault. On the sidewalk a man was carving something out of a large piece of driftwood. Several completed pieces stood at his feet. They looked like elephants.

This one's going to be a giraffe, Devorah said, watching. I have one of his owls in the bedroom.

He sells them?

Mine was a gift.

Something in her voice made me look at her.

I guess you'd call him a boyfriend.

Really.

This was Devorah's boyfriend, busy in the lower left pane of the window. It felt like we were watching a movie.

I didn't know you had a boyfriend.

I didn't either, she said. Until I woke up one morning and he was here and I was glad about it. She got up and returned from her bedroom with the owl. She stood it on the table, its eyes level with mine.

The wood was smoother than wood should be. The eyes wet, and human.

I peered around the bird to the man on the sidewalk. He seems nice, I said inanely.

Watch this, Devorah said, and she pivoted the owl around so it faced out the window, and the moment she did that, the sculptor looked up, met its gaze, and then ours. Devorah waved.

That happens, she said, every time.

What was I supposed to make of that? It occurred to me that the sculptor saw what the owl saw, that the owl's eyes were his eyes. I got up and carried my beer away from the window.

The place was filled with pictures. Of us. The four of us. Devorah had lived here all these years, with these pictures, loving us, and never letting us in.

I lifted my favourite from the wall and carried it into the kitchen.

It was taken in the garden. I'm wearing a white terry cloth robe of Celie's that is far too big for me. Devorah is holding the train, serious, intent. Claudia and Gwen, in black ballet suits, salute like guards. They are grinning.

What was that about? I asked. What were we playing?

Devorah shook her head. You were getting married, apparently.

To whom?

She shrugged. Pollione?

That bastard. No way.

She picked up the picture. Look at me, she said. You know I play this game where I pretend I can go back and get her. That kid. I pick her up and carry her out of there. I raise her myself. I raise *me*, to become someone different. I protect her from all the damage I'm about to do. Imagine that, Lucy. She pushed the picture away. The person I am now, walking into that garden – I'd be unrecognizable to all of you, even myself – and taking that child home to this apartment. I feed her. Ride the bus with her. She comes everywhere with me. I keep her safe.

From?

I go about my daily life holding that child's hand. It's a game I play.

She wouldn't be you.

That's what makes the game so irresistible. Who is she, then? Who will she become?

Didn't Devorah's parents do that? Didn't they love her? Didn't they try to protect her and nourish her?

But it was Celie's love I wanted.

There it was. That pathetic greeting-card truth.

Devorah said: That question Celie always asked us. If we could be wealthy, intelligent, or beautiful, which would we be. We always said intelligent.

Because it was the right answer, I said.

We were lying.

Gwen has a theory about multiple choice questions, I said.

I know. I don't subscribe.

Okay then. What's the answer?

There isn't just one answer, but many. Which would I be? Who would I be? I would be Norma and Tosca and Scarpia and Ulysses S. Grant. Something more than Devorah-in-the-dining-room. And Violetta.

You chose her.

I don't know. I think she chose me.

Violetta, who dies of consumption. Devorah, consumed.

Devorah said: If I were made up, this is the name they'd give me. Names always mean something small. It's so fitting, this name, I can't breathe in it.

They.

That's why I spared my characters.

She looked back out the window. The sculptor met her gaze.

What if Celie's question had gone like this, she said. What if she'd asked: If you could be healthy, wealthy, intelligent, full, heroic, immortal, beautiful, brave – if you could fly or sing or swim – if you could be *loved* – would you?

So. Not a multiple choice question at all. Yes, I said. Yes. And then: Where did you learn to speak like that?

She forgot love. In that list, she forgot, *if you could love*, would you?

I put the ticket on my credit card. The agent looks at Brittany. She'll be flying alone?

Yes.

Will she need a chaperone?

No.

I go with her through security. Neither necklace sets off any alarms.

In the bathroom, I cry. Brittany watches me in the mirror. I say: I guess I'm going back.

She nods.

Nobody tried to find us. So I will go back to where I started from and *find them*. But I will not make it easy. No. It will not be tidy.

I drop the necklace, the one with a little bit of blood on it, in the garbage on the way out.

Brittany has never been on a plane before. I tell her she may want gum to chew. She goes off to buy some. I sit in a long row of empty chairs and watch the runway.

They announce her flight. I hug her once, and let her go.

It is easy.

I watch her plane from the window. I watch until it takes off.

It is not easy.

No, no it's not. To be alone in a long row of chairs.

I get up and return to the bathroom. I reach into the garbage. I rummage through soggy paper towels. Nothing. I empty the garbage. Nothing.

Well. That didn't take long.

Am I still the Bedazzler without it?

Brittany flies into Las Vegas at night. Imagine it. She's so excited she kneels on her seat.

God says: You can descend into a city, but not *that* city.

You can have any name, but not your own.

You can become, but I cannot help you.

You are alone.

This Place is a Circus: Juggling Voice, Parody, and Silence in *Bedazzler*

When I write a short story, I run a tight ship. I control who gets in and who gets out. Mood, volume, lighting – all are closely monitored. But I found this wasn't so easy with a longer work. With *Bedazzler*, I was running a circus. There were competing acts. One side of the circus tent was on a different time zone from the other. I had trouble with scheduling. And when, at the end of the day, I left that world for my own, I had the uneasy feeling that the show was still going on, *in that place*, without me.

All this is to say, writing a novella is a more complicated project than I anticipated. *Bedazzler* wasn't to be a comedy, romance, melodrama, or mystery, but, like it or not, a freakish conglomeration. It was hard to not feel worried about this. I felt I had to admit whoever turned up at the door and just see what happened. Once I let in Pete Rose, I couldn't very well say no to Jesus. Meanwhile the word "novel" felt like a dagger pointed at my throat. Tacking the "la" on the end only blunted the edge a little.

But I reassured myself: A novel(la) is supposed to be a carnival. It's supposed to be multi-voiced. It's allowed to be noisy. According to Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the author of a novel engages in a dialogue with languages – those of his or her characters, but also social, historical, and literary languages – what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossia.

So what voices have I, or has *Bedazzler*, forced into dialogue with each other? Comic strip and opera? Comedy and romance? History and melodrama? They all call

to each other across the tent. They are a bit like the Tallest Man in the World, the Shortest Man in the World, and the Contortionist. Apart, they have nothing in common – indeed, they aren't even all that interesting – but put them together and you have a spectacle.

I didn't set out to create a circus, though the atmosphere is certainly present from the start – in the hotel in Las Vegas, which doubles as a circus, and later in the amusement parks visited by Lucy and Brittany. But perhaps it was reading Bakhtin some time ago, before I began this project, and finding his description of the novel so appealing – a super-genre, he calls it, a riot of voices – that set the scene for this text and made me brave enough to carry on when I felt the voices were running away with the show.

Let all the opposing pieces speak to one another, Bakhtin might advise me. The novel is a hybrid genre, so you must allow for cross-pollination. Thus Pete Rose, Ulysses S. Grant, and Lucy share a similar moral fallibility. Thus a red silk scarf is discarded in one bathroom, a diamond necklace in another. Thus Claudia's swimming-pool-death becomes Brittany's almost-death at Noah's Ark Water Park. Thus both Brittany and Jesus are kidnapped – or rescued – depending upon your point of view. Thus the weeper on Lucy's Whirry Free machine echoes the tears of a woman beside the stream at the Biblical Gardens. Thus two separate incidents in Iowa City, a year apart, feel like the same incident.

But there is another kind of dialogue going on as well. Certain scenes seem to chat and upstage the others. Unintentionally, I admitted parody into the tent.

Bedazzler speaks sometimes like a soap opera, sometimes like a comic strip, sometimes like a technical document – but always with a nudge-nudge-wink-wink at the reader. In sharing space, these voices become self-aware.

Here is Bakhtin on the subject of parody: "the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or a given style. Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a straightforward genre" (55). I don't pretend to have achieved anything rich, important, fundamental, or *heteroglot* here. However, I can sometimes hear the two voices Bakhtin refers to, the one being parodied, and the one commenting on, or correcting, that voice. And I believe a dialogue of this sort can be illuminating.

Take, for instance, the childhood scene in which Lucy and her cousins act out their favourite operas: "Druid priestess, political prisoner, courtesan, water nymph. We forced them to inhabit the same tales" (85). Here is the circus on a smaller scale, the commingling of many voices.

> I am Alfredo at Violetta's bedside. I weep – but Devorah coughs and dies, coughs and dies. I put a hand on her forehead and announce: She's burning up. Or I withdraw my hand quickly: She's cold as ice. She's dead as a doornail. Sometimes I shake her, out of frustration, and she sits up to tell me not to do that....
>
> Rusalka struggles to become human. She is not allowed to speak – if she does Devorah will die – and therefore she develops an elaborate system of hand signals to make herself understood. Sometimes we end up just playing charades.

> We trick Ježibaba and push her into the oven.
>
> I am Cavaradossi, executed by firing squad. Tosca watches, believing it must all be an act, only to discover it's not. She has betrayed me, unintentionally. I am really dead. She sinks to her knees beside my corpse. I am really dead. She leaps from the parapet.
>
> I am Maximilian of Austria, executed by firing squad. Ulysses S. Grant watches, believing it must all be an act, only to discover it's not. He has betrayed me, unintentionally. I am really dead. He sinks to his knees beside my corpse. I am really dead. He leaps from the parapet.
>
> We leap. We burn. We are shot, stabbed, cursed. We plead. We do everything except sing. (85)

Melodrama degenerates into a game of charades. The dying resurrect themselves to protest their treatment by the living. Tosca's betrayal becomes Ulysses S. Grant's. Parody ridicules, but also illuminates; it encourages the reader to make certain connections, within the scene, and perhaps throughout the novella as a whole.

How does a crime story take itself seriously when no one bothers to pursue the criminal? Or the comic strip, when its superhero falls down, lapses in judgment? Or the love story, when the lover cannot love?

I wanted comedy, yes, but also revelation, and sometimes poignancy.

Lucy's story is a parody of the superhero's. It goes like this: A mortal is bitten by an exotic insect, or she is exposed to something radioactive, or she falls out of the sky. She becomes superhuman. In Lucy's case:

> My super powers derive from two sources: The necklace, which makes me brave and alluring, and the Sarcoptes Scabiei experience, which makes me, well, a force to be reckoned with.
>
> We're in comic book territory. Girl bitten by not one, but a thousand microscopic spiders. Generations of spiders. Grandparents, grandchildren, great grandchildren – all tapped, briefly, into my bloodstream.
>
> They were bound to produce something remarkable in me. (22)

On one level, this is the story of a superhero. On another, it is the story of a thief, a kidnapper, a runaway. There are too many Lucys – weak Lucys, malicious Lucys – for us to believe entirely in the Bedazzler. Her behaviour, she admits herself, is often unbecoming of a superhero.

"We're in comic book territory," she says. Only we're not; we're just putting up a comic book stage in one corner. We're making Lucy seem cartoonish, so that when she is otherwise, she seems *intensely* otherwise – intensely human, fallible.

Take this scene in Iowa City (the second of the two), when Lucy sees Darren and Rose.

> I'm invisible, I say.
> A car pulls out, the windows fogged.
> I stare. What do you mean I don't love you? I call after the car. (134).

Invisible, like a superhero might be. But not invincible. She is physically weakened by what she has witnessed. Shortly afterwards, she comes to the following realization:

> Superheroes, it has only now occurred to me, get left behind, once their job is done. I had not accounted for this. That I could become God. Omnipotent, but unloved. (138).

It is through Lucy's parodic portrayal of the superhero, through her often exaggerated bravado, that she seems her most vulnerable.

Like Donizetti who put the romanza in his comedic opera, *The Elixir of Love*, I wanted to include one of my own.

In films, budding romances are often depicted this way: A musical soundtrack kicks in. We witness a rapid series of romantic episodes – here is the couple at the zoo, sharing an ice cream; here they are in a rainstorm; here they are on the deck of the Love Boat – and we are meant to understand that the relationship has reached a new level. By the end of the soundtrack, the characters are in love.

Similarly, I put Lucy and Darren in a series of romantic settings: Toledo, Iowa City, Denver, the Grand Canyon, Needles. I tried to convey the *sense* of a soundtrack. I was writing a romanza, but it was a parody. In mine, the characters acknowledge it directly. Both Lucy and Darren maintain that the other has been "taking on flesh and personality" during the trip out west. Lucy tells it like it is:

> In the tent I snuggle into Darren, who is not the same boy I left Buffalo with. Every state line brings a new state of being. They don't call them states for no reason.
>
> He's taking on flesh and personality.
>
> I say: You're not the same boy I left Buffalo with. You're taking on flesh and personality. (127).

By drawing the reader's attention to the contrived structure of my romanza, I am placing it in what Bakhtin calls "intonational quotation marks" – that is, I am making it not just a romance sequence, but an *image* of a romance sequence. The reader is not required to take it too seriously, to believe in it entirely – a good thing, as it likely feels somewhat formulaic. But I hope something is gained by having the characters show an awareness of the parody. That they see their own experiences this way lends them a certain innocence and sincerity.

Or take the dramatic episode in the hotel room, when Brittany's heart stops. Lucy makes a long speech about the child's need to run. There is something unnatural and familiar in Brittany's silence. Predictably, Lucy finally tells us Brittany is asleep. Consider what she says:

> Just like TV, when someone finally comes clean, confesses love or murder, in a dark bed, and the camera stays on her too long, and you know, you just know, the other person is asleep – and missing everything. (140)

Again, the parody is self-aware. What I hoped to achieve was an added dimension to Lucy's speech. The confession to a sleeping confessor is by now a cliché – all the soap operas do it – but by making Lucy *confess* to the staged confession, as it were, I hoped to make it fresh, more compelling. I wanted to draw the reader's attention to it *as a confession* – because it may not initially seem to be one.

My plan, when I submitted the original proposal for the novella, was to include with it the four short stories written in the competition for the necklace. And indeed, I began writing them, each one beginning the same way, with the sentence, "There has been a lapse in judgment," but unfolding differently, in different voices. Gwen's voice, Claudia's voice, Devorah's voice – why not add these to the mix?

But as I completed the novella, I began to wonder if perhaps there is a saturation point – a point at which extra voices compete with, or overwhelm, the existing ones.

As a first person narrator, Lucy is the vehicle for all the existing voices in the novella. They are filtered through her unreliable point of view. I say unreliable

because I sense there is something Lucy is not telling us (me). I suspect her of misleading herself and the reader. Take her strange reaction to Darren's question about her parents:

> One night in the toaster house, Darren asked me: Where are your parents, Lucy?
>
> Like he expected me to say, On their way over.
>
> He was dicing vegetables in the kitchen.
>
> I'd been helping, but now I moved into the doorway. I don't know, I said.
>
> What's that like?
>
> It's like being Charlie Brown.
>
> He looked at me.
>
> I pushed my knuckles into the doorjamb. (91)

This is followed by her recollection, or mis-recollection, of the three cartoon women, one of whom she thinks may have been her mother.

> In the absence of other candidates, why not these three? And even now, should the question come up (and it rarely does), these three step to the microphone like contestants for Miss America and make their unconvincing arguments.
>
> Forgive me my mis-memory, for giving you all identical faces. And I will forgive you for not taking the competition seriously. For never once picking me up from a cold floor, carrying me out to a warm car, and taking me home.
>
> I've been shown pictures of my mother when she was a child, but she looks suspiciously like me. In fact, if I concentrate, I can remember them being taken. So. (93)

I don't trust Lucy's point of view – not only with respect to her missing parents, but with respect to the other characters: Claudia, Gwen, Devorah, Brittany. They seem, at times, too much like shades of Lucy herself. I worried that writing the stories from

their (perhaps) more reliable points of view might compromise Lucy's ambiguity. And I like her ambiguity.

This is a noisy novella, but there are lots of silences too – what reception theorists might call places of indeterminacy. These are gaps left by the author that can be filled, or concretized, by the reader in various ways. While I'm not sure I subscribe entirely to the reception theory – that the reader acts as an equal *creator* in a literary work – I think there is some truth to the idea that each reader watches a different performance and walks a different path through the circus tent.

Consider what Margaret Atwood has to say on the triangular relationship of writer, reader, and text:

> Picture [...] a triangle, but not a complete triangle: something more like an upside-down V. The writer and the reader are at the two lateral corners, but there's no line joining them. Between them – whether above or below – is a third point, which is the written word, or the text, or the book, or the poem, or the letter, or whatever you would like to call it. The third point is the only point of contact between the other two. (125)

What happens, then, in the space between the two lateral corners that are writer and reader? The circus, that's what. The upside-down V is my circus tent, and the performance that goes on under it is a unique performance, every time, depending upon the reader.

When I submitted *Bedazzler* to my first reader, I had the odd sensation of leaving my characters on a dark stage, or perhaps in a dark tent, waiting for the lights to come up. I wanted to warn them: The set will be different. It will not be quite like we've rehearsed it. You may not look the same, or talk the same. But say your lines

anyway. Act it out, against the new backdrop. Believe in it. Be brave. *Become*. I was feeling, I think, this gap Atwood refers to. And I was acutely aware of those points of indeterminacy that make a unique performance possible. I felt some anxiety. I wished I could be there, to witness it, to make sure it all went the way I wanted it to. But this was one more part of the process I couldn't control. And in the end, what I wished for, more than my own authority, was that the show be simply entertaining. Bedazzling.

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