

BORDER LIFE

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts in English: Creative Writing Fiction

By

Sophie Goodman

May, 2012

“Every man has to learn the points of a compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.” – Henry David Thoreau

“The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars...” – Jack Kerouac

For all the mad ones in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are an immense number of people and events that have contributed to the following body of work. I could go as far back as my first grade teacher, Ms. Miller, who would read aloud the tales of Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, or to listening to my dad as he patiently read to me every Berenstain Bears book before bed time. I could cite my first book report or the voraciousness with which I devoured the Harry Potter books, one after the other.

With my childhood as a basis, it is important to acknowledge the teachers who have encouraged me along the way.

From Concord Academy: Lucille Stott, Abby Laber, Sandy Stott, Liz Bedell, and Parkman Howe.

I would like to thank the English Department at The Colorado College, and in particular, the Creative Writing focused faculty: Steven Hayward, for catalyzing this insatiable appetite for putting pen to paper during Beginning Fiction Writing; Nino Ricci, for taking me and my work seriously and fostering an incredible workshop environment; and finally, Jim Heynen, my incredible thesis advisor, without whom this would never have come together. His breadth and depth of experience have added to the depth of the following stories in ways that I could never have foreseen. I can confidently put this forward as the capstone work of my undergraduate academic life because of the encouragement and support of the wise Jim Heynen. And if it looks like I know what I'm doing in terms of grammar and formatting, it's only because Jim painstakingly copy-edited every draft.

Finally, my parents have provided the support and all of the opportunities that have culminated in "Border Life". This would truly not have come to fruition without their unwavering and unconditional love. In a sort of homage, much of the voices of my family and our family dynamics as a whole have provided fodder, both humorous and serious, for the following stories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Artist's Statement
2. "Border Life"
3. "Define Relationship"
4. "Summertime in November"
5. "Friday Nights"
6. "Extra-ordinary"

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My stories can be described as “slice of life” stories. In other words, a confined, very specific setting begets a character and defines their unique experience. The defined borders of the environment allow the setting to come alive as much as the characters: the pressures of prep school life motivate three friends to push boundaries with dire consequences; Brooklyn through the eyes of an orthodox Jewish girl becomes a vehicle to highlight specific cultural values and to highlight a foreign land contained in the very familiar; a cartoon artist's daily route through the streets of Providence catalyzes character transformation when that daily routine is interrupted by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong; feeling out of place in a city so different from home can result in an affliction of the mind attributed to intense nostalgia and loneliness; and finally, the city of New York becomes as much a part of the narrative as the boys' journey and coming of age.

I credit Henry David Thoreau as my inspiration for the following exploration and the title piece of this collection. Through his experiment in living, Thoreau arrived a place where he found the profound in the very minute: he describes connecting on an intimate level with pine needles, seeing Greek battles in the way that ants marched to and from home, and the connection between Walden Pond and the sky, “sky water”, in a moment of transcendence on a sunny afternoon. The meat of a story and of a character is in the details. For example, the answer to the question of why a certain character chose to wear a particular pair of shoes could be the key to ultimately understanding them.

The tradition of the *midrash*, stories collected in the Talmud from medieval rabbis that attempt to anecdotally explain scripture, also provided a model for the overall structure of many of the stories and the dialogue itself embedded in the stories. *Midrashim* are told in a manner similar to that of a Socratic dialogue where one rabbi poses a question and others answer with an opposing view. They argue back and forth, in often humorous exchanges, until it results in an absolutely unexpected, yet satisfactory, philosophical conclusion. This structure explores not only the extremes of the larger issue at stake in a story but also highlights the reality of dealing with the person on the other side of the table who may have wildly different life experiences and opinions than you.

My goal was ultimately, through my own artistic lens, to capture something human and relatable in each of these stories. I hope that the reader finds that something comes alive for them as well, either in the characters, the plot, or the environments.

BORDER LIFE

The pizza delivery guy used to hide our weed under the large pepperoni slices. It was always pepperoni, covered the smell better. We'd call Dino's and order, "a large pepperoni pizza with extra green peppers to be delivered to Horace House"; twenty minutes later, the dorm parent on duty would answer the door to the decadent combination of sub-par herb and dripping slices. She would hand the box over to us, smiling, as she congratulated herself that all the hard-won hours of high school dorm bonding had finally paid off.

Mr. Wolf was the house parent to fuck with. Wolf was feared amongst all sophomores as the hardest of the chemistry teachers and most famous for an errant affair with a young English teacher that ended up in the pages of the *Globe* as an anecdote in her weekly Sunday "Single Life" column.

Some men go about making love as if scratching a chemical equation on a chalkboard. Women must be willing to jump out of their chairs, grab the eraser, and take the lead. We know what we want, and what we want does not involve *cadmium*.

You can bet that we ran with that one. Wolf was also, to his great demise, a stickler for dorm rules: lights out at eleven meant just that and under no circumstances were there allowed to be members of the opposite sex beyond the confines of the common area. We needed no further invitation.

"So, Wolf, how about them Red Sox?" He loved baseball.

"Runner on third, top of the fifth. We've got a shot if Manny would hit the darn ball! What do we pay you for?" he yelled at the ancient antenna TV.

“Manny, what a player. One minute he can’t miss, the next he’s fucking useless. The pitcher sneaks that ball past him every time.”

“Watch your language, Joey, but yes. And right now, he’s useless. Come on, just swing. You might get lucky. Eye on the ball, eye on the ball.”

Angie took up her position by the fuse box while Chang ran up the stairs with the box full of handles we’d just picked up from some day students at the train station. We had gotten so confident by our sophomore year that once we even dragged up a rusted-out sculpture of an alligator that we found in the Concord junkyard. Just for the hell of it. At some critical moment in the game, one of us would stamp on the floor in front of the vent leading down to the basement, and Angie would pull the fuse. Bam! The power would go out, students would scream from their rooms that their unsaved papers had disappeared, and the warning sirens on the smoke alarms would scream, emergency lights epileptically flashing down the halls. Wolf knew it was us that incited the chaos, but he wasn’t ever quick enough to catch us in the act. Angie, Chang, and I would run out the back door and off into the night, heading to god knows where, somewhere where we could breathe, somewhere beyond the Academy campus, somewhere we felt less suffocated.

Angie was the one who suggested we try to rebuild Thoreau’s cabin to return the structure to its historical placement closer to the train tracks. The slightly less than life-sized bronze statue of Thoreau that sat between to the neatly whitewashed “re-interpretation” of the cabin and the permanent ice cream truck in the parking lot across the street offended her. She had become obsessed with Henry David after reading *Walden*

in our fall semester English course senior year this past fall. We had spent many classes down by the pond, listening to the train whistle and watching the iron horse streak past as we read of winter forests and loon calls. We followed Thoreau's instructions in the chapter "Economy" to a T, and with a little help from the architecture teacher and Chang's calculations, we drew up some basic floor plans. Much to our relief, I think, we'd started hunting for viable wood after the first snowfall so it was all too wet to start building, though we snuck out every night to clear the snow off the pile (a feat as every floor board in the one-hundred-year-old dorms squeaked when you even feigned to walk near it). We even went as far as stealing one of the battery-powered heat lamps from the biology lab. That heist created a bit of an uproar because I guess we had taken it from some freshman who was trying to coax along her crossbred orchid for a final project. When it was clear that the snow was too deep for heat lamps, Chang dropped off the lamp in Wolf's office while he was out at a meeting. No further inquiry was made.

Then Chang suggested that we try to plant green beans in Thoreau's bean field.

"Why would we want to plant green beans?" I asked.

"I don't know, they're long, stringy, green..."

"I think that you're taking this too literally. Yes, it *was* a bean field, but what about a pumpkin patch? Or a garlic field?"

"Seriously? Garlic?" Chang retorted. "Where the hell do you come up with these things, and where the hell are we going to find garlic seeds?"

“Think about it. Garlic is a practical plant. It’s tasty, and the stench will definitely cover up any other imbibed substances that we drag back to campus.”

“Look, Thoreau...”

“Henry David,” Angie interjected.

“Whatever. He had it right. The beans fit. And now you want to defile the field with garlic?”

“Thoreau died a virgin. What the fuck did he know anyways?” Angie called over her shoulder as she stalked away, farther down the train tracks.

The day that we met Angie two years ago during our sophomore year, Chang and I were out on a run for basketball practice. As we ran past Walden Pond, we saw a lone figure careening across the iced-over surface.

“Who do you think that is?” I asked between gasps.

“An angel.”

Chang broke off from the team and ran down to the edge of the pond. He was right; her eyes were closed as she whirled across the surface in converse sneakers. Her red coat flew out behind her like some cerebral Superman cape while long blond hair cascaded from her head. She leaped and twirled. But as she reached the center of the pond, she halted; the music must have stopped. Kneeling down, she folded herself into a ball and just sat there for the longest time.

“You’re beautiful,” Chang called as she walked back towards shore.

“I’m Angie,” she called back.

By the fall of our senior year, Chang and I ran the fucking place. I had been elected President of Boarding Life, and they elected Chang Student Body President. Together, we met with the administration, Board of Trustees, representatives of the student body; we crunched numbers, reviewed budgets and academic policy, and met with prospective students as the face of this venerable institution. Chang was an international boarder from Korea, and I was a double Academy and Harvard legacy. We had them licking our feet. Chang’s parents flew in from Seoul when they heard he’d been elected: he was already a brilliant physicist so it was all his parents could do to keep from shitting themselves after this latest triumph. We loved it when Chang’s parents came to visit us at the Academy; his mom, Mrs. Kim, would walk around in her Chanel tweed suit, inspecting every aspect of her son’s room while his father stood solemnly at the door and nodded as Chang spoke in rapid-fire Korean about his latest test score and praise from a teacher. Chang turned into the well-mannered academic that his parents knew him to be, and Angie and I got to go out to a fancy dinner in Cambridge.

But Chang and I, we worshipped Angie. When she danced, the music followed her lead. She was in this production during our junior year where the entire ensemble had to wear gargoyle masks, hop around the room to ACDC, and fawn over the audience, while the choreographer stood bowing completely naked in the middle of the room. It was weird, to say the least, but Angie’s grace was gargoyle turned regal. She spellbound the audience and didn’t let go until the final ear-wrenching chord. Angie thought flowers were stupid (“Why are you giving me a gift that’s already dead?”) so Chang and I brought balloons. “Congratulations, it’s a girl!” and a monkey resembling Curious

George seemed more appropriate than “Over the hill!” or a sparkly “Get well soon!”. She kept them for weeks and finally, when they were too deflated to float, she sucked the helium out of the balloons and pasted the skins on her wall.

At the end of first semester during our junior year, some alum came back to the Academy to give a presentation for the whole school about her altruistic year spent studying gorillas and water supply in Central Africa. My phone rang just as she was going through the slides of dehydrated gorillas lying on the sides of highways.

“You should answer that,” she sneered. The gorillas were clearly offended.

“You know what, it’s okay, I’ll call them back. This is more important,” I replied, raising my voice so she could hear me from the back row of the auditorium.

“Answer it.” The entire auditorium watched as I pulled out my phone from my backpack.

The caller-id said, “Dad Work”. Shit.

“Hi, Dad,” I sighed. “No, I haven’t talked to Headmaster Fay yet. I have no idea what you’re talking about. Actually, now that you mention it, I do recall that incident. No, I’m not purposefully trying to embarrass you. What do you want me to say, thank you? I don’t need your help. Sure, I’ll pass on your regards to the PETA protesters. Stay in touch.” I snapped my phone shut. The alum glared at me from the podium.

“Can I continue my presentation?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

She jabbed at her computer to change the slide, and the screen went black. Unable to hold it in any longer, Chang and Angie burst out laughing. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“My office. Now. All three of you.”

Earlier that day, Wolf had caught Angie, Chang, and me attempting to sneak bags of live lobsters into the toilets in the academic buildings. Angie thought it would be funny to literally scare the shit out of everyone. As it turns out, we had crossed some animal rights boundaries or something, and a concerned senior had notified the local town chapter of PETA. Within half an hour, protesters showed up on campus, and the quad was swarmed with suburban dog lovers eager to do their part to save the poor lobsters. To be honest, I hadn't really thought about how putting lobsters in fresh water was actually torturing them.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” Headmaster Fay asked us.

“Sorry,” Chang offered.

“Mr. Warren?”

“What Chang said. Sorry,” I replied.

“Angie?”

She glared at Headmaster Fay, unblinking. “Lobsters are bottom feeders anyways. They're used to eating shit. Excuse my language, ‘detritus’ rather.”

Headmaster Fay rolled his eyes and massaged his forehead.

“I’ve made some calls, and all of this will go away, but what you did was very serious. The Academy does not need this kind of negative exposure. We’re competing for school rankings. This was not some harmless prank. I will not drop out of the top three this year, understand?”

“I understand that you called my father,” I replied.

“Your father is a great supporter of this school and a strong presence in the greater community. He has been very accommodating and agreed to help us keep this out of the press.”

I kicked back in my chair and leaned my head back. A portrait of Headmaster Fay hung upside down on the back wall.

“You may go. No more of this. Are we clear?”

We were untouchable. Chang and I nodded and walked out, following Angie’s expressionless reaction.

The administration would annually take pity on the boarders and our lack of home-cooked meals by organizing a school-wide potluck hosted by day student parents. At our sophomore year potluck, someone’s mother, thinking she was being politically correct and ethnically conscious, brought what she labeled a, “mixed Asian fusion” dish in an attempt to include some of the international boarders. Her homemade kimchi ended up giving food poisoning to all those who dared try it, including Chang. I had to listen to him vomit his guts out for the next 24 hours.

I perused the tables of this year's potluck, admiring the ornately decorated Halloween cupcakes and cookies. My paper plate bent under the weight of all the food I had heaped onto it. Chang and I found a spot on the quad under a tree to sit and enjoy the fare.

"Are you seriously not going to get any of this grub?" I asked Angie as she walked up to us.

"Do you remember what happened to Chang two years ago?" Angie replied. "I am not risking projectile vomiting for some, let's be honest, only semi-decent food."

"You're insane. This lasagna is amazing," Chang said and stuffed another heaping forkful into his mouth.

"I'm not really hungry. I had a peanut butter sandwich not too long ago."

"All you ever eat is peanut butter. Add some jelly, some bananas, anything. You're way too picky, and you're seriously missing out today."

"Whatever. I have an essay to write for Johnson anyways. Ten pages on Ahab's sexual relationship to Moby Dick. See you guys later."

Chang and I snagged half of a blueberry pie as they began to clean up lunch. We decided to bring what was left of the pie to Angie after we had our share. I heard muffled choking as I went to push open her door. I pulled back and instead peeked through the crack. Angie was curled in a ball on her floor. She hugged herself, shaking, snot and tears dripping all over her face. Chang and I left and never mentioned to Angie that we had seen her that afternoon.

We were drawn to Walden for a lot of reasons but I think that, for Angie, it was the ghosts that most fascinated her. You see, Walden Pond had gone through many transformations over the years: glacier to kettle pond to Thoreauvian Eden to a carnival grounds and finally to a protected state park with a beach where naked babies and yoga-doing young mothers would flock as soon as the weather turned.

“The Ferris wheel must have been here,” Angie said, pointing to a patch of sandy ground.

“How did they even install the rides? The embankment is ridiculously steep, the physics alone...”

“Give it a rest, Chang. Tap into that imagination.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Joey? Look at the slope; it’s a hike to walk up. Now put a roller coaster there, and you have a recipe for major passenger carnage.”

“Go ahead then, sir. Take some measurements, do some calculations. Prove me and history wrong.”

“I’ll take some measurements and then shove them right up that...”

“I dare you to jump in the water,” Angie called from a rock perch a few yards off.

“There’s a layer of ice in the shallow end, no fucking way,” I called back.

“Joey’s right, we have like a mile to walk back anyways. Frostbite in places I would not want frostbite.”

“Fine, I’ll do it.”

In one fell swoop, her clothes were off and she was in the pond. She swam farther and farther out into the middle, despite the desperate yelling from shore, and stopped just before she got to the place where the moon was reflected in the surface. Chang had grabbed a rock and was trying to break the lock on the boathouse to get a canoe or anything that we could use to get out to her. I shouted, waving my arms, on the verge of tears, useless from shore. She swam into the reflection of the moon, and I stopped shouting. Sky water. Flecks of water caught the light of the moon as she splashed around, laughing, and I wanted to grow old right then. When Angie got back to shore, she had to crawl because she had lost so much feeling in her extremities. Chang and I took turns piggybacking her back to school, her hair in icicles, jogging through the November woods.

A few days after the pond incident, Chang and I came back from basketball practice to find a kitten sequestered in the corner of our room. Angie was feeding it scraps of what had been a turkey sandwich.

“Where did you find that cat?”

“Her name is Ginger.”

“How creative, a ginger cat named Ginger. You can do better than that, Angie.”

Chang rolled his eyes.

She ignored us and kept feeding the kitten strips of turkey.

“Dude, you can’t keep that in here, you know I’m allergic,” Chang said and rubbed his eyes with the back of his jacket sleeve.

Angie continued to ignore us and pet the kitten, gently rubbing between its eyes until it purred and fell asleep.

“You two don’t have to worry about it. I’ll take care of Ginger and move her to my room before she wakes up again.”

I got a desperate text message from Angie a few days later: “Out of food for Ginger. Bring whatever you can hide in your pockets.” (We weren’t allowed to take food out of the cafeteria). I got to her room only to find piles of food in the cat’s bedding area. The kitten couldn’t move, surrounded by cookies, rotting fruit, and stale bread.

“Are you sure the cat likes eating this stuff?” I asked.

“She needs her nutrition, Joey.” Angie grabbed one of the chocolate chip cookies from the pile and mashed it up with some water in a bowl. She then sucked up the concoction into a wisdom tooth water pick, and forcefully opened the kitten’s mouth to shoot the food inside. The cat whimpered as Angie held its jaw open with her fingers.

“Angie, seriously, the cat isn’t hungry. Can’t you see it’s crying?”

The cat fought desperately to get away from Angie’s arms. I could see it was scratching her legs, her tights ripping and blood pooling as the cat’s claws fumbled around, but Angie ignored this and held tightly to the furious kitten.

Angie told me this story one day as we were leaving Walden Pond after class: God presents the idea of creating man to the angels in the heavenly court. They freak out, chaos erupts, and the angels take sides. One side argues that righteousness justifies man’s creation, while one argues that the he will be full of lies. Another side says that man’s

inherent justness justifies his creation, while the fourth argues that he will incite fighting and disrupt the peace on earth. While the angels are going at it, God pops down to earth and creates man in his image. He then flies back up to the heavens and cries out, “Hey, angels! What good are you doing? Man has already been created.”

As much as Chang and I loved Angie, we couldn’t understand her. She was unreachable, untouchable. The kitten died the following week from either choking on a piece of unprocessed food in the water pick or the chocolate in the cookies. Angie chucked the kitten into the river along with all of its rotting food.

We didn’t go back to Walden until the night that Angie got her acceptance letter to Julliard. We had made her promise, in writing, that she wouldn’t pull any shit like jumping in the pond again and if she did, she would warn us in advance so we could bring a flotation device and a day student with a car. She signed the contract, assuring us that her taste for icy water was satisfied for the season.

The three of us went to the chapel and popped three bottles of champagne right there in the middle of the pulpit. I took pleasure in the fact that the Puritan architects who built the whitewashed chapel in the 1700s must have been convulsing in their graves not three blocks away.

“To the Academy and making it through to the other side,” Chang toasted as he jumped up onto the lectern.

“I christen this night as the night we start to take over the world,” I said, pouring a little champagne onto the hardwood floor.

Angie was clearly drunk. She sat in the first pew and laughed, yelling “Hurrah!” for each of our toasts. At one point, she jumped up and went over to the piano; Chang and I tapped danced along to the songs, as Angie, in the manner of a satirical Russian ballet teacher, severely counted out the rhythms and the steps. One and two and three and four, one and two and three and four. The front doors swung open with loud crash that echoed through the wooden chapel, and the lights came on.

“What the hell do you three think you are doing?”

It was Wolf. We ran, laughing hysterically, out of the back door into the woods towards Walden, dropping the bottles of champagne as we jumped into the thicket. Wolf tried to follow but stopped at the edge of the soccer field just before the woods. We ran until we hit the train tracks.

We were running blind; heavy snow clouds hid the moon. It would be a white Christmas in Concord this year. At one point, I tripped over an errant root and smacked my nose on a tree trunk. There was blood everywhere, but I didn’t really care and just wiped it up with my sleeve. We heard the train coming; the wheels made this whirring sound that carried through the barren winter woods. Chang and I jumped off the tracks, but Angie kept going, hopping from railroad tie to railroad tie, one foot after the other. The whirring got louder, and Angie stopped to face the train. Arms out, eyes closed, right there in the middle of the track. She just stood there.

“I think I left my jacket in the chapel.”

I nodded. “It’s getting cold out here.”

Angie's parents decided to have the funeral in the chapel on the grounds of the Academy. Chang was already sitting in a pew when I walked in. He sat in the far left corner behind a pillar, as far from Angie's family as he could. I started to walk towards him, but he looked up. You're right, I thought, I can't be near you either. I sat down in the opposite corner, under the carved plaque with 1 Corinthians 13:4: "Love is patient, love is kind." But I was just angry.

The band played some somber ballad as people filed into the pews. Angie's mom put on sunglasses.

Everyone keeps saying that there's nothing we could have done. And I believe them. She had me fooled. She had us all fooled.

Chang and I stopped speaking after it happened. The administration thought it was best to move us into separate rooms for the second semester after Chang tried to beat the shit out of me for borrowing a pencil from his desk. He broke my nose, which seemed to be more prone to bleeding after that night in the woods, and I almost pushed him through the third story window.

Now it's graduation; they skipped over Angie's name as if she had never even been there, and they're about to call my name. Even the headmaster can't bring himself to muster much enthusiasm. Maybe I'll get lucky, and they'll forget my name too, and then I won't have to fake it anymore.

“Joseph Donald Warren,” Headmaster Fay announces.

It would have bugged me a few months ago that he used my middle name. I stand and adjust my tie. The sun is too bright; I have to squint. Shake with the right hand; accept the diploma with the left. Shake right, diploma left. Smile. I look out to the audience: the smiling grandparents with cameras around their necks, mothers with extra large sun hats, dads with cigars. Everyone claps. Chang keeps his head down.

This would have been a great night. Instead, I’m stuck in the New England version of Dante’s inner circle of hell, wishing I could find some kind of fast-forward button.

The ceremony ends, and we stand up to file out of the tent. I pass Chang’s family as I head towards my parents. Mrs. Kim and I make eye contact, so I walk over, thinking that it might be easier to just be polite rather than make up excuses to avoid them.

“So I guess we did it,” I offer.

“We sure did,” Chang replies without looking up from his shoes.

“Congratulations, Joey,” Mrs. Kim nods in my direction. “This is truly a great day.” She places her hand on Chang’s shoulder.

“Well, hey, have a great summer. You’re headed back to Seoul for a while?”

Mr. Kim nods. He’s standing with his hands clasped in front of him behind his son, looking solemn as ever. “Chang will stay with us until the academic year starts in September.”

“Let me know when you get back to the States. Providence is only forty-five minutes away from Cambridge. We should get together sometime,” I say, knowing that it will never happen. Chang will be one of those people I delete from my contacts after a few years because I’ll never need his number again.

“We should do that.”

I try to force a smile, but it comes out as more of a wince. Mr. Kim says something about greeting the Headmaster. I raise my hand to wave goodbye but decide against it, and I am left standing with my hand half-raised, watching their backs as they walk away across the quad.

DEFINE RELATIONSHIP

Yaakov and I are going to get married in one month. This test was supposed to be a formality.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Goldman, your result came back positive.”

I look up at Dr. Stein.

“Both you and your fiancé, Yaakov, are carriers for the Tay-Sachs mutated gene. If you were to think about starting a family, you must know that there is a one in four chance that your child will inherit the gene from both of you and will have the disease. The child would die within the first five to eight years of its life.”

There is a poster of the fetal gestation cycle hanging on the wall behind the doctor. The third trimester baby lies almost horizontally in the cross section of the mother’s womb. Its eyes are closed. It can’t even look at me.

“You must understand. Jews of our heritage, Ashkenazi Jews, are significantly more prone to carrying this disease. You and your husband will have to make some choices.”

Yaakov was Eligible Hasidic Bachelor Number Four. Our community *shadchan*, an ancient Russian woman who still drove her Buick around Detroit as if she were plowing through muddy *shtetl* streets, had matched my parents 23 years ago, and now it was my turn.

I had met Yaakov Rosenberg about eight months ago. We were both 22 years old, we had both graduated from community colleges in our hometowns with degrees in

accounting, and we both liked to read. That information was all my parents needed to agree to ship me off to New York to meet with this Yaakov. And Yaakov was getting ready to join in his father's diamond distribution business. A nice New York Hasidic Jewish boy with a college degree and a solid plan for the future: what more could a Jewish mother want for her oldest daughter?

My first meeting with a prospective bachelor wasn't so terrible. David Klein's parents were so excited that I had agreed to meet their son that they paid for my plane ticket to San Diego. The weather was beautiful, and I loved walking along the boardwalk, but David's latent homosexuality had really put a damper on the trip. I couldn't bring myself to tell his parents about the magazine I had found hidden in the back of the medicine cabinet so I just gave my practiced, "We just didn't connect in that way," excuse and headed back to Detroit.

I had agreed to fly to St Louis for my second meeting in spite of the threat of a late February blizzard because my father had gone to college with some cousin of the Abramowitzes, and if I had refused, it would have gotten back to them some way or another. Michael Abramowitz's obsession with Tolstoy and the Russian Revolution left conversation lacking, though his mother boasted the tastiest *ruggelah* in St Louis so the trip was not a total loss.

The third and fourth visits were closer to home; Shmuel Goldberg and Yoseph Eisenson were best friends, and we had been in school together from Kindergarten through the 12th grade. I had had a hard time letting go of the 7th grade gum-in-the-hair incident so one could say that those meetings were dead on arrival.

Mrs. Rosenberg had picked me up from LaGuardia on a Thursday afternoon; she'd called me four times on my way from downtown Detroit to the airport -- once even during the *Tefilat HaDerech*, the prayer for safe travel -- that my father was in the middle of reciting. I sheepishly silenced my phone, though a slew of text messages that followed the call caused my father to throw up his hands and exclaim to anyone who was within earshot, as he always did when something exasperated him,

“What a world we live in!”

As it turned out, the calls were simply meant to remind me that Mrs. Rosenberg would be wearing her red head scarf at the arrivals gate so I'd be sure to recognize her and to remind me to bring something nice to wear for Shabbat dinner on Friday night; the Rebbe was coming over. My mother admired Mrs. Rosenberg's attention to detail, noting that, hopefully, it had rubbed off on her son. I couldn't say that I'd disagreed.

Mrs. Rosenberg spotted me as I walked into the baggage claim area. She charged through the crowd and ushered me out to her car, all the while apologizing for her lateness: there was a back-up on the bridge, the incompetence of the architect who designed this *fakakta* airport, the inappropriateness of the airlines for allowing strange men to sit next to nice Jewish girls, and above all, the rising gas prices. Mrs. Rosenberg's demeanor would have disarmed even the most socially adept, but her diatribe had the opposite effect and instead reassured me. Silence would have meant that my mousy hair or the fact that my skirt showed a little too much of my practical black flats disappointed her. I buckled myself into the back of the car, and we were on our way to Brooklyn to

meet Mrs. Rosenberg's son, Yaakov Rosenberg, the man I had flown all the way to New York to meet.

We arrived at the Rosenberg's apartment to four men gathered around a 1980's television, poking, prodding, and yelling at the television and at each other.

"The antenna needs to be shifted more to the right."

"No, left, the signal comes from Manhattan."

"We should put it against this wall."

"Oy vey, next you'll be wanting to hang it on the wall."

"You have to turn the top and bottom dials right at the same time to land on the channel."

"Move over, what are you doing? You're going to blow up the whole building, *baruch hashem*."

I stood on the landing of the apartment, holding my suitcase in my right hand and the carp that we had picked up at the butcher's for the *gefilte* fish in my left hand. My head began to throb.

"We call them the Wise Men of Chelm," someone whispered behind me.

I turned and there he was, leaning against the wall, peering at me from behind a pair of oversized dark-rimmed glasses. He didn't have the typical Hasidic beard; rather, there was only the suggestion of five o'clock shadow. The *peyus* hanging down from his

forehead were tucked behind his ears instead of curled and hanging, and his black felt hat was casually tipped towards the back of his head. Converse sneakers.

“Ha ha, the Wise Men of Chelm, that’s good.” It took a few seconds for me to recall what he was referring to. The four men did in fact resemble the famed *shtetl* fools from the fairy tales of Eastern Europe. In one of my favorite stories, the townspeople thought that they had captured the moon in a barrel of water only to find that the moon was gone from the barrel the next evening (it was a cloudy night). Thinking that the water had melted the moon, they poured out the water, emptying the barrel completely. No moon was to be found.

“I’m Yaakov.”

“Rachel.”

Yaakov reached for my suitcase, waiting for me to place it on the floor so as to not accidentally touch my hand.

I had helped Mrs. Rosenberg make the *tsimmes* for dinner with the Rebbe that Friday night. Why did it always have to be *tsimmes*?

“Rachel, sweetheart, could you pass me the *tsimmes* plate?”

I stooped down and opened the cupboard that Mrs. Rosenberg had pointed to, finding five separate glass platters that could very well of all been the *tsimmes* plate that she had wanted. I pulled one at random and handed it towards the sink in her direction.

“Oy, not that *tsimmes* platter, that’s for Rosh Hashanah. The other one, it’s right there.”

I held out another random plate, and she began to scoop the sticky, citrus beef and turnips into the dish. Mrs. Rosenberg arranged the carefully cut orange slices around the edge of the steaming pile while I tried to subtly tilt my head away from the platter to avoid the familiar *tsimmes*-induced nausea.

“Yaakov!” Mrs. Rosenberg called to her son, “Add the other leaf to the dining table; your father’s friends are staying for dinner. And bring some chairs from the storage in the basement.”

“Oy, you’re making that boy run all over the place,” Mr. Rosenberg chimed in from the living room, “I’ve kept him busy all week with the trade deal with the Moskovitz’s, and he has enough on his mind already with Rachel here. It’s almost Shabbat. Call the neighbors, and see if they have any extra chairs next door.”

“This is why I had children, so he can run up and down the stairs for me when I get old,” Mrs. Rosenberg joked, lovingly kissing Yaakov’s cheek.

The four men were still in the living room futzing with the television, trying to catch the end of the Mets’ game before sundown and the start of Shabbat.

“She’s right, Rosenberg,” one of the bearded men replied, “Pretty soon you’ll have more little Rosenbergs running around this apartment. And when you get old and fat, you can just have them carry you from room to room.”

“Children are such a blessing. Though I hope if Yaakov and Rachel have sons, the son will be able grow a proper beard instead of that scraggle that his father, that Yaakov, seems to think is ‘in’.”

“With Rachel’s face, the kid will at least have a fighting chance,” teased Mr. Rosenberg.

I flushed red and turned back towards the sink to wash the dishes, away from the door leading to the living room.

“But that *goy* landlord. He’ll make such a fuss with babies around. Remember what happened when David Katz’s grandchildren came to visit? *Goyim* just don’t understand. He doesn’t want Jews in the building.”

“Oy, enough with blaming the *goyim*. We live in a world full of non-Jews, might as well get used to it.”

“And God willing, next year we’ll celebrate the New Year in Jerusalem.”

As if on cue, the doorbell rang, and the Rebbe walked in. His stout stature indicated that he was kept very well fed by the multitudes of Jewish mothers who invited him over for Shabbat meals, but all the same, he dug into Mrs. Rosenberg’s *tsimmes* like it was to be his last.

“Rebbe, you have such a good appetite,” Mrs. Rosenberg beamed. “Rachel, serve the Rebbe some more *tsimmes*, would you? And why are you not eating yours? You don’t like my *tsimmes*? You’re going to get sick if you don’t eat; have a little warmer.”

I smiled weakly, thinking the opposite, that I might in fact be sick if I had one more bite. Yaakov winked at me as his fork discreetly disappeared under the table, giving Hershel, the family’s dog, bites of his food.

“So, Yaakov,” the Rebbe asked, “You’re going to take over your father’s business.”

“Yes, we’re very proud of him,” replied Mr. Rosenberg, “All A’s in school, he’ll double my business in one year, guaranteed.”

Yaakov nodded politely and took the opportunity to shovel more food to his dog. I tried to suppress a laugh, but it came out as more of a snort, causing Mrs. Rosenberg to run around the table and slap me on the back, convinced I was choking on an errant piece of meat.

“Deep breaths, Rachel, sweetheart. Come on now, breathe, get it out of your system.”

“Mrs. Rosenberg, I’m fine, I promise,” holding my hands up in protest.

Unable to control himself, Yaakov burst out laughing, sending the bottle of Manishevitz wine careening across the table.

“Oy, I live in a circus,” Mr. Rosenberg sighed as he put his head in his hands.

We went to services at Temple Beth Shalom for Shabbat the next morning and spent the afternoon walking from apartment to apartment so I could meet the neighborhood.

“So, Rachel, sweetheart, you’re in from Detroit? My cousin’s nephew lives there, Yoni Fischer, do you know him?”

“You are so lucky. Our Yaakov, what a catch. And handsome too.”

“You two are going to very happy. I can tell. I have a sense about these things. My mother used to predict the results of the Mets games based on the mystical *Gemara* numbers and tea leaves. I think I inherited a little bit of her gift. Of course, she was never right, but who knows?”

I followed Mrs. Rosenberg around all afternoon while Yaakov and his father stayed with the men at the synagogue until sundown, marking the end of Shabbat. When Yaakov got back, Mrs. Rosenberg and I were just finishing the dishes from the night before. I passed Yaakov in the hallway as I was putting away the dishware in the storage closet. As I reached for the door handle, my hand brushed his arm as he walked by. We stopped, mutually shocked and intrigued by the brief encounter. A clash of dishes broke the silence, and Mrs. Rosenberg came rushing out from the kitchen.

“These go in the closet as well, Rachel. Yaakov, put another shirt on, you look like a street vendor, and Rachel, what time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Eight a.m., Mrs. Rosenberg. Out of LaGuardia.”

I found myself reluctant to leave the next morning. As I emptied my suitcase from the weekend, more than a little dazed and exhausted, a small white slip of paper fell out of the outside pocket:

(718) 389-2707. Call me?

The *Mourner's Kaddish* prayer teaches us that we should take consolation in the fact that God exists. The knowledge that there is a higher being should take us beyond this human suffering, for we know that what we feel here is relatively finite.

I take the simple gold band off my left finger as I leave Maimonides Medical Center. I walk out into the lunchtime traffic, whispering *Kaddish* as I head back towards the Rosenberg's apartment. My hands are shaking, and I drop my change for the subway ticket. An old man bends down to help me pick it up. He places it in my palm and cups my hand with his two hands. I do not pull away immediately but give him a moment to smile at me. I nod and walk down the steps to the train.

Yaakov is standing in the kitchen with his mother on the other end of the apartment polishing the silver Shabbat candlesticks when I open the door. She absently reaches up and tenderly strokes the face of her only son with the back of her hand, probably whispering *shana punam* and *ani ohevet otcha*, my beautiful son and I love you, in Yiddish and in Hebrew. Mrs. Rosenberg leaves the kitchen to remind the men in the living room to wash before they sit down for dinner. Yaakov walks towards me, into the dining room, and places the candlesticks at his mother's seat at the head of the table next to her wine glass. As he reaches across the table to pour the wine for his father, he looks towards the door and smiles. I cannot return his glance.

SUMMERTIME IN NOVEMBER

The handlebars on George's bicycle snapped off at the neck as the traffic light switched from red to green, and he turned out onto the crosswalk. George landed face down on the pavement in the middle of 8 a.m. rush hour traffic. He lay there on his stomach, momentarily rendered immobile, as aggressive car horns and flashing bright headlights swerved to avoid the scene. George caught a blurry glimpse of his reflection in the rims of a recently waxed Cadillac as it came to a stop dangerously close to his head: glasses shattered and hanging from one ear, blood dripping down the side of his face, graying hair. George pushed himself up, one knee at a time, and as he struggled to untangle his slacks from the bike chain, the late November breeze swept the drawings that he had been clutching in his left hand across the four-lane road. He began to drag the dismembered bicycle to the opposite sidewalk, bending to pick up the fallen sketches as he hobbled across the street.

George sat himself down on the curb and inspected the damage: Junebug's face was smudged on one of the panels from this week's *Jerry & Junebug* cartoon strip, and Jerry's house had a piece of pink bubblegum attached to the roof. A rip in the paper had torn off Junebug's legs in the next panel, and there was a rusty red spot in the middle of the ocean, covering what should have been a sailboat on the following panel.

George aimed a kick at the bicycle, sending a mangled wheel into oncoming traffic. A U-Haul truck screeched to a halt just before it ran over the wheel, and a large muscle-shirt wearing driver jumped down from the cab.

"I'm driving here for chrissakes! What the hell do you think you're doing? Are you trying to kill someone?"

George placed his hands on the back of his head as if surrendering, and shrugged his shoulders, apologizing for the wreck. In response, the driver picked up the crunched metal and rubber and threw it at George who rushed to protect his bleeding face with his arms. The driver slammed the door of his U-Haul and flipped George off as he sped away, leaving George defeated, sitting on the curb. He lowered his head between his knees and watched a red drop fall from the tip of his nose to the pavement. He grabbed his sleeve, which tore away from his corduroy jacket at the elbow, to stem the bleeding from his forehead. George tossed his glasses onto the sidewalk, picked up the pieces of his bicycle and what he could salvage of his drawings, and began to walk back towards home. He glanced at his watch and shook his wrist in an attempt to calm the erratic flashing of the digital numbers. He would be late, yet again, for the weekly *Providence Journal* staff meeting.

“Shit.”

“The light is green!” cartoon Junebug screamed into the ear of cartoon Jerry who sat at the wheel of their car in the forefront of the panel. Small dialogue bubbles appeared in the background, shouting “Honk! Honk! Honk!” as cartoon Junebug shook her fist at the immobile Jerry.

Traffic swirled around Jerry and Junebug’s car in the panel; angry drivers leaned out of their windows shouting expletives denoted with pound and dollar signs and exclamation points. In the following panel, Junebug leaned across to the driver’s seat and grabbed the wheel of the car, pounding her left foot onto the accelerator while Jerry raised his hands in surrender.

The final panel showed the car lurching forwards through the light and Junebug navigating with her right hand while her left pushed Jerry's head out of the open window.

"Drive like you mean it!" shouted Junebug, as the car peeled out of the intersection.

George resented having to write the cartoon every week, but by the time he and Karen had broken up three years ago, *Jerry & Junebug* had already become a beloved staple of the Sunday edition of the *Providence Journal*, and his editor refused to let him write a new strip. In protest, George restored the walls of his apartment to their original stark white, the walls that had for the past six years been his sketchpad and canvas. He painted over the scene in the kitchen last: it had been his masterpiece and the impetus for the *Jerry & Junebug* cartoon strip. The scene was of him and Karen cooking for a dinner party. Somehow, the giant bowl of pasta that had been sitting on the countertop had slipped off, sending spaghetti flying everywhere. Karen had already slipped and was sitting in the pile of spaghetti on the floor while George was still mid-slip, falling head over heels into the saucy mess. Both were laughing, together.

The fourth floor walk-up apartment had been a steal when George and Karen were looking for their first apartment after graduating from college: floor to ceiling windows, relatively new appliances, and a small balcony that had just enough room for a basil plant and a folding chair. Karen had found the apartment at random one day while she was trying to track down a real estate agency where she had been looking to interview. The agent had offered her the apartment on the spot, she accepted, and they moved in the following week. George had been rather annoyed that Karen hadn't even

thought to consult him but, seeing her excitement and knowing that he would not be able to change her mind, George gave in without much fuss.

But now, six years later, as he dragged the bicycle piece by piece up the four flights of stairs, George cursed the real estate gods and Karen's goddamn deal-sniffing real estate nose. The blood running down the side of his face had congealed and began to crack as he squinted to place his key in the deadbolt. He practically fell into the apartment as the door swung open. George tossed the bicycle and the destroyed drawings into a corner in the entryway and went to the bathroom to search for bandages and some Neosporin. He happened upon a pair of expired contact lenses in the medicine cabinet above the sink and squinted to put them in. Now that he could see, George began to hunt through the linen closet, shoving away hotel-sized shampoo bottles, extra deodorant, and the monogrammed washcloths that his grandmother had given him when he first moved in. George emptied the closet and found no bandages, but instead, a forgotten drawing.

Hurricane Bob in August of 1991 had knocked out the power to George and Karen's apartment, and the high winds had sent them hiding to the bathroom, the only room with no windows. Karen was too scared to venture out into the apartment so they spent the night on the tiled floor, telling ghost stories, and rationing the last Hershey's bar from their stash that they kept hidden in the back of the medicine cabinet. Karen fell asleep on George's lap sometime around 3 am, and he sketched her on one of the shelves in the inside of the linen closet.

I must have forgotten to paint over that one, George thought, as he hurled the contents of the closet back inside like a dog kicking the dirt back over a recently dug hole. George had felt, for a while, that he had found the love of his life in Karen. But now

the good moments were only sprinkled in between the oppressive trepidation he felt every time he was forced to call upon memories of their long dead relationship to write narrative for Jerry and Junebug. Living with Jerry and Junebug was exhausting.

Junebug's constant nagging of Jerry, her taste for bizarre ethnic restaurants, and even the dangling earrings George painstakingly drew into each panel reflected some aspect of Karen. His first panels were rife with cute mishaps the couple would fall into: a late ferry to Martha's Vineyard, an errant spark from some fireworks that had caught George's sweatshirt on fire, a fight over cereal brands that had turned into a full-fledged food fight. But as time passed and the relationship evolved, so did the cartoon strip. Junebug's wit transformed into biting sarcasm as flowers became forgotten birthdays and a new puppy became a constant source of tension over who would vacuum the carpets.

“Je voudrais bien les escargots et après, la salade verte,” said Junebug to the server in perfect French as Jerry poked his head up, bewildered from behind the comically oversized menu. The server placed the snails down on the table in the second panel, and Junebug voraciously attacked the plate, spraying sauce all over Jerry.

“Where's the bathroom, Junebug?” Jerry asked in the third panel while attempting to wipe off his dripping forehead.

“Down the hall to the right,” Junebug replied without looking up from her plate of half-eaten snails. “If you get lost, just come back.”

In the fourth panel, Jerry began to walk to the left and was followed by an enormous dialogue bubble emanating from Junebug, still seated at their table across the restaurant, “I said, RIGHT!”

George sprinted down the stairs of the apartment building and back out into the morning towards the office. He wasn't used to wearing contacts so the cut on his forehead kept reopening as he reached to adjust his absent glasses. Disheveled and distraught, George almost brushed past the flower stand on the corner of Prospect and Halsey Streets. Louis Armstrong's baritone, singing Gershwin's "Summertime," drew him towards the stand, open despite the winter chill in the breeze. As he rounded the corner, a woman came out of the hut holding a large set of clippers. She turned towards George to trim a few sprigs off a stunted Christmas tree. Her olive knit sweater, worn over a pair of Carhart overalls, set off a messy pile of auburn hair. Her eyes were so blue.

“Are you okay?” asked the woman. George realized that he must have been staring and tried to recover by looking at his watch and up at the street signs as if trying to orient himself.

“I'm fine, I'm fine,” George replied and smiled. “My bike, it was an accident. I'll be fine.”

“You don't look fine. Your forehead's really bleeding. I have a first aid kit, let me get you a Band-Aid.”

George reached up to touch his forehead and sure enough, the cut was once again gushing. Even more embarrassed, George tried to clean himself up with the collar of his

shirt and considered sprinting away. But before he could make up his mind about whether to leave, the florist came back outside, hands full of gauze and tape.

“Didn’t have any Band-aids left -- the dangers of being a florist -- but I did find some tape and a few gauze pads, I hope that’s okay.” The woman reached towards George and began to wipe away the blood.

George watched her as she wiped his brow. She was biting her lower lip; George held his breath, suddenly worried that he’d forgotten to brush his teeth that morning.

“There you go; looks better already.”

And George was feeling much better. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong were singing, “A Foggy Day”. Until now, George thought.

“Can I get you some water?” Jerry asked Junebug, smiling and leaning over to the opposite side of the bed. Junebug was already leaning over the side of the bed away from Jerry, searching for something beneath the frame. The second panel focused on Junebug’s face under the bed as she searched. She was biting her lip in concentration and squinting into the darkness.

“There it is!” exclaimed Junebug in the third panel, reappearing again on the bed with an enormous valise.

Jerry asked, “What is that?”

“My sleepover kit,” Junebug replied in the fourth panel as she began to pull things out of the trunk, tossing aside a sleeping pad and an errant toothbrush.

Triumphant in the fifth panel, Junebug pulled out a six-pack of bottled Perrier and a giant silver goblet. In the sixth and final panel, a dialogue bubble appeared above the Perrier, exploding with a loud “POP!” and the seltzer water sprayed all over the bed, soaking a bewildered Jerry.

George didn't know why he had held onto Karen for so long. They had been unhappy for a while and the return of a past college boyfriend to Providence had not done them any favors. They tried to break up multiple times, but they had all the same friends and kept running into each other at birthday parties and concerts. Post-breakup breakup sex had proved to be better than breakup sex or make-up sex or any other kind of sex really so the habit had been hard to shake. One afternoon in July three years ago, Karen showed up at what was now George's apartment and, with a note of what seemed to George forced finality, informed him that she was dating Guillermo, an Italian food critic whom George had met once and thought wore too much cologne for his own and everyone else's good. George had to admit, however, that he was relieved.

On his way home from work the evening of the accident, George stopped by Taylor's Grocer, the local gourmet foods shop around the corner from his apartment. He and Karen used to only go there when they were hosting a party because the price of the food was three times that of any normal grocery store. George liked to walk the aisles, perusing the imported food oddities, and pretend that he was somewhere other than in Providence: ghost peppers from northeastern India, zaatar spice mix from Israel, plantains from Puerto Rico, tripe soups made from the rare Taiwanese black chickens. Karen was always too disgusted by the exotic fair and opted for the twelve-dollar jarred

roasted red peppers while George stared longingly at the sea urchins and abalone on ice in the fish case.

The woman with the auburn hair, she would love that, George thought, as he passed a sample table of caviar on petit toasts engulfed in a seaweed floral arrangement. They had even suspended plastic fish in the arbor above the table. The irony of the fish parents watching their unborn babies get eaten was maybe a bit too harsh, even if the fish were plastic. As George bent down to grab a toast, he knocked into a display of gourmet olives, sending the jars rolling down the aisle. He scrambled to pick up the jars and ran back and forth with arms full, trying to reassemble the display before the manager could intervene. This had happened once with Karen: they had come into the store to shop for dinner, and George knocked over an entire case of Chinese spices, sending an open jar of something green and spicy directly into Karen's eyes. She screeched, her face turned bright red, and she bolted out of the front door with her hands over her eyes, leaving George sitting alone in the pile of spices. The manager came over with an enormous broom and a receipt for the cost of the spices. Busy with sweeping and emptying his wallet, George didn't even notice that Karen was gone until he went to pay for their items and realized that the Irish cream butter was missing.

“Jerry!” Junebug called out from her windsurf just as a wind gust came along and started to take her away from shore. Jerry was bent over his board, busy attempting to simultaneously stand and lift his sail.

The windsurf floated farther away from shore in the second panel, Junebug becoming a little dot on the horizon.

In the third panel, Jerry finally stood up, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun, and began to glide his way back and forth parallel to the beach.

A waterlogged Junebug washed up on shore in the fourth panel, seaweed hanging from her hair, as Jerry continued to glide back and forth. Her eyeballs looked as if they were going to pop out of her head as she glared menacingly at Jerry.

“Look, a mermaid!” Jerry called, smiling as he effortlessly glided past Junebug in the fifth panel.

The second day after the accident, George left a half an hour early from his apartment to walk to the newspaper office. He was bundled up, scarf piled high on his neck, gloved hands gripping the new sketches he had rapidly assembled earlier that morning. George’s shoulders relaxed away from his ears as he approached the flower stand and his teeth unclenched, as he briefly forgot the cold.

“I’m doing some sketches for a scene in the spring,” George told the florist as he walked towards her stand. She was wearing a light blue fleece hat and heavy boots today. “Do you have any cut daisies that I could model a drawing after?”

“Absolutely,” replied the florist, taking her gloves off to pull a white daisy out of a bunch in the corner of the stand. “Your cut looks better.”

“I kept poking it yesterday thinking my glasses were still on my head, but it seems to be healing.”

The woman handed George the single daisy in exchange for three dollars. George nodded, thanking her, and continued down the sidewalk, tucking the daisy into his portfolio.

“I’m going to turn on the water for the sprinklers. Okay, Junebug?” Jerry called out across the garden in the first panel.

“What?” Junebug replied.

But Jerry had already gone over to the side of the house to turn on the hose, and Junebug continued to trim the rosebush in the second panel.

The sprinklers turned on in the third panel. A startled Junebug spun around as the sprinklers came on all around her, chopping the heads off of the daisies with the clippers as she turned.

“I’m so sorry, Junebug!” Jerry called in the fourth panel as he rushed over to Junebug seated in the dirt.

In the fifth panel, Junebug looked up at Jerry laughing, and sprayed the hose right up into his face. Jerry fell, laughing, into the flowers beside Junebug in the sixth panel.

Though George had remembered to put the daisy in a glass of water on his desk at the office, it had wilted by the second day so on the third day after the bicycle accident, George stopped at the stand again to buy another flower. Louis and Ella crooned Gershwin from the same album, and the florist with the auburn hair was sweeping the landing in front of the stand.

“Good morning,” the woman said to George as he approached the stand. “How did the daisy work out for your sketches?”

“It was perfect, but it wilted a bit, and I was wondering if perhaps you have something similar, or maybe, entirely different that I could use today.”

“I just trimmed some holly for wreaths.”

George paid for his bunch of holly and spent the day distracted, walking around the office, trying to appear productive. He had drawn Jerry and Junebug a thousand times, but today his sketches weren't coming together. He erased and redrew Jerry's hairstyle, added an extra building in the skyline, took away a bird in the tree, but not until he erased Junebug's dangling earrings did he feel that he even came close to a complete panel.

On his way to the office the next morning, George hurried to the flower stand; he had something to give to the florist. But as he made his way down the block, he did not hear the habitual Ella and Louis recording nor could he see the cranberry strands that hung from the doors the day before. Maybe she just brought the plants inside, George thought. He didn't know what he had expected, snow had already fallen, but it was clear as he approached the stand that the woman was not there. The hut was boarded up, locked with a thick steel padlock. The normally swept landing was riddled with dead cigarette butts and flakes of discarded sheets of paper. Too chilly for flowers. George reached into his portfolio and pulled out the drawing he had done yesterday evening: the florist was standing on a stool trimming some hard-to-reach holly plants. The stool had become unbalanced somehow and she began to fall, knocking over flower arrangements on the way down. George was standing under her with his arms out, ready to brace her fall. He

left the drawing tucked into the crease between the doors, reassuring himself that the woman with the auburn hair and the blue eyes would know that it had been he who had left the gift.

FRIDAY NIGHTS

Flo doesn't make the mac and cheese balls right. You gotta add just enough breading that they'll fry up nice and good and enough Velveeta so the noodles kind of squish and melt as you bite into 'em. Sue Rudd used to do it good. She'd have my Budweiser and my fried balls and my stool all ready for me on Friday nights when I'd head to Rudd's Spirits, the bar in town. They know how to treat a person in Wyoming. It took me three years to find this diner here in Boston, Mickey's, that even makes mac and cheese balls. Did you know that they sell burgers in this city that have the onions all caramelized and bleu cheese? Why would you put that on a burger?

I hear the record flip in the jukebox. Wish I had another quarter. That Ella Fitzgerald. God damn, that woman had some pipes. The voice of an angel. But one of those buxom, throaty ones, not that fluffy cloud shit you see around.

"Joseph, sweetheart, can I get you some more coffee?" Flo asks me. I shake my head, no.

"Thank you, darling, but I'm still working on this cup. My buddy over here might want some, though." I point to the stool on my right, and then empty the sugar packet container onto the counter. The colors are all mixed up: the pink Sweet 'n Low with the real white sugar. I start to put them back in order, one by one.

Flo smiles and winks at me; I don't think that many people call her 'darling'. So, she carries her weight in her ankles and she should probably do something with her streaking gray and brown hair, but she has tired eyes, and I like that. She's not from here, and I like that too.

She makes her way down the counter, wiping up a dropped cherry from a half-eaten slice of the Pie of the Day. I watch as her stretched smock makes its way down the counter towards the milkshake machine, swaying in time to Ella and Louis on the CD player. She turns off the music and switches the channel on the TV over the counter to the news. "Friday Late Night Watch with Gloria Frank". 11 p.m. on the dot.

"You know, we sit at this bar, in these same stools, every Friday night, waitin' for God knows what, talkin' about nothin', never any particulars, just shootin' the breeze," I say, swiveling towards the stool on my right. "I don't reckon I even know your name."

"Me neither."

"And you with your two-word answers as if you don't think I'll be able to understand anything more'n that."

I pick up a Sweet 'n Low packet and rip a pink corner off. A little bit of the sweet stuff spills onto the countertop. I pick up another one and shake it back and forth to get the grains to the bottom of the packet.

"That's not it. Just not much to say."

"What is it then? You got somethin' to hide behind that beard and those two-word answers?"

Flo drops a coffee pot farther down the counter. Her hands are shaking as she reaches for the cloth to wipe up the spilt coffee.

"You okay, Flo, darling?" I ask.

“No need to get so worked up over there, Joseph. These late nights, just you and me. Don’t scare me like that.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I wouldn’t hurt you. This guy over here, though,” I say, pointing to the stool, “I’m not so sure about him.”

“I said I got nothin’ to hide,” says the voice on my right.

Bullshit. He comes in every Friday night with that same flannel shirt, those same work boots, and orders the same pancake special. He never actually eats those pancakes.

“All right, tell me this: what’s with the ’76 rodeo buckle? Were you some kinda rodeo star? Some kinda real live cowboy?”

“Buckles hold the belt together which holds up my pants. That’s all I gotta say about that.”

“I used to have one of those. Picked it up a bunch of years ago back in old Wyo. ‘Chief of the Day.’ That’s what they used to call the guy that could ride the bull the longest.” I look out the window; the snow is really picking up. “I hope they got snow where you come from because there’s a hell of a storm coming in,” I say. I can see the flakes in the streetlamp, the headlights from the cars speeding past in a hurry. So much hurry.

“So that’s all you gotta say, huh? What about me? You’re never curious about me, what I’m doin’ here every Friday night? Why I sit here night after night talkin’ this bullshit with you?”

“Just enjoy the company. Leave if you gotta.”

“Who said anything ‘bout leavin’? Just thought two old buddies should get to know each other a bit since we’ve been doin’ this goin’ on ten years.”

“Been that long, has it?”

“Damn right, ten years almost to the day. I was here at Mickey’s grabbin’ a bite with a couple of guys, and you walked through that door, nose bleedin’, you could barely see out of your right eye. All roughed up. And it was rainin’ pretty damn hard. Worst rain I ever seen this side of the Mississippi. You didn’t even say nothin’. You limped over to that stool you’re on now and ordered a coffee and those pancakes.”

“I like my pancakes.”

Flo looks over at me from the coffee maker. “Joseph, sweetheart, what are you doing with all that sugar if you’re never going to use it in your coffee or on your pancakes? You’re just making a mess that I’m going to have to clean up later.”

“I don’t rightly like sugar. I just like organizing the packets.”

I pick out another couple of packets and rearrange them in the container. “You poured enough syrup on those pancakes,” I say, peering at my buddy’s plate. “How about a change-up? Flo, two chocolate milkshakes over here, darling,” I say. I smack my palm on the Formica countertop.

“Joseph, how many times do I have to tell you to order a frappe? You ask me for a milkshake one more time, and I’m gonna hand you a carton of milk that’s just come off the back of the truck.”

She smiles. Such a sweet smile.

“Whatever it is, it’s wicked good, Flo. You make it good.”

She slides me the aluminum cup with the frothing chocolate ice cream, and I take a sip. I lick off the foam from the ends of my mustache and set the cup back down on the counter.

“Wait a second. Flo, where’s the other one? I ordered two, one for me and one for my bud here.” I point to the stool.

“You have your frappe, Joseph.”

“I ordered two.”

“Don’t you like it?”

“There’s supposed to be two.”

I know I’m not supposed to go behind the counter, but I stand up and reach across the counter for another cup. I feel light-headed, like I might fall over. Must’ve stood up too fast. I hear a crash and look down to see the sugar packets spilled on the tiles. I bend down to pick up the packets, my knees cracking and shaking, and I want to cry. Flo sighs a long, shaky sigh.

“Joseph, let me help you. Be careful; don’t hit your head on the counter when you stand up.”

She’s a sweet lady; I don’t need to make any more trouble for her. He’ll order a milkshake if he really wants one. Let him eat those pancakes.

“So, how about them Red Sox,” I sigh, and sit back down in my seat and turn back towards the stool on my right. “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to ask about ‘round here?”

“I suppose so.”

Flo has her back to me now. She’s breathing heavy, and her bracelets jingle as she rinses off some silverware. Red flakes of nail polish collect on the countertop as she picks it off her left index finger with her thumb.

“Don’t follow the Sox myself, but I love those Cubbies. You ever been to Chicago? I’ve been wantin’ to get out there for a while but haven’t had the chance. Been savin’ the trip for the right occasion, you know?”

“Never been to Chicago.”

“I reckon you’d meet Sammy Sosa. Just meet him walkin’ down the street. You’d wave, nice and casual and say, ‘Hey Sammy, how’s it goin’? And he’d say, ‘not bad, not too bad’.”

“The Friday Late Night Watch with Gloria Frank” segment ends as I look up at the television.

“Joseph, honey, sorry, but I gotta close up. Eric says I’m supposed to close by midnight, and it’s 12:15. Guaranteed he’s already asleep in his recliner in the apartment upstairs. You’re the last one here.”

“Alrighty, sweetheart, I guess it does look like ‘bout that time. I should be gettin’ back anyways.” I step off the stool and button my coat.

“See you Friday then, comrade,” I aim at the stools. “And don’t forget to shine that buckle of yours. It’s been lookin’ a little rusty.”

“Will do, will do. See you Friday.”

With my head down, I make my way to the door across the black and white tiles. I turn back briefly towards the diner countertop.

“See you Friday too, darling.”

“Goodnight, Joseph.”

Flo locks the door behind me as I head out into the evening. The snow is swirling under the lamps and has covered the sidewalk since I came into the diner. My breath comes out in puffs as I shove my hands deep into my pockets. The Mickey’s Diner sign above the door flickers. Flo flips the sign hanging on the door from ‘Open’ to ‘Closed’. She shuts off the main lights and stands silhouetted in the doorway to the kitchen. I wish I was there with her. At least I always got someone to talk to on these Friday nights. I walk towards my Chevy, the only car in the diner parking lot.

EXTRA-ORDINARY

*I'm looking for a muse, a passion,
 Inspiration shouldn't have to be on ration.
 The time is now; tomorrow is way too late,
 Though we find it hard to count
 The minutes, the hours, the days,
 It's always the same amount.
 Up here above 110th, my life's a mess,
 My mind's a fucking ball of stress,
 Everyday's the same; we sit, we rap, we shoot the breeze,
 While the city blows by, it's got its own steeze.
 Waiting for something to turn my life upside down,
 Right side up, I walk the streets,
 Searching hard for these front side flipped beats.*

The three boys turned and sure enough, there was a giant pumpkin headed down 121st Street in a red wheelbarrow. As the pumpkin got closer, the boys began to grasp the sheer enormity of its size. It trumped the hotdog man's umbrella by at least two feet, and its breadth spanned the entire sidewalk. The bulbous orange form was only distinguished as something resembling a gourd by its gnarled stem that scraped along the pavement as the wheelbarrow moved slowly and deliberately down the street.

Everybody turned their head as the pumpkin passed. One woman, in the middle of buying a string of dried chili peppers from the Korean supermarket, dropped the strand, sending red, green, and yellow peppers flying. A little girl paused her hopscotch game mid-hop, balancing on her left foot and careening her neck to follow the pumpkin. A man on a bike nearly sideswiped the guy delivering the *Times* to the newsstand. The stack threatened to topple over, but the man found the counter just in time.

“I ain't never seen nothing like it.”

“How did that thing get all the way down here, did someone fly it in?”

“Get a crane!”

The boys stood up from the stoop and walked towards the pumpkin. As they got closer, they could hear the labored breathing of the person pushing the enormous package. A set of beige orthopedic sneakers and a flowered housedress appeared from behind the pumpkin.

“Are you going to help me or just stand there, gawking like the turkey your mamas are about to put in the oven for tomorrow?”

The boys jumped to attention.

“One of you. Get in front and make sure she doesn’t tip over. And you, come back here and help me push. And you, walk in front to make sure the sidewalk is clear.”

The boys assumed their respective positions, and the pumpkin once again made its way down the street.

“Where did this pumpkin come from?” one of the boys asked.

“I grew it,” replied the old woman.

“In Harlem?”

“Yes, in Harlem.”

The woman paused, one arm extended against the side of the pumpkin. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her dress, took a deep breath, and began to push again.

“Where are we going?”

“To the parade,” the woman responded.

“What parade?”

“The Macy’s Thanksgivings Day Parade. Where else would I be going? You are from New York, aren’t you? I’ve been growing these pumpkins for as long as I can remember. My mother used to feed the plants the extra bacon grease, thought it would make them shinier. Turns out it made them grow bigger at first, but they died before reaching their full size. The real trick is to water them with the water from the drainpipes. Fertilizer and all that ain’t got nothing on a little New York City grime. Yep, these pumpkins have been around for a long time. But it’s not all about watering; these plants have got heart too, and a soul. That’s why you need that little something extra. Something you can’t find on these streets.”

The old woman paused as she knelt down to fix her shoelaces. Chinese food at three in the morning, two baseball teams, the Knicks, Biggie Smalls and Jay-Z: New York is the greatest city in the world. You can find anything in New York.

“I don’t buy it,” replied one of the boys, shaking his head, “I can get you anything. My buddy Antonio’s got the hook-up down by the docks. He lifts stuff right off the crates.”

“What these pumpkins need doesn’t come in a crate, boy.”

The group turned the corner and headed west towards Central Park and the start of the parade.

“Where do you keep the pumpkin?”

“She stays on the roof of the building, likes to see the stars.”

“Come on, you can’t see the stars in New York.”

“You just have to know what you’re looking for.”

One, two, three, and four; counting the steps, the cracks in the sidewalk, the number of taxis that rolled through the intersection as the group waited for the light to change. They were farther uptown now. Two women in fur stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. The three boys and the old woman maneuvered the pumpkin around the stalled women and into the street. The women and their dogs continued on their way without looking back.

Five, six, seven, and eight; one of the boys began beat-boxing a rhythm. The old woman laughed, and the boy in front spun, bouncing his way across 95th.

*Now I’ve got a flow,
My boy over here’s caught some mojo,
This beat is hot, we’re speeding up,
Waiting for the snap, crackle, pop,
Of the subway under the streets.
All right ladies and gentlemen, time to take your seats.
Move over, cause here we come,
Go on, put down that heavy bottle of rum,
We’re fighting hard,
Just trying to achieve that dream of living large.*

The momentum of the wheelbarrow suddenly came to a halt as the wheels hit something in the front.

“What is going on up there? Weren’t you supposed to keep an eye out for anything in the way on the sidewalk?”

“Cops.”

Unfazed, the woman led the odd group forward; the three boys, the old woman, and her pumpkin headed towards the cluster of NYPD on the corner. One officer looked up from his coffee and nudged another to his right. All of them paused to watch the pumpkin approach and stepped aside to let it pass through.

The group ran into the first balloon just north of 85th Street. The gauzy nylon of what appeared to be some sort of wing stretched across the avenue. In the next few blocks, the old woman shouted directions to the boys as they wove through flattened Ninja Turtles, a large Scooby Doo paw, and Nemo's broadside, all laid out across the cracked pavement.

The group finally arrived at an enormous pile of hay sitting in the bed of a flatbed truck.

"Raymond!" the old woman called.

"Yes, ma'am, have we been waiting for you," Raymond responded, appearing from the cab of the truck. "There she is: what a beauty. And I don't mean the pumpkin, ma'am."

"Would you quit it and help me get her in the truck, you old joker? We've been dragging this pumpkin up and down, and she's in need of a break."

Raymond and the boys started to maneuver the pumpkin out of the wheelbarrow and onto the waiting forklift that then hoisted the pumpkin into the truck.

"All right, boys, keep lifting, keep your eye on the stem too," Raymond called out as he looked around for the old woman's approval. But she was gone. The woman had

disappeared into the crowd that was watching them move the pumpkin. Out of breath and dazed, the boys headed back up towards 110th.

The next day, stomachs full of turkey and canned cranberry sauce, the boys met at the stoop, resuming their neighborhood watch.

“Look, it’s the pumpkin. There, on the TV in the window of the Five-n-Dime.”

The boys ran across the street, noses pressed to the window of the convenient store. They watched as their pumpkin made its way through Times Square. The early afternoon fall sunlight shone through the copper leaves and the cool breeze swept up cigarette butts, bits of trash, and already fallen leaves from the ground. The boys sat there in front of the window on the sidewalk watching the parade, pointing and shouting every time they spotted the pumpkin pass by. The old woman was watching too. She followed unseen through the crowds, never far from the pumpkin.