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## The American dream and other fiction

Raquel Hollingsworth

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THE AMERICAN DREAM  
AND OTHER FICTION

By

Raquel Lisette Hollingsworth

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English  
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

April 2011

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2011

THE AMERICAN DREAM  
AND OTHER FICTION

By

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*The American Dream and Other Fiction* is a collection of four magical realism short stories focusing on the idea of revealing the human condition through the ridiculous. Although the four stories are written independently of each other, they all carry the similar motif of entrapment. This collection also remarks on the growing absurdity of American capitalism and political correctness. The critical introduction analyzes techniques of verisimilitude in magical realism by traditional authors as well as the techniques of more contemporary magical realists. The collection focuses specifically on the techniques of frontloading and authoritative voice.

## DEDICATION

This collection is lovingly dedicated to my mother who gave me a love of stories, my father who gave me a sense of humor, and my family who taught me to put them together.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first offer my humblest gratitude to Michael Kardos, my committee chairman, for his endless patience, guidance, and encouragement. Special appreciation is also due to the other members of my thesis committee, Becky Hagenston and Dr. Richard Lyons, for their enthusiastic attention and suggestions. I thank each of them for a uniquely different and educational workshop experience from which this thesis was born.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION: FRONTLOADING AND NARRATIVE VOICE:  
TECHNIQUES OF VERISIMILITUDE  
IN FANTASTICAL FICTION

Although the genre of magical realism has undoubtedly changed since its infancy to present day, the traditional markings of the genre are perhaps most clear in the twentieth century writings of Franz Kafka and Gabriel García Márquez. These two authors framed what has come to be known as the traditional style of magical realism in which authors blend magical or fantastical elements with a realistic world view in a way that enables the reader to better understand reality. In Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Kafka creates a character with a fantastical problem and places him in a very realistic, if quite mundane, setting. Gregor Samsa wakes to find himself transformed into a vermin. As expected, he is unable to continue his life as before, and his shocking appearance disgusts his family to the point that Gregor severs all ties with them and remains in his room until his death. Although the unusual element in a realistic setting may seem comical or bizarre at first, it is this combination that creates the fantastical mood of magic realism. In the article "Magic Realism and Garcia Márquez's Erendira," Moylan Mills notes Seymour Menton's claim that "a magical quality is 'achieved by juxtaposing scenes filled with very realistic details with completely fantastic situations'"

(qtd. in Mills 115). Also notable, though, is that the juxtaposition of these two elements serves to highlight reality, in this case, the reality of people's alienation from humanity.

Writing with a similar genre structure in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," Gabriel Garcia Márquez introduces a pitifully aging man whom everyone mistakes for an angel because of his wings. The characters lock the man in the chicken coop, charge admission for townspeople to see him, and eventually make a hefty profit off of the man's captivity. When years of destructive weather finally free the man from his dilapidated coop and he is healthy enough to grow new feathers, he flies away from the family who has cruelly preyed on his differences. Márquez puts a strange character in a realistic setting to expose the injustices of humanity. However, what is even more notable about these authors and their stories is that they are both able to present such fantastical ideas without making the reader doubt their validity.

Their techniques of achieving a story that successfully blends magic and reality without violating verisimilitude have become the techniques that many authors have come to view as the rules to writing magical realism. For example, in Kafka's story, he frontloads fantastical information so that the reader is less reluctant to believe it. The first sentence of his story introduces the magical element: "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (2301). By giving the reader a fantastical element this early, Kafka gives the reader no choice not to believe in Gregor's transformation. It is simply so. This straightforward and authoritative voice is another technique that has survived years of change within the genre. Márquez uses this voice as well in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," when he seeks to familiarize the unfamiliar. Pelayo and Elisenda

watch the old man from the courtyard and “[t]hey looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar” (218). By using a voice that simply tells the reader what to believe, the authors leave little room for doubt or argument.

Although Kafka and Márquez are two of the most traditional authors within the genre, magical realism and its techniques have evolved over time. Jeffrey Wechsler, author of “Magic Realism: Defining the Indefinite,” notes that the genre of magic realism has recently been bombarded to include more fantastical elements than traditionally accounted for. He notes that at its core, magic realism “deals with a strange reality, not a surreality...it simply reorders reality to make it seem alien. Magic realism is an art of the implausible, not the impossible; it is imaginative, not imaginary” (293). Although magic realism unarguably “deals with a strange reality,” authors have recently stretched the genre to include more of the impossibilities Wechsler refers to, but in a way that still urges the reader to better understand reality. Notable contemporary magical realist authors like George Saunders and Kevin Brockmeier have now made a name for themselves with their fantastical yet crushingly realistic stories. Although these authors’ writings still show identifiable influence of such authors as Kafka and Márquez, they divert somewhat from the traditional path of magical realism set forth by those early writers and yet still manage to achieve verisimilitude. Though Brockmeier more closely follows the traditional techniques of magical realism with his pacing of fantastical elements, he often transposes the traditionally fantastic character and realistic scene to reflect an ordinary person in an extraordinary situation. Saunders, on the other hand, more blatantly diverges from the traditional techniques of frontloading, but still uses a

highly authoritative voice and is able to achieve verisimilitude. In my own fantastical writing, I aim to mimic Brockmeier's technique of frontloading and setting while using an authoritative voice similar to that of Saunders' narrators.

The traditional technique of frontloading is an effective tool authors often use to achieve verisimilitude when introducing fantastical elements in a story because frontloading allows the author to quickly assimilate the reader to the world of the story while giving him or her very little time to object to a story's believability. Because all stories depend on believability, especially fantastical fiction, the sooner the author is able to assimilate the reader to the bizarre reality of the story, the more likely the story is to convince the reader to suspend disbelief. This is only possible if the reader quickly and willfully suspends his or her idea of reality. Good fantastical writing asks the reader to do this without remorse, regret, or hesitation. However, it is this willful suspension of reality and a conscious surrender to fiction that a reader must make for fantastic fiction to work. The writer, then, has the difficult job of making the reader's surrender one that he or she never notices or questions. If readers are simply told the fantastical elements at the beginning of the story, that is all the reader has the choice to accept. With that suspension of reality, the reader enters an alternate reality, in this case, one that is quite fantastical. Because frontloading enables the reader immediately to accept the bizarre nature of the setting or characters, he or she is unlikely to exit that alternate reality when other fantastical elements appear in the story. Since the reader has already accepted the existence of these elements, their repeated appearance is expected, normal. Although readers are aware of the fictional nature of writing, by reading, they partake in an agreement to accept the presented material as real, even though they know it is a fiction.

Therefore, the earlier an author is able to present the information, the sooner the reader must suspend his or her reality, in turn, making the dream world of the story a longer, more complete one.

In his fiction, Brockmeier uses frontloading much like Kafka and Márquez, often introducing the fantastic blended with reality in the very first phrase or sentence and allowing the reader to quickly abandon notions of a realistic story. For example, in Kevin Brockmeier's "A Day in the Life of Half of Rumpelstiltskin," the fairy tale character is presented as he would appear in the real world. He holds a job, cooks himself dinner, sometimes dances at night, and on occasion, writes letters to his other half. As if a fairy tale character's interaction in the real world were not enough, Brockmeier's Rumpelstiltskin suffers another ailment. The forlornness of the story is amplified when we find that the body of the character is sliced into two bilateral creatures but presented as if his halfness were something people saw every day. Just as the other characters in the story regard Half of Rumpelstiltskin normally, so do readers. The absurdity of half of a fairy tale creature becoming a working citizen of the real world does not present itself as the least bit unbelievable because Brockmeier introduces the fantastical as early as the title. In "Half of Rumpelstiltskin," the first sentence, while preceded by the words, "7:45 a.m. He showers and dresses," reads: "Half of Rumpelstiltskin awakens from a dream in which his body is a filament of straw, coiled and twined about itself so as to mimic the presence of flesh and entrails, of hands and ribs and muscles and a knotty, throbbing heart" (85). Like Kafka and Márquez, here Brockmeier introduces a fantastical creature in a highly realistic world. Not only does he ask the reader to suspend reality by believing in a character like Rumpelstiltskin, he pushes the reader further by asking the reader to

believe in a character who is only *half* of an imaginary character. By introducing a strange notion in the first sentence, and arguably earlier in the title, Brockmeier immediately establishes the world of the story, one in which the reader unconsciously knows that he must suspend reality to continue reading. And because the first sentence creates a strange and curious world so different from the reality that he knows, the reader has no choice but to accept it. Moreover, because virtually all readers know the name Rumpelstiltskin and that he is a classic fable character, they already know from the title that this story depends on their acceptance of its fantastical nature, so getting the reader to read beyond the title is half of the author's battle. Beyond that, the new and strange world instills curiosity in the reader; what reader would not be compelled to read on?

In his fable "A Fable with Slips of White Paper Spilling from the Pockets," Brockmeier uses frontloading to immediately let the reader know that he or she must enter the story with the understanding and agreement to suspend reality. Although this title does not give the reader an overt context like "Rumpelstiltskin," the word fable immediately signals the reader that this story must be read with an acceptance of an alternate reality. The first sentence reads, "Once there was a man who happened to buy God's overcoat" (260). Of course in reality we know that this is a fiction, but Brockmeier compels the reader to accept the notion and move on. Because of the curious nature of the story, most readers are happy to read the next sentence. Although it is similar to the structure of traditional magic realism, this story transposes the structure of Kafka and Márquez. Instead of a fantastical character, Brockmeier presents to the reader a normal character in a fantastical situation. The story follows a man who buys an overcoat at a thrift store, unaware that the pockets constantly fill with white slips of paper revealing the

prayers of people around him. Because readers have already agreed to suspend disbelief, the story's oddities strike the reader as nothing of the sort. Additionally, the narrator delivers the first sentence very matter-of-factly, with little to no room for doubt or questioning. This is what happens. If this were presented as a realistic story from the beginning, one might argue before reading that the character happens upon a rare artifact believed to belong to God. However, because Brockmeier discloses in the title that this is a fable, readers are not inclined to take this story literally. In fact, they are more inclined to believe that which people readily know to be untrue than to believe that which might have actually happened. By creating strange worlds at the beginning of stories, writers give the reader no choice of the world in which they are about to inhabit.

Although frontloading fantastical information is one technique to increase verisimilitude, magic realism often requires the reader to imagine a completely unrealistic setting, and therefore, often requires authors to conjure a more complete setting or world so that the reader feels comfortable in such a story. The wholeness of the world cannot be imagined by the reader's association with real events and places, but must be made whole with only the strange building blocks the author allows. For this reason, the writer's building blocks must build something that *is*, in fact, whole, because the nature of the fiction allows the reader to bring so little to the table. In her essay "FAR FAR AWAY: Fictional Place," Janet Burroway explains that creating fantastical settings that are believable is imperative to the verisimilitude of the story: "Even Utopian fiction, set *Nowhere* with a capital *N* (or *nowhere* spelled backward, as Samuel Butler had it in *Erehwon*), happens in a nowhere with distinct physical characteristics...If anything, these must be more intensely realized within the fiction, since we have less to borrow from in

our own experience” (166). Because readers are left at such a disadvantage regarding the setting or milieu of absurdist fiction, the writer has a responsibility to guide the reader through the assimilation to such a quickly fantastical setting.

In “A Fable Ending in the Sound of a Thousand Parakeets,” Kevin Brockmeier creates a bizarre world much as Burroway suggests in the very first sentence, then seeks to familiarize that world, and effectively creates a believable yet absurd reality by the top of the next page. It begins, “Once there was a city where everyone had the gift of song” (3). As absurd as this may be, reader have no choice but to believe that this is the world they are about to inhabit. Although some readers might read on with skepticism, Brockmeier immediately familiarize the absurd by connecting it with actions familiar to the real world so that the reader is more comfortable walking such strange territory:

Gardeners sang as they clipped their flowers. Husbands and wives sang each other to sleep at night. Groups of children waiting for the school bell to ring raced through the verses of the latest pop songs to get to the pure spun sugar of the choruses. Old friends who had not seen one another in many years met at wakes and retirement parties to sing the melodies they remembered from the days when they believed there was nothing else in the world that would ever grip their spirits so and take them out of their bodies. (3)

This elaboration creates a reality that is perhaps a bit peculiar, but plausible. Only at this point does Brockmeier introduce the strange premise of the story: “In this city there lives a mute, the only person who was unable to lend his voice to the great chorus of song that filled the air” (3). By this point in the story, only the end of page one, the reader is

already so prepared to accept the strange world to the extent that a mute, a phenomenon that is actually more plausible than a town of sensational singers, becomes the oddity in the story. The fantastical has become the real and the real has become fantastical. By the end of page one, Brockmeier has convinced the reader that such a strange world is normal and that the element which is one of reality, becomes bizarre. What is more important is that by the end of the first two paragraphs, the reader is completely convinced of the mythos of such a fantastical world.

Although Brockmeier's traditional use of frontloading to achieve verisimilitude in his fantastical fiction is one that often works, some authors are able to achieve verisimilitude in magical realism without frontloading, but rather by revealing fantastical elements gradually. This particular introduction of fantastic elements may come later than the beginning of the story, but this method is considerably less common and significantly more difficult and intricate to achieve. By introducing a realistic atmosphere first, authors run the risk of fantastical elements seeming out of place within the fiction. This "out of place" feeling is one that interrupts verisimilitude and effectively ejects the reader from the dream-like state within the world of the story. However, to avoid the lapse in verisimilitude without frontloading fantastical elements, authors must present a setting malleable enough to make the shift from realistic to fantastic. According to Rawdon Wilson, author of "The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism," creating place is the key to this malleable setting. He points out that being "precise about the location of the world of the imagination" is not easy, but sometimes the "sketchily conceived or incoherently presented" place is just what allows readers to "learn to leap, land, and adjust" to the changes in setting (216-17). This sort of setting is what allows

writers like George Saunders to introduce fantastical elements gradually throughout the story.

In Saunders's short story, "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," the narrator tries desperately to stop the decline of CivilWarLand, a financially struggling theme park run rampant with violent gangs and subpar employees. In what seems at first to be a purely realistic, if slightly strange, story, Saunders defies the readers' first notions when he introduces a family of mentally unstable Civil War era ghosts nearly halfway through the story, and then stages a conversation between a different ghost and the narrator just before the narrator is killed at the end of the story. Although most craft advice warns against introducing fantastical elements late in the story and advises against killing main characters any time in the story, Saunders is able to create a story in which we believe and accept without question or hesitation. In the readers' minds, the McKinnon family of ghosts is as real as the failed actors who work at the park and the twisted Vietnam veteran, Samuel, who slays anyone unlucky enough to resemble trouble.

To create a story that achieves such verisimilitude, George Saunders uses a noticeably slower pace than most fantastical writers to introduce magical elements, but he still manages to achieve believability by using a reality that is not so much different from the fantastic elements he later introduces. Saunders is able to create a realistic atmosphere that becomes increasingly fantastic. Using such a malleable setting, he is able to introduce a setting in which the reality initially introduced becomes an illusion of reality that is in fact something much more magical. Sometimes, the illusion of reality is just what is needed to convince the reader that any fantastical element being introduced is no different than the realistic story in which he or she is now invested. In "Civil War Land in

Bad Decline,” Saunders takes a steady and gradual pace to reveal the absurd world of Civil War Land. Although the first page of description reveals a depth of inference about the decline and possible absence of authenticity within the theme park, the reader is not led to believe anything out of the ordinary. Saunders introduces the gang problem promptly by page two, but the deterioration of the park is fed to the reader slowly. The narrator reveals on page three that authentic seminars are poorly attended as is the park in general. Page four reveals a solitary restaurant in the park and page six merely refers to the over-run bird population. It is not until page eight that we get another physical description of the world of the park and know the extent of its pathetic nature: “When visitors first come in there’s this cornball part where they sit in this kind of spaceship and supposedly get blasted into space and travel faster than the speed of light and end up in 1865. The unit’s dated” (10). To this point, the setting of Saunders’s story seems quite realistic, if quite pitiable. Readers can buy the authenticity of Saunders’s setting because most readers have been to theme parks. If they have attended as adults, they know that these parks lose some of their magic for adults that, as children, shone like luster dust. The reader, in turn, from his own experience, creates such a realistically pitiful setting that he is already invested in the reality of this setting. For eight pages, Saunders slides the reader into accepting the absurdity of how pitiable the narrator’s job is. It is because of this understood reality that the introduction of fantastical elements is not surprising or disturbing. Rather, readers likely react with pity for the narrator because the fantastical elements add more fuel to the fire that is the decline of Civil War Land.

In “Civil War Land in Bad Decline,” Saunders does not introduce the main fantastic element, the McKinnon family of ghosts, until eight pages into the story. Up

until this point, Saunders presents a story that is both plausible and possible. The protagonist of the story works, ironically, as a Verisimilitude Inspector at a Civil War theme park that doesn't quite achieve the authenticity he hopes for. In fact, through his attempt to achieve authenticity and safety in the park, circumstances begin to deteriorate to the point of absurdity. It is, perhaps, this increasing absurdity of circumstances that makes the late introduction of such an unbelievable element in a believable story one that we accept with little question. In fact, by the time the McKinnon family comes into play, it is as if we were already expecting them to be there. One must grant that even though the introduction of the ghosts falls into the story with little disturbance, Saunders must also maintain the believability of ghosts within the park. One way he does this is to make them indigenous to the park and Civil War era. By matching them with the story's milieu, the reader seems to naturally accept the ghosts' presence in the story and in the park with the thought that they, in fact, belong there, perhaps more than the narrator and other characters. In fact, because the ghosts are native to the era, they actually serve to better characterize the place of the story. Nearly five pages later, Saunders turns the park into a littered battle ground – not a Civil War battle ground, but one more similar to a Vietnam bloodbath. However, because Saunders methodically presents a world that can only take shape in the way he has built it, readers are inclined to trust in that world, and subsequently, believe it. By slowly revealing the world of the story, Saunders is able to effectively hook the reader into the rest of the story. By this time, the reader has an investment in what happens and is unlikely to stop reading.

Although Brockmeier and Saunders approach the timing of revealing fantastic information differently to achieve verisimilitude in fantastical fiction, perhaps the most

notable technique that they both use to achieve verisimilitude is an authoritative narrator's voice. With as much authority as possible, narrators establish the world that is the story, whether it is a world that looks like reality or not. Such an authoritative narrator offers the reader very little opportunity to object to the existence of such a world. For John Gardner, verisimilitude depends on a voice with enough authority to "lull him [the reader] into dropping objections; that is, persuade him to suspend disbelief" (24). This authority sometimes comes from logic and proof which readers find difficult to argue against; it sometimes comes from a bald frankness which offers them little choice other than acceptance. To achieve the kind of believability that Saunders and Brockmeier achieve in their tales, a writer must create a narrator whose voice either possesses enough authority to present an idea to which readers will not object, or whose cleverness distracts them into missing the opportunity to question until after they already believe. The first is often done by way of introducing fantastical elements up-front, whereas the second calls for a longer and arguably craftier weaving of logistics.

As Brockmeier tends to frontload his information, his narrators usually introduce information with fast authority. In the beginning of a story, the narrator's voice must give the reader assurance that everything he or she learns is credible and true. In Brockmeier's stories, these authoritative narrators usually appear in the form of distanced points-of-view, usually an omniscient point of view. Since an omniscient narrator is privileged to all characters' thoughts, readers tend to trust omniscient narrators. Omniscience is less likely to take form in a naïve or unreliable narrator, therefore, readers place more trust in these voices. In her article "The Rhetoric of Communion: Voice in *The Sound and the Fury*," Margaret Blanchard explains why readers trust the point of view in the fourth

section of the novel. She explains that trust on the part of the reader occurs because of the amount of privilege the narrator has over the information at hand. Generally, the more information the narrator is privileged to, the more the reader trusts the voice:

If ‘omniscient’ and ‘objective’ have any meaning at all in criticism, they designate degrees of privilege granted to the persona. And if these terms are used to measure privilege, then they are at opposite poles on the scale, which is: (1) ostensibly complete limitation: dramatic or ‘objective’; (2) limited to the inside view of one character; (3) limited to multi-person inside views; (4) omniscient but fallible; (5) ‘omniscient’ (knowing what) and ‘infallible’ (knowing why). (556)

Because the omniscient narrator is naturally privileged to the most information in a story, this point of view is generally the most trustworthy for readers, and therefore, a common point of view for magical fiction.

In Brockmeier’s story, “A Fable Containing a Reflection the Size of a Match Head in its Pupil,” the omniscient narrator’s voice holds enough authority for the reader to trust its truthfulness. Since the reader is able to trust the voice of the narrator, he or she is less likely to disbelieve any information presented, resulting in a continued state of verisimilitude. Any distrust of such a narrator would likely cause the reader to pause and consider the believability of any absurd information or the trustworthiness of such a narrator. For example, if a third or first person narrator were to present such information, the reader may read skeptically, wondering whether or not the narrator is a reliable one. However, by using such a reliable voice in his fables, Brockmeier is able to put the readers’ doubts at ease in the first few sentences:

Once there was a city where people didn't look one another in the eye. It had been that way for as long as anyone could remember. Old married couples lowered their heads like swans as they sat on park benches together. Young mothers stared sweetly at the folds of their babies' necks. Whenever two people met in conversation, each would rest his gaze on the blank surface of the other's shirt, and though occasionally, in a fit of daring, the most intimate of lovers might go as far as to watch each other's lips move, to venture any higher was considered the gravest of social transgressions. (200)

The first several sentences and even the title establish the magical or unusual elements of the story, but with such a privileged narrator, Brockmeier gives his readers' little reason to doubt the information presented, and therefore, is able to achieve verisimilitude.

Breaking from the traditional use of the omniscient narrator, Saunders's narrators tend to be more active participants in the story, and therefore, they connect with readers in a way that eases them into accepting absurd information. "Civil War Land in Bad Decline," has a first person narrator. Although this narrator is only privileged to his own thoughts, the reader comes to identify with this narrator, and subsequently, comes to trust his voice. In her article "The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*," Martha J. Cutter applies the theories of Tzvetan Todorov to these novels and claims that the narrative voice in Morrison's novels is what invests the reader to the point of believing in the fantastic. She claims that even though the points of view are not omniscient, this lack of knowledge is what creates ambiguity, and in fact, believability. Contrary to the traditional use of an

omniscient and all-knowing narrator, Cutter claims that in these fantastic novels, the ambiguity and uncertainty created by the narrators actually coax the reader into a connection and trust with the narrator. Because the reader has no certainty, he or she must rely on the narrator: “Since the fantastic is based essentially on a hesitation of the reader – a reader who identifies with the chief character – there is often a confluence between the main character’s and the reader’s points of view: ‘The readers’ role is so to speak entrusted to the character’” (63). Since readers must place so much trust in the character’s hands, readers must have faith that the character will not betray that trust. In Saunders’s case of “Civil War Land in Bad Decline,” the main character *is* the narrator. By creating a connection between the narrator and the reader, Saunders ensures that the reader identifies with and trusts the narrator.

In “Civil War Land in Bad Decline,” Saunders uses a non-traditional first person narrator, yet still manages to achieve verisimilitude because the narrator makes a connection with the reader, which in turn, triggers the reader to trust the narrator. In this particular story and in much the same way that Morrison achieves verisimilitude through narrative voice, Saunders’s narrator is able to make a connection with the reader because his voice evokes sympathy in a way that nearly forces the reader to invest himself in the trustworthiness of the narrator. The first few sentences of the story alert the reader to the fact that the narrator and main character of the story is somewhat pitiable:

Whenever a potential big investor comes for the tour the first thing I do is take him out to the transplanted Erie Canal Cock. We’ve got a good ninety feet of actual Canal out there and a well-researched dioramic of a coolie campsite. Were our faces ever red when we found out it was actually the

Irish who built the canal. We've got no budget to correct, so every fifteen minutes or so a device in the bunkhouse gives off the approximate aroma of an Oriental meal. (3)

With this first paragraph, the reader immediately knows that the narrator is one who deserves sympathy. Because of this sympathy, the reader connects with the narrator and creates a trust that pulls the reader into the stakes of the story, subsequently initiating verisimilitude early in the story. As the story continues, the narrator's voice calls for more and more sympathy from the reader. He loses his potential investor because gangs are jeopardizing the safety and authenticity of the park, the narrator's job is at stake because a lack of funds may force the park to close, he must fire an employee at the insistence of his boss, and although he attempts to solve the gang problem, he only manages to endanger another employee. Yet through all of this, the narrator's voice remains calm and free of complaints. At the news of a financially breaking court settlement, the narrator does not curse or cast blame. Instead, the narrator's voice seems to take on an air of defeat. When the narrator's boss finds out the courts are requiring the park to pay one hundred thousand dollars, the narrator says, "I wait for him to say I'm fired but instead he breaks down in tears. I pat his back and mix him a drink. He says why don't I join him. So I join him" (11). Instead of needing to be consoled, the narrator becomes the consoler. Because the voice does not actively pursue the reader's sympathy, the reader is that much more ready to give it. By the time that the narrator introduces the ghosts in the park, the escalating events have forced so much sympathy for the narrator that ghosts do not seem unnatural; rather, they serve only to evoke more sympathy for the narrator. What could cause more trouble for the narrator's already delicate situation but

ghosts? This escalation of pitiable events and their potential consequences on the narrator serve to invest the reader in the stakes of the story, subsequently increasing the likelihood that the reader will not eject himself from the world of the story. The voice, although it is not a traditional distanced narrator, achieves the same verisimilitude.

In my own fiction, I attempt to combine several techniques of verisimilitude, some made popular by the traditional writers Kafka and Márquez, and others imitated from the styles of Brockmeier and Saunders. In most of my fantastical fiction, I imitate the traditional technique of frontloading absurd ideas so that the reader will quickly assimilate to the alternate reality of the story. For example, “Marshall” is the story of Marshall Crimm the day he finds himself inside a woman’s womb:

Marshall Crimm has come to the impossible conclusion that he is inside a belly. Last week, he celebrated his forty-third birthday.

“I don’t think that you actually realize how much you should not have children,” his secretary had told him last year. Marshall agreed with her. He understood people, so he generally didn’t like them. He didn’t want to be responsible for understanding children.

That was four months ago, and since then Marshall has been cramped in a space so small he can’t even straighten his back. He spent three weeks screaming until he realized he didn’t have a mouth. Now he has a mouth, but the situation seems pretty much hopeless. He can’t go back to his auditing job, and the darkness is all-encompassing, like he’s just stepped into a darkened room after being outside in the sun. For a while, he kept expecting the light to adjust, for the shadows to show some

contrast. He needed a point of reference. Though it occurred to him that he would not stay this way forever, Marshall has spent weeks trying to figure a faster way out. He doesn't know exactly how he got here, but if he can get out, surely he can go back.

In this selection, I attempt to establish the fantastic element right away so that the reader is more likely to accept its bizarre nature. A forty-three year old baby is unlikely to be believable half-way through a story, and to spring the explanation on the reader at the end would likely appear gimmicky. However, by presenting the information first, I seek to immediately familiarize the reader with the world of this story. As Brockmeier makes a return to the real world in many introductions to his fables, I also immediately follow the first sentence with a brief flashback to the real world when Marshall still walked on his own two feet and among other people. Bringing the reader back to the real world for a moment is an attempt to ease the reader into a notion that the fantastic forces on him. Then, I quickly move back to the bizarre and attempt to describe the character's very human fears. Similarly, in "The Bee Hostages," arguably a less absurdist story, I introduce the most absurd element early in the story. In the first paragraph, the narrator relates that she is trapped in her home because bees have descended around it. Although her allergy to bees is itself a complication, it is further complicated by the dead body of her stepfather being trapped in the house with them. Though the premise of this story is improbable, it is considerably more plausible than the premise of Marshall's entrapment. However, both are similar in the ways that the narrators ask the reader to quickly abandon reality or disbelief in the alternate reality of the story.

The points of view in my collection are also indicative of the styles of both traditional and contemporary authors. In “Marshall,” I have chosen a third person omniscient narrator. Since this is an absurd premise for a story, the omniscient voice lends itself as an authoritative voice meant to suspend disbelief, while the third person point of view attempts to evoke sympathy for the character. The tone of voice of this story should emulate those of Saunders and Brockmeier’s narrators and allow the reader to slide over objections that he or she may have of the premise. In “The Bee Hostages,” a considerably less absurd story, I have chosen to use a first person point of view. With a more realistic setting, the reader is more likely to accept a less objective voice, in this case, the protagonist’s retrospective voice. Since the character in this story is relatively young, the retrospective point of view attempts to lend more authority and maturity to the voice to maintain the verisimilitude of the story.

As Saunders uses his narrator’s voice to stir up sympathy for the character, I also attempt to use characters’ emotions to coax the reader to make a connection with the characters, and hopefully, trust their voices. I include descriptions of actions and similes to show emotions instead of stating them. Telling the reader that Marshall is frustrated would be nearly the most obvious understatement in the story. However, by describing his physical constraints, the reader is more likely to feel a similar sort of captivity and relate with the character. In “The Bee Hostages,” Janice’s emotions come through her thoughts of her sister’s interaction with her stepfather. By using her sister as a filter for her own emotions, Janice tries to distance herself from self-pity, subsequently, earning pity from the reader:

She called him Dad once when he'd dropped us in front of the school cafeteria. She was just five then and didn't remember our father. I guess I didn't really blame her for being confused or whatever. He was all she knew. She'd yelled to him as she waved from the doors. He'd started to say something back to her, maybe a bye or a correction, but put the truck in gear instead and drove away. She didn't call him dad again. I never had. He wasn't.

Janice's emotions are portrayed inadvertently through her reaction to the relationship between her sister and stepfather. Instead of saying that Janice and he do not get along, which would be misleading, more emotion comes into play, perhaps jealousy, perhaps anxiety, perhaps fear. However, the point is that her attempt to distance these emotions prompts the reader to understand the existence of them much more poignantly, thus creating a connection between the character and the reader, and thus, verisimilitude.

Although most of my stories primarily exhibit techniques from more contemporary authors like Brockmeier and Saunders, one technique included in my stories is one that comes from the traditional authors of magic realism, but is also one that I feel makes the biggest difference in my writing. In this collection, I attempt to force the reader to examine the human element in every story. Just as Kafka and Márquez use magic to reveal a deeper understanding of reality, it is my goal that each story persuades the reader to see the flaws in the characters and ask themselves about those flaws in themselves. For example, "The American Dream" ultimately asks how far people will allow themselves to be changed for their dreams, "The Bee Hostages" makes the reader look death in the face and forces him or her to examine the importance of life's

relationships, and “Marshall” seeks to enable readers to recognize second chances and take those rare opportunities when they reveal themselves. Fiction is meant to entertain, but also to be reflective of the people who read it. Sometimes the fantastic is what enables people to see reality and make such an introspective examination.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE BEE HOSTAGES

My mother snapped the phone back into its receiver before locking herself in her room and leaving her husband dead in his easy chair. From her reaction, I knew we wouldn't be leaving any time soon, and neither would he. We would all sit in the house, trapped, as we had for the past two days since the bees first came. Thousand of them we figured from the sound. Millions maybe. For reasons no one could figure out, the swarm had descended on the house, and since they were protected in this part of the world, they weren't leaving until they were ready. And we certainly weren't leaving. I couldn't. It didn't bother me so much, though. I'd never seen a dead person up close.

I looked at Patrick in his chair with the now familiar buzzing background outside the windows. In spite of the two days of sitting decay, he looked just like Mom had found him two mornings ago, sitting up in his chair with the television playing an infomercial for a rice cooker and a free vegetable chopper. At first, we thought we should move him, but my sister and I didn't want to touch him, and we didn't know where to put him anyway. There was only one bathroom, and Mom said she couldn't sleep with him in their room. So she had decided to put a sheet over him, but that only lasted for a few hours before it scared my sister more than the sight of a dead body. I had looked at him each morning since, and not much had changed til now. One hand still rested on the arm,

fingers caged over the remote; the other elbow dug into the leather and his hand tucked into the waist of his slacks. Mom had turned the set off after she found him, but yesterday, my sister, Judith, had reached around his fingers and tuned to cartoons as she did every Saturday morning.

His fingers, blue-gray and chalky now, rested on the channel up and number six buttons. His hair was the same, though. He had one of those hair rings, bald except for a semi-circle of fringe that stopped above each ear. And it looked greasy now. The whole house had taken on a sweet, over-ripe fruit smell. The first few hours were the worst, the decay burning our noses. Now we almost didn't notice it, but as I inched closer to the chair, it smelled as it had in the first few hours, rotten and hot. The returning smell reminded me of an air freshener that has been plugged into the wall for a while; you smelled it every day until it is no longer noticeable except when you walk by.

I breathed through my nose now as I looked up at his face, drooped down, chin resting on his chest. His eyes were sunken, and I reached up and touched his mouth, wanting to peel his lips back from his teeth. I hadn't touched him the other mornings, but now I wanted to know what he felt like, as if knowing his lips would feel different from my own. They were hard. Unmoving. I dropped my hand back to my side.

They had fought the night before about doctor bills. Mine. I'd listened at the door in my room and heard their harsh and hushed talking. Expensive doctors were getting to be too much for Patrick. He hadn't said expensive kids, but I'd heard it. He hadn't picked up my prescriptions that day; he said they would have to wait until he got paid.

"I just don't have it," he'd said. "And they aren't going to make a difference for a few days anyway. Janice can just tough it out." I couldn't see him but I knew that his

hands were on his hips. He stood that way when he refused to back down or admit he was wrong about something.

Mom whispered back that she had already kept me home from school for three days because there were too many bees and I had used my last epi pen a week earlier when the cafeteria made the fries in the same grease as the shrimp. I hadn't had my allergy meds in nearly that long.

"Not going to make a difference?" she'd asked. A bee sting would kill me, and Mom wouldn't risk it.

"So she misses long division. It's sixth grade. You can catch her up on whatever. A few days and these bees will be gone," he'd said.

I imagined him swatting the air, even though the bees were locked outside.

When I was almost two, a bee had stung me on my forearm, and it had swelled so quickly that my father had barely gotten me to the hospital in time. When we reached the ER, my tongue was so big I couldn't close my mouth and my throat had nearly closed. Allergy tests were positive for nearly all insect bites, shellfish, peanuts, wheat, and strawberries. After that, the doctor prescribed three epi pens per month and a strong anti-allergy medication I now took every day. So when Mom had seen these bees, she'd stuffed all the window seals and the space between the doors and the floors. She'd totally cleaned out the linen closet to block the cracks in the attic and the dryer vent. But they weren't gone. We watched the bees multiply for days until there was more of a mass than we'd ever seen crawling up and down the panes of glass, darkening the house as if it was night twenty-four hours. The house vibrated now with a constant buzz. They rattled Grandma's good china that Mom wouldn't let us touch, and the water in the toilet bowl

pulsed in soft rings. Had it always done that? It seemed as if the ringing of the bees had always been in my ears. What else had always been there? Only if I sat very still could I decipher a single bee's sound. It took practice.

After their argument, Mom's footsteps slapped on the wooden floor as she marched to her bedroom; Patrick's hadn't followed. She'd left him standing in the living room mumbling something about insurance co-pays and extortion. We both thought he'd slept on the couch. It didn't happen often. Mom usually agreed with him to avoid conflict, and they went on as if nothing unusual had happened, but I think the bees had her more worried than she let on. She had not been that way with my father – accommodating. They had fought most days, so I figured her usual compliance with Patrick was because she was tired of fighting with my father.

“Must have been an embolism,” she'd said the next morning. “I would've heard him if it was a heart attack.” As if those were the only two ways he could've died.

He had never been sick a day in his life, unless you count the time Mom's new perfume had made his ears swell up. He'd looked like Curious George. I told him so when I saw him, and he sent me outside to change the light bulbs on the porch fans while he and Mom went through the medicine in my bathroom cabinet. He drank a whole bottle of Benadryl by the next morning, and Mom had to call in for him at his work. She told Patrick's boss that he was feeling just fine but that the truck had a flat, there was no spare, and it would take more than half the day to wait for the tow truck to make it all the way out to the house and fix the tire. Which was probably true. She was very sorry for the inconvenience.

Mom had quit driving years ago, just a few months after she and Patrick married. I don't think it was something she did consciously. I'd seen her drive Patrick's truck a few times after she sold her car, but she said there was no need anymore. She worked from home, creating junk mail fliers for mail order companies, and they both did the week's grocery shopping after church while Judith and I were in Sunday school. Our church had two services and they shared a Sunday school hour between them. When they picked us up each week, Judith and I would crawl into the back seat of the truck and tuck our feet up Indian style, careful not to put our feet on the eggs or rattle the plastic bags lining the floorboard. Mom always had a sharp eye and a sharper ear.

Once, Judith's feet were all red from her new Sunday shoes. She'd thrown a fit not to wear stockings that morning because it was hot outside, and her feet were blistered by the time we headed home. She'd taken them off in the truck, trying to be quiet, but she had to pull the left one hard, and when it finally came loose, her hand smacked into the carton of eggs balanced on top of the other bags. The flat fell over on its side and four or five of them cracked and oozed into one of the other shopping bags. Patrick didn't stop the truck as he'd promised, but he had made her wear the shoes every day that week until they were broken in. He told her that would make them comfortable faster. When Mom found her in her closet trying to tear the buckles off, she had rubbed Judith's feet and put Band-aids on her blisters.

Judith walked into the room now and sat down beside me before looking up at Patrick, cross-legged like she was watching cartoons in front of the TV.

"When do you think they'll come get him?" she asked me.

"As soon as the bees leave," I said.

“When will they leave?”

“When they’re ready, I guess.” She looked at Patrick’s feet still in his argyle socks, her head tilted.

“I used to pretend he was my dad,” she said.

It didn’t surprise me. I’d even wondered if she would for a while. We lived out of town. Way out. Forty-seven miles from the nearest interstate sign. Thirty-two from the school. Patrick drove us into town every morning. Me and my sister. She called him Dad once when he’d dropped us in front of the school cafeteria. She was just five then and didn’t remember our father. I couldn’t blame her for being confused or whatever. He was all she knew. She’d yelled to him as she waved from the doors. He’d started to say something back to her, maybe a bye or a correction, but then he put the truck in gear and drove away. She didn’t call him Dad again. I never had. He wasn’t.

“I know you did,” I finally said to her.

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When I was eight years old, my mother told me that my father died in a car crash coming home from work, but she didn’t tell me that he had a woman in the passenger seat and his pants unbuttoned. I found that out from Marcus Glass at school the next week. His mom was a paramedic and had worked on my dad’s case. When I went home that day, I found my mom folding his shirts, darks then lights. I asked her if the rumor was true, and she just blinked twice and finished boxing his clothes. So I left her there and

took all the pictures of him from around the house and put them in my room before mom could throw them out.

He used to take me to the aquarium every year for my birthday, just the two of us. He would take the day off if it was a weekday, or tell me I didn't have to go to church if it was Sunday. I liked to watch the manatees. I never understood how they got so fat eating only lettuce. They just floated around in a circular tank the size of a swimming pool while everyone watched from the observation deck at the side. They would let us feed them if it was lunchtime, so we started timing our trips. We had to ride the train for two hours, but we never missed a year.

The last time we went, when I turned eight, a tall man in a camouflage mask robbed the corner store where we went to get an icy. I was standing at the machine trying to get the spout into the hole in the dome plastic lid, but cherry icy kept sliding down the sides, staining my fingers. He came in and knocked me down on the way to the register.

"Fill it," he said to the cashier. She had to be seventy and no taller than five feet. She wore a bandana around her hair and a pin on her smock that encouraged customers to ask about the sucker specials.

My father had thrown me in a corner beside the coolers by then and I couldn't see anything. I concentrated on the dust balls on the broken tile. They had wafted into the shape of a scorpion and I scattered it with my fingers. The dust stuck to the icy syrup on my hands, and it made a print on my father's shirt when I fisted the back of it.

The cashier handed the bag to the robber and told him that he should really try to find God when he had the time.

My father took me home early that day and went to work late that night. He said.

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Mom came out of the bedroom and walked past us sitting on the floor, sliding her hand through Patrick's hair as she walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She touched him in little ways like that. Straightened his shirt, brushed his hair with her fingers, dusted the dandruff from his shoulders. She had cried the first day, sat by Patrick's chair and just shook without much sound, but after that, she was careful not to cry in front of us. I'd heard her last night in her room, her tears competing with the noise from the bees. Now she drank straight from the orange juice carton while she looked at the bees on the window. She stepped over to the window and shook out the curtains and watered the herbs in the window seal. I don't think she ever cooked with them, but she never missed watering them. Mostly, she was a whiz with *Hamburger Helper*, green bean casserole from a can, and she'd gotten pretty good at baking fries in the oven. Patrick tried to get her to try new dishes sometimes. He'd even bought her a cookbook for her birthday. She'd thanked him when she opened it, put it on top of the fridge, and had never taken it down again.

She knocked on the kitchen window and a circle cleared as a few bees fell away, but it covered over again as the other bees crawled and the ray of circled sunlight was gone. She picked up the phone again as she had nearly three times a day and sat at the kitchen table with her back to us. I could hear her mumbling into the receiver, raising her voice before she realized she was raising her voice. Judith turned the TV on to

*Spongebob Squarepants*, and I turned to watch it with her but quickly lost interest. I kept feeling Patrick's gaze on my back.

"ASPCA still says no." Mom came in the living room enough to lean against the door jamb. I turned to her now. Her head was leaned back and she was staring at the ceiling.

"Can't they just smoke them out," I suggested. She looked at me then and rubbed her forehead.

"They say they can't interfere at all in the nesting ground, but they feel confident that they will dissipate on their own in a few days. Fire fighters would spray them out but the hose could bust a window or push them through the door jambs." She was leaning on the kitchen door jamb now. "I told them we couldn't risk that. We'll wait."

"Don't worry about it, Mom," I said and turned back to Judith who had turned to look at Mom, too.

"So how much longer is he gonna stay?" Judith asked her.

She looked at him then.

"Not long," she said. "Can't be long."

\*

That night, Judith came into my room and crawled in bed with me. She told me that Patrick was haunting her bedroom. She said she saw him standing in the corner and he told her that he wanted her to call him Dad. He even promised to let her sit on his lap when she watched cartoons next Saturday.

“Just a dream,” I said and scooted over. My bed was small but Judith seemed to disappear in the pillows as she shimmied up to my stomach and buried her face under the polka-dotted sheet. I turned on the night-light beside my bed that I had refused to use any longer nearly two years before but never gotten rid of.

“He’s not in your room,” I said. “And he definitely wouldn’t have said that.”

It wasn’t that Patrick was all bad. He wasn’t. He’d the whole family to the carnival one July. Rebel Amusement Rides came for five days and set up their rides and coasters and hotdog stands on the town softball field. Patrick bought each of us an armband on Tuesday night and let us ride as much as we could before nine o’clock. I knew it was because he’d gotten coupons at work for Tuesday night, but I figured he didn’t have to take us, so I kept my mouth shut and ran around with Judith until the fireworks started.

She liked those swings that go in a circle and fan out the faster they go. She would beg me to ride with her and once bribed me with extra tickets that she’d found on the ground. I didn’t remind her that we had armbands and could ride as much as we wanted. Instead, I pocketed the tickets and strapped her belt before hoisting myself into one of the chairs. The swings turned and the wind blew the hair away from my face. My feet felt heavy and I could see Judith swinging hers in front of me, so I swung mine, too. I could see most of the fair from here. From one point in the circle, I could see Mom and Patrick at the picnic table in the middle of the field. The rides were all set up in a sort-of circle, so they could watch us from there without tromping all over the field. My mom was sitting on the table top and Patrick sat on the bench just below her, both grinning at each other, touching slightly. He had bought her a caramel apple and kettle corn for himself

and he was teasing her and tossing kernels at her when she took a bite of the apple. The popcorn stuck to the apple, and they both laughed as she picked it off. He saw me looking and waved at us both. I remember Judith waving, but I don't remember now why I didn't.

Judith rode with me on the Tilt-O-Whirl and sang as loud as she could and squealed when the cart slingshot in circles. She giggled when the ride attendant at the coaster made a big show of measuring her height. Compared to the other workers, he looked high-class. He'd combed his hair and tucked his shirt into his jeans. He'd even given her a high-five when she came up tall enough. Then she'd pulled me along. Later, she told me that she wouldn't tell on me about seeing that boy from school kissing me behind the Zipper.

When the fireworks started, we made our way back to the center circle to sit with Mom and Patrick as the sky exploded with color and the air smelled like singed hair. They held hands as the crowd clapped, and when the last firework fizzled out, he'd put his hand on my head and tousled it as he stood.

"Ready, kiddo?" he'd asked.

I'd ignored him, just stood and waited for Mom to gather our bags and throw away the rest of her caramel apple and Patrick's popcorn box, but now I woke up and stared into the dark. Somehow the buzzing outside had made it easier to sleep the last few days, but now they just rang like a taunt in my ears that refused to let me go back to sleep. I slipped out of bed, and Judith rolled closer to the wall. The bees still covered the windows, and when I tapped on it, a few fell away and the swarm took their place. Walking out of the room, I thought about the feel of the floor on my feet and the sound of

the bees surrounding the house. They were the two most consistent sounds I could remember in this house.

I crept to the living room and sat down across from Patrick under the living room window. His clothes were drooping from his shrinking frame, and something was starting to slide from his nose and eyes. I just sat watching him. He didn't stand up from his chair like I expected him to, and he didn't tell me to call him Dad, but that one I didn't expect. He sat there like he was waiting for me to speak. So I told him how much I hated him for marrying my mom after my father died. And I told him how much I couldn't stand how we had to pick up our feet for groceries on Sundays. And I told him how much having him here was scaring Judith. And I told him how much I missed him.

And then I just sat, like him. When my Mom came in from her bedroom, I was tapping the back of my head against the window behind me, and a little circle of light was growing brighter on the floor in front of me as the sun came up. Bees fell away from the center of the pane where my head bumped the glass, but instead of masking the glass again, the bees kept falling away, and the light shone in.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE INCENTIVE PLAN

On Fridays, Silas chooses the employee with the worst idea in the staff meeting to kill an office pet. A dog catcher once, he has a habit of collecting strays and bringing them to the office. Everyone adopts a Chihuahua or a ferret that ends up sleeping on the corner of the desk. Bomber is some sort of Pug mutt that looks like a pig, and he sleeps in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet. Even though we aren't supposed to, sometimes I take him home on weekends.

By last April, Silas had collected more than fifty animals, but the pound charged for euthanasia, and the office couldn't afford to keep them all. Anyway, the staff seemed to write better with them around. So Silas came up with his Intelligent Ideas Incentive.

Chuck in ad sales had to go first. When Silas told him he had to get rid of the poodle that came in last week, Chuck asked him where he should take it.

“Out back,” Silas said. “You can't kill him in the office.”

“Kill him?”

“You'll have better ideas next week, won't you?” Silas asked.

It was true.

I heard that Chuck paced the back lot for nearly an hour with the poodle walking in circles and barking behind him. He said he tried to chase him off, but the dog thought

he was playing and barked louder. But I guess the barking finally got to Chuck because he ended up kicking the dog against the cement loading dock. Hard. After a yelp, the poodle lay still on the cement with his stomach racing up and down. Chuck finally had to kneel on his neck until he stopped breathing. Before going home that day, Chuck threw up in the break room.

I don't worry about the Incentive Plan for the most part; I don't sit in on staff meetings. I just write for Joan, my supervisor. Greeting cards and fortune cookie messages – and I never have to hear whether or not my ideas killed the cat that came in last week. She just picks the best out of the stack I give her.

“Hey, Marv.” Rodney leans on my cubicle wall and lays his head on his forearm. His duck, Filbert, always perches on the cubicle wall and mimics him. He turns his head now and looks at me. Four months after he was hired, Rodney became the slogan representative, but instead of moving to an office, he kept his desk next to mine because he says I make him feel sure of himself. I’ve always thought he was a bit of a bully, but I don’t guess he actually hurts anybody, so I don’t say anything. He’s gone more than he’s there, anyway. He takes most Mondays off and disappears on Friday afternoons until just before five. I’ve never taken a day off. Not one.

“What are you doing this weekend?” he asks, and smiles like he has been wondering about my answer all day. He doesn't pick his head up, so his lips slide against his arm when he speaks, and I can see his teeth meet his gums.

“I figured I'd take Bomber to the dog park.” Bomber is under my desk chewing on a bone, but it isn't one of the snack bones that I buy for him. The vet recommended soft chews for his teeth, but this one looks like it came from a ham. Or a chicken. Maybe.

When I reach for it, Bomber tucks it under him and licks my fingers, the drool from his jowls sliding down my hand. I wipe my hand on the carpet but instead of wiping away the slobber, dirt and dog hair stick to my hand like paste. I reach again for the bone. This time, Bomber bites it and moves farther into the corner under the desk where he drops it and stares at me.

He did that the first day I got him. Just stared at me like that. Silas came in around nine that morning with Bomber and a kitten. When he put them down, the cat smelled the carpet for a few seconds, Bomber smelled the cat for a few seconds, then Bomber peed on the cat and moved on. He pranced around the cubicles for a few hours, sitting every now and then to watch another dog or bird sleep or play. He had snuck under Rodney's desk while he was on the phone and peed on his shoe. Then he came around to my desk and peed on the files in the bottom drawer. When I took them out to exchange the dirty folders, he climbed in the cabinet and looked at me before he went to sleep. He was still there the next morning when I came in.

He is a cute dog, I guess. As far as dogs go. I never wanted a dog. But I never had one either. I imagine he is better than most others. He eats what I give him, and he goes to the door when he needs to pee. He likes to sleep in the crook of my back in the bed, no matter how many times I lay him on his own dog bed in the floor. I don't mind anymore. There's room.

I speak softly because I don't want Silas to overhear me. "Joan was eyeing him Tuesday," I explained. Rodney raises his eyebrows but remains silent. "We may not go." I shake my head and look back at my computer. "I have to drive several hours to my sister's house anyway." It's a lie. "I probably won't have time." My sister hadn't seen me

in a year, not since I helped put our parents in the convalescent home by the river in Jersey. But she calls every month with an update. It's usually about the same. *Jerry and I went to see them on Sunday and played a game of Yatzee. Mom asked about you. We'd love to have you for dinner. Call me.* I never do. She's just being nice anyway, but lately she's taken to calling me at work, and the messages are piling up behind my phone.

I'm sure she doesn't actually want to see me. She calls out of obligation. I'm the only other child in the family, and Mom asks about me. She doesn't have much choice.

Nevertheless, I always feel obligated to have plans when Rodney asks me about my weekend, so I usually end up making something up because I never actually have any plans. Most times I catch a movie or order in dinner from a new restaurant. But no plans. I just don't like to appear that way. He always has something to do.

Rodney picks up his head and shakes it with a smile and goes back to his desk. Filbert fluffs his wings and wags his neck before turning back to Rodney.

"Temple," I hear from the staff room. I see Silas making his way to my desk. "Temple," he says again, still six desks away. He calls everyone in the office by last names. I stand up to signal that I hear him, but he looks at me and says "Temple" again until I say "yes." Then he stands in front of me and pulls his slacks up from the side and leans on the cubicle wall. I always thought he looked like John Belushi or Al Capone. Both scare me.

"You're in on staff meeting today, Temple," he says and looks down at the papers in his hand. "I need pitches on greeting cards and better fortune messages. And take care of lunch, too." He shuffles the top paper to the back and turns to walk away.

“Better fortunes?” I ask. Joan always told me that my fortunes could apply to a bullfighter and a lamp at the same time. I took it as a compliment.

He turns back to me but files another paper to the bottom of the stack without looking at me. “People want to know they're gonna get lucky, Temple, not think they might.” He looks at me now. “As your supervisor, I'm telling you to get it right this time.” He looks at Bomber cleaning himself in my filing cabinet, then back at me.

“Joan,” I start.

“is gone,” he finishes, turns, and walks away. A pair of ferrets follows him back to his office.

I stand with my back to my desk for several more seconds until Bomber's snorting and licking gets my attention, and I remember the line of birthday cards I had been editing. I wonder where Joan has gone. Probably left to work at a newspaper. Most people who leave do media writing somewhere else. Three years ago, I decided to quit and work in the classified section of *The Business Bulletin*. It paid better money, and the newsroom smelled better, but I figured I would get a raise here soon. Also, I like writing cards, never having to settle on one way to say “Congratulations” or “I love you.”

Bomber rearranges himself. His toenails tap the metal until he settles with his jaw hanging over the side of the drawer and starts snoring again. He has a pinched left nostril, and when he snores, white foam comes out his nose. The vet says it's normal. I put an old blanket in the drawer and keep an eye on him anyway.

I pull up my files on holiday cards and fortune messages while the office buzzes about Joan. Rodney thinks she's quit writing altogether. I don't guess it matters. Gone is gone.

The messages from my sister spill out from behind my phone as my hand moves the mouse around the pad. They scatter across the desk before I rake them up and stuff them back in place. The quotes I have on my computer are from last week. Joan had me working on birthday cards. The first fortune message says, “When the time comes, take the third one.” I have seventeen fortune messages in the file and read through all of them. Finally, I open the sympathy quotes and place “Don't worry. It happens to everyone” on top. Since I can never decide which ones to pitch, I decide to print all of them and ask Rodney to look them over while I think about lunch.

I usually bring my own lunch and eat in the break room, but for the meeting today, I decide to order pizza from Fino's Gourmet Pizza on Fifth Street; the website shows Fino eating a slice in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Joan always talked about how much she liked it. I order a cucumber and sausage pizza and a pickle, pork, and grape pizza. They are Fino's suggestions.

Personally, I don't even like pizza, but I know Silas eats it often, so I order. As a kid, we had pizza every Tuesday night. It was Mom's favorite. One pepperoni, one cheese. Every Tuesday. And she made sure to work it off with an extra hour of yoga on Wednesdays. Once I moved out, I didn't eat pizza for years.

“Hey, Marv.” Rodney peeks back over the cubicle. Filbert rests his beak on the top of the partition in tandem with Rodney. “If it ends up being you, which one are you gonna pick?”

“I don't know, man.” The question had crossed my mind. “I figure I'll pick one that

doesn't have a name yet.”

“I once had to kill a rooster that fell off of a chicken plant truck. I didn't tell anyone, but I took him home after and told my wife I bought him fresh for dinner. She made a pot pie.”

“What's your point?” I ask.

“If it comes down to it, twisting its neck is the quickest way.”

“I don't want to think about that,” I tell him.

“You might want to start,” he says and hands my papers back to me.

\*

Thirty minutes before the meeting, I leave to pick up the pizzas. Fino's doesn't deliver. The street is busy with people jockeying and yelling into cell phones, street peddlers set up to sell knock-off handbags and souvenir t-shirts. I get stuck waiting on the curb next to a drag queen carrying a food processor and an old karaoke machine. When he catches me staring, I look forward quickly, leaving him looking at the side of my face and hoping he'll stop soon. The light finally flashes and I weave through two teenage girls to get to the front of the pack.

At Fino's, red checkered tablecloths blow in the line of air coming from the window unit and pictures of the staff making pizzas cover the walls. In one, two old men toss pizza crusts to each other, their fingers waiting to catch. I walk toward the counter

and take my place at the back of the line behind a construction worker wearing his hard hat.

Seated at a table tucked against the wall, with a half-eaten pepperoni and artichoke in front of her is Joan. I get out of line and join her.

“What are you doing?” I ask. She is leaned back with her elbow draped over the back of her chair and her legs crossed, one foot wagging up and down. I haven't seen her this relaxed since I've known her.

“Hey, Marv. How's it going?” she asks.

“What happened about work?” I want to know. “Everybody's wondering where you went.”

She has to know I'm sitting in on the meeting, but she doesn't say anything.

“So are you taking some vacation time?” I ask, but I already know she isn't. I just don't know another way to ask her why she isn't working anymore.

“God knows I need one,” she says and offers me a slice before taking a bite herself. “That place is hell.” We sit in silence for a moment, just looking at each other, Joan's jaws moving in a circle. The people at the next table have three kids at the table spinning the pizza between them, fighting over who gets stuck with the one with the burnt crust. I wonder why they aren't in school, but let the thought pass.

“How do I kill 'em?” I ask. I didn't know I was going to ask her, and now I'm embarrassed, but there it is.

She chews for a few more seconds and takes a drink of her cola, then wipes her mouth with her napkin and refolds it in her lap.

“You'll know,” she says. “Everybody's different. Carlene says the neck is best. She had to do the hawk that came in a few months ago. The week after that, she made nine sales and got promoted.”

I nod my head like I understand. “Okay,” I say. “Maybe I'll try that.”

“Let me ask you something,” she says and leans way over the table. I think she's going to ask me something about the meaning of life from the way she looks at me. “How come you never take a day off? Three years and not a day. You gotta have something worth skipping work for.”

I'm genuinely surprised by her question. I figured as my boss, she would be happy about that.

“I got the weekends,” I say and shrug my right shoulder.

“Weekends ain't shit, Marv. Sure ain't time to see that sister of yours,” she says. “Don't think everybody hasn't noticed all her messages. What's she calling you about anyway?”

*My parents* I nearly say, but instead, “We talk plenty.” We don't talk at all, though. I haven't called because I don't want to see my parents in a convalescent home by the river, and I know that's what she's going to say. I am the one who suggested putting them there, and now that it's done, I can't believe I told myself that. It was convenient at the time, though, and I didn't want to think it might be a bad idea. By now they probably wouldn't recognize me anyway. Mom was really the only one who needed to go to a home, but the homes I looked at offered an incentive for the spouse to accompany the patient. I jumped on it. I figure Dad would have been miserable by himself, anyway. That's what I told myself. A year before we put them there, my mother

starting confusing me with her brother. That was when I started looking for homes. Dad had a double knee replacement the year before, and while he would have been fine on his own, he couldn't take care of both of them, and we didn't want to leave Mom by herself. Really, I just hadn't wanted to move in with them, so I talked to my sister about it.

She didn't want to do it at first, but she couldn't take care of them either; she had a family. So we drove up one weekend and looked at two places. I picked the one by the river because I figured Mom would like being close to the water. She cried when we took her. I promised to visit on weekends, and she put on a brave face when she called me a good brother. I never went back. I'd traded them for my own peace of mind, and a twenty-five percent discount. That's what I almost say to Joan now, but I lie instead.

"Well I'm not suggesting you split like I did or anything," she says. "But a day or two here and there wouldn't hurt anybody, Marv. Me? I just wanted a permanent vacation from the crazies over there where you are, but maybe a long weekend to your sister's place would keep you from going off the deep end when you get in over your head. Because you will," she says, "They all do."

"That what happened to you?" I ask.

Joan leans back in her chair again and stabs at the ice in her cup with her straw. "Like I said, I just wanted away from the crazies. But we're talking about you. Guess you're in on the Incentive Plan," she says. "Silas wanted to wait a while before he got you, but I guess with me gone..."

"I guess he needs new stuff," I say.

"Well, either way," she says, "Don't forget what I told you. About the neck, I mean."

“The neck. Right. I better get lunch back before I lose for being late,” I say and walk back to the counter.

\*

Being in the staff meeting with Silas Gaines is like sitting tied to a chair with your feet in cement blocks and one leg in the river. The back of the staff room chair leans forward, like it's encouraging me to pay more attention. I wonder what everyone thinks of the pizza. Rodney is no help. Each time I look at him, Filbert looks back and honks, which has me staring back at my stack of pitches. On the top one, Rodney has written, “This one's shit, but the rest are better.”

“Tack that to the wall for next week,” Silas says. I expected that he would talk softer in staff meetings, but it seems as if the small space only amplifies his voice. Katherine from graphics walks over to a wall lined with corkboard and tacks up a Sprite ad with a picture of a man lying on a giant neon butterfly with a soda in his hand as traffic on the freeway stands still around him. She sold the graphic the day before. Last week, she whacked a goat. Good for her. It could only be a matter of time before I sold something too.

“Temple, what's on the pitch for birthdays?” Silas looks at me. I try to sit straighter in my chair, but the back makes me feel like a hunchback with my chin down, so I scoot to the front few inches of my chair and start to spread out the sympathy quotes I have.

“I have several if you want to give them a look,” I say.

“Give me your best five,” he says and leans against his hands spread on the table in front of him.

“I think they're all about the same,” I say. “You want old or young?” I ask. Rodney looks at me and Filbert shakes his tail. Silas doesn't answer. I take one out and read, then look up at him.

“What else,” he says.

I read a Christmas card. “Bunches of kisses and holiday wishes are coming your way on Christmas day.”

“No,” he says.

I read the one that Rodney wrote on.

“What about fortune messages?” Silas says.

I shuffle my papers again. One slides across the desk toward Katherine and stops when it hits her steno pad. She leans forward and pushes it back with her finger on top of the words without saying anything. Why is everyone quiet?

“Everything will now come your way,” I read.

Silas stands.

I read another one. “Don't ask. Don't speak. Everything lies in silence.”

Silas still doesn't say anything, and I remember what Joan said about leaving.

“Is there something specific you want to hear?” I ask. My voice is louder.

“Did you like the pizza?” Silas finally asks me.

“The pizza?” I regret not asking Rodney what to order. He says I can't decide on anything. Well, I'd decided we were eating gourmet pizza. And now I decided it was a shitty call.

“Someone suggested it,” I say. “I’ve never had it before.”

Silas doesn't ask me any more questions during the staff meeting. He continues through the departments. Rodney pitches something about staplers and guitar straps. I'm not listening. Three more people tack ideas to the wall. It starts to look like a teenage girl's bedroom wall, posters and snapshots hung so that the bald spots gape where my ideas should hang. I begin to worry.

\*

After the staff meeting, I go back to my desk and re-file my card pitches. I don't know if I am supposed to keep them or not, so I do. A new message from my sister is taped to my computer screen, and I file it with the rest. Second one this month. A waft of cat hair drifts down from the cubicle in front of me and Bomber barks softly, like he's trying to whisper. Rodney asked me once if I trained him to do that. I lied and told him yes, but I'm pretty sure his trachea is slowly collapsing. I've read that happens when Pugs get older. His breathing sounds like asthma, and he limps favoring his left shoulder when he goes to the puppy pad in the corner of the office.

My dad limps like that. Very slowly and methodically until he gets where he's going. The day we dropped them off, he shuffled down the hallways, stopping sporadically to look at this or that, to rest his knees. He'd rubbed them when I told him goodbye, and waved from the corner of the bed when we left the room. Bomber limps back to his drawer and tucks his head into his stomach before I hear him snoring again.

I go to the break room for coffee, but Jerry's skunk is sleeping on the percolator. He says he's been neutered or whatever so he doesn't smell, but I decide to have a juice from the fridge instead. No point in pushing it. For a while, I sit at the table there and read the corkboard where Maggie put up an invitation to her house-warming. Someone else had an apartment they wanted to sublease. It was probably next door to a pedophile or something. People in this town don't move unless they die or have crazy neighbors. I don't have a crazy neighbor; I don't have any neighbors. The two units on either side of my apartment have been vacant for years. So I figure I'm stuck where I am.

Back at my desk, my computer beeps to let me know I have an office memo. I know it's from Silas before I open it.

**MEMO**

**RE: Intelligent Ideas Incentive**

**TO: Marv Temple**

**CC: Department Representatives**

**By no later than 5pm today, you are expected to contribute one credit to the Intelligent Ideas Incentive. Please have the designated witness sign below. Thank you. Have a great weekend.**

**P.S. I liked the pizza.**

**Witness: Rodney Thompson**

**Credit: Bomber**

I read the memo twice and then realize Rodney is looking over the wall again. He always hangs over it like he's going to give me enlightening advice. He's in this just as much as I am, but he looks pumped, adjusting the buttons on his shirt and smoothing his hair. He even scratches Filbert's breast. How can he be so excited to end a life? I'm angry at him for wanting to stay at the desk beside mine, but I would never tell him that. I was okay with strangling something nameless. But now I didn't have a choice. Rodney was shutting down his computer, straightening his desk. He's the closest thing to a friend I

have at work, besides Bomber, but I don't want to be his friend right now, and I sure as hell don't want him to be the only one I have to choose from. Although that would make decisions easier. I'm angry at him for having people to see on the weekends, even if I don't really believe he does. I want Filbert to snap his beak closed on Rodney's ear.

"I've never been a witness before," he says. "Sucks about your dog, though. I thought he'd let you choose."

"Yeah," I say and don't look up. The ear would be satisfying.

"So I guess we should get this done," he says. "Gotta be before five and all."

"Uh huh," I say. At least I would have a sale soon. That would be a blessing. Rodney's sales had been growing steadily for the past year even though he'd only been assigned to pay three credits to the Incentive Plan. Way more than anyone else's average growth rate to Incentive credit ratio.

"Let me ask you something, Rodney." I stand and scratch Filbert's feathers. He's looking at me real serious like I'm gonna throw him a curve ball or something. "Where do you go on Mondays when you're out?"

"Huh?"

"On Mondays," I say. "You're never here."

He looks at me sort of sideways for a minute. "You know. Monday blues," he finally says. "Long parties sometimes. Gotta see the friends. Family on Sundays. Doesn't leave a man much time for himself. Sometimes a man just needs an extra day on the weekend, ya know?"

"So you're taking long weekends?" I ask.

"Look, I got sick days," he says. "I can spend em like I want."

“Yeah. Of course you can,” I say and wrap Bomber in his blanket before tucking him into my elbow and offering him the bone he had earlier. For some reason I don’t believe Rodney has the weekends he’s always led me to believe he has. He probably watches movies just like I do, and just takes an extra day because he wants it. He probably hasn’t seen his family in years. I think about maybe taking a day and driving up to my sister’s. It would actually be true the next time I tell Rodney I’m going. Bomber grunts and wedges the end of the bone on my arm to chew on the soft gristle at the end.

When we stand up, Filbert flaps down from his perch and takes his place behind Rodney. Or maybe I’ll skip seeing my sister and just drive up to Jersey. Bygones be damned. I might not even see them. I could just sit in the garden and wait for them to come outside. They go outside every day at those places, I’m pretty sure. I don’t even have to talk to them. Just watch from a bench or something.

“He’s getting pretty old,” Rodney says. “It’ll probably be good for him anyway.” “Yeah,” I say and start to put Bomber down to answer my phone when it rings. Right then, Filbert flies up and bats my face with his left wing so that I jump back, then he plops in front of the phone and taps it with his beak while it rings, twisting his head back and forth, shaking the receiver in its cradle.

Bomber sniffs at my feet, white foam bubbling from his left nostril. Rodney takes his hands out of his pockets, and my fingers rest on Bomber’s head, scratching. He collapses under my fingers and rolls over so that I’ll scratch his belly. He already looks dead, feet in the air, jowls pulled back to his face, eyes closed. I oblige him and scratch his fur for a bit, and I let my hand scratch a little higher and a little higher until it presses on his neck and he wheezes louder.

“Look, Marv,” he says, “I know it's your first one. I can do it if you want me to.” He looks around, takes a step toward me, and talks low. “I’ve taken care of a few more credits than my due, if you know what I mean,” he says. “Unofficially, of course. I've been taking care of Joan's credits for months now. And a few others I won't name. It's not for everyone, but either way, it has to be done. Don't want that getting out, though. I'd look a little stingy.” He shifted back from me now, like he'd been caught standing too close. “But it's not that bad. You just have to get used to it,” he says again.

When I look at him, his hands are in his pockets and he has his eyebrows raised like he's waiting for an answer. Filbert shuffles his feathers, and Bomber gives a hoarse growl from upside-down on his spot on the carpet. Without saying anything I move toward the spot where Bomber is and pick him up.

“Do you want me to hold him?” Rodney asks. “It should just take a once over with my car. I heard Katharine got one that way, but it was a lab. And she drives a Taurus.”

“What are you doing this weekend, Rodney?” I ask.

“Oh, man,” he says. I know what he thinks, but I let him finish anyway. “I get that your first one might get to you, but I got a rule about hanging out with co-workers. I don't.”

“Big plans, though?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “Got a festival back home I'm going to.”

I give a “Hmm,” because the secretary walks up then.

“Message, Marv,” she says and hands me a pink slip of paper. It must have gone to the front desk when Filbert was pecking at it.

“Big deal, huh?” I say, but I’m not really listening at that point. Doesn’t matter anyway.

“Yeah,” he says. “Biggest of the year.”

The message is from my sister. She wants me to call.

“You have fun at that,” I say and start gathering my bag. “Think I’ll take a long weekend myself.”

“What about the dog?” Rodney asks.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say as I walk to the door. “No worries.” I look down at my sister’s message as Bomber’s toenails tap the floor behind me. I’ll call her tomorrow.

## CHAPTER IV

### MARSHALL

Marshall Crimm has come to the impossible conclusion that he is inside a belly. Last week, he celebrated his forty-third birthday.

“I don't think that you actually realize how much you should not have children,” his secretary had told him last year. Marshall agreed with her. He understood people, so he generally didn't like them. He didn't want to be responsible for understanding children. Now he was one.

The best he can figure, that was three months ago, and since then Marshall has been cramped in a space so small he can't even straighten his back. He has always been claustrophobic, terrified not so much of being trapped, but of not being able to move. Once he had gotten stuck under the edge of his house fixing a pipe leak. He'd panicked so violently that the brick had scraped a bloody line across his spine when he tried to get out. And now he is here. He'd spent the first three weeks screaming before realizing he had no mouth. Now he has one, but the situation seems hopeless. He can't go back to his auditing job, and the darkness is all-encompassing. For a while, he kept expecting the light to adjust, for shadows to show some contrast. He needed a point of reference.

Though it occurred to him that he would not stay this way forever, Marshall has spent weeks trying to figure a faster way out. He thought if he focused enough, he might

somehow warp back to his life. For all he knew, that was how he'd gotten here. When that hadn't worked, he'd tried praying. Although he hadn't believed in God since leaving the Catholic Church at eighteen, now he imagined himself kneeling in the confessional, lighting a candle, reciting a novena. He later laughed at that idea because the Catholic Church didn't condone reincarnation, and from what he could figure, that was the closest to what was going on. Then, he'd tried moving like he had when he'd torn himself from under his house. He'd stirred a little, so that was what he decided to go with. He doesn't know exactly how he got here, but if he can get out, surely he can go back.

\*

Today, Marshall wakes up to muffled voices. He's heard them before, and knows where they're coming from, but can't make out anything more discerning than a muted drone. He's figured out that the woman who carried him was named Ann, but she was always moving, so he hasn't heard much more than that. His mother's name was also Ann. That was a brief thought before everything else was drowned out. He thought it sounded like having his ears under the bath water.

It is still dark, but he's learned to make out a few things. The fact that he is growing means that he is closer to escape, but what it really translates to is less room to move. His knees jut up against his cheeks and the space won't allow him to straighten his neck, so Ann's belly presses his nose toward the center of his body. Marshall thinks about moving again, and he shimmies against Ann's belly, imagining being held under the bath water or unable to free himself from under his house. Marshall thinks about a

time when he was seven and his mother locked him in a closet for breaking his grandmother's urn while playing football in the house.

“You never think about why the rules exist, Marshall!” she’d yelled as she closed the closet door. She always said that. There was no lock, but he didn’t dare come out until she opened the door. She swept up the ashes with the little dust broom she kept over the washer. “You can’t just do what you want to do all the time,” she’d yelled from the other side of the door. She was always saying that, too.

He had sat in the dark for hours, staring at the slat of light on the closet floor that came from the space underneath the door. He watched it as he rubbed his fingers against the wood on the walls. It was striated, like the ocean floor when you get just deep enough to barely touch, and it was so smooth that he rubbed three blisters on his right hand that day. Since then, he’s panicked in confined spaces. Ann's belly is that way – too small for him to stretch or straighten his neck, smoothly rippled on his right side, and inescapably dark. In the last few days, he has noticed her belly getting relaxed and sticky along the ridges, as he imagines a candle might melt from the outside. But he is still here, and there is no light under the door, no ray of hope.

\*

*Reincarnation is hope for the regretful, but it is punishment for the ambitious, Marshall thinks. This is no excuse for laziness. I have no time for replays or regrets, nor will I accept them once things are back to normal.*

Marshall refuses to think he will not make it back to his old life. He likes his old life, so the idea of reincarnation seems unfair. Maybe it was good for people who needed to make a change or fix something they regret. Not Marshall. Once, his secretary asked him what he would do differently if he had a second chance at life. He told her that he didn't believe in second chances. They just didn't happen for people. Not real second chances. He'd promised himself when he left home that he would not regret his life, and he hadn't. Marshall decided long ago that a career was a safer choice than a family. He'd never been good at being a part of a family. He'd never gotten it quite right. None of his family had.

When he was fourteen, he'd snuck out and taken his mom's car to his friend's Superbowl party. When she found out the next day, she'd asked him what he was thinking.

"I knew you wouldn't let me if I asked," Marshall said.

"So why take it if you knew better?" she'd yelled. Marshall was hoping she would let his dad handle this one. He usually pretended to burn Marshall's ass about whatever it was, but really he didn't give a shit. He mostly yelled from his chair as long as he figured the crime merited, then flipped the foot recliner before telling Marshall to stop fucking shit up.

"I wanted to go," Marshall said and shrugged, like that was all there was to it. She'd decided to handle this one herself and let his father forgo the act.

"You know?" she started and drank from her glass. "You never even thought to ask if I would drive you."

He hadn't.

Later, when he was sixteen, an elementary student late for class had got him caught smoking weed outside the football locker room at school. The kid told his teacher someone was smoking a cigarette by the field. Marshall had only tried it that once. He'd found it in the locker bathrooms, but he didn't figure much could go wrong since the other players on the team had been smoking most every day. It had. By that time, Marshall's mother and father had divorced, his dad had moved into a townhouse with his college buddy, and his mother started working evenings as a telemarketer. Marshall had been expelled, and his mother had to put him in private school. The school only took him on the condition that he complete a drug course, so he took the course and was more careful from then on about what he did at home and at school. He could do what he wanted when he moved out, no matter what his mother said.

\*

Marshall thinks about the first job he had when he left home. He wanted something where he didn't have to deal with hovering or nosy kids. His mother always hovered after he was expelled. He worked in the mail room at a paper company and barely made enough to pay rent and his metro pass. The third week he'd been there, he got stuck in an elevator with a six year old girl for three hours. The power in the building had gone out and the girl had peed herself in the corner. Marshall had seen her pink leggings turn dark in a stripe down her leg, but neither of them had said anything. He imagined the worst movie scenarios and thought about the chances of him having to cling to the elevator cable as the cart plummeted to the basement. He was sure they were low.

The girl must have been thinking something similar; she had stared at the floor and the buttons on the elevator wall, snot rolling from her nose, but all the time silent. Marshall did the same. If he hadn't decided against them before, Marshall had decided against kids then.

Even now, Marshall doesn't think about the irony that he is a child himself, dependent on the woman who carries him. He still thinks of himself as forty-three year old Marshall, auditor. Each day he moves a bit more, his space growing tighter and tighter. Even Ann's voice doesn't deter him. By now, it seems familiar; at first he thought it was strangely familiar, but he decides he must be accustomed to the voice's tone from hearing it every day. Marshall still cannot make out the words Ann says, but they grow louder and louder every day.

\*

Marshall is a yes/no man. He had grown up to be a quiet person, but one with very little compromise or social interests, so he often felt awkward around people who asked too many questions. There were too many details in learning people, kids in particular, and Marshall had never learned to master the details, so he chose to avoid them. He liked being able to go to auditing conferences in Japan and Australia. He'd worked for the IRS as an abusive tax avoidance officer for thirteen years. Most of his clients were issued refunds, but were happy to see him go before he found something out of order. That had only happened twice, and both times were by accident. He liked giving refunds; people were less confrontational when you told them they were getting one. He

traveled across the Ohio River Valley, had few friends, and spoke to his secretary by phone more than in person. He didn't know much about her personal life except that she was unmarried and did not intend to start a family.

Growing up, Marshall had wanted to be a baseball coach. He didn't necessarily want to play, though he enjoyed it. He played in the free park league when he was four and five. He liked to tell the other players *Goodjob*, and *Keep your eye on the ball*, and *Hustle!* like his own coach yelled, but as he got older, all the teams started getting trophies at the end of the season, no matter if they came in dead last. Marshall grew to despise the lazy kids who came in last and accepted their trophies in one hand with an icy *Gatorade* in the other hand like they had worked for their landslide loss.

Marshall had not always disliked kids. He'd had a little brother. They shared a room, so it was Marshall's job to sing him to sleep at night after his mother put him in the crib and took her nightly dose of medicine from the amber bottle he was supposed to leave alone. He liked to sing "The Green Grass Grew All Around." It didn't really tell a story like the other rhymes, but it was long, and Marshall could change his voice when the lyrics were echoed. His mother even let him rock his brother to sleep in the middle of the night if he woke up fussy. Once, Marshall heard him crying for a long time, so he threw off his covers and picked up his brother and started walking him around the room. His mother had looked in the door a few minutes later, seen him, and gone back to bed. Marshall liked the big rocker that was in the room. It was big enough to fit an extra large man, so Marshall had to step on a box to get in the chair, and he had to be extra careful with the baby. He pulled his feet into the chair with him and rocked and bounced until they both fell asleep again.

After several days, his mother got so used to him rocking the baby that she stopped waking up in the night, even when his brother cried for a long time. And on the night when Marshall sang all the nursery rhymes he knew, he'd hugged him so tight and tried so hard to rock his brother back to sleep that he killed him. At first he thought his brother had finally fallen asleep, so Marshall laid him back in the crib and crawled into his own bed, pulling the covers over his head and falling to sleep so deeply that he didn't wake for school the next morning. Later, he overheard his aunt telling her husband that the drunk bitch had probably shaken him to death and was now trying to blame it on Marshall, and she deserved to rot in hell for her sins of irresponsibility. The official ruling was crib suffocation. No fault.

Marshall once told his aunt the truth, and she told him he was confused and asked all her friends to pray for the unburdening of his soul. He hadn't exactly felt responsible for what had happened; he had been so tired that he couldn't remember much of it. But he figured he should feel worse. He had felt remorse, but he figured it was probably the same kind of remorse any child felt when a parent scolded him for forgetting to feed the dog. He knew they weren't the same thing, but he didn't feel guilt until he was much older.

\*

In Ann's belly, Marshall tries to stretch his legs. If he can just move enough, maybe he can wiggle his way back, like he had wiggled his way out from under the house. All he has to do is keep moving, keep stretching. Even if it takes longer than

planned, Marshall is determined to find a way out before the end of the pregnancy. He can't start over. He won't. There is no second chance for anything, and Marshall doesn't want one anyway. So he moves more. Every time he does, he can lie a bit straighter. He hears Ann yell something to an unfamiliar voice.

“I don't care how long it's been,” she says, “he's not normal.”

“It's normal to be scared,” the other voice says.

“I'm not scared. I'm just not a good mother.”

“Everyone thinks that at one time or another.”

Marshall stretches again and Ann gets louder. He's excited that his hearing has improved. What else were they saying? Marshall listens hard but Ann moves again. When she finally settles, she is lying down and her belly stretches so flat that Marshall cannot move. Both walls hug him so tightly that he flips sideways, his own belly toward Ann's back. He feels the side of her belly on his cheek now, slicker than it was days ago, less ribbed. Marshall rests his head and stretches again. When he does, he feels himself getting longer. The ripples in Ann's belly get smooth, so he pushes once more. The ripples stretch so that the striations run in the opposite direction.

Marshall feels Ann's hand pressing on him now as she yells louder, and he knows that he is finally doing something. Her hand presses on his feet, trapping them against her other organs and disabling them. Marshall uses his hands now instead, and the belly stretches so far that he can feel Ann's fat cells under her skin, her stomach's curve and the hard line of her ribs. He kicks out, and can feel the outline of the rib against his foot. Her hand has moved and he hears the strange voice once more.

“It won't be much longer,” he says. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Marshall tenses and lies perfectly still to hear Ann's reply. He has come to enjoy her voice. It is pleasant, like a wind chime. Not the small wind chimes that are piercing, but the longer chimes that vibrate a velvety echo.

Instead of a clear melody, her voice is muffled. "You can't just do what you want to do all the time," she says, and he hears her counting backwards from ten.

Marshall's limbs start to feel heavy, and he is surprised that so little fighting makes him this weak. He pushes his foot again, and although it takes most of his strength, he finally begins to see a contrast in the shadows of Ann's belly. Just as a dark room comes into focus once the eyes adjust, Ann's belly starts to reveal itself. Marshall, who never asked for second chances at life, sees the chance to grasp his old one.

Like with the light under the closet door, Marshall looks at the new light in Ann's belly. It is pink and dim through the blood, but he can see it, and Marshall knows it is his way out, but his limbs won't work. His fingers are still. For the first time in months, Marshall tries to scream.

"I know you hear me!" he yells. He knows he can talk, but like his fingers, his lips have been rendered useless. Marshall is tired, and he cannot fight any longer.

\*

When Marshall's limbs go numb, his mind does too. He forgets about trying to escape and his thoughts go back to work, where they always seemed to be before now. He thinks about his secretary, Shelley. Did she try to locate him when he didn't show up to work the next day? He's quite sure she did. She would have assumed it was part of her

job. She assumed everything was her job. Once, Marshall's housekeeper had called the office to say she was moving and would no longer be able to clean his house. Instead of leaving it to Marshall, Shelley paid her, wished her good luck on her move, and hired a new housekeeper for him within the week. He never knew until he read it in his update report the next week. She didn't make a habit of bothering him with constant updates. She put it all in the reports. She said telling him once was enough. He thought she was practical for that. He knew from then on that he was smart to have hired her so hastily. She took care of the details he detested. She had his car detailed once a month, sent his obligatory wedding gifts and thank-you cards, and even paid his personal bills.

He wonders what she has done with his house. He hopes she hasn't sold it yet. It would not have sold so quickly.

And what about his body? He still wonders how he ended up in Ann's belly, but he's come to the fairly positive conclusion that he must have died to be reincarnated. And he wonders how he can get back to his old life if he is dead there. He realizes this is a problem, but his mind is too fuzzy to think of it logically. He wonders if he died in his sleep. He tries, but he cannot remember the last thing he had been doing in his old life. He hopes it wasn't something gruesome.

Maybe it was like his brother died. Suffocation. Marshall allows himself to think about his brother. After he woke up that day, his mother had tried to tell the police that he must have done something to his brother while she was out of the room. Marshall could have denied it. He could have confirmed it. He did neither. He didn't say anything. Not to the police, not to his mother. He had changed his clothes when the officer asked him and

climbed into the back of the car. For hours, he sat in the police station and colored pictures and ate doughnuts.

For the next several nights, he stayed with a lady who made him blueberry muffins for breakfast. She had three other children in the house who weren't hers. Marshall thought the oldest one looked like a bulldog. His cheeks were long, and he walked with his toes pointed in. Marshall didn't sleep much in those few days. The next week, after the police said his brother's death was an accident, they let Marshall's mom come and pick him up.

Maybe someone killed him. Who would kill him? No one knew him enough to want to kill him.

He could have died at the office, behind his desk where everyone says everyone else in the office will die. Shelley would have found him. He remembers Shelley, always remembers Shelley. Fiery curls that she pulled back with a clip, and a weakness for peppermint patties. He'd found them in her drawer one day while looking for a pen. He wonders if she stayed at the office working for someone else, or if she took another job. He hopes she is still there. Marshall wonders if she misses him. Surely she does. He thinks about the peppermint patties that she hides, their flavor dark and cool. His mind is fuzzy now with fatigue and something else, but he has not tasted real food for some time and wants to think about the clear memory. He doesn't feel hunger, but he wants to taste something as badly as he wants to escape.

The only other taste he could conjure up as clearly was the spicy crawfish his college roommate boiled once. He'd never eaten a crawfish, so when he picked up the bug, he didn't know how to eat it. He knew he had to open it somehow, so he waited and

watched as the other people pulled the tails from the rest of the body and peeled the meat from inside the tail. Marshall remembers being surprised that peeling the first bug was more difficult than it looked. He pinched the tail flat and crushed most of the meat into the body of the crawfish. Instead of throwing it out and trying again, Marshall had tried to suck the juice out of the body as he had seen his friend do. The juice was spicy, and he coughed until it ran down his chin, but he ate more. The flavor was like salt water. The more he ate, the more he wanted. He learned to pinch the tail softly and peel the first ring from the meat before pulling it with his teeth. As Marshall thinks about it now, he realizes the unlikelihood that he will taste crawfish again. He thinks about the sharp Cajun taste once more before he lets it slip from his thoughts.

Nothing stays in his thoughts long now. A line of memories shuffle through Marshall's thoughts, none staying long. His brother's funeral. His first woman. The night he got sick on Evan Williams and Skoal. His high school graduation. His first job interview. His mother crying on the porch. No. He couldn't live those again.

\*

He can still see the pink light, and he realizes that it is coming from outside Ann's belly. A way out. Marshall wants to stretch but still cannot move, and he begins to get sleepy. He can hear the same voice from before, but Marshall can no longer make out what he is saying. He thinks he hears something like *no more problems*, but he can't be sure. Marshall's arms and legs are still; the only way he knows out- taken from him.

Ann has not moved or talked in several minutes, and Marshall starts to miss her voice now. It was oddly calming. Familiar. He wanted to be free from her for so long, but she's the only person he's touched in weeks. Now that he cannot leave, she is gone, and Marshall knows that he will die alone, so he closes his eyes, and for the first time in weeks, feels comfort in the darkness.

Marshall doesn't know how long his eyes have been closed. Seconds? Minutes? Longer? He sees the light from a hole in Ann's belly near his left arm. It seems so small, like a pinhole in the side of a balloon. Marshall wonders about all the people he has ever known who have died. He wonders if they too found themselves trapped here. He can't be sure. One of his colleagues at work had a heart attack during an audit and was unconscious for eight minutes, but he never told Marshall what had happened in those eight minutes. Marshall doesn't think it was this. His friend woke up eight minutes later. Marshall was still here, and he couldn't go back.

He doesn't even know how long he's been here, but he knows he hasn't been here long enough for Ann's pregnancy to be over. Far from it. He doesn't know how he came to be here. He only knows that he'll die here.

Just as Marshall touches his cheek to Ann's belly, the hole grows bigger, and he feels his limbs go cold. At first he thinks they are numb, but the cold revitalizes Marshall's arms and legs and he starts to stretch again. He pushes a foot against Ann's rib. He's not trying to hurt her, but he can feel the hard bone against his foot and pushes out. He reaches with his hand and it pushes closer to the hole. He sees a scalpel there now, reaching toward him and the rippled walls of Ann's belly.

Marshall pushes with his arms and legs against the wall of the belly. Just as his hand pushes up, it connects with the tip of the blade and it starts to bleed into Ann's belly. He doesn't care. He pushes up again with his other hand, another cut. And with his leg, another. Marshall rolls and kicks until he stretches the hole in Ann's belly wide enough for the whole hand with the scalpel to reach through. The hands reach in and free him from the belly, and Marshall feels like crying.

Like before, there is no sound, but he doesn't worry. He is no longer in the dark. He can't open his eyes all the way, but Marshall knows that the man with the scalpel is a doctor, and he will get Marshall back to his life. He doesn't know how. But he will. He doesn't worry when the doctor wraps him in plastic, or even when he folds it over his head and wraps the plastic in something darker. Marshall welcomes the dark now. He remembers thinking this must be how he came to be in Ann's belly in the first place, and now he is going back. But it won't be a second chance. He doesn't believe in them.

CHAPTER V  
THE AMERICAN DREAM

At first, when we were chosen as one of the illegal immigrant families to compete for the right to citizenship on reality TV, my father cursed in Spanish and told the producer to go fuck himself.

“Vete al carajo!” He pointed his finger and poked Sampson in his chest, urging him out the door with every finger prod.

“Usted insultar a mi familia!” My father's words were hard. I saw spit fly through his teeth and his fingernail turned white when he hit Sampson's T-shirt. “Usted no sabe sobre el respeto,” he whispered before he closed the door on Sampson's open mouth and Boston baseball cap.

For an hour after, he had gone outside and hammered on the barn in the backyard. The boards on the roof were old and rotted, so every few months or so, my father would have to find replacement wood to keep the rain off the hay. We didn't have any horses or pigs; he just hated losing anything he could work to keep. So he worked to keep it.

When he came back into the house, my mother and I were setting the table for dinner: eggs rancheros. It was an easy dish and one that she made when she didn't want to think about what she was doing. When I was twelve, she had taught me how to chop the

peppers with my fingers tucked under my knuckles so I didn't slice my nails. When she nearly burned her fingers twice on the skillet, I offered to finish.

My father hadn't said anything, just showered and sat at the table with tiny water flecks still shining in his hair. His chair squeaked and the table wobbled when he scooted up, but it didn't seem to bother him. My mother had found the set in the alley behind her work, then sanded and sealed it when dad was working out of the state. When my father asked her where she'd bought it, she told him she got it at a garage sale for ten dollars. He had smiled, proud of her for the bargain. If he'd known where it came from, he would have told her to get rid of it; he didn't take hand outs, no matter who they came from. Even if they came from no one at all.

“Do you need help with the barn tomorrow?” I asked as we sat down.

“You speak Spanish, Carmela,” he said in Spanish without looking up. “Speak Spanish in this house.”

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When we got to L.A., the show put all the families in one of those beachside mansions like you see on *America's Next Top Model* or *Laguna Beach*. Each family had a separate wing but shared a kitchen and heated pool on the back deck. Some intern had thrown lily pads and blossoms in the water to make it look classy.

The show had eight families, and the Korean couple had the smallest wing; they didn't have any children. I heard one of the younger Chinese girls ask when she would get to see the Hollywood sign. Her father said something quiet and terse that caused her to

grip her pillow tighter. According to Robby, the camera man, our wing of the house was painted Old Towne Gray and was designed in the style of a Connecticut town house, whatever that meant. I had never been to Connecticut. Robby had, and he said it was a true liking, so I believed him. He was white, and he wore a blue bandana tied over his hair. I wondered if he wore it when he wasn't working.

My mother and I finished unpacking what little we'd brought: clothes mostly sewn or found at rummage sales: button down blouses, A line skirts, trousers with deep carpenter pockets and a hammer loop for Dad. Then the producers had everyone come down for dinner and a meeting about the show. Someone had cooked pot roast with those little carrots and potatoes like I saw in a *Family Circle* magazine once. I moved it around my plate, separating each food. I liked to eat one thing at a time, savoring each different flavor, but the carrots tasted like the roast, and the potatoes tasted like the roast, so I gave up.

Taping would start the next day, and we were to act normally, forget the cameras were there. We would have seven competitions, and seven eliminations. Seven deportations, but no one said it.

At the end of the meeting, Sampson took all our family pictures and anything related to our home country. Daisha, the little Chinese girl, had to give up her patchwork stuffed animal. It was a dragon her grandmother had made for her on her first Chinese New Year. My mother's frame of Our Lady of Guadeloupe was replaced with a bookmark with a picture of the American Mary. White people never realized there was a difference. They let her keep her rosary. The house only had one phone, and it was in a

separate room with its own camera. When I asked Mama if I could use it to call my friend, Jules, back in Arizona, she told me I could write her a letter.

My mother and father didn't have many friends in Arizona. They mostly worked and kept to themselves. They hadn't crossed the river with a duffel bag like most people, so they didn't have that experience to share with other aliens, but white people still called my father a wetback. They hadn't wanted to come to America when they did. My father had taken a quiet job for the money when my mother was pregnant. His boss didn't worry much with details like green cards, just as long as his workers could hang sheetrock and roll a decent paint job on the walls. He sent the money home, and after I was born, my mother snuck to meet him. She left her parents, her grandparents. They would never have let her come if they had known.

My grandparents had once applied for visas. My grandfather wanted to take my grandmother to Sea World in San Diego for their fortieth wedding anniversary.

#### Homeland

Security interviewed them twice and then accused them of trying to hide in the States and bleed the government for tax free work. He bought her a new fish tank instead, and told my mother to hope my father came home soon.

My mother grew up hating the States, but she couldn't go back to Mexico now, so she taught me how to be skeptical of the government, and answer questions with phrases people didn't push to ask more about. But she wanted me to go to school and get a job, learn how to be a lady of business and class. She tried to put me in school when I was five. The teachers asked for birth certificates and social security numbers and shot records. So she taught me at home instead. She tried again last year to put me in high

school. She figured she could lie about a house fire and home schooling. That didn't work either. She didn't know the government regulated home schooling, and there was no record of me. We didn't try again.

When Sampson came to our door the day after my father had thrown him out, my mother begged them for my sake. She wanted me to have the education she had been trying to get me for years. Failed to get me. We begged. Sampson promised I would go to an Ivy League college, learn a better way of life. I didn't know they would take the old one. Neither did my father.

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The first day, Robby told us that he would tape us getting to know each other. The house was still new and everything in it felt hard, but we wanted to see it all. Deisha still wanted to see the Hollywood sign, and Robby promised her in a few days. I took her outside with me past the pool and hot tub. The west end of the house gave way to the beach where rocks peppered the surf and sprayed us as Deisha gathered seashells. She held up a giant conch, hand held high above her head like a trophy and yelled, "Look!" with her cheeks held tight, accent fresh, and bent her head again to dig. There was more space here on the beach than anywhere I had lived in Arizona. Once we'd had lived in an apartment that had no front or backyard, just a fence with a poison ivy cover. There were no fences here. I let my head fall back and smelled the water. Salt and mud and freedom.

Deisha had moved to the edge of the water and squealed when it gurgled around her ankles, sucking her toes in the sand. She jumped and splashed the water on me,

squealed again and ran in a circle to meet the tide as it unfolded back to the shore. I stamped at the water when she got closer and watched as her eyes got wide watching the droplets sparkle in the air. She stomped again when those fell, harder this time, spraying bits of sand and seaweed. The gulls that had been hovering overhead let the wind carry them further down the beach, obviously unimpressed with our playing. Deisha hopped in a circle at the edge of the water, chanting something young and foreign.

“Ngun, Ngun, Shing, Ngun,” she sang.

“E “come un culcano frizzante,” I laughed, breathless from jumping. We looked at each other, realizing our words sounded funny here by the surf. This place made us strange to ourselves.

\*

Later, Deisha and I went for a swim with the other kids in the house. Lyov was a twelve year old Ukrainian boy, and he had spent most of his time staring at everyone, lifting an eyebrow sporadically. Deisha was scared of him. She said he looked like her cousin who used to leave spiders in her shoes. Lyov floated in the shallow end, elbows hooked behind him on the side of the pool, feet floating, watching.

Most of the other kids played in the deep end, some diving, and two bobbing with floaties on their arms. Those were the twin girls from Saudi Arabia, Amira and Aminah. They had just finished elementary school. Mom said she couldn't believe they let them on the show, but I figured she was more jealous that they had been to school. Dad said he

wasn't surprised by anything anymore. They looked nice enough, but I decided to tread several arm lengths from them. They stayed close to the side, reaching for the cement every minute or so, while the rest of the kids sprang from the diving board and one-upped the last with some awesome trick.

The two German kids liked to flip. They went end over end until they were both red bellied. The three Greeks, two girls and a boy, looked like they didn't swim much. I heard them talking about fishing, but I guess that didn't mean swimming. The girls jumped over and over feet first, arms tucked close, noses pinched, and swam to the side immediately. The boy tried to keep up with the two German boys, but his foot slipped once and he nearly fell in sideways. He was timid after that.

I didn't notice at first that Robby had come outside with the camera. He stayed pressed to the wall, scanning the pool, and stopping several times on Julianne. She was nineteen and British. She lay on one of the lounge chairs by the pool with her eyes closed. I heard her parents say at the meeting that competing with the other families was a waste of time. They had been working on citizenship for months. Sampson whispered something to them that must have convinced them because Julianne's mother had been smiling and playing checkers all day. Not Julianne, though. She already knew how to smile and play checkers, so she had come to the pool.

She was the only one who didn't have to change the way she said her name. The house announcement this morning had a detailed list of all of our English names, complete with a meaning and web link for the etymology. My new name was Carmen, but my mother still called me Carmela when she was angry. Carmen was fine, names didn't really matter anyway. When we talked out loud, I had to call Deisha Daisy. We still

hadn't talked much since the beach, but I started to think of her as Daisy silently, even though she turned her nose up.

She whispered to me later, "But I like sunflowers."

Sampson had looked at her and raised his eyebrows in a way that didn't need words to say she should quietly comply. She tucked her head and curled her body toward her mother.

Lyov was Leo, perfect. Aminah's name meant faith, so she became Faith, but Amira had no direct translation, so Sampson told everyone to call her Rose.

And everyone in the house was to speak in English, especially in front of the camera, but off camera, too, for the practice. People on American TV needed to be able to understand what we were saying.

\*

Over the next several days we all cried for home and tried to tell each other we weren't crying for home. I missed Arizona. I missed the non-existent backyard and grumbling that I didn't want to get up for church on Sunday morning. Why couldn't we be Baptist? They didn't have church until 11:00. Now we didn't go to church. Sampson said we were free to read the Bible in our separate wings for one hour on Sunday morning, so Mama rewrote the prayer of Our Lady of Guadeloupe on one of the blank leaves of her new Bible. She had me say it ten times, and then recite a rosary with her. I always got confused about how many Glory

Be's to say. Usually I would say them slow enough that I could hear her start them and then join in.

On the other days of the week, we spent our time studying laws and songs and foods and customs. People in New York made stuffing for Thanksgiving. People in Tennessee made dressing. I figured it might be on a Challenge so I learned it. Even when it made me crave green chili over cheese burritos, I flipped a page and read a new recipe. Peach cobbler, green bean casserole, seafood gumbo, Eggs Florentine, Belgian waffles. I thought the last was unfair to learn, but I studied the ingredients anyway. I read the words to patriotic songs over and over.

They stayed in my head for hours. I studied people like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Sam Houston. The book had left out some stuff about Sam Houston, but I figured they could only fit so much in a few pages.

I had never been more miserable in my life, but who could I tell? My parents wanted Harvard or Columbia for me. Slacks and pearls. I couldn't tell my mother that I didn't want what was best for me. I couldn't tell anyone that. I could have run away to my grandparents. Slipped out in the night and crossed the river the other way; no one would have stopped me. But I hadn't seen my grandparents in seventeen years; even though I was just like them, they wouldn't know me now. I couldn't go until I wasn't one of them. So I studied Sam Houston and how to make Belgian waffles.

I liked to study by the beach the best, the sound of the waves a constant ripping of paper in my head, an ignorable buzz in my ears. I couldn't stay in the Town House Gray

of my room. I had tried to make it brighter, more like home. I had made curtains out of a few old skirts that I didn't wear much, a deep purple with delicate white stripes, a curtain and a valence. More detailed than any I had made at home. I had sewn for hours in the middle of the night when no one would find me. Someone had found me. Not that night, or the next day, but someone had taken them down. Someone wanted them gone. And so they were. As was the page in my mother's Bible where she had written the prayer of Our Lady of Guadeloupe. The sheet ripped down the seam of the page, only a letter or two remaining, but not a word from anyone. They were silently taking us from ourselves. We didn't know how to fight back, or why we wanted to.

So we didn't. We sang the songs, and recited laws, and ate the food.

Everyone but Daisy.

Daisy had found a marker somewhere and drawn a forked tongue from the mouth of the teddy bear that had replaced her stuffed dragon. She had even torn the fluffy tail from his bottom and glued in its place a ripped piece of her pillow case, also marked to look like scales. The glue hadn't stuck very well, and the stuffing from the bear was falling out in small silken balls.

The bear's bottom was now saggy, drooping like a wet diaper, and pulled to an odd shape from the weight of the tail. Daisy carried it everywhere and gave a shrieking scream when anyone tried to take it from her. At first, we didn't care that she had it. We all missed what had been taken from us. Then we were jealous that she had figured out how to keep what Sampson had tried to take. Once, Leo called her a spoiled Japanese brat. I didn't bother to say she was Chinese. Leo only meant to imply that she wasn't American.

Even though everything else changed, my father's mantra didn't. He still expected us to work for what we were getting. The show wouldn't let us have jobs, so my father found ways for us to earn our board. I had to clean the windows every week, and my mother was in charge of mopping the floor. Sampson tried to explain that the show hired people to do these things, but my father wouldn't hear of it. He cleaned the pool, and on Thursdays, found loose nails that needed nailing down or made the family practice memorizing the proper way to care for the American flag. He huddled us in our wing, in the sitting area that we rarely used for anything else but these meetings. He quizzed me on the Bill of Rights and made Mama tell him the proper way to dispose of an unserviceable flag. I missed the third amendment, and he made me write it in English one hundred times that night.

“I want to go to Harvard,” I repeated to myself as I wrote. “America is no place for slackers.”

When Dad realized that Sampson liked what he was doing on Thursdays, we started meeting three times per week and in the commune living room instead of our private sitting room. Dad made us whisper sometimes, though, when another family came through the room, especially the Koreans. Dad thought they should be eliminated first because they had no children to want a better life for.

On group days, Sampson called on people to make sure they had been studying. Each right answer earned the family a point. The family with the most points at elimination earned immunity. At Sampson's insistence, Daisy stood up to say the Pledge of Allegiance. She stumbled several times and started reciting the lyrics to the Star Spangled Banner. When Leo looked at her with raised eyebrow, she pulled her dragon

bear to her mouth and started speaking. We all recognized the sound as a foreign one, the same sound from the beach on the first day, a sound we all knew to be wrong now.

Sampson would habitually sigh with his teeth showing and readjust his Boston cap.

“English, Daisy,” he would say. Then he looked at Robby. “Let's just fix this in editing, okay?”

“Sure thing, boss,” he replied.

“I think she needs to listen to Julianne a bit more,” Sampson told Daisy’s parents.

“Absolutely,” her father said and nodded his head, deep enough to be mistaken for a bow, but flattering enough for Sampson not to say anything.

Julianne was everything we didn't want to be and everything we knew we had to be. She didn't have to get used to a new name, and she didn't have to change her language. And although she had trouble at first remembering to change words like loo and kip and telly, now she walked through the house, proudly announcing what program was on television. She even learned the acceptable times to use the word restroom instead of bathroom. Once she worked it into her conversation on the phone, and Sampson complimented her on her vocabulary the next day.

She didn't like talking to me or the other kids much. She spent time by herself at the pool or with the other adults cooking chicken and dumplings. She had become a master at rolling dough and sprinkling just the right amount of flour. She said she liked to watch Paula Dean, but she turned the sound off and the captions on because she didn't want to sound that Southern. She wanted a Midwestern accent because she had heard it

was the least identifiable of all the American accents. Sampson had her listen to the DIY network instead and try to mimic the accents. She rarely corrected any of our English anymore, only laughed daintily like she had been taught to do in awkward social situations.

My speech wasn't nearly as refined as Julianne's. I knew English because I'd grown up in the states, but I thought in Spanish; my father had always made it clear that Spanish was my first language, so I had to translate most of my thoughts, and they usually came out sideways, not unlike the other kids' attempts. By now, we knew each others' weaknesses. Leo wasn't nearly as intimidating as he wanted to be. His voice was high-pitched and he had a lisp when he spoke in English. The Saudi twins had very pronounced vowels, and I often got the syntax of sentences backwards. It didn't overly matter who had the best speech. None of us were close to Julianne. We were all racing for second place, vying to outlast the next. But we needn't have bothered.

Daisy was leaps behind on her speech translations and conjugations. She was only seven, but she had required age-level classes just like everyone else. Most of the kids avoided her now, but they would find her every so often brushing her dragon's imaginary hair and writing Mandarin symbols on pages torn from the house phone book. Once, we wanted to order pizza from the local pizzeria, but the number had been stolen, ripped from the book. Later, Sampson had pulled it from under Daisy's bed. She had to rewrite everything she had written, but this time in English, and on lined notebook paper. We wanted to ask what this would do when eliminations came around, but we were scared to know the truth. Scared we already knew it.

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The first elimination wasn't far away, and we were all anxious. No one wanted to be here, but we didn't want to go home, wherever that was. I had heard Robby talk about the families who had been deported. They were sent packing with a plane ticket. Julianne liked to tell us the story of one family in particular; she had watched the two previous seasons of the show and knew all about what was going to happen. She said only the hopeless cases went home first. The director got them out fast, before the ratings fell. And so we all wondered what it would be like to be the first home, even if we knew we wouldn't be.

It would mean green chili for me and grandparents for the first time I could remember.

Julianne slipped up once while we were sitting on the edge of the pool and said she missed the Queen's Parade. When I asked her what that was, her eyebrows drew down and she called me gormless. I thought it was some word that I hadn't learned in my lesson yet, but it was British for clueless. Despite the insult, I was glad to see that Julianne's natural English was not natural at all.

The third week of filming, Sampson announced that the kids would have a separate competition that would add points to the family name for immunity. All the kids were shown a YouTube recreation video of Betsy Ross sewing the flag. Then Sampson told us that we would be paired to make five of the American flags and explain what each flag symbolized. We would be judged on creativity, accuracy, and presentation.

“This is an event that this country was founded on. You all need a first hand understanding of the patriotism these flags symbolize. They are your flags now,” he ended in a proud voice. We understood that we too must value what the country valued.

Sampson paired each child with a child from a different family. He called each name, and everyone sighed in relief when they heard their partner. Except Leo; he was paired with Julianne, and he actually smiled. But everyone held their breath for the same reason. No one wanted to work with Daisy. She was harmless, but I didn't want to be paired with her now either. I didn't want to jeopardize my own chances for immunity. I had worked so hard at studying the textbooks Sampson had given us, and I even knew how to sew, but I didn't want to give Daisy an unfair edge any more than anyone else. Or worse, I didn't want Daisy to give me an unfair disadvantage.

We were the last two names called, and Faith looked at me with a sympathetic smile from one corner of her mouth. Sampson had been trying to teach her to smile pretty with her mouth closed because her teeth were too crooked for television.

“Great,” I mumbled, but smiled like our media coach had taught us to do in uncomfortable situations. I knew she wouldn't take the challenge seriously. All I ever saw her doing these days was jumping in the edge of the surf like that first day and singing songs to her dragon bear. It wasn't fair. They knew I would pull her weight.

When we got to my wing of the house, I snatched the fabric from Daisy's fingers. “I don't want to hear any whining about this,” I said. “Just let me finish it, and don't say anything stupid when we have to present it. I'll do the talking.”

“Fine,” she said, but the i was sharply long and the e sounded more like a g. I didn't say anything, and she went back to singing to her dragon. We had three days to

finish the flags. The first night I cut all the pieces out and laid them into piles by year: 1776, 1818, 1861, 1912, and 1960. I told Daisy to meet me back tomorrow, not that she was going to be much help, but I didn't want to lose because she was running around singing Chinese songs while we were supposed to be working either.

The next night I sewed all the pieces together. Red and white stripes, and stripes, and stripes. I decided not to sew each star because there were so many, literally hundreds, and used glue instead. I didn't think I would be docked any points. Sampson hadn't specified how we had to make the flags. I decided this was something that Daisy could do, so I gave her the 1776 flag and told her to glue the stars in a circle while I started on the others. I thought about the presentation while I worked. 1776. first sewn by Betsy Ross. 13 stars for thirteen states. The circle wasn't the only way the stars were arranged, but it was the most popular. 1818. Act of 1818 made the stars a permanent symbol to be updated when new states joined the union. 1861. the first confed ...

When I looked back to see how Daisy was coming, I leaped up and snatched the pieces of the flag from her. She had a pair of scissors from my sewing kit and had cut the flag into a cape for her dragon bear.

“What are you doing?” I yelled. “You've ruined it. I can't make another flag. There's no time.”

Daisy yelled back at me, but it was in Mandarin. Her dragon bear flaunted my tight-stitched red and white stripes, much longer than his feet and tied around the neck so that the material bunched at the back of his neck. I grabbed it from her and held it high above her head. She jumped and reached and screamed, but I didn't care. She was ruining

our productivity. There was no way we would win the challenge. I held the dragon higher, and Daisy stopped reaching for it. She jumped on me instead and punched my belly and pulled my hair. I was flat on the floor now, trying to roll on top of her, and she bit my arm as I switched the dragon from hand to hand. I yelled too and felt someone pull me from behind. Daisy was crying now and still reaching for the dragon when Sampson took it from me.

He took me to a room in the house where I had never been. It had a TV in one corner and one chair in the middle. It was probably as large as my living room in Arizona, but now it looked like a broom closet to my trained eye. Sampson made me watch a series on the proper way for business professionals to handle uncooperative co-workers. It was no use telling him that Daisy was more than uncooperative. Then he showed me video clips from previous seasons of the show. Families who had been eliminated early in the competition. They cried to the camera, said angry words in their own tongue. I didn't want to be them. They sounded pathetic. And now they had nowhere to go.

When Sampson let me leave, I went to the telephone room. No one was there, and I didn't have anyone to call, but I didn't want to face my parents' disappointment. So I sat under the camera where it couldn't see me, my wet cheeks, and my runny nose. That night when my parents had gone to bed, I snuck into my bedroom. Daisy was waiting for me on my bed. She held her pillow. She had drawn a four inch stick figure on the edge of the case; it was primitive, but I knew what it was. I knew what she was asking. She wanted her dragon back.

“I’m not going to enable your reckless behavior,” I told her with my eyebrows up. I went to stand at the door.

“Please,” she said. She had slid from the bed and landed on her feet with a small slap against the tile.

“Your refusal to cooperate will not endanger my opportunity for success,” I said and held the door. She sniffed and let her mouth form a closed O, but she didn’t cry. She walked out the door without looking back at me. Her pillow dragged on the floor behind her, collecting the dust my mother hadn’t swept in weeks. *How can business be so cold?* I thought, then went to bed.

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The next day, I overheard Robby talking to Sampson about Daisy.

“She’s not learning,” Sampson said. He took a swig of coffee and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He started every day with a tall skim mocha latte. I had developed a taste for them, too.

“It’s taking her longer than the other kids, but she’s younger too,” Robby pointed out.

They were on the patio leaning over the railing, and Robby scratched the bandana on his head.

“If she doesn’t get on board soon, we’re going to have to take action before Washington does.”

“Gotta beat em to it,” Robby agreed.

I knew what *it* was, and I could have warned her parents. They had tried to make her sing the national anthem and learn the rules of baseball. They wanted to stay, but I didn't want her here anymore. She was slowing down everyone's progress, and she wasn't happy either. Each morning she came to the breakfast table with red eyes and chewed fingernails. Her already skinny frame was practically bone now; she wouldn't eat what Julianne cooked. If Washington didn't call soon, Social Services was going to.

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The next day, the show brought back the winners from the previous seasons to teach the adults how to fill out tax forms and build a financial portfolio. They taught us how to answer interview questions and write a resume. Casey, first season winner from Hungary, was now a teller at SunTrust Bank. She counted American dollars and wrote reports on profit and loss and presented them to her boss daily. She said that it was important that we all know the proper way to present our most marketable skills to employers. She smiled at each of us with the close-lipped smile that Sampson had taught her.

When she had shown us the right way to type a resume and the correct way to respond to interviewers, she gave us samples to correct. On the third resume sample, Rose looked at me and said, "This ain't hard at all." Casey had given us samples with obvious mistakes, but I knew it was because she was following the rules. The video that Sampson showed me said that any person in a teaching position should always present

problems that are solvable so that the learner feels confident in his or her success. I was glad these were easy, but the interview questions were harder.

We had to think on our feet, and our speech had to be accurate and natural. None of us did very well. Julianne had been practicing job interviews for weeks, and she still had to stop several times while answering questions. Daisy told her interviewer that she didn't think she had skills, but she could draw animals. Rose and Faith would not look at Casey when she asked them questions. In Saudi Arabia, looking at people in the eye is an act of disrespect. Faith stared at the brooch on Casey's jacket. I didn't say much of anything when it was my turn, not much of consequence anyway. I couldn't translate my thoughts fast enough, so my sentences were backwards, and I used the word great nine times in three minutes.

We practiced for hours on interviews. Eye contact. Feet crossed. Hands in lap. Don't fidget. Close your mouth. Don't squint when you smile.

Casey had done what she could. She told us to practice with the adults and to pay attention to each other. Noticing errors in other speech would help our own speech. Then Sampson announced that we would have to practice extra long because each of the children would have to tape an interview with *Entertainment Tonight* to be aired the next week. The winner would get immunity points. I needed them after the fiasco with Daisy and the flags. At least I wouldn't have to work with Daisy on this challenge.

But no one was ready for taping. I should have been excited. While I was growing up, my mother constantly reminded me how to answer prodding questions, even the ones

that I didn't have answers to. I was supposed to say, "I wouldn't want to give you the wrong information, so

I'll let you ask someone informed on the subject." I was pretty sure that wouldn't work here.

Casey said we should never appear ill-informed. How could a person be ill-informed and still not appear ill-informed? It was like ignoring the fact that we were all competing. It wasn't politically correct to discuss such cut-throat ideas in polite company, but no one forgot that we all hoped the other would forget to smile at the interviewer or accidentally look into the camera or forget how to speak altogether.

I decided that I would practice in the mirror at night like Casey had told me, but the house had very few full length mirrors because the cameras couldn't risk filming themselves and ruining a shot. I decided to watch myself in the glass patio doors to the pool. Everyone had gone to sleep, and the quiet forced me to minimize all of my motions as I sat in a kitchen bar stool two or three feet from the door. I held my breath as I adjusted myself in the chair and practiced my eye contact. It was strange to look at myself. I had pulled my black hair from my face like Casey told me, and I didn't have any pearls as she suggested, so I left my ears unadorned. I practiced smiling, adjusting my cheeks so that my eyes stayed open but not bugged. I looked nothing like myself. I was proud.

I practiced until I couldn't focus on my reflection. As I put the bar stool away, Julianne came down the stairs and went to the refrigerator. She hadn't seen me, and she stood at the sink drinking from the carrot juice that she made every other day. As she put in back in the refrigerator, I heard her mumbling.

“Rudder valve reversals. Rudder valve reversals. Rudder valve reversals,” she repeated.

“That's really good,” I said from my corner and watched her tense and relax.

“Thank you,” she said. “It's the hardest for me to say. The r's,” she finished. I walked to the sink and tried.

“Rudder valve reversals. Rudder valve reversals,” I said slowly. My r's rolled and I giggled before I realized what I had done. It was hard, but I didn't want Julianne to have any more confidence than she already did. “Keep practicing,” I said. “I'm sure you'll get it.”

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The next morning, Julianne made biscuits and sausage gravy. She had gotten the recipe from *American Eats*, and she added a whole teaspoon of Crisco to the gravy to make it extra American. When she set the plates on the table, Daisy smelled it and scraped the gravy from the biscuit before deciding on her milk instead. She had not developed a taste for orange juice yet. I picked up my plate and walked toward the patio. I wanted to practice looking in the glass again before our interview that afternoon.

“You should try your biscuit, Daisy,” Julianne said behind me. “It's part of a complete breakfast.” She got the last part from cereal commercials. I wondered what the other part was because it was bound to be better than this looked. The gravy was the color of glue

and it lay in big globs over an overbrowned biscuit. I could see their reflections behind me in the door, and

Daisy stuck her tongue out at Julianne and blew, spitting on the steaming food in front of Julianne.

“Bloody brat!” Julianne yelled and stood. Her chair scraped against the floor, caught on the rug, and fell backwards with a smack. Daisy jumped from her own chair and grabbed a handful from her plate and chunked. When it splattered in Julianne's hair and drooped from her face, Daisy squealed and ducked under the table. When Julianne squatted and tried to reach her,

Daisy slipped out from under the other side of the table and ran toward me.

“Catch her, Carmel!” Julianne yelled from under the table.

I watched Daisy run by me in the reflection and purposely turned around too late to catch her. And my hands were full, too.

“Sorry,” I said to Julianne. “She's quick.” I turned around and leaned to open the glass door to the patio. I still needed to work on responding without pausing unnaturally. I needed to translate faster in my head.

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Sampson gathered us all at the bottom of the steps of the patio that led to the beach. The reporter would take us one by one and interview us at the edge of the water. Sampson gave us a list of questions that the reporter might ask so that we could practice

with each other before our turn came. Daisy looked at it and started drawing pictures. She still couldn't read well, English or Mandarin.

The beach felt different than it did the first day Daisy and I came here. Then it had felt like freedom. It was fun. Now I noticed the curves in the beach line that secluded us from the rest of the world. Other people didn't walk this section of the beach. It was ours. No one else wanted it. I wanted to feel the sand and remember that first day, to stand barefooted in the surf and smell the mud. No one stopped to smell the mud anymore.

I would ruin my suit. The sand would stick to my feet, and I would never get them back in my nude pumps my mother shopped specifically for. So I stood in the sand with the other children and wondered what the reporter would ask. I hoped it wasn't anything about what I had learned. I hoped it wasn't anything that required words with r's.

When Sampson called my name, I walked to the chairs set up by the water. The tide was higher than when we first gathered at the bottom of the patio stairs and it lapped close to the chairs now. The first few questions were easy. The reporter asked my name and where I was from. I concentrated on smiling and making the r in Carmen as flat as I could. It didn't roll, but I did not breathe easy. The ocean air was not cool like it normally was. The wind was hot and it reminded me of the boiling Arizona summers when ground critters hid in shadows to keep cool. I flipped the hair from my neck, wishing that the interview would go quickly. But she kept asking. And I forgot the hours I had practiced in front of the mirror.

“What is the most beneficial segment of the show for you?” she asked.

I didn't know. I had no idea. I paused. I wasn't supposed to pause. I spoke. "I wouldn't want to give you the wrong information," I began, "perhaps someone more informed on the subject can tell you."

That was wrong. I knew that was wrong. I would answer the next one naturally, like I had practiced. Don't over-think. Smile. Answer.

"Why do you want to be an American citizen?" she asked.

"Yo no lo quiero," I said and stopped. *Shit*. English. "My parents want me to get a fine American education," I said and smiled without squinting my eyes. I didn't think the smile would matter.

"You don't?" she asked immediately. It hadn't mattered.

*Damn*. What was I supposed to say now? Casey hadn't taught us how to recover from something like this.

Eye contact. Eye contact. Feet crossed. Hands in lap. Don't fidget. Eye contact. I looked at the others huddled feet away on the sand. Faith and Rose were brushing each others' hair. Leo picked the dirt from under his fingernails and smoothed back his gelled hair. Julianne reapplied her lipstick in a compact mirror, glanced over it to me, and smiled at me like Sampson had taught. She was the best interview smiler. And she knew I had messed up. She looked back at the mirror. The slap was immediate. She hadn't said anything, but her satisfaction was loud, obvious.

I looked back to the reporter. She was waiting with her eyebrows raised, lips parted, and the cameraman moved closer to me. They had me boxed in a triangle.

“America is almost....” I started before the surf hit the back of my chair and rose to hang in the air before diving back to the water that had made its way to our feet.

“Let's move up before she gets too wet for the rest,” the reporter said and was already sliding from her chair. I looked down. The water was lapping under me. I swung my feet out and vaulted my body to clear the water, but my new shoes sunk in the foam and more droplets dashed the air.

I heard a squeal. I must have splashed the interviewer and looked up to see how bad it was, but I saw Daisy instead, racing to the water. She had seen me jump to the water much like I had the first day with her. She had already taken her shoes off and sand flew behind in sheets behind her before the wind swept it away. Her feet hit the surf so hard that the water sprayed all four of us. Her steps made glugging noises like a two liter soft drink being emptied straight down. We were drenched. And I was saved.

But Daisy couldn't save herself from this. This was the media. And her stunt would get back to Washington. We would both be sent home if I didn't separate myself from her now.

“That is not how an American behaves, Daisy,” I said. “We are civilized.”

Everyone on shore was pointing now. Julianne had put away her lipstick and Sampson was jogging to us. This was one of the only times I had seen him without his Boston cap. He plucked Daisy out of the surf before looking back to me.

“It's all right,” I said in the flat voice I had practiced. “She doesn't know any better.”

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I wouldn't have to pretend to feel pride for a country I barely knew. I wouldn't have to pretend to be someone else because Daisy's family was being sent home. Sampson had taken her straight to her bedroom and pulled out her suitcase himself. I didn't feel bad. I wouldn't feel bad. She didn't want to be here. But she had saved me, and I was thankful. Later, I snuck to her bedroom door and almost left a sunflower on her dresser while her back was turned.