THE DOOR IS LOCKED FOR YOUR PROTECTION

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ABSTRACT

We are only afforded a small plot of land in this life, but as Candide reminds us, “the little piece of ground yielded a plentiful crop.” Gardens are at times beautiful, dressing themselves in the vibrant colors of spring. Gardens are at times dead, suffering the harsh realities of winter. Gardens are at times somewhere in between—like those that tend them—always living yet always dying.

Gardens require constant attention and careful work. Gardening takes patience and consistency. A garden must constantly be revisited. Adjustments need to be made. Things must be added or taken away in proper proportion.
Writers are at best gardeners. Their tools are simple. A clear head and steady hands do most of the work. There is no sitting and philosophizing over great quandaries. There is only rolling up sleeves and getting hands dirty. There is much to toil. Only under the right conditions, will the results yield what is intended. Hopefully, we get at least what is needed.

The life of a gardener is a difficult one, but man has done it since the time of Homer. I have learned the craft from those who came before me, and I hope to make a garden others will want to stroll through, to look around and see what I have created.

Raymond Carver was a gardener. Many would say there wasn’t much in his garden. They always say he was a minimalist gardener. I never saw it that way. His garden was a place for gathering and drinking and talking, an everyday place that revealed the human condition. But he buried so much underneath the dirt. In his garden there were often long silences, yet so much was said when there were no words.

I’ve learned from other gardeners as well. Flannery O’Conner had the amazing gift to do a lot with a little. Don DeLillo creates scary and prophetic gardens. The great Russian gardeners, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Nabakov, so often at the mercy of their harsh environment, inspire me. Anthony Doerr is a fairly new gardener, but one I still learn from.

The four gardens I have created here are simple ones. They may relate on thematic levels, but that is for the observer to decide after meandering through them all. People meet in these gardens, they talk. Sometimes they wish they hadn’t met and
sometimes they don’t want to talk. They search for a better way to live, but as is often the case, they don’t always find the right path. The people in these gardens struggle with the isolation we feel, even when together. They struggle with the possibility that an even greater isolation exists in the margins. These people yearn for a better garden, but they aren’t sure how to make their desires become reality.

We are at best gardeners. We toil. We sweat. But little by little we can improve our gardens. And it is good to know that this solitary work is not done alone, even when we feel like we work and live in solitude.

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He noticed graffiti on the outside of the train, but it mattered little. He could not read the messages anyway. They were written in an indecipherable, unknown language. They only reminded him of his attempts at conversation with his son Mac. Though they slept in the same house, they lived separately.

Entering the car, he grabbed the first metal pole for support. His wedding ring clinked as his left hand hit the pole. He felt the metal edge press against the soft flesh of his finger. His eyes chanced a quick glance around the car. He was relieved when he saw it empty. The overhead fluorescent lights hummed above the pastel-colored seats of tangerine, aquamarine, and sea green below. The bright colors were stained with dark smudges, gum, burn marks. He looked down at his shoes. He felt the sole of his right shoe cling to the sticky floor. He kicked a tattered newspaper. The seats were all vacant. He slumped down into one. *Only six stops*, he thought.

The train lurched forward with a mechanical screech. A rattling noise on the floor caught his ear, but this late at night he knew better than to look. Instead, he looked at an advertisement above the window. “No way to live. No way to die. Say no to fur.” He closed his eyes, rubbing his palm down his face.

At the next stop, he didn’t hear anyone enter, so he opened his eyes and looked across the aisle. He regretted his decision. A man lay on his back across the pastel seats, his head tilted back, his mouth open. He saw the man’s eyes were rolled up to his
forehead, but at that angle, the eyes seemed to be staring directly at him. *When did he get on*, he thought. He stared at the two vacant eyes.

The rattling noise continued. A needle tumbled across the aisle and tapped him on the foot. He looked down. Whatever was inside looked gelatinous. Before he could kick it away, the needle rolled back across the floor with the rhythm of the subway.

He looked across the aisle at the man on his back. The eyes stared at him. The man wore a black vest over a shirt, which peeked out near the bottom, untucked. The shirt, obviously once white, was unbuttoned to the chest, revealing a necklace and a cross nestled in black chest hair. The man’s left arm dangled toward the floor, palm facing outward. Blood trickled down the forearm in disparate paths but met at the wrist. From wrist to the tip of the middle finger, one thin streak of red ran toward the subway floor. A single drop of blood clung to the tip of the man’s finger, before falling to meet another, already on the floor. *Maybe I should check his pulse*, he thought. *But all that blood.*

This was a time he wished he did not have a wife. He imagined her seeing him like this. He could hear her voice in his head, the judgment in her voice, and the words *consorting with a junkie* in her judgment.

He hadn’t seen that much blood in a long time. He wondered if someone was going to die. *Should I help*, he thought. *Will someone else?* He looked around and saw no one. Then he thought about moving cars at the next stop. He looked back across the aisle. The man’s jeans, light blue and faded, looked too big. The thighs, soiled, the knees, nearly black. His fly was open. The man’s left leg stretched across the pastel rainbow of
seats. His right foot was planted on the sea green one, leg bent at the knee, leaning over his other leg. The man wore no socks. Dark ankles separated his jeans from a pair of black, tattered loafers.

He considered how clean he must look by comparison. The blood crawled down the dangling arm. The open palm, facing him, was caked with dirt, but the red streak of blood ran cleanly over it. He opened up his own palms and looked down at them. He looked back at the crimson streams and then at the eyes. *Inside the grave there's no more pain,* he almost said aloud. Instead he said, “Hey. Hey, man,” but his voice sounded quiet and distant and he didn’t say anything else.

Usually his wife Victoria would be asleep when he arrived home. He would try to be quiet but she would wake up anyway. She would yell at him for being out so late and being with Nikkee. Victoria would ask what kind of example he was setting for Mac. She wouldn’t mention that she was glad he came home late since it gave her more time with Kenneth and his BMW.

Tonight was different. They would be waiting for him. He wondered if they’d be in his bed.

His body swayed to the right as the train screeched into the next station. On the seats across the aisle, a lighter and a small bowl skipped from one seat to the next. The bowl, flimsy aluminum, was charred black at the bottom. He hoped the man would leave. The man did not move. The doors closed and the train rolled on. Four more stops.
He looked at the eyes, but wasn’t sure if those vacant eyes even saw him. They might be looking right through him. The pupils were so small and black, surrounded by a sea of white, like the speck of mold on a white subway station tile. The scruffy face looked simultaneously young and old. Stringy black hair oozed onto the tangerine seat. *Do those eyes think I can help? Am I supposed to act like I don’t notice?* Like so many other times in his life, he didn’t know what to do. Like his conversations with Mac. Like his first time with Nikkee.

He tried to look away. He didn’t. The blood was still there, fresh. It was still dark red and had not clotted. He watched another drop hit the floor. A pool was forming. He pictured the man inserting the needle into his flesh, his head rocking back, fist clenched, inhaling deeply, receiving the gift, bliss, such a state of metaphoric euphoria. *What did you do for this fix, junkie?* he thought. Maybe the man had given money, maybe he had given favors, maybe he had given his life.

He thought about his own life, all he had given and what he had gotten in return. He wasted his love and received only his wife’s resentment in return. His efforts in business only the homecoming of failure. He thought about all he would do if things would work out differently. If given the chance in life, he would change the past, his marriage, his relationships with his son and daughter, his life. But he knew that chance had passed. He knew his life was a subway car, firmly fixed in its tracks and heading toward the end of the line.
He looked at the man splayed across the seats, and saw his right hand in a loose fist, resting on his heart. He wondered if those eyes were dying before his own. He wondered if he was at a deathbed. He wondered if he was at a subway car funeral. *Maybe those eyes think mine are just as vacant,* he thought. He folded his hands in front of him and looked up. His brow furrowed and he shook his head. He unlocked his fingers and put his hands on his thighs. *Sorry, man,* he thought. *I don’t know any prayers.*

He looked away and saw another subway ad: “Latest AIDS Statistic: 0,000,000 Vaccinated.” He thought of his wife Victoria, a doctor at St. Mary’s Medical. He remembered back, a long way, to when they were in love. He thought of a sunny afternoon, the two of them riding bikes over mountainous roads. It was rigorous, but not purposeful. Twice she had to walk her bike up a hill. He peddled slowly at her side. They crossed an old wooden bridge, the cool water rushing below. Dropping their bikes in the grass, they found a boulder along the stream to sit on. Victoria tilted her head back, the warm sun making her golden hair shine. She looked at him, her eyes, so full of emotion. He tried to teach her to skip rocks. She threw each rock with too much arc, creating only a splash. Her laugh, light and delicate and sincere, followed each failed attempt.

But that was a long time ago. He couldn’t forget how he ruined it. He remembered when he knew that she knew he ruined it. He tried to make it right. He wanted to fix it. He asked her what she wanted for her birthday. *Anything,* he said.
Anything. He pleaded. She looked exasperated, defeated. She said 
Honesty. That was when he knew it was over.

Now he was stuck. He couldn’t afford to divorce Victoria. He knew she would leave him, he just didn’t know when. The word imminent tumbled through his mind. Maybe tonight, he thought. He figured she wanted him to suffer in anticipation, like waiting for a doctor to pierce your arm with the needle. At times like these he pictured her in the passenger seat of Kenneth’s BMW, her hair whipping in the wind. That look in her eye, now reserved for him. That laugh, now for his jokes.

He knew Kenneth. They met once at a party. He remembered how Kenneth had looked at his wife. Kenneth told him he was an artist, and he would love to photograph his wife sometime. Victoria smiled and touched her ear when Kenneth had said that. He knew what Kenneth meant by the word photograph. He knew at that moment that Kenneth would take everything, his wife’s look, laugh, body. Months later, trying to hurt him, she told him about Kenneth fucking her—that’s the word she used. Then she said, “But I hate the name Kenneth.” He told his wife, “I hate Kenneth too.” But he knew that was a lie. He knew who he really hated.

He looked at the man lying on the seats. A pack of cigarettes peeked out of his pocket. The top was open. It was empty.

He moved in the seat but didn’t feel any more comfortable. This time of night the subway smelled, even when empty. He had no car. So he took the subway in the middle of the night from Nikkee’s studio apartment. This subway would take him home.
This subway would take him away from home. This subway would take him where it chose. Hundreds of miles of track, but the path was predetermined.

He thought the eyes blinked. Then they did. *I wish I could take a picture of this junkie,* he thought, looking at the man’s gaping mouth. He slipped his hand in his coat pocket and touched a wadded up piece of paper he had nearly forgotten. He took it out, uncrumpled it, and stared. Victoria had left the note on the kitchen counter that morning. “Have something to tell you. Will talk when you get home. Kenneth will be here too. —V.” As he read the note again, his own eyes opened wide. He began to breathe more rapidly and he could feel the coolness of the sweat on his forehead. He clenched his fist tightly around the piece of paper and scratched at his bulging forearm. His vision blurred.

He watched the doors. Opened. Closed. He looked at the sign on the station wall. *Can’t be right,* he thought. *Plinser already? What happened to Stetson?* He realized he’d been lost in his head and missed the last stop. Rolled through without even noticing. He was getting closer to home. He thought he would rather be anywhere than here, across from those vacant eyes, but was cemented to the seat. He put his elbows on his knees, resting his forehead in his hands. Two more stops.

As the train gained speed, his head leaned to the left and he rolled his eyes up to his forehead. He noticed an ad with a picture of a man. He looked miserable. “Painkiller Addiction: Chances are you know someone who needs help.” *I do,* he thought. *I really do.*
He thought of his daughter Teresa’s eyes when she overdosed. *She couldn’t even do that right*, he thought. She bought a super-saver bottle of aspirin and took the whole thing. Three hundred and fifty tablets. When they found her, she had red paint in horizontal streaks across her cheeks. She thought she was some Indian chief’s daughter, but he remembered it was not Pocahontas or one of the famous ones. Some unknown Indian princess, foaming at the mouth, looking up at her father with vacant eyes.

When his daughter died, he was supposed to be home, but wasn’t. He had gone for a quick early evening romp with Nikkee. It was a still new for him then, and he figured as long as he got home before Victoria everything would be fine. When he found his daughter, her body was cold and limp, there was barely any struggle left in it. He called the paramedics, but it mattered little. Victoria blamed him. Mac followed his mother’s example.

Teresa died two weeks before her seventeenth birthday. She never got to open the birthday present he had bought her. A framed picture of the two of them, the only one he could find where they both were smiling, and a pair of boots, not the expensive ones she wanted, but another pair he thought would be good enough. He remembered laying the wrapped box in her coffin, the red bow contrasting with her pale dead skin. His son Mac had stared with vacant eyes at his older sister’s casket.

He looked up and noticed his own reflection in the smudged window across the car. He tried to focus on his own eyes, but couldn’t find them in the distorted image. He only noticed how his face looked young and old at the same time. *Such an empty, wasted*
life, he thought. A crackling beep and a recorded woman’s voice announced his fate. His stop was next.

He thought of Nikkee, the girl he just left, and his relationship with her. She was a decade younger, loved the sunshine, lacked cynicism, and alleviated that feeling that he was marching to his grave. He looked at the bloody arm across from him and thought of the band that had tied it off. *Nikkee is my band,* he thought. He knew he had nothing to offer her. He thought about never going back. It would be best for her.

He put his head into his arms, closed his eyes. *What would someone else do?* He provided no answer. Instead, he reached his arm out toward the man lying on the seats, but retracted it when he felt it getting too close. The sound of the train on the tracks penetrated his head. Clak-clak. Clak-clak. Clak-clak.

He remembered late one night, looking out the window from his desk. Amber halos engulfed glowing street lamps. He watched a deer meander across the highway and thought, *What are the chances of survival?*

He looked up at the vacant eyes. He thought they stared back.

The train screeched to a stop at his station. Metal scraped against metal. Doors shuffled open, but neither he nor the vacant eyes moved. Looking over his shoulder out the window across the platform, he saw the train going the opposite direction. Inside the car he saw a boy who looked like Mac. He thought about calling out but he didn’t know what to say. He turned away from the window. The bell distorted itself through the speakers. The doors closed. He stayed cemented to his seat.
He looked at the man lying on the seats. He thought of giving the eyes some advice, but he wasn’t sure even he’d understand it. He glanced around the car. It was vacant.

The train pulled away from the station. He searched the vacant eyes for an answer, though he did not know the question. He stared into them, waiting. The train disappeared into a tunnel of darkness.
Silence saturates the still room. Darkness pushes into quiet corners. A black piano slumbers in front of the bay window. A layer of dust turns the baby grand silver where the light falls, grey where it does not. In the center of the dust is a solitary candle, burning in an ornate canister carved with a half circle and sprawling lines. The candlelight emerges through the canister, creating the illusion of a setting sun. Wind-blown snow batters the broad window. Beyond the windowpane is darkness.

Doris sits on the couch shaped liked stretched out macaroni. She looks at the black screen of the t.v. Before the couch is a glass coffee table with wrought-iron legs. Fish float placidly in the tank adjacent to the t.v. The tank’s florescent light makes their blues more bold, reds more rich, and violets more vibrant. Light from the tank pushes into the room. Two thick coats hang next to the front door. Under them is the antique wooden record cabinet. At times sonorous music crackles through the house. Next to the record cabinet, a lamp offers only enough light to occupy the space immediately surrounding it, drawing a circle on the floor below. Near the macaroni couch, a quiet man with a thin moustache rests in the chair, checking his watch.

“Well, we should get back to it,” says Doris. The man nods and smiles at her. He gets up from the chair. Doris hands him a box. He stoops to grab a piece of newspaper, shaking one piece free from the rest.
The two work in silence, plodding from one task to the next. Doris stacks picture frames and hands them to the man, who wraps them in newspaper and places them in a box. She gathers books, handing them several at a time to the man. He piles them in another box. Doris scans the room. The man patiently waits. The sound of metal sliding into metal startles Doris. She hears keys jingling on the opposite side of the door. It opens, and cold wind forces itself in. John steps in quickly, turning his back to the room to close the door. He stamps his shoes on the mat at the base of the door. Snow falls. He shakes his coat. More snow. He unwraps the scarf around his neck and peels off his coat, hanging it next to the two already there.

Doris and the other man stare at John.

He turns to face them. No one says anything as John surveys the room. Doris stands near the couch, empty handed. The other man, behind Doris, holds an empty box. John studies each of them.

“John?” Doris says.

“What are all these boxes for?” John says.

“John,” she says again. “You’re—” She shifts her weight to her other leg. She coughs into her fist, and then places her hand on her chest. “Why are you here?”

He stamps his feet on the mat once more and then says, “Cold enough to die out there tonight. Is the cat in?” He moves toward the bedroom door, but sees it slightly ajar
and stops. Looking through the door, he sees a stack of boxes labeled with his name.

“Jesus, Doris.”

He turns to face Doris. Opening her right palm toward the man behind her, she says, “John, this is Ray—”

“You’re packing up my stuff already?” John says as he navigates the darkness past Doris and the man, looking at neither of them. He reaches the fish tank. Stooping slightly, he opens the doors of the cabinet the tank rests on. He grabs a glass, leaving Doris and the man for the kitchen. They are silent. They look at each other. He returns and sets the glass full of ice on the edge of the cabinet. The light from the fish tank dances through the tumbler. He reaches back into the cabinet, grabbing a fifth of scotch. He unscrews the cap and pours a drink. He migrates to the opposite side of the room, maneuvering his way through boxes.

John shakes the ice in his tumbler, standing between the piano and the bay window. He gazes outside into the darkness. A streetlamp in the distance is obscured by the driving snow.

Doris whispers to the other man and they begin their work again.

John takes a drink and notices a small alabaster carving on the window seat in front of him. He picks it up, turning it over in his hand. He had seen the sculpture in a window shop in the south of France many years ago. The shop owner kept saying, “Avant garde. Nice piece.” John thought the abstract carving looked like two people embracing, so he bought it for Doris. John’s memory breaks as the other man takes the
sculpture out of his hand and walks away. John turns, reaching at nothing but the man’s back. He glowers at the man, watching him wrap the sculpture in newspaper and place it in a box.

John blinks several times. “Okay, everyone just stop for a minute. Just sit down, everybody.” The man looks at John, then at Doris, who nods. She sits on the couch. The man settles back into the chair.

John begins to pace around the living room. The wood creaks beneath his leather shoes. He watches his feet as he walks. The charcoal tweed jacket hangs on his shoulders. He stops to inspect the bare wall where familiar photos once hung.

Doris breaks the silence. “I don’t want you to feel bad, John,” she says.

“I don’t feel any way in particular,” he says, still entranced by the blank wall.

“What about you?”

“I feel terrible, John.”

“Terrible for what, Doris?” he asks. “What do you feel terrible for?”

“I don’t know. For whatever.” She spreads her arms and glances around the room. “For all this, I guess.”

“Geez Doris, it’s always the same with you.” He takes a drink.

She looks over her other shoulder, away from John. “Yeah, and I can see it’s always the same with you.” The words sneak out of the corner of her mouth, dissipating
before they can reach anyone else’s ears. She puts her palms on her knees, pulling her elbows into her lap. She quietly tucks her head to her chest.

The walls shudder as a gust of winter wind buffets the house. John moves from the dimness to the corner illuminated by the 40-watt bulb, casting glances at boxes on the floor. He sets his drink down hard on the record cabinet. Glass hits wood. “Well, where do we go from here?”

On the floral-patterned couch, Doris rubs her forehead with her fingers. Her nails are short and look as if they have been chewed. The fingertips are raw and pink. Her eyes are closed.

The nondescript man, sitting in the chair near the couch, watches her.

She looks up, craning her neck toward him. “I just don’t know.”

John opens the record cabinet and pulls out a drawer full of neatly filed vinyls. He walks his fingers over the cardboard sleeves and pulls out a record. “Here it is,” he says. John removes the record from the sleeve and puts it on the turntable. He lifts the arm with his index finger and sets the needle on the matted black surface. The needle wavers, scratching as the record whirls, then finds the groove. The Beatles’ “Two of Us” comes on. John sings along softly, “Two of us riding nowhere, spending someone’s, hard earned pay.” John looks up. He thinks he might say something but instead he takes a drink. The song continues.
Doris coughs and the man sitting in the chair leans toward her. She pushes her short hair over her ear. The man sinks back into the chair.

John hums as Paul McCartney sings: *On our way back home.*

“Are we really?” asks John to no one in particular. No one in particular answers.

John stands alone, the lamp illuminates part of his face. He is biting his lower lip. Sitting between the dim bulb and the fish tank, the man brings his watch close to his face and squints.

“We’re on our way home. We’re on our way home. We’re going ho-o-o-m-e,” John sings. As staccato drums beat, John says, “This song repeats a lot.” He almost follows with, I wonder if it’s because they couldn’t think of anything else to say. He says nothing instead.

The man shifts his weight in the chair. He puts his index finger against his temple and cradles his chin in his thumb.

“How did they know when to end it?” John says.

Doris, on the couch, stops rubbing her forehead. She reaches down and tugs at her sock. “I guess it just felt right, John,” she says toward the floor.

“It felt right,” John says, and scratches the back of his neck.

Doris gets up and walks to the fish tank. Brilliant colors dart among the rocks. They slow once they realize they aren’t in danger. She watches them, therapeutically. The
hum of the pump soothes her. Luminous bubbles drift to the surface. She exhales and smiles. Walking away from the tank and into the kitchen, she yells over her shoulder, “Would you like something to eat?”

John studies the man in the chair. He looks back at John. No one says a thing.

John leaves the light of the lamp, traversing the darkness toward the fish tank. He reaches into the cabinet underneath the tank and freshens his drink. He holds the glass up to his face, examining the ice in the tumbler.

John sings again. “Two of us sending postcards, Writing letters.” He blinks and then remembers. “Didn’t you at least read the letter, Doris?” he shouts into the kitchen.

“Of course I did,” came the reply, “What’d it say?”

“You and me chasing paper. Getting nowhere,” John says, amused with himself.

“It said what?” says Doris.

“Just.” He sighs and takes a drink. “Doris, would you come back in here so we can solve this thing? We’ve got decisions to make.” He looks at the floor, tapping an empty box with his foot.

“I’m cleaning my kitchen.” Water runs and a pot crashes into the sink.

“There’s no need to clean now, Doris. We both know it’s always been a mess.”

Doris returns with a bag of potato chips. She sets the bag on the glass coffee table and takes one of the three white plates. She bought the triangular dinner plates at a
garage sale while visiting her sister in Chicago last year when she first felt herself slipping away from the marriage. She made the trip thinking the distance would help. Putting a handful of chips on the plate, she takes a napkin, holds her floral dress against the backs of her legs, and sinks down into the couch. She surveys the other two plates sitting on the table, thinking they look like icebergs floating on a sea of glass.

The man with the thin moustache licks his lips but does not reach for a plate. Instead he stretches his arm toward a withering plant on the adjacent table. He pinches a dry leaf between his fingers. It crumbles and the pieces fall to the floor.

“I saw those ceramic mugs we got in Mexico,” John says.

“Don’t worry, Raymond will throw them out with the others,” she says.

The man in the chair stops turning plant leaves into dust and looks at Doris.

John shakes his head and moves back to the bay window. “When are you going to slow down, Doris?”

“Oh, pretty soon John. I’m getting divorced soon you know, so my life will be over.”

“Congratulations.” John shakes his drink. Ice clinks against glass. Doris looks at John. She shakes her head. He notices. “I’m just trying to exercise the demons.” She looks away. “I know you’d like me to exercise them,” John says, “but I just prefer to let them get out and run around a bit.” The harsh winter wind slams into the house. John keeps
his balance. He raises his glass, looking out the window into the darkness. “To you,” he says.

The man in the chair starts tapping his foot to the rhythm of the song.

John turns to look at him. “Who the hell is this guy?” asks John, pointing at him but looking at her.

“I already,” says Doris, but leans forward to put the empty plate on the coffee table.

John looks at him. He stops tapping.

Doris looks at the man. Her eyes soften and she smiles. He gets up from the chair and picks up a box.

John returns to his drink, and echoes Paul McCartney. “You and I have memories, longer than the road that stretches out ahead.” He looks at Doris and says, “This is us, you know.” She doesn’t respond. He says, “This song came right before The Beatles split.”

Doris gets up and goes to the closet. Her back turned to the room, she reaches onto the shelf for a yellow canister draped with a rag. She walks toward the piano, clutching the rag in her fist. John watches her from the other side of the piano, by the window. She wipes the top of the piano with sweeping circular motions. She lifts the burning candle, the flame dancing, to wipe beneath it.

“Why don’t you just sit down?” John says.
She continues wiping the piano, each stroke leaving a pale gleam of light in the black wood.

The man uses a black marker to write John’s name on a box.

John hums along with The Beatles *Two of us wearing raincoats, Standing so low.*

John, standing alone, says, “Are they saying *standing solo*? I thought there were two of them.”

Doris slams the canister on the piano. Her teeth clench. “Dammit John,” she says. “You think I *want* to do this?” She looks down and picks a piece of lint off her dress.

“Well if you don’t *want* to do this, why are you?” He looks into the bedroom.

Doris walks over and closes the bedroom door and then moves back to the piano. She turns to John. “What about Chicago?”

“Chicago?” He blinks and considers the past. His face flushes crimson. “Geez Doris, who’s talking about Chicago? That was almost twenty years ago.” He takes a drink. “See that’s your problem, you’ve been holding that against me for twenty years, Doris. Twenty.”

“It’s not just that, John.”

“Well then, what?”
Raising her voice, she says, “I just wish,” but doesn’t say anything else. Doris drops the rag on the piano keys and a dichotomous sound pierces the room. She drops her eyes, searching for something interesting on the floor. She drops her voice and says, “You never.”

“See what I mean?” John says.

The man stretches packing tape across the top of the box. He runs his palm across the top to seal it.

“I’m fighting for you now. Isn’t that worth something?” John says.

Doris inhales forcefully. Her eyes widen. She stares at John. “Is this what you call fighting for me? Showing up uninvited?”

“Uninvited? This is—well I’m doing the best I can now, at least.” He looks at the glass in his hand, then back at Doris. He sets down his drink.

“Now’s too late.” She puts her elbow on the piano, cradling her forehead in her hand. “When you had the chance, you never fought for me.”

“Doris,” John says softly. “You think I don’t know that Doris?” John turns his palm towards his face and looks at the ring on his finger. The man sets down the box in his hand and peeks at John’s finger also. John quietly repeats, “Don’t you think I don’t know that?” He looks at Doris’ naked fingers and then closes his eyes. “Getting nowhere,” he says.
Doris picks her head up and looks at the man. He stacks a box in the circle of
light beneath the lamp.

“Will you at least look at me Doris?” John says.

“The time for that is gone, John. It’s gone.”

“Is your love gone?” The words whisper out of his throat.

“I love you because I always loved you. But that doesn’t seem like a good reason
to love someone.”

“But look, Doris. Just look. Look at these boxes. What about our memories?
You’re filling these boxes with our memories. Others you’re just throwing out.”

The man clears his throat. Doris looks up. He motions to her.

Doris walks through the darkness to the man by the lamp. He leans down and
whispers in her ear. Doris eyes John, scrutinizing him.

“What did he say?” John asks. She says nothing in response. “Doris, what did he
say to you? I demand—I mean—don’t I at least deserve that?” Doris says nothing.
“C’mon Doris. I’m sorry for Chicago. I’m sorry for everything. You can’t be serious
with,” he says, pointing to the man without looking at him, “this guy.” The nondescript
man checks his watch and then glances back at Doris.

“John, you can’t be what I want. I want a man who can walk with his head up in
the rain!” She shouts. Her words spread through the room.
John’s head sinks toward the ground.

The nondescript man looks up but does not say a word.

“We’re going home,” says Doris.

“Better believe it,” says John. He picks up his drink. He shakes the tumbler. Ice clinks on glass. He peers out through window over the snow, the drifts now covering the bottom half of the window. There is only darkness beyond. The song ends. The record keeps spinning. Doris and the man stand next to each other. John, his back to the room, says, “I can’t believe the song is over.” A vacuous sound saturates the room. The candle on the piano extinguishes. Smoke tendrils waft into the air.
A sharp pain in her wrist forced Anna Lee’s eyes open. She looked at J.P.’s hulking back lying horizontally in front of her. His left shoulder rose and fell with deep breaths. She rolled toward the edge of the bed, reaching for the nightstand. Her outstretched arm revealed the auburn bruise around her wrist. Turning the alarm clock toward her, red numbers flashed in staccato rhythm. She snapped her neck toward her boyfriend. “John. J.P. John! Wake up!” J.P. muttered, the words still trapped in the depths of his sleep. Panicked, she reached for his body, touching him softly on the heaving shoulder. “J.P. The storm knocked out the power last night. You’re late for work.” His body tensed. She recoiled, putting her hand to her face, inhaling deeply. She looked down at her other hand, gripping the sheets. Her veins wrestled within her pale skin.

J.P.’s throat rumbled to life. “Annie, what the hell.” He rolled over to glare at her through one open eye. His lips made snapping sounds as he gnashed at the morning air.

“The storm, J.P. Look at the alarm clock. It’s blinking.”

J.P. kicked off the sheet and roused himself from the bed. He stomped to the bathroom, his feet thudding against the wood floor.

“Do you want me to make you something to eat?” she asked.
She could no longer see him, but she heard him say, “Like I have time Annie. Maybe if you woke me up an hour ago like you was supposed to.”

“Like I was supposed to? But the storm—”

“Yeah. You already told me about the alarm. It’s always the same shit. Now you made me late for work.”

Annie looked into the corner of the room, where a stack of J.P.’s boxes leaned into the corner. A crude hand had written “J.P.’s shit” on one of the boxes. The box on the bottom, slightly larger, was bearing the weight of the others. The same hand had scribbled “Don’t fuckin touch.”

J.P. came out of the bathroom wearing pants and holding a shirt. His muscular chest protruded, as if he were perpetually holding in a deep breath. He twisted the shirt down over his square frame.

“Oh J.P., you got a stain on that shirt. You should have let me wash it for you.” She pursed her lips together.

J.P. pulled his head back with his powerful neck and furrowed his brow. “Let you?” He shot a blast of air through his nose, and Annie thought of a bull ready to charge.

Slowly turning her head, Annie looked at the blank wall and thought about the Employee of the Month plaque with his picture that would never hang there. She looked back at J.P. A white nametag was pinned to his red shirt. The nametag was blank.
“Are we goin’ to Pa’s for dinner tonight?”

“Don’t know,” he said, bending over to lace up his boots.

“Well when will you know?”

“Don’t know.”

“Well I got to let him know, you know.” He walked out of the room while she spoke. His steps trailed away and she heard the metal porch door slam shut. She looked over her shoulder and saw the red numbers, still flashing, and fell back into the bed.

Annie sat on the couch, holding the warm mug between her hands. She looked at the front door, left open by J.P. Beyond was the rickety aluminum storm door, white from the paint, black from where it had chipped. Through the storm window was the swing on the covered porch, and the gravel driveway in the distance.

Annie loved the front door. Her father built the house years before, and the Colonial-style door had been his favorite touch. She remembered riding across town with him in his pick-up truck. Her father let her sit in the front seat. “Just don’t tell your Ma,” he said and winked. She remembered running around in the house while it was being built, her voice echoing through the vacant rooms. She remembered watching her father work on the door, for days, with a plane and chisel, carving the relief panels, crafting the decorative molding. She remembered the smell of fresh sawdust, and the smile on her father’s face when he noticed her watching him. “It’s solid oak,” he said.
Annie’s Pa moved across town when her mother died, leaving the house to his daughter.

Last summer, as they walked the grounds at the county fair, he told Annie, “When your Ma passed, I couldn’t bear selling that house to a stranger. Now,” he paused to look at Annie, “well.” He looked away and said, “J.P.” Then he didn’t say anything else.

Annie clenched the shag rug between her bare toes. She took a final sip of coffee and got up off the couch, leaving the mug on the table. She grabbed the laundry basket and walked to the bedroom, noticing how much cooler the wood floor was than the rug.

She opened the top drawer of the dresser, taking socks out to rearrange them with fresh, clean ones. At the bottom of the drawer, she uncovered a framed photograph she had hidden many months ago. She only took it out when doing laundry, and never when J.P. was home. She looked at the picture and smiled. She and Rhonda, her former coworker, smiled back. J.P. stood between them, his huge arms enveloping their shoulders. His eyes were wide and his mouth was open, caught in the middle of a laugh. She and Rhonda both had margaritas in their hands and sombreros on their heads. J.P. wore a baseball cap and a button-down shirt. She liked how her own big smile bunched up the skin under her eyes. Memories of drinking and dancing and laughing flooded her mind. Annie admired herself in the picture, her layered hair, her bright blue fingernails. She looked much younger in the picture. A smile like that will make any girl look young, she thought. She remembered the sense of freedom that night brought, like every night.
afterward would be just as full of promise and wonder. Her focus softened and she found her reflection in the glass. Pulling the frame close to her face, she saw the small bruise underneath her left eye, how it was green and almost healed. She stopped smiling. She gazed at her likeness and thought about how different it was than in the picture. She shifted her hand and covered J.P.’s face with her thumb. A grin crept over her face.

Returning it to the bottom of the drawer, Annie covered the picture with socks. “That was Anna Lee in that picture,” Annie said aloud. Then she thought, *That sounds too much like a eulogy.*

Annie’s name wasn’t Annie. Her real name, what she wished to be called, and how her Pa—and now only her Pa—called her, was Anna Lee. When she met J.P., her name changed to Annie. That’s what he called her, so that’s what others called her. She took her Pa’s slow drawl, proper pronunciation of her name, as love.

A girl named Anna Lee.

Her boyfriend called her Annie.

Annie scrubbed the plate with the blue sponge. The dishwasher had not worked for months. “I can fix her for ya,” her Pa had said on numerous occasions, but Annie always found an excuse to refuse him.

She picked up a plastic cup sitting on the counter. She recoiled at the smell of Kentucky Ten High. The smell of whisky always made her remember the same night.
She had been asleep. J.P. had been out shooting pool. She woke up on her stomach, pinned down, immediately terrified. A massive hand was suffocating her face into the pillow. There was only darkness. J.P.’s breath scorched her neck. She struggled to turn her head, gasping for air. He said, “Don’t make noise. The quieter you are the sooner it will be over.” As he spoke, his breath burned her eyes, and not even her tears could soothe them.

Annie sighed, put away the final dry dish, and walked into the living room.

“You thought I forgot about you, pretty boy?” she said, taking the blanket off Marty’s cage. “I couldn’t do that. You’re the only friend I got left.”

Marty was a Miligold Macaw—“Rare for these parts? Hell,” bragged Annie’s Pa, “Only one in the county, maybe only one in the whole state.” Annie’s Pa saved for months to buy Marty for his wife, saying, “Some people say these birds can live to be 80. Hell, it might outlast us all.” When Annie’s mother died, she left her only bird to her only daughter.

Marty hopped onto Annie’s wrist. Wincing as he wrapped his talons over her crimson bruise, Annie brought him out of the cage. She held up her arm to admire the golden feathers on his belly. “Who’s my beautiful boy?” she said, as her index finger stroked the green on his head. His blue wings rustled through the air. He gazed at Annie with eyes framed by swirling zebra stripes.

She walked across the room and lowered her arm. Marty hopped onto the back of the couch and began pacing back and forth. Annie walked around and kneeled on the couch cushions, facing him. “What do you want to do? You want me to read to you?” Marty’s head bobbed up and down. “Yeah? What you want me to read? I wish we could still afford People. I know how you liked that.” She looked at the table near the front door, and the small number of books beneath. She walked over and grabbed the one on top, its cover dusty from disuse.

Sitting back down on the couch, she read the title to Marty, “The Consequences of Communism. This was from my last class at Millstone, you know.” She paused, looking up at Marty. “Pa always told me education was my ticket out of here, but this was the last class I ever took there.” She opened to the middle of the book and pointed at a picture, reading the caption to Marty. A shirtless boy, his ribs looking like they would burst through his skin, stared with sunken eyes. His arm, like a twig, stretched forward, his palm open. She flipped pages and saw another picture. A man holding two bags stood like a statue in front of a long line of tanks.

_Somehow there’s never a sunny day in a Communist country_, Annie thought, looking at the pictures. _Or at least it seems that way._

Annie met J.P. on the Millstone campus. He worked for the grounds crew at the local community college. She remembered first seeing him as she came out of class. He wore a baseball cap, his sunglasses resting on the brim, a dirty white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and knee-length jean shorts. He was emptying a trashcan. She noticed
how easily he swung the full bag into the back of the golf cart. A cigarette dangled out of his mouth as he caught Annie’s stare. She felt herself walking towards him.

“You shoot pool?” he asked.

“I like to, but I’m no good.”

“Figures,” he said, smiling.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, brushing the hair away from her face.

“Pretty girls like you are never any good at pool.”

She looked down at the ground, watching her feet turn inward. “Well maybe I just need someone to teach me.”

“You been to Skinny’s?” He reached out his hand, holding a cigarette. She looked up, and even though she didn’t smoke, she took it. He flicked his lighter to life and held the flame out for her.

“Never been, but I seen it.”

“You should go there Saturday night. I’ll show you a thing or two.”

She found herself staring at his massive arms, bronze from the sun.

As she flipped through the book, she was reminded of how Communism, Satellites, and Eastern Blocs were always depicted: a mixture of grey and gray, swirling together with that end of the world feeling, the tyrant never far from his peasants’ daily lives. She looked at another picture in silence. Several men struggled to wheel a massive
boulder, balanced on two wooden planks, across a bridge. Behind them another man pushed something that looked like a coffin. A large, menacing man in a black coat watched them. When she read the textbook for class, Communism always seemed so distant, so impossible. Looking at the textbook now with Marty, she empathized with the people in the pictures.

She glanced away from the book, peering out through the windows. The sky had turned grey. Annie closed her eyes.

A sharp rapping against the aluminum door startled Annie out of her slumber.

“Yes? Coming. Just a second.”

Annie arose from the couch and stretched onto her tiptoes, her arms reaching over her head. She trudged over to the door, turned the knob, and pulled it open.

Two men stood on the covered porch. “Good afternoon, miss. I’m Pastor Fred,” said a short, older man with a long face. He had a sloped forehead, several chins, and a wide, crooked nose. Annie’s first look at his face made her think of cling wrap. She almost apologized, but realized she hadn’t said anything. Instead, she said, “Hello.”

The other man, much taller and even older, wore a gray trench coat, matching fedora, and a warm smile. He stepped forward and said, “I’m Senior Pastor Thomas. Hope we didn’t disturb you.” Deep creases crossed his forehead below the brim of his hat. Blue eyes penetrated from behind his horn-rimmed glasses. His hair, silver like his
moustache, peaked out of his hat and fell over his ears. “We’re from Living Life Ministries.”

“Oh no. Not at all. It’s nice to have visitors. I’m Annie.”

The short man, Pastor Fred, said, “Well, Annie, how nice to meet you. Are you a believer in God, Annie?”

“Well,” said Annie. She shifted her weight to her other foot.

“Whether or not you are,” interjected Senior Pastor Thomas, brushing back his trench coat, “we’d like to invite you to our Sunday morning service. We have a prayer service with the congregation and then fellowship.”

“Fellowship’ means donuts,” the short man said and chuckled.

“Yes,” the man in the trench coat said, and offered a soft smile. “Do you know where we’re located? Out off Old Blanton Road?”

“I’ve seen it. It’s on the way to my Pa’s house. Do y’all want some lemonade?”

“We wish we could, but a storm’s coming, and we hope to reach a lot of folks today,” said the short man.

Annie widened her eyes and said, “Well, a lot of folks round here need savin’.”

“I’m not sure how many people we’ll save going door-to-door, but we’ll see,” the man in the trench coat said.

“You should come by on Sunday. See if it’s right for you,” said the short man.
“Well I haven’t been to church since my mom left. I guess I just felt like something was taken away.” She looked at the ground.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother,” the short man said. “Where’d she go?”

“Heaven, I hope,” said Annie, “but I just don’t know for sure.”

The older man looked at her with soft eyes and said, “Annie, we are always at the mercy of our surroundings, but that’s exactly why we need God’s mercy.”

“It sure seems like I could use a little of that,” she said, touching the bruise beneath her eye.

“What happened there?” asked the short man.

“Oh,” said Annie, pulling her hand away from the bruise.

The taller man stared at her for a few moments, squinting behind his glasses.

“David once said to Gad, ‘Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercies are great, and let us not fall into the hand of man.’”

Annie looked at him and smiled. She leaned her head against the door frame and said, “That sounds like pretty good advice.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Lord knows I’ve fallen into the hand of a man once or twice. Maybe I should come on Sunday. Maybe that’ll set me straight.”

The short, crooked-nosed man winked at Annie and said, “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”
Annie looked at him, but her smile faded.

Then the older, taller man took a step toward her. He reached his left hand out, clasping both of hers within his. His right hand moved to her head, his thumb touching the bruise beneath her eye, his hand falling gently yet firmly on the side of her head. His thumb felt warm against her bruise. He moved closer, his blue eyes probing hers, and said, “There’s never a sign on a lighthouse that says, ‘This is a lighthouse.’”

Annie’s ears perked as she bit her lower lip. Entranced in the pastor’s gaze, she wrapped herself in his words. She looked in the old man’s blue eyes and felt lost, as if at sea. Her feeling of loss was not one of hopelessness or despair, though. She felt safe. She felt distanced from danger. The warm smile still permeated his face. Annie felt as if she knew him, knew him her whole life. Her head swooned and she clenched her hands within his. She wasn’t sure if she should say something, so she didn’t.

Instead, she thought of one humid night the previous summer, sitting on the porch swing with her father. They talked some, but mostly they just stared at the stars. During a long silence, Annie said, “Oh, Pa! A shooting star! Did you see it? You know I’ve never seen a shooting star before.”

“Make a wish Anna Lee,” he said, “and make it a good one.” Her father looked at her and smiled, but Annie did not notice. Her gaze remained on the darkness of the distant horizon.
The short man shuffled his feet and chuckled, but Annie could barely see him. “Well, we best be going now. Need to stay ahead of the storm. Hope to see you Sunday.” He turned his back to leave.

The man in the trench coat, his right hand still on her head, thumb against her bruise, said, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Have a blessed day, Annie.”

Senior Pastor Thomas slowly removed his hands, taking a step backward, studying Annie.

She said, “My real name’s Anna Lee.” She closed the front door and heard the aluminum door bang shut outside. She stared at the door as if she could still see the man in the trench coat on the other side. She stayed for several minutes, staring at the door. “My name’s Anna Lee,” she said again, and then went into the bedroom and began packing a bag.

Thunder rumbled overhead, reverberating through the walls of the house. Rain pelted the roof. Annie didn’t like the rain. It reminded her of Communism. Marty hated thunder. He sidestepped down his perch in anticipation of the coming clap, reversing directions when his cage shook.

The storm was just beginning.

J.P. said nothing when he walked through the door. He looked at Annie, who flashed a simple smile that J.P. did not return. “Hi J.P.” she said.
He grunted, tossing Annie’s keys and a pack of cigarettes onto the coffee table. As he walked toward the kitchen, she smelled whiskey. She scratched her nose and thought of that night.

Annie heard a beer can open. “John,” she said, leaning toward the kitchen. There was no response. Annie heard a pot slam on the stove and then slide across the counter and crash into the sink.

“How was the day?” asked Annie.

He came back into the living room. “Shit,” he said.

“Shit,” said Marty from his cage.

“Shit,” said J.P. scratched his thick neck.

The thunder rolled. It rocked the house. Marty squawked.

“Where’s dinner?”

“I thought we might go to Pa’s. We haven’t seen him in so long. What if we did tonight?”

“What if?” J.P. stared. Blinked. Stared. “If a bullfrog had wings, he wouldn’t bump his ass when he jumped.”

She sighed. “Aw John, c’mon. Can’t we? Please.”

Annie noticed J.P.’s lip curl into a snarl at the corner of his mouth. “Why don’t you just get in that kitchen and get started.” He took a drink and then wiped the foam
from his mouth with the back of his hand. J.P glared at Annie. “I’m gonna go change. When I come back I hope you started.”

He stomped toward the bedroom. Annie looked at a pack of J.P.’s Marlboro Reds on the coffee table. “Maybe it’s time I change, too,” she said. She took a cigarette, went to the kitchen for a match, and then walked out on the porch. She sat on the swing, watching the rain cascade over the gutters. Lighting the cigarette, she inhaled deeply, causing her to cough meekly. Lightning burst through the sky. Thunder rumbled a retort. Annie held the cigarette in front of her. She gazed at the long slender white body, and the orange tip, flashing brightly in the gusts of wind, only to dim a second later. She bit her lower lip and nodded to herself. Crushing out the cigarette, she rose from the swing and walked back inside.

J.P. stood in the living room, gazing at her. “Well looky here,” he said.

Standing to her fullest height, Annie stared firmly back at J.P.

“You making eyes at me girl? Like a brand new you. I tell you to get goin’ on dinner and instead you smoke my cigarettes.” He shook his head. “It’s a brand new you.” He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them. Her feet stayed anchored to the floor.

“Me and Marty are going to Pa’s for dinner, and we might stay awhile. Maybe then you’ll learn some to appreciate me. See,” she said pointing toward the door, “I already packed a ba—” The word was slapped out of her mouth and fell silently to the floor, unfinished.
“I don’t know what got into you today, but you best get it out. If you can’t, I’m gonna help.” His stout shoulders heaved.

She felt his massive hands clench her arms. He tossed her to the floor. She smashed her hip into the corner of the coffee table before she collapsed, her sobs muffled by the carpet. He shouted over the violent thunder outside.

She opened her eyes inches from the floor and focused on one strand of the shag carpet. The loop had been pulled from the base, appearing to tower above the rest. The top of the loop was open, while near the base the thread was twisted until it disappeared into the floor. Annie smiled. It’s like a tiny hangin’ rope, she thought. She stopped smiling.

She found the strength to lock her legs long enough to stand. She swung wildly, scratching his face. He reached for her, but was only left with a handful of her blue blouse as she fled to the bedroom. She slammed the door and locked it. Disheveled hair covered her tear tracks. She tasted sweat. Running to the far side of the bed, she glanced around the room. The thumps and heaves of her chest created an off-balanced, uneven rhythm.

The storm loomed. The thunder rumbled longer and the lightning flashed brighter.

She heard nothing from the other side of the door. She thought about the previous summer, sitting with her father and sipping sweet tea from sweating glasses. Annie admitted she almost called the police once. “Aw, that won’t do nothing. Police can’t never do anything until somebody ‘does something’,” Pa said, staring at the radio
tower in the distance, watching its flashing lights warn local planes, “but by the time that happens, time they actually ‘do something’, it’s usually too late. You should just let me take care of it.”

“It’s like you say Pa, ‘When the seconds count, the police are only minutes away,’” Annie said. She stifled a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand.

Her Pa soaked in the silence, taking a drink of his tea. The ice cubes knocked against one another. He looked at her and offered a weak smile. “You know Anna Lee, you only see the good in everybody. That is your greatest strength and your greatest weakness.” Annie looked down at her sandals.

Cowering behind the bed, Annie stared at the door. She used her palm to move hair away from her face. She glanced around the room, darting to the dresser to grab a small pair of scissors before retreating behind the bed again. She saw no way out. There were no policemen. There was no phone in the bedroom. She clenched the scissors like a dagger.

She heard Marty in the living room, whistling and squawking. Then his sounds were drowned out by J.P. “You picked the wrong day to fuck with John Preston Fuckin’ Steele.”

She could hear his boots stomping toward the bedroom as he screamed, “You won’t be worth a pitcher of warm piss when I’m done with you.” He finished his sentence, as if all in one motion, with a thunderous kick that rocked the bedroom door off its hinges. Splintered wood exploded into the room.
J.P. stood at the threshold, filling the doorframe. He put four fingers against the side of his face, then drew them away to look. He turned his hand toward Annie, showing her the blood. He said, “Seems like normal lessons won’t do.” He looked over his shoulder at Marty, who tried to fly away, but bounced against the roof of his cage.

“Okay Annie,” J.P. said.

“No J.P.!” Annie yelled. She held the scissors above her head as she ran at him. She felt the thump on the side of her head, and there was a brief ringing in her ear. Then everything went dark.

Annie opened her eyes and saw the red numbers of the alarm clock flashing in front of her face. She was lying on the bed. Well, she thought. I’m in bed. His usual apology. She tried to piece together how long she’d been there. The storm still raged outside, the vibrations rumbling down her spine. Before moving, she listened for something, anything. She concentrated on the smallest sounds, waiting for some sign of where J.P. was.

I never thought silence could be this loud, she thought. Listening for J.P.’s footsteps, she heard nothing. Hoping to hear Marty’s squawks, only silence remained. She even longed to hear Marty curse. Something. She heard only rain against the roof. Annie looked at the remains of the bedroom door, and then out into the living room.

She swung her feet softly onto the floor and stood up. Unbalanced and lightheaded, she braced herself against the bed frame. She took two deep breaths.
Annie crept toward what was left of the bedroom door, stepping over fragments of wood. She peered into the living room. Nothing. Cautiously, she leaned out into the room so she could see it in its entirety. Nothing. She saw the solid oak front door, open. The white storm door was also open, rhythmically bumping into the side of the house, the winds swirling in the corner of the porch. Annie’s looked into Marty’s cage. Nothing.

She tried to convince herself Marty had somehow escaped, though she always locked him back in his cage before J.P. got home. Thunder rumbled. She shuddered.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the alarm clock, flashing intermittently. She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. She spread her hands wide, fanning out her fingers, and then clenched her fists. She exhaled and opened her eyes.

Annie inched through the living room and into the kitchen, searching for signs of Marty.

A primal scream from the backyard rivaled the thunder. She dashed toward the window. She saw J.P. His back was to her and he was bent over like he was holding something between his knees. He was no longer wearing a shirt. His elbows flared out and the muscles in his back tensed intermittently. He looked like he was wringing out a rag.

“J.P.!” Annie yelled, slamming her knuckles against the window.

He looked over his shoulder, saw her, and grinned. Lightning flashed, revealing all of his off-colored, uneven, sharp teeth. He turned to face her, one hand still behind
his back. His eyes were wide, the rain running off his shaved head. Blood mixed with
water, and trickled down his face. His body swelled with deep breaths.

_His eyes, Annie thought. That's what hell must look like._

“See. See Annie. See what you did, Annie,” said the muffled voice, strained
through the pouring rain and the closed window.

Annie, though trembling, moved toward the window. She approached J.P.,
pressing her face against the window pane. Rain splashed against the window and rolled
down the glass.

From behind his back he brought a fistful of magnificent blue tail feathers. She
shrieked, raising her right hand to her mouth. The feathers were so radiant, so pure.
They shined so bright against the grey gray of the storm. They shined even brighter next
to J.P.’s sinister darkness.

Outside, J.P. stared at Annie through the pane of glass. His eyes were wide and
calculating. He shouted, “I see you crying, but this is cause of you!” He looked as if he
felt vindicated. He sounded far away, drowned in the storm.

Inside, Annie was finished crying. Her face was still pressed against the
windowpane. The rain made tear-like streaks down the glass. Annie brushed her hair
back with her hand. She watched the rain stream downward and continued to gaze out
the window.

The two stared at each other.
Outside, J.P. continued to hold up the feathers, his arm waver ing. He wiped the rain-thinned blood from his face with his forearm, and continued to breathe with a heaving chest. To Annie he seemed to be sinking into the pool of water that had gathered on the lawn.

Inside, Annie gazed at the feathers, barely seeing J.P. any longer. She slowly backed away from the window. Finally, she withdrew her eyes from what was beyond. She turned her back on J.P. and walked across the kitchen.

Annie ran her palms down the front of her blouse, trying to cover what J.P. had taken. In the living room, she looked at Marty’s empty cage. She thought of her mother, who would never come back. She thought of her Pa, who would take her back. She thought of the elderly pastor who had visited earlier in the day.

Annie took the car keys off the coffee table. She drifted toward the front door. Bending down, she clenched her packed bag in her other hand. She stood before her Pa’s beautiful front door, still open. The outer aluminum door, unlatched, flapped in the breeze of the dying storm. She looked out through the open doors. A single ray of light penetrated through the dissipating storm clouds, touching down on her rickety car in the gravel driveway. She saw the interior light, flashing on and off. Annie stood there, anchored to the floor. Anna Lee thought about the lighthouse.
Wanted and Unwanted Things

The thing I want most is for her to be around. I like it when she is around. In the winter, she makes me feel warm. In the summer, we laugh in the sun. We have a good relationship. Her touch is soft. Her voice is nice and soft too. Unless she is angry, then sometimes she screams. Loud. It’s okay though. We have a good relationship.

The thing I don’t want is for her to not be around. When she’s not around I am lonely. When she’s not around nothing happens. When she’s not around it’s dark. Sometimes spiders come. There is no talking. There is no music. There is no light.

She’s not around right now. She supposed to be around, but she’s not here. I’m waiting for her. They brought me here to wait. That was a long time ago. They said they would explain everything, but when they did, I didn’t understand. They don’t explain things like she does. I want her to tell me. Sometimes a stranger comes in to talk to me, but I don’t like when people I don’t know talk to me. She told me I have to be careful around people I don’t know. There are other boys my age here, but I don’t talk to them. I don’t like this place. She was supposed to be here a long time ago. I feel like I’ve been here a long time. I think she’s still mad at me because of the soda. Whenever she is around, though, I feel lucky. Lucky is when someone throws something at your head but misses. Then someone always says, That was lucky. I want her to show up soon, but I can wait.
She is pretty. She likes to look pretty. She made a necklace out of seashells she found when we went to the beach. Then she painted them all kinds of pretty colors. Sometimes she has a flower in her hair. Sometimes it’s yellow. Sometimes it's blue. It doesn’t matter what the color is, it’s always pretty and smells like the springtime. I like it when she turns on the radio. She sings so loudly. She gets really excited when the man named Van Morrison sings the song called Brown Eyed Girl, even though her eyes are not brown, so I know he is not singing about her. She laughs as she sings along with him. Her laughter is very nice. Not like some other laughter I’ve heard that sounds fake. She is not a very good singer but I like it anyway. She always screams the Sha-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-dee-dah part. She wants me to do it too, but when I try it I mess up all the la la la parts, and she laughs at me and tells me I’m cute. I like when she tells me I’m cute, but I like it more when she sings that part. It makes me think she is free.

Sometimes when she is around she talks on the phone. I like when she talks on the phone, even if I only get to hear what she says, and not what the other person says. I don’t say anything. I just listen. I get to learn more things about her when she’s on the phone.

Other times she talks to herself, even if I’m right there. I know she’s talking to herself because she doesn’t say the word you. If it was only me and her and she said the word you, I know she would be talking to me. But she doesn’t say you. When she talks to herself, she talks about other people. Sometimes I know them and sometimes I don’t. She never asks me any questions, though. Even when I know the people she is talking
about, she still doesn’t ask for my opinion about them. Sometimes she even says, “I’m talking but no one is listening.” But I am.

I liked it when her dog was with us. He was little. I’ve seen other dogs and he was a little dog. His actual name was Rufus, but she also called him nicknames like Snookums and Puppy Pup. He would run around in the car. He was little enough to run around in the car. He would climb up to the open window and bark and it would sound like a big red fire truck. She would rub the top of his head and tell him how cute he was. His fur was soft. I liked to pet his soft fur. He liked to lick me in the face. He always seemed excited, like every day was the best day of his life. His tongue hung out of his mouth.

I’ve seen her cry. That makes me sad. Her sadness makes me sad, but I don’t cry. I know there is nothing I can do about it, so I just let her cry. I don’t know if it helps her, but I hope it does. I would like to help but I don’t know what to do. I would let her squeeze me if it would help. I would let her hit me. I would let her nails scratch me. If it would help stop her crying. Her fingernails are pretty. They are always changing colors. The last time it was hot, I mean really hot, we went to see the fireworks and she had little flags painted on her nails. Very pretty. Even if they were scratching me, they would still be pretty.

I remember when she got a new job, she was so happy. Her new job was in New York City. She taught me that New York City was also called The Big Apple. It was a nickname like Snookums and Puppy Pup for her dog. I didn’t know that cities could
have nicknames. I asked her why it was called The Big Apple but she didn’t know. Maybe they like to eat apples there, but I didn’t see a lot of people doing that. Some people, but not a lot of people. She said she always wanted to go there. We were in the car and she blasted Katy Perry on the radio and sang as loud as she could. The windows were open and her curly blond hair was flying everywhere. Sometimes when music is on she doesn’t sing, but just talks while the song plays. One time when we were listening to Katy Perry, she wasn’t singing. She was talking about Katy Perry’s boobs. She said she was jealous of Katy Perry’s boobs. I know what boobs are, but I didn’t know why she was jealous. She said Katy Perry’s boobs were big and soft. I figured Katy Perry rubbed her boobs on her, and that’s how she knew they were big and soft. The way she described them sounded nice. I just thought Katy Perry was someone on the radio, and not a friend that rubbed her boobs on her. Hopefully she’ll invite Katy Perry over sometime. I would like it if Katy Perry rubbed her boobs on me. I like when big soft things rub on me.

When we went to New York City, she was excited. She was driving and I was sitting in the back seat, even though I’m not a little boy anymore. She said it’s safer for me to sit in the back. She kept looking up at all the tall buildings and kept slamming on the brakes so she didn’t hit the car in front. She was staring up at all the tall buildings. It seemed dangerous but she was having so much fun that I didn’t say anything. She kept giggling every time she almost hit the car in front. And then went back to looking at the tall buildings in The Big Apple.
One time in New York City, we were just sitting in the dark. The new place we lived was cold and didn’t have many lamps. Her new friend Tracy was there. Tracy asked if I should be listening. She told Tracy, Don’t worry, he doesn’t understand. But I do. At least sometimes I do. She was telling Tracy she had been mugged. I don’t know what mugged is, but she was crying, so I guess it’s a bad thing. Her crying sounded like when she has the hiccups. Except the hiccups were wet and muffled her words. Tracy said, Just breathe honey. That sounded like unnecessary directions to me. She knows how to breathe. I’ve seen her do it without someone giving her instructions. She said, I feel violated. She said, He grabbed my crotch after he already took my purse. I know what a crotch is because I got in trouble for kicking a man’s crotch once. They said I can’t do that, so I think the man who took her purse wasn’t allowed to do it to her, either. She said he took more than her purse. I didn’t know what else he took, and Tracy didn’t ask, so I didn’t find out. She asked Tracy why anyone would live in this city. Tracy did not answer that question. I like it better when she is singing loudly and poorly and sounds free.

We’ve been together for years. I remember when we first met. I was at the place where I lived with all the other boys and she came to get me. She was so happy. She gave me a big hug and balloons. Her face got real close to mine and her eyes were like big gumballs. I figured she was happy because she was meeting me, but she didn’t say, so I just think of it that way. I was glad that she liked me right away. I like when people like me right away, and not only get used to me after a long time and think I’m just okay. I liked that she was happy when we met. It was good for her, too, because then I liked her
right away too. If she had been sad to meet me, I would have been sad too. But she smiled so big and was so nice to me, so I liked her. Then she took me to get ice cream. I think it was love at first sight. Sometimes I think I am right, but I don’t know. She’s complicated.

When it was cold in New York City, I saw her one night laying in her bed with her dog Rufus. Her door was just open a little bit so I peeked in. I know I’m not supposed to peek but she looked so sad, so I wanted to see why. Rufus wasn’t running around like normal. He was very still. He was just laying on the bed. She was talking to him, but he wasn’t moving. She was petting him, but he wasn’t moving. Her face was red and puffy. She said, Oh Puppy Pup why. But then she didn’t say anything else. I didn’t know the answer to her question because I didn’t know the rest of it. There was one tear rolling down her face. She said, I’ll just keep you here one more night. I just want you to sleep with me one last time, Snookums. She was talking and talking and talking. Sometimes to Rufus, and sometimes to no one. The dog looked so stiff. It didn’t move. I thought it was weird to sleep in the same bed as a stiff dog, petting the soft fur, but I didn’t say anything because she was so sad and I wasn’t supposed to be peeking.

One time she was in the passenger seat of the car, and a man was driving. She said his name was Oliver. She was yelling, I’m wasted, out the open window. I don’t know what wasted is but it sounded like fun. She kept laughing and poking the man in the face as he drove and saying Oliver Clothesoff. He said, You shouldn’t act like that in front him. He didn’t say you or look at me, but he threw his thumb back at me in the
backseat, so I knew he was talking about me. She said, Oh relax, I just had a little too much at dinner. I wasn’t sure what she had too much of. She ate a big salad at dinner. So maybe wasted is when you eat too much salad. But she was happy, so it was okay with me. She kept laughing and pulling down the front of her shirt with her finger. He kept telling her to stop. Wait ‘til we get home, he said. We’ll be alone, he said. Stop. And she just kept laughing. She put her hand in his crotch and he jumped. Whoa! I’m driving! C’mon! he yelled. I remembered that she didn’t like getting grabbed in the crotch, so I wasn’t sure why she did it to Oliver Clothesoff. She just kept laughing. I didn’t get the joke but I was happy that she was happy. And I thought I’d like to be wasted one day. It seemed like a lot of fun, and you can make jokes even if only you think they are funny, and someone keeps saying stop.

Soon after that she was crying to Tracy again. She was saying that Oliver gave her an STD. I guess she was talking about Oliver Clothesoff, because I didn’t know anyone else named Oliver. Sometimes she called him That Bastard or Motherfucker, so I guess those were nicknames for Oliver Clothesoff, like Snookums and Puppy Pup for her dog, or like The Big Apple for New York City. I didn’t know why she was mad that Oliver Clothesoff gave her an STD. She normally likes getting gifts, so I didn’t know what the problem was. Maybe she asked for something else, and got an STD instead. I remember one time she got something for Christmas she didn’t like, and so we returned it to the store. She said getting an STD was the worst thing that could happen to her. I didn’t know why she didn’t just return the STD.
When the sun got hot again, she said, Enough. We’re going home. So we left 
The Big Apple and went back home.

She seemed happy again. She didn’t talk about Oliver Clothesoff or the STD she 
never wanted anymore. She started talking about someone named Brian. Then she 
started talking about him a lot. On the phone. To her friends. To her mom. She said he 
was so hot. Her mom said he was handsome. I heard her talking on the phone about 
him to Tracy. She said, You saw the picture? I told you! Isn’t he cute? It sounded like all 
the women liked him, so I guessed he was pretty good looking. She said he was the best 
guy ever because he got her chocolates and a card. She made it seem like no other guy 
ever did that for her before. She seemed to like the chocolates and the card from Brian 
way more than the STD from Oliver. Back then I still had not met Brian, but I thought 
he must be the best guy ever because of the way she smiled when she said his name.

I remember one time her mom was came over. After a while she looked at me 
and said, Go read your comic books in your room. I went to my room but I didn’t read 
any comic books. I was peeking out the door. I know I’m not supposed to peek but I 
wanted to know what they were talking about. Her mom said she got cancer. I didn’t 
understand some of the next part but she said it was on stage four or something like 
that. I didn’t know what cancer was, but the next time her mom was around, all of her 
beautiful curly blond hair was gone. I figured she got her beautiful curly blond hair from 
her mother’s beautiful curly blond hair. After dinner I got to play my video games, but I 
wasn’t really playing. They were still at the table and they were talking and I was listening,
Her mom said, I’m not going to, but then she started crying so loudly that she couldn’t say anything else. Her mom sounded like she was having a hard time breathing. Too bad Tracy wasn’t around to tell her to breathe. Then she said to her mom, You’re going to be. But then she started crying like her mother. Her crying sounded different, but it still stopped her from talking. I waited for them to stop crying and finish what they were saying. But they just kept crying and hugging and didn’t say anything else. I didn’t understand why her mom didn’t just send the cancer back if she didn’t want it. Or we could have all taken a trip. I like to go to the store on sunny afternoons. We could have invited Katy Perry, and they could all sing while we drove around returning things they didn’t want like an STD and cancer.

After a lot of talking, I finally met Brian. He was handsome. She was right. He was really nice to her and he was really nice to me too, so I liked him right away. He gave me some X-Men comic books when he met me, so that maked me like him even more. I think he liked me too because he called me Bud. That’s not my name but she told me it was a nickname for when someone likes someone else. Brian taught me to make a fist and then hit his fist. He called it fist bump. I saw two black guys on TV do fist bump and they looked cool doing it. So I thought me and Brian looked cool too.

Brian was always giving her compliments. He said things about her eyes being shiny in the sun. It sounded better when he said it. One time he said, Those guys before me were blind if they couldn’t see what I see. I remember that one because it maked me think about Oliver Clothesoff. I wasn’t sure if Oliver Clothesoff was blind. I saw a blind
guy once and he had sunglasses and a big scary dog. I never saw Oliver with a big scary dog, but I did see him with sunglasses, and Brian seemed smart, so maybe he was right and Oliver was blind.

Brian had a deep voice. I liked the way it sounded. Sometimes he changed it when he talked to her. His voice would get real high, and then her face would turn red and she would laugh. She seemed to like his fake voice because she would talk back in a high voice too. One time we went through the carwash. She told me to get out and go inside. She gave me some money and told me I could buy candy inside and watch the car get washed through the big windows. The brushes were slapping the car and the water was pounding the windshield. I could see into the car a little bit, and it looked like her and Brian was on the same seat. She looked like she was jumping up and down. The car was moving slowly on the tracks, but she was moving very fast inside. Up and down and up and down and up and down. When I got back into the car, she was in her seat. She was breathing hard and brushing the hair away from her face. She said, real loud, My God that was awesome. I know awesome is a good thing, so they must have had fun going through the car wash. She was breathing really hard. After that we took Brian home. He said, The lake’s gonna be awesome tomorrow. I wondered if there would be more up and down awesome like in the carwash. Brian kissed her goodbye and got out. When he closed the door, she called her mom. She said on the phone, Yeah it’s pretty serious, and then smiled and her face turned red. He might be, she said to her mom on the phone. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but it sounded like a good thing because of the way she said it and the smile on her face. I hoped it was. I liked Brian. Then she said,
Don’t say that. You’ll be there. I hope it’s soon, too, she said. It doesn’t matter when it is, you'll be there, she said. She wiped a tear from her eye. You’ll be there, she said. I promise, she said. I liked Brian. But I liked Brian mostly because he made her happy again.

One of my favorite times was when we went to a place called Yellowstone. We drove for a long time to get there. Brian was with us. When we got there they just kept saying Ooh, and Wow. They were pointing everywhere and taking pictures. I thought it was really pretty too. We were driving really slow and a huge animal came up and started licking the window. She leaned away from the window and screamed and laughed. She didn’t stop laughing. Brian said the animal was a mule deer. I had never heard of a mule deer but I guess it’s an animal with a huge tongue that likes how a car tastes. Brian took pictures while she laughed. A little while later she answered her phone. She said, No. Then she said, No, again. She covered her mouth and started crying. What, she said. Then she said, No, no, no, no, oh no. Dad I wasn’t there, she said. She cried for a little while and didn’t say anything, and then she said, I was never going to be ready, Dad. We’re coming home, Dad. She hung up the phone and then looked at Brian. Her eyes were red. We have to go home, she said to Brian, I’m sorry about. But he grabbed her hand and she stopped talking. He said, Of course. Maybe he can hear the other person when she’s on the phone. I never can, but Brian seemed to understand.

After it started snowing again, Tracy came to visit and was talking to her about Brian. Every time Tracy said, Brian, she said, You mean my fee on say. Then Tracy
would scream and say, Fee on say! She said that Brian was her fee on say. I didn’t understand what those three words meant together. I had never heard them together before. But it made her and Tracy so excited so I guess fee on say is a good thing. It was snowing and she was wearing a red hat with a white ball on top like the fat man at the mall. I know that fat man is not really Santa Claus, because Santa Claus isn’t real. I used to think he was real but I don’t anymore. He’s like the X-Men. I know they aren’t real either, but I like them better than Santa Claus. I like the X-Men better because they save the day. Santa Claus dresses up in a costume but he doesn’t save the day. I think if you dress up in a costume you should save the day. Even though the white ball sagged down to her shoulder, the hat still looked like a happy hat. Her favorite part was her really shiny new ring. She kept talking to everyone about it on the phone. She showed it to everyone. She kept looking at it when no one was around. It was cold out but she looked so warm.

When all the flowers came back, and she started putting them in her hair again, she seemed different. She was acting a lot more like her mother. I didn’t see her mom since before we went to Yellowstone, but I know what her mother acts like, and she was acting like her mother. She was making lists and doing things. We went a lot of places. We had to shop for cakes and dresses and invitations and all kinds of stuff. A lot of time Brian was with us. Sometimes she called him fee on say instead of Brian. I still didn’t understand those words, but I guess they were nicknames like Puppy Pup, The Big Apple, and Motherfucker. We went to one store with Brian and I had to put on clothes at the store and everyone looked at me. She said I looked handsome, but the clothes was
uncomfortable. The jacket was heavy and the shirt squeezed my neck. Brian called it a monkey suit, but I’ve seen monkeys at the zoo and they didn’t wear clothes like that. Then Brian put on a monkey suit too and told me they were our costumes, like superheroes. He said we was going to save the day. I liked the monkey suit a lot more after he said that. The whole time she still did that special smile at Brian, especially when he was in the monkey suit. We went to more stores and she told him how good her life was. She said she was lucky, like if someone threw something at her head but missed. She talked about the future a lot. He sounded excited like her. Then he said, Your mom would be so proud, and put his hand on her leg. Even though she looked like she was going to cry, her smile was so wide it seemed like it was trying to run off the sides of her face. Those were the best times.

The worst was when we were on the way to the church. She was wearing a lot of make up, but not too much. Her hair was all piled on top of her head, but in a fancy way. She looked like a girl on a TV commercial. Very beautiful. I was in my monkey suit costume. We were on the highway driving real fast. She said we was late for the church. I was mad because I couldn’t get the top off my soda. It was hot in my monkey suit costume and my hand was slippery. I couldn’t open the soda and I really wanted to drink some of it. She reached back to help me get the top off but then I went forward real fast then stopped. My soda flew out of my hands and my body hurt. My seatbelt grabbed my chest real hard. She always made me wear my seatbelt. I remember I looked at her while I went forward until the seatbelt stopped me. She slammed her face into the steering wheel. Hard. When she hit her face it was so hard the whole car shook. Right before she
hit her face there was very loud noises. Everything went dark but only for a minute. I looked at her but I think she was asleep. When she woke up, she moved very slow. She looked at me and her face was all bloody. I didn’t bleed or anything, but she was bloody. My chest just hurt and my soda flew on the ground. She was bloody though. I just kept seeing her face hit the steering wheel in my head. Over and over again. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want her to be bloody. I wished I just put the soda on the seat next to me instead of asking her to open it. One time we saw a TV show where the man had a time machine and could go back and fix things that he messed up. I wanted a time machine to go back and not worry about my soda until we got to the church. She was yelling Shit, shit, shit, and hitting the car. Then she tried to call her dad but she dropped her phone and couldn’t reach it. I couldn’t reach it either. She moved slowly. She put her hand to her stomach. When she pulled it away there was even more blood than on her face. I didn’t understand why. It dripped from her hand. Oh God, she said. Oh shit. Oh Brian. I’m so sorry Brian. I’m so so so so sorry, she said. I didn’t think Brian could hear her, but I was sure Brian wouldn’t be mad. He is so nice. I didn’t know what she did wrong, but she kept saying sorry. I was the one that was sorry, but I didn’t say anything. She touched her stomach again. More blood. She stopped saying shit and started saying fuck. She didn’t say that word too much, usually only when she was really mad. I didn’t want her to be hurt. I didn’t really need the soda to be opened. I could have waited. I didn’t like seeing her with the blood on her face and on her hand. I didn’t like seeing all of that blood on the outside of her body. I thought it would be better if the blood stayed on the inside. We watched a movie once and a guy had all his blood on the outside. She
told me to cover my eyes but I peeked through my fingers. I asked her what happened and she said the man went to heaven, but when I peeked I didn’t see him go anywhere. He just laid there with all his blood on the outside. In the car I didn’t peek. I just looked at her like normal, but more scared. She said she was scared. That made me even more scared. She said, I’m coming to see you mom, but she just stayed where she was. She was crying. Then she stopped crying and didn’t say anything else. It was silent for a long time. I couldn’t even hear her breathe. I wished Tracy was there to give her some directions. Then some men came with a big machine that ate part of the car. The men said, Ma’am? Ma’am? We’re here to help. She didn’t say anything. One of them said, Careful, there’s someone in the back. Then the other one said, He looks better than she does. The other man said, Can you hear me? He was looking at me and used the word you, so I knew he was talking to me. I could hear him, but I didn’t say anything. I just looked at her instead. She laid there, bloody and not moving. They had very deep voices that sounded serious. The first one said, Shit Bob, is that a wedding dress in the back? Another deep voice said they should call her mother. I wanted to tell them that she said she was going to see her, but then I didn’t say anything. She was just silent and bloody. They moved her out of the car. They kept telling me they were helping her. Usually she says thank you to people that help her. But she didn’t this time. They took her away in a big red and white ambulance. Then they put me in a different red and white ambulance and took me too. They took me to a hospital and maked me better. I was only there for a little while, since all my blood was still on the inside. Then other people came and said
they was going to move me out of the hospital. There was a lot of grownups talking and they had a lot of papers.

I wanted to know where they took her, but no one would tell me. I didn’t see her at the hospital.

They must have taken her a long way away, because she’s been gone a long time. Maybe they took her home. Maybe she got Brian from the church and they went back to Yellowstone since last time we didn’t stay as long as we wanted. Maybe they picked up her mom and brought her too. I hope so. I hope Katy Perry went too. That way she would have someone to sing with. Maybe they just forgot to come get me this time. Maybe she didn’t want to come get me because she’s still mad about the soda and doesn’t want me around anymore.

I keep waiting for her to come back, but she hasn’t yet. I just stay here and wait for her, and try not to talk to the strangers when they come in. I can wait until she’s ready. I hope she’s not mad at me, but I think she is. That’s why she won’t come back. I know I shouldn’t bother her when she is driving. If you see her tell her I promise I won’t do it again. Next time I’ll just be quiet and wait, even if I'm really really thirsty. I'll just wait. After the soda part, when she was hurt, I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to help, but I didn’t know how. I was in my seatbelt, just like she always told me.

A woman came in and told me that she wasn’t coming back, but I don’t believe her. I know she’ll come back when she’s not mad at me anymore. I know she’ll come back. So now I’ll just wait. If you see her, tell her I’m sorry. It seems like it’s been a long
time. But I am patient. I can wait a long time. Sometimes it’s dark in here and the spiders come back. It’s cold in the winter without her. I don’t want that. I want her to sing loudly and poorly and be free. Or even scream. It’s the thing I want most. I can wait.