

Thus ends the opening salvo.

Now, things might get a little bit weird.

PART II: THE IDIOT'S CONCLUSION

Carrie Keane, because she does not consist of matter or light or energy, is wholly unconstrained by limitations imposed by the laws of physics. This includes the apparent linearity of time, which dictates the sequence in which most people believe they experience reality.

Carrie also exists as a 'meek personality' (her term) as opposed to a 'doofus' (also her word). The analogy she uses is that living human beings, the doofuses, are like balloon animals. We are each a bag with a thin skin that is filled with something, let's call it spirit, and then mercilessly twisted into a shape, often an incoherent and unrecognizable one, by our interactions with other people.

Having interacted only briefly with me as I peered into the toilet in which she floated, Carrie's balloon never got twisted. Her bag popped before that could happen, and so when Carrie makes an appearance, she manifests as the humble, precarious cloud that hung in the air in the milli-moment following her fateful explosion (she can do this because she is unconstrained by chronology, among many other things).

Carrie is much more analogous to a storm system than a human person. She likes to say she is a river. Literally, a stream of consciousness. Because of all this, she thinks and expresses herself differently than most people are accustomed to. Her identity is also semi-nomadic. She flits from self to self like a butterfly made of vapor when the mood strikes her. She can also be "goddish" (a word she made up; I like it). You'll see.

In Part II, I mostly let Carrie take the wheel, intervening only when I felt it absolutely necessary to make her writing at least somewhat digestible for those of you still trapped in time and wrapped up in yourselves.

A table of contents, however, was a total nonstarter. You'll understand why.

When I asked Carrie for advice to give readers before delving into what follows, she replied with three words.

"Pay attention, doofus."

Sigh.

She says that a lot.

Time's Marrow

Chapter II: The Crone

Start with this.

Why would an old woman collect children's teeth? Why would she pay for them? I mean, what could possibly motivate someone to make a career out of such a thing? Surely you have wondered this, if you yourself profited from her business as a kid?

Perhaps the reason is this. Perhaps those teeth have value.

Maybe our deciduous teeth are the forest into which our childhoods disappear. Because they do disappear, our childhoods. Like smoke does in the wind. Or groups of people in the wilderness, occasionally. That is one of many inconvenient truths that life teaches those who pay attention.

Things vanish.

I can't speak for you of course, but I remember precious little about my own youth. I mean actual memories, with details. Just a hodge podge smattering of events which, for one reason or another, struck me as significant or funny or unusual. They probably amount to forty-eight hours' worth of mental footage in all. Maybe seventy-two. Where did the rest of it go? All that time in classrooms, all the summer days, games and tricks and magical thinking, poof. Hours and minutes and seconds and years. Vanished like they never were in the first place, leaving behind impressions at best, like old footprints in the snow.

Maybe our minds work like computers.

Well, they do work like computers in many ways, you likely already know that, but perhaps more so than we think. Maybe our minds have *internal* disk drives for storing memories we know we need to keep - the quivering gray jellyfish inside our skulls that we call our brains - and also *external* drives, like for example teeth, for storing ones we regard as disposable. Maybe those childhood memories which don't meet some archiving policy criterion that determines relevance or importance get saved to the external disks.

Imagine it. Each little tooth like a thumb drive with a specific set of memories written onto it. And when the drive gets disconnected, when the tooth comes out, the truth comes out, too. Our rememberings of those things get lost for good.

Maybe the so-called tooth fairy found this out at some point.

Maybe, being an old lady, a lonely hag, she craved the feeling of being a child again. And maybe she figured out how to feel that way all the time.

Maybe she takes the teeth she collects home with her to a creaky cabin hidden deep in a remote forest. And maybe there, working by candlelight, she uses a little hammer to smash those little molars and cuspids and incisors one by one into fine white powder, and she snorts that powder up her nose. Maybe during the day, when she is not out breaking and entering and harvesting teeth from under pillows, she is slumped in an easy chair with glazed eyes, while inside her head she is a child again, some child anyway, in a world where anything can happen, and she can run faster than the girls who run faster than her, and never get tired, and butterflies tickle her nose.

Maybe that's it.

All I know is that I lost my first tooth when I was six and my parents told me to put it under my pillow. They didn't tell me why, just that I would get a surprise. Having a few hours of naivety remaining during which I still entertained the childish delusion that the word "surprise" is fully compatible with the word "good," I did as my parents said and fell asleep to dreams of what fun thing might happen to me in the morning as a result.

But that night I woke up in darkness, and to my horror a witch was standing at my bedside, looming over me. She was ancient-looking, a crone with a large, hooked nose, and old age had bent her back into a sickle shape. She looked down at me and reached for my face with a skeletal hand, for what malevolent purpose I could not imagine. And as the witch raised a bony index finger to her thin, dry lips in a shushing gesture and smiled an evil smile, the moonlight streaming through my window gleamed in one of her rheumy eyes.

In this moment of sheer terror I forgot about the tooth I had left under the pillow and the promise of surprise my parents had made to me. And before I knew what I was doing, not even knowing *what* I was doing, I showed that witch my true face. Or one of them. The bad me.

She stopped cold, frozen. Her hand recoiled. The feigned kindness in her decrepit smile faded. Some kind of gargling sound began in her throat: a terrible,

liquid moan. Her features began to melt. The deep wrinkles etched into the sagging flesh on her pale face began to wriggle and recombine into some kind of writing, a message written in an eldritch script I could not comprehend.

To shut out the horror, I took the pillow from underneath my head and pressed it over my face and screamed a soundless scream into it. During the whole incident, strangely, the thought of crying out for help never occurred to me. I just covered my mouth and eyes and ears and quiet-screamed and hoped that what was happening was not happening.

At some point I felt something touch me. A hand, fingers, tapping gently on my chest. I did not move. I could not move.

The next morning I awoke in that same bed to sunlight streaming pleasantly through the very same window that had illuminated the witch's hideous eye. My room was quiet. I sat up in bed and looked around. The memory of the night hag surfaced. But she seemed to have gone. Then I remembered my parent's promise.

I checked under my pillow. A shiny silver coin caught my attention. My tooth was no longer there.

I picked up the coin. It was cool to the touch. As I held it in my palm, the sunlight made it almost glow, making it look like a gold doubloon. This must be the surprise, I thought. I imagined myself standing on my tiptoes, handing it across the counter at the fudge store on Bearskin Neck, and some gangly high school girl with pimples on her forehead that she was trying to cover with makeup sliding a toffee-colored piece of chocolate sugary awesomeness wrapped in plastic toward me in return.

Still clutching the coin, I got out of my bed and shuffled out my bedroom door and down the stairs, where my mother and father were sitting at the kitchen table, speaking in quiet voices to one another. My mother's hand was resting on my father's back. He was slouched over the table, hands clasped together in front of him. They both looked sad.

When I entered the kitchen, my mother looked up and then stood. She offered me a weak smile. I walked carefully toward them. When I was standing next to her, behind my dad, who turned to give me another smile as if to soften the blow that was coming, my mom told me what had happened.

"Nana died last night," she said.

And as she proceeded to inform me that Nana had lived a good life and had loved me very much, as much as anything, and that no one we love ever really dies, that they stay with us our whole lives and are never lost, my six-year-old hand instinctively formed a little fist around my new coin.

Later, after lots of hugging and some quiet crying, as I sat on the porch couch alone, I inspected my treasure more closely. It had been explained to me that it was a gift from the toothy fairy, left in exchange for my baby tooth. It was silver and round, like a quarter, but a bit bigger than a quarter, and there were eleven straight edges inside its outer circle forming an eleven-sided shape. Thirteen stars curved around the sides and bottom. The word LIBERTY appeared at the top in capital letters, and on the right side the phrase IN GOD WE TRUST had been engraved in smaller letters. I recognized the number across the bottom as the year I was born, 1979.

“It’s a Susan B. Anthony silver dollar,” my father’s voice said. I looked up, startled. Unbeknownst to me, he had at some point appeared in the doorway to the porch and was looking down at me, his daughter, as she looked at her coin.

I didn’t say anything for a while. I was busy studying the most prominent detail on my Susan. B. Anthony silver dollar: the profile of an old woman’s face. It took up most of one side of the coin. The woman had a large nose and prominent chin and the hair in the back of her head was wrapped into a bun.

“It looks like Nana, kind of,” I said quietly to my father.

My dad stepped into the room and looked at the coin.

“Huh,” he said, then chuckling with no joy whatsoever. “I guess it does.”

I turned the coin over and found an eagle on the other side.

That night my grandmother visited me again. Not in quite the same way as she had before, but it was her. I dreamed that we walked together on a broad avenue lined with oak trees and cozy homes. Anachronistic streetlights cast nostalgic halos of light on the pavement, leaving pockets of shadowy darkness in the spaces between them. It was autumn. The sidewalk was thick with fallen leaves and the air was crisp and cold. With each step I swept and shoveled more leaves ahead of us or off to the side with my sneakered feet.

Swoosh. Swish. Swoosh.

Nana was not young in the dream, but she was a good bit younger than I had ever seen her. Her hair was still white, but she stood straight and walked straight, not bent over and shuffling. Her smile was the same one that I had come to know very well. Not the wicked smile of a witch in moonlight, but a warm, tender smile that always offered me unconditional love, no matter the mischief in which I had become embroiled at any given time.

Poor Taylor, my Nana would always say, for no apparent reason, touching my face or patting my head.

Poor Taylor.

I didn't know what she meant back then. I didn't feel poor in any way I could think of.

Now I do, of course. I've learned things. And I remember now what I had then forgotten, but what she could not: what actually happened to our family dog.

Unfortunate Taylor is what my Nana meant.

The one with the burden.

The many-faced girl.

We came to a small brick chapel and climbed the steps. To the right of the door a gold plate was affixed to the brick. For some reason I took note of the fact and still remember clearly the sentence engraved on it.

"On this site on June 6, 1944, nothing happened."

We took a seat in one of the back pews, and there we huddled together and had a conversation. For an indescribable amount of time, my grandmother softly told me things that, for the most part, I do not remember but which I am nonetheless certain I heard.

It is still to this day my favorite of all the dreams I have ever dreamed. My Nana was there with me. Really and truly there. Not dead. Not gone. Just like my mom had told me. My Nana was *there*, and I could hear her comforting, hushed, reassuring voice with crystal clarity. And I knew, in those moments at least, that everything would be OK.

After our chat, we stood and retraced our steps, heading back to the exit at the rear of the church. My grandmother, as she always did after Catholic masses, dipped

her fingertips in one of the fonts of holy water which had been erected beside the doors. She made the sign of a cross on herself with her hand, touching her forehead, then each of her shoulders. Then she turned and made the same sign on me. When she tapped my forehead, I felt the water from her fingertip moisten my skin there. It tickled.

Outside the chapel, dawn was just beginning. I could see the sky lightening over the rooftops of a row of two-family homes to our left. Nana turned to me and said she needed to go.

“But I’m not going,” she told me, and looked into my eyes, and I knew what she meant. Then she leaned over, kissed the top of my head, and hushed one more thing in my six-year-old ear. Seven words that I heard as I opened my eyes to awaken the next morning. Seven words spoken into my ear in my dead Nana’s voice, as clear as any sound I have ever heard.

“Be water. Go where you are poured.”

I sat up in bed. I felt wonderful. Nana was OK and my mom was right. But I was also sad the dream had ended.

Then I felt a drop of water begin to roll down the skin on my forehead. It ran down the side of my nose and onto my cheek. I wiped it up with a couple of fingers and brought it to my nose. I sniffed it. It smelled like holy water. I don’t know how to describe what that smell is, but there is something distinctive about it, maybe because the water sits for a long time in the open air in a stone font in an enclosed space.

“Be water. Go where you are poured.”

That is what my Nana said.

It is good advice. I like to think that I have done my best to follow it.

And also to share it.

I say that to people sometimes, as they are on the way out, when it seems appropriate.

I might have my hand wrapped around the hilt of a knife whose long blade is buried deep in their abdomen, or their body might be a broken, rag doll mess because I have recently pushed them off a ledge from a great height, or they might have dozens of bite marks on their face and neck and torso and legs from my now very adult teeth, but as I lean in to bring my face close to theirs, I fix their terrified gaze and try to make their transition as easy as I can.

“Be water. Go where you are poured.”

And I show them my Nana’s face. Kind and unconditionally loving.

It doesn’t always work. Maybe it never does. Maybe it only makes me feel better about my hobby.

But I like to think it sometimes makes a difference.

It feels like the ethical thing to do.

What happened to my dog was this. The coin of me has an eagle, too.

My dog’s name was Charlotte. I had named her after the spider in E. B. White’s children’s story, *Charlotte’s Web*. We adopted Charlotte from a shelter. She was an indecipherable mutt, about the height and length of a beagle but lean and muscular, with a long hound’s face. Her fur was white with a smattering of black and brown spots and her snout was the color of milk chocolate. Charlotte, a one-year-old puppy, appeared beneath the tree on Christmas morning in an open cardboard box. I was five years old at the time, which places her arrival about a year and half before I lost my first tooth and grandmother and innocence all in one fell swoop.

My dog Charlotte was *fast* and she was *wild*.

A few times she got loose in our backyard. The wind in her fur and the audacious glee on her dogface as my father and mother and I, and my cousins from the next town over, too, if they happened to be visiting, chased her around in futility while she circled the yard, weaving and swerving and ducking, was a sight to behold. It was only after she tired and stopped running, laying her belly down on the grass and panting, tongue lolling happily out of her wolfish mouth, that she was catchable.

When not doing her level best to give me an asthma attack (my cousins always found it so funny when I would bend over, hands on my knees, gasping for breath), Charlotte was inside with me, snuggling and nibbling on my fingers and licking my face. I fed her and made sure she had clean water, and I scratched her belly when she rolled over.

I have never loved anything more strongly and purely than I loved my dog Charlotte and I doubt anyone ever has.

And what happened to Charlotte is bullshit.

What happened to me when what happened to Charlotte happened is bullshit, too.

And what happens to the dead people I kill is, as far as I am concerned, on those rare occasions I find myself looking for justification for what I am, what God gets for having allowed what happened to Charlotte to happen in the first place.

If He or She or It doesn't like it, you can tell him where I live. I'm waiting. I'm right here, asshole.

Come and take your medicine. It's long overdue.

"That's it. I'm ending it."

"Ending what?"

"Everything."

The Man looks away in disgust from the television, which is playing a cellphone video of a high school girl being kicked and beaten by a group of classmates as she crumples to the ground and turtles in an attempt to protect herself from the assault. A female student enters the line of sight long enough to empty a plastic cup of orange soda onto her and guffaw viciously into the camera with inexplicable pride. Others laugh, too. The phone pans around the sunlit, locker-lined hallway to provide a view of the participants, simultaneously capturing all the many onlookers in the background as it does.

Some have stopped or slowed down to watch. Others try to scurry past.

Underneath the video is a news station logo and an area of colorful text reporting that the victim in the video committed suicide two days later. School officials and authorities "suspect" the events "might" be connected.

The Man sighs, picks up his remote control, and presses the "Off" button. The Couple sit in somber silence on comfortable chairs for a few moments. Then the Woman perks up. Using her own phone, she opens a social media app, and types a message.

"Bullying is bad," it reads.

The tip of Her tongue peeks out from one side of Her mouth and She wrinkles Her forehead as She proofreads Her retort.

After some time, She reaches an important decision and makes a significant edit.

"Bullies should be CANCELED!!" the message reads now.

With a satisfied smile - THAT should do it - She holds the phone up so that Her Spouse can read what She has typed. After He nods His approval, She taps a button on the screen that reads "Post" and turns her attention away from the device to regard her handsome husband with a winsome smile.

"Well, I'm sure glad that's over. Want to take becky for some ice cream?"

"Great idea! We deserve it after having to watch that! Let's do it!" says the man.

"Totally agree! Oh, look, hon, my post already got a like...it's so good to be *involved*, you know?"

"That's it. I'm ending it."

"Ending what?"

The Man looks away from the television, on which security footage of a grinning so-called man and alleged woman inviting their daughter for an ice cream is playing. The little girl is swinging happily on a swing set that is situated in a fenced backyard which shows evidence of much time, expense and effort having been put into the care of its immaculate lawn.

"Everything."

He picks up the remote and is about to press the "Off" button when the Woman speaks up.

"Wait," She says.

The Man's thumb pauses over what could very likely be the end of the world as we know it, whoever "We" is in this story.

"Wait for what?" He asks.

"Before You do that, Dear, let Me show You something first," says the Woman.

The Man gives the suggestion due consideration. He doesn't seem to be inclined to accept. His thumb is centimeters from the red 'Off' button.

"The fallacy of sunk costs," He mutters.

"What's that, Love? I didn't hear you."

"Never mind. What is it that you want to show me, Heart?"

"This, for starters," She says, and rummages in a straw handbag for a moment or two before withdrawing a mauve-colored wallet. She reaches into the section of the wallet where others might keep their cash to extract the only thing She keeps in Hers: a small, folded piece of dog-eared, yellowing paper, covered in black and white newsprint.

She unfolds the piece of paper and hands It over to Him.

It doesn't take Him long to read: a short news clipping; a terse article reporting a tragedy. He does not seem impressed.

"So what?" He asks.

"Now, let's go for a walk," She says.

And they do.

They don't speak as they stroll together, side by side, in the direction of a nearby graveyard. The Man's face is still fixed in a mask of anger and disappointment. Nothing has changed for Him. He seems barely tolerant of this delay. His Mind is set. His Decision is Made. He is Not One to Change Course. He appears to be more humoring His companion than anything else.

The Woman has a specific destination in mind. They enter the cemetery and wind their way through it, up a hill, around a circular grove of evergreens, until They reach a point at which She guides Them off the beaten path and into a patch of dirt and grass containing several rows of non-descript markers. The stones are not noteworthy here in any way except perhaps for the complete absence of interesting details. They are neither old nor new, neither big nor small, neither simple nor ornate. All these lives, destined to be overlooked - a mere backdrop for most cemetery visitors.

How lovely. Bystanders ignored by onlookers, thinks the Man.

Like a theater-goer locating a seat, the Woman finds a particular row of graves and guides them both down it. When She finds It, the stone that She is looking for, She stops and stands aside, inviting Her companion to read It: What It Is That She Has Brought Him Here To See.

Pebbles crumble under the Man's boots as he positions himself directly in front of the stone in question. He stands there, looking put out and disinterested, hands buried deep in the pockets of his navy-blue sweatpants, and He reluctantly reads the message It conveys.

If this were a television program being watched by yet another Couple somewhere else on a totally different screen, our camera might fix itself on the Man's face for a long time at this point. A very long time. Several minutes perhaps, or longer, with no dialogue whatsoever, no music either, just the shot of an Old Man's sad, exhausted face as He reads It.

The Stone. What The Woman Wants Her Man To See.

Her masterpiece. The Book of Love.

If an imaginary camera were so inclined, it could capture the very slow transformation that occurs in The Man as He studies the object before him. Long moments of flat affect, of static ennui, of sadness and mild irritation, which are suddenly, subtly disrupted by curiosity and interest as a single detail catches his attention. His Head tilts ever so slightly to one side, one eyebrow arching. He squints as he reads more carefully, a movement that draws attention to the crows' feet etched deep on either side of his ancient blue eyes. Then something difficult to describe passes over His face - a rippling, a tremor, a wave - as he fixes his gaze on one particular spot on the stone. His ruddy cheeks twitch. For just a moment or two, it appears as if a mild electrical current is passing through him. Gradually, very gradually, we witness other changes. A furrowing brow. A change in his breathing.

And water.

Puddles.

Forming in the old man's eyes.

The drop to his knees, when it comes, is abrupt, as is the gasp that accompanies it, venting explosively from his bearded mouth. He simply collapses, as if someone has unexpectedly kicked the backs of his knees from behind. His arms fall to either side, palms open, in something resembling supplication. He looks limp, weak, and overcome. A moment later he leans back, shifting his weight from his knees back onto his heels, and he keeps reading.

The man, this once and future Man, kneel-squats there in a patch of dirt and grass, reading the Book, awestruck, and he reads it, and he reads.

And he weeps.

After some time - after a very, very long time - the Man turns his head at last to look up at Her, the Woman Who Saved the World (Again), with new and wet and wondering eyes.

"It worked," He says, wishing He did not sound so surprised.

"Told you I was good," She says.

And their joyous laughter literally never stops echoing off the stones.

"That's it. I'm ending it."

"That's it. I'm ending it. Wait, ending what?"

The Boy turns away from the open window out of which He has been staring, the one that overlooks their dusty side yard and narrow driveway, the one he looks out every night while drifting off to sleep, toward his Sister, who is seated near the foot of the bed with one of Her long, gangly legs tucked underneath Her bottom and the other dangling off the side of the mattress.

She is the one who started the copycatting.

She is also The One Holding The Gun.

The expression on the Boy's face is strange. Sad. Resigned.

And tired. So very tired. Tired most of all.

"Everything," He says.

And then He does.

WHY? IT NEVER ENDS

Playing around is what it is, just fooling, kid stuff. Silly. Teasing and "let me have it; it's my turn, goober." Until the shot rings out. Suddenly, blood. A lot of blood. Panic, accelerating hearts, and spatter: on him, the walls, you. It simply cannot be. Cover the fresh, impossible, gushing hole that has suddenly blossomed on your beloved - is

that what he is? - with your small hands, like a foolish, disbelieving Thomas. Sense the impossible velocity of his departure. Watch her shrink and fade from view. So sudden. This cannot be happening. It simply cannot. Realize the unthinkable. You must say goodbye forever to him, now, right now, the person, the Boy that, yes, the Boy you love, the one you love more than anything, more than everyone else in the world all put together. Understand the unacceptable. You are losing her, yes, Her, the Girl you love, deeper and more truly and more certainly than everything, than anyone else in all the universes that might ever be. A desperate, unspoken mutual wish takes shape: that these final few moments could stretch out into an eternity, as if he, her, you, us, them, could be pulled into a time-twisting black hole that could freeze you, leave you, him, her, forever cradled in one another's (our) awkward arms.

And maybe it happens. Maybe just this once an exception is made, because of the power and bravery of our love. If ever there was a chance, a cause for special dispensation, it very well might be the pair of you, at eleven years old, who are the ones to whom it would be granted. Maybe your shared plea reaches just the right ears.

Or maybe not. And this end, yours, is just like all the others. It is hard to know.

So, before I go, as you clutch your boy to your heart, your man, your limp and broken echo, a shivering dwindling doll, you lean in close, and you whisper. You tell him.

What you have never quite actually said in so many words. Not even when alone. The bare truth of you, which escapes from you now into the outside world even though you never quite knew it yourself. Things you have only hinted at even in the slender diary you slip under the rug in your bedroom and never, ever speak. The future you dream of, the only one that makes any kind of sense, the one you are losing right now, at this very moment.

Your lecture is brief and desperate, utterly desperate, and terrified. It is panicked, awkward, and hurried. The content, the actual language, the words used, if any words are used at all, will elude you later. But he does hear you. Yes, he does. Of that you are certain. Of that you will always be certain.

Your Boy hears you.

And just before the light leaves his eyes, there is an answer in them.

At least, you believe there was.

It is hard to know.

The masculine name Paul means "small" or "humble".

The feminine name Georgia means "farmer" or "earth worker".

February 26th, 1956 was a Sunday.

And love is a coin tossed into a fountain that has no bottom because only the water exists.

"That's it. I'm ending it."

"*Ending what?*" asks the Reaper.

"Endings."

The Reaper's skeletal hand freezes in midair, inches from the boy's face. He ponderously tilts his vast oxen skull of a head toward the boy's sister, who is seated a few feet away with fresh tears glistening on her freckled cheeks. The Reaper is unaccustomed to taking directions. He is not quite sure why her authority should mean anything to him, but somehow, in this moment, it does.

There is something about her (HER) is all that his mind, such as it is, can come up with.

"Zeno's Paradox," the girl says, with a distant, thoughtful expression. "My brother's not going to die."

The Reaper regards this intriguing little one through eye sockets that despite being empty, still manage to convey mourning and sorrow and mild curiosity.

"Zeno's Paradox," she murmurs again, not averting her gaze from her brother's face. The boy's breathing is barely perceptible, and the floor around him is cranberry and wet. "To get from where I am sitting to where he is, or where you are, I need to get halfway from here to there first. And to get to that point, I need to get halfway to *there* first. And to get halfway to the halfway point, I need to get halfway to halfway to the halfway point..."

The Reaper scratches the side of his skull through his dark cowl with a bony finger and waits for the girl's point to crystallize.

"I can't ever get there," she says. "Time could work like that, too. To get from now to the moment that he dies, I have to get halfway to that moment. And halfway to that moment. And halfway to that one. *It's never going to actually happen.*"

She turns and looks at the Reaper now, her voice and bearing not that of a terrified, traumatized young girl but of something else entirely, for which the Reaper does not have a ready description.

"My brother is *not* going to die. Ever. Keep...your goddamn bony hands...off my brother," she says.

And this finally does it. The Reaper rears back his massive head and roars with laughter. The sound is loud and layered and chaotic and not very pleasant, like the noises that a train filled with loose bones barreling through a tunnel might make. When he finally regains his composure, the Reaper smiles at the girl. He likes this one. But rules are rules.

"*That's not how this works,*" the Reaper says. "*When it's time, it's time, and this, little one, is your brother's time.*"

"I just explained it to you - "

"Yes, yes, very clever. I give you "A"s for both effort and creativity. Katherine, is it? But just because you can describe the world being a certain way does not mean that is how the world actually is."

So, without telling her that he is sorry, because he is not, the Reaper turns to do his thing as the girl (whose name is not Katherine but Georgia) helplessly looks on. He tries to lay his graveyard hands on the Boy, and in doing so to bring this chapter of the Boy's story to its final conclusion. And then the Reaper tries to do It again. And he finds in both instances that he cannot. After a few more frustrating moments of unsuccessfully struggling to get halfway to the Boy, or halfway to the time when the Boy departs this mortal coil, he turns to look at the girl. The trace of a satisfied smile is curling one side of her mouth.

"See?" she says to the Reaper. "I told you."

The Reaper tries to find a suitable response, but words fail him.

Then the rifle fires for the second time that day.

There is no fear in ἀγάπη (love).

Perfect ἀγάπη (love) casts out fear.

Fear has to do with punishment.

Whoever fears has not been perfected in ἀγάπη (love).

And if it takes you forever to say goodbye, you may just never have to.

The Reaper feels something strike his chest and penetrate his flesh, embedding itself pretty near the center of his heart. He understands that this is impossible, since he is only a skeleton, and has never possessed flesh or a heart for himself, at least not for a very, very long time. And yet it happened. Or happens. He looks up from the small bullet hole that has been made in him, toward the Girl. She is still pointing the gun in his direction.

"How could, do you, do you have any idea what you have done, you -"

And then he sees it. And he stops talking. He sees it (It) and then he knows.

In the chaotic sea of freckles that decorate the girl's pale skin like muffin crumbs scattered haphazardly across the surface of a breakfast table by some sloppy child too impatient to wait for a plate, he sees the mark: a special one, remarkable only for being so typical: a tiny, round, light brown freckle just below and off to the side of her left eye.

Like a period completing a sentence. Or a bullet.

Or a singularity packed with potential energy that will explode any moment and ignite an entirely new game, the rules of which the Reaper cannot possibly imagine.

"You cracked the code," the Reaper wheezes in admiration. He smiles at the rifle in the girl's hands, then one more time at the bullet in her eyes before looking down at the hole in himself, which is, miraculously, after all these many, many years of bony dryness, bleeding. *"Someone had to, eventually. I'm glad it was - "*

THE PARABLE OF THE MONKS AND THE WOMAN

Two monks are traveling together on foot, heading home after a lengthy pilgrimage to distant lands. They arrive at a river with no bridge spanning it. As the monks prepare themselves to cross the river, they see a young and very beautiful woman also readying herself for an attempt to cross. She is hiking a cranberry-colored skirt up her legs and beginning to wade into the cold, churning water.

To the monks, the woman's actions seem brave, but also foolhardy. She is small, and the river's current is strong, and its water is deep in places.

The monks exchange glances. While they have vowed never to touch a woman, it seems as if she might need their help, and they have also vowed to help when needed.

"That's it. I'm ending it," says the older of the two monks.

"Ending what?" asks his companion.

Without saying another thing, the older monk strides over to the woman and they share a brief conversation.

She introduces herself as Georgia.

"But you can call me Katie," she tells the older monk, and smiles.

The monk turns then without saying a thing and squats in the river water immediately in front of Georgia nee Katie nee Georgia whoever. As he does so, it occurs to his younger counterpart, who looks on from a short distance away, that his old friend very much resembles a frog perched on a lily pad. Gratefully accepting the implicit offer of assistance, the pretty young woman clambers onto the monk's shoulders, and after a moment or two of ensuring that she is balanced properly, the monk enters the deeper waters of the river himself, carrying her across with him.

The younger monk follows behind them both. He is now sulking.

Upon reaching the other side of the river, the older monk places the woman down. She thanks him and he bows silently and then they go their separate ways. She selects a path that will take her east, whilst the monks choose the one that will take them both northward, toward the monastery that is their home.

The monks walk side-by-side together in perfect silence for some time. The face of the younger monk is angry, revealing intense distress of some kind that is not dispersing itself. Hours pass, until finally the younger monk cannot contain his emotions any longer, and he blurts out what has been bothering him all this time.

"We have both taken vows never to touch a woman," he says, berating his fellow monk in a nasty, disdainful tone of voice. "How dare you carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looks at him and replies, "Brother, I set her down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?"

Normally this is where the parable ends, with the older monk's question unanswered. And maybe this is where we should stop. Probably we should. Going any further is too much like explaining the magic trick. Or providing the recipe for an especially tasty dish.

But do you want the truth? Is that what you're after here?

OK, here it is.

Truth.

The Truth of it, the Great Unsaid, is that when the younger of the two monks glimpsed the young woman preparing to wade in

the river, she was lifting the hem of that pretty cranberry skirt, and in the process of doing so, revealing a pair of pale, creamy white legs that were somehow, in an elusive, profound, indefinable way, fundamentally different than any pair of legs that young monk had ever before yet seen, speckled with dirt and small clinging leaves and smudges, some of which might have been intriguing birthmarks or yes, even freckles and the soft white shirt the woman was wearing did not fully cover the area around her neck either, her clavicles, or the front of her chest, and at one point she bent forward and he saw - and when the young monk accidentally saw what he unexpectedly saw he immediately knew, then and there, that he would never be able to unsee those things and the unthinkable shocking perfection of it all made him question his entire life, all the choices that would come before and after it, this, now, then, the Moment In Which He Saw What He Saw.

The monk also knew from pained experience, even as a young person, that he would not have the courage to do a damn thing about any of it. Which of course, he did not. So, the notion of the anonymous (to him) young woman's surprisingly miraculous legs pressing themselves against the sides of the older monk's ratty old hairy body, and her slender freckled arms wrapping themselves loosely around his companion's grizzled neck, and her damp, copper hair tickling the old man's skin, and the smell and feel of her, which the other monk would experience but of which he himself the younger monk would never partake...the sheer foolish, useless injustice of it all...made the young pacifistic monk want to light the Match That Burns the World. He was not quite sure he would be able to make it home without murdering the older monk in his sleep, bashing his ancient fucking head in with a stone until it looked like red pepper relish, he was so fucking angry about it all.

So, the younger monk, desperate to continue being the person he believed himself to be, a man of non-violence, of temperance, of acceptance and benign intentions, he blindly reached out, grasping for a different vehicle to convey his anger and shame for being himself such a coward. It was a safe way to do it, he thought, as the vehicle would not (he believed) force him to reveal his true feelings. He was a coward, remember. And what the young monk found was the pretense of monkly vows, which he (clumsily) used as a weapon with which to hurt his older companion. Or tried to, anyway.

That's the Truth.

For whatever it's worth to you, the young monk does manage to make it home without killing anyone and they both arrive safely, if no longer the closest of friends.

But the next morning, as he steps out from his humble hut to greet the day, the young monk will find the body of a dead gull on his doorstep, right there at his feet. He will look up to see a tabby cat regarding him without expression from the edge of the woods that surround his domicile. The monk and the cat will stare at one another for a while before the feline quietly turns and disappears behind a dense, virid wall of bobbing fronds and leaves, never to be seen again.

The monk, meanwhile, in the process of disposing of the bird's corpse, will almost without thinking pluck a single white feather from it and keep it for himself. He will take it inside his hut and clean it and then spend much of his morning sharpening its hollow point by grinding it against a stone from his garden.

Later he will sit in a rickety, bamboo chair, one of the only two pieces of furniture that he possesses (aside from his narrow, straw bed), and he will lay his right arm, palm facing up, flat on the dark wood of the other one: a small, square wooden table that occupies one dimly lit corner of his hut.

Holding the feather in his left hand, the monk will press its tip against the soft skin on the underside of his forearm. He will increase the pressure, pushing harder and harder with the feather, slowly and deliberately forcing the quill into himself, puncturing his flesh with it, and easing it inside. Blood will trickle from the hole he has made, a thin stream of rich red liquid that rolls down the side of his arm and onto the table. He will wince, gasp, gnaw on his lip as he continues to jab himself with the implement, transforming the nature of the procedure from a simple injection into a full-fledged excavation, driving the feather deeper in, digging with it, until at last he withdraws it and takes a moment to admire the glorious ink now covering much of the shaft.

There will be an open notebook on the table in front of the monk. Its pages will be white and eager and blank.

Its pages will be white and eager and blank, and his forearm will be on fire, and his newly fashioned wound will be beauty itself: glistening and crimson and dark.

Like cranberries.

And "Thank you, dead bird," a wild woman will whisper from somewhere deep in the woods as finally, that monk begins to write.

ERRATA

Whew! That sure was...a lot of words. Let me know if you can make sense of it. We sure can't.

But I do have a confession to make to you, pal, or Georgia, or Katie. I lied earlier. Actually, the whole thing is a lie, truth be told, every last letter and mark and space, but you already knew that, I suppose. All stoetry is.

What I mean is this.

That little aside about the fountain and the coin and the water? It's not precisely correct.

The water doesn't exist, either.

There is only the coin.

Which could be a bullet. Or a pebble. Or a freckle. Or a punctuation mark. It might also be a pearl or a baseball or a soggy green pea or some other kind of seed. Or it might even just be a logical abstraction.

The point is that the point is the point.

And it is in the nature of the point, as it is in the nature of a pea or a pearl or a pebble, to fall when dropped, and someone appears to have dropped one once for reasons unclear and so, having nothing to impede its motion, and urged on by literally pointless attraction, that little freckle just keeps falling and falling and falling, and it won't ever stop, simply because we can't bring ourselves to believe it ever will.

As much as we tell ourselves, while we huddle behind our walls, or retreat into our shells, that our pearl's careening descent into the sky-void-nothing in which it is encased has been permanently interrupted, that it has been retired to gather dust on a shelf, or perhaps that it was long ago discarded, tossed into a deep, dark hole along with a foolish wish that never became a reality, or maybe that it's the stone we wear (most of the time, some of us) on one of our fingers, it just ain't true.

We still, all of us, everyone, believe in the joy and thrill and inevitability of falling. Even when we don't.

And that, our foolish stubbornness to accept an ending to our endless falling, is why there is anything at all.

"That's it. I'm ending it. For real this time."

"You can't end it, silly."

Why not?

"I just told you," Carrie Keane says.

[illegible]

The Dragon Booger

Chapter I: The Incident

The day after it happened, Dave Cooper walked to school. Which was the first of several unusual things to occur. Normally, Dave would take the bus to school because it was a pretty long way. But on that particular morning, he preferred not to contend with the noise, and the nonsense, and the stupidity and commotion that a bus ride would mean.

Dave didn't walk to school that day because he wanted time to himself to think about things, about what had happened. He didn't want that at all. But he *more* didn't want to have to talk to anyone, about anything. So he walked.

What Dave wanted was a little sister. But that wasn't going to happen now.

He kicked a flattened soda can off the sidewalk and tucked his hands in his jacket pockets and listened to the swishing and swooshing sound his sneakers made while he slid and swung them through the leaves speckling the pavement. It was a mid-October Friday in New Hampshire.

He had left his house very early, getting no objections from either of his parents, just gentle hugs and a kiss on the head from his mom, who looked pasty and tired and had red circles around her eyes. So when he arrived at school, almost no one was there. The crossing guard, Miss Jackson, a short, round woman who had, as usual, finagled her medium-length brown hair into a tight bun that bobbed from the top of her head like the pompom on Santa's hat, was just taking her position on the road in front of the school. She scurried out just before Dave started crossing.

"You know you are supposed to wait for me to give the OK before crossing, Mr. Cooper!" she said. Not meanly, but not nicely, either; mildly annoyed.

"Sorry," Dave mumbled.

She regarded Dave through squinting eyes as he passed by her, and seemed to catch a whiff of something in his demeanor.

"That's OK, honey. Just remember next time."

Dave nodded, put his head down and kept going.

He mope-shuffled his way into the playground area behind the school. It was a typical setup for an elementary-middle school in a middle-class town. Jungle gym. A full-length basketball court. Swings. Climbing ropes with knots at regular intervals hung from a couple of tree branches. Lots of open space. This was where he and his sixth-grade classmates spent their recesses. Throwing balls around, relating and reliving their latest video game heroics, and for kids like Dave, staying out of the way of bullies like Jake Hammond, if possible.

Dave walked up to his favorite tree in the yard, a big maple with gnarly roots erupting rebelliously from the mulch surrounding its base, and propped his backpack up against the trunk. Then he turned and with his back to the tree, slid himself down.

His butt hit the mulch and he sat there.

He just sat there. Like a king with neither a throne nor a kingdom.

Dave didn't feel like crying. But he didn't exactly feel like not crying either. He took a deep breath, then another one. He looked around him but didn't really take anything in. This was a strange feeling, how he was today. Usually his mind would be hopping around, thinking about stuff: things he wanted to talk to friends about or something he saw on TV or on the internet, or sports or school stuff or, well, lately, girls. Lots of girl thoughts were starting to happen. But today he felt empty. Just, there. Like a blob. He might have been the skinniest kid in his grade, but he felt heavy and fat.

He sighed and wondered if this was how it felt to be an adult. He hoped not.

Then he sniffed and looked down and then he saw it.

It was a slug. He thought.

A slimy brownish red kind of vaguely lumpy worm kind of thing, clinging to a gray root. *Like* a slug, anyway, but a big one. Not quite fat, but plumpish. It looked wet, or moist at least. Morning sunlight glistened off its surface. It wasn't moving.

Dave sat up straighter and bent over a bit to study the critter.

It wasn't moving, not in the sense of advancing up the root or moving down it, but upon closer inspection it didn't appear totally still, either. It seemed to be

vibrating, so subtly that it was hard to say for certain he was seeing things right. Trembling, maybe, Dave thought. Quivering. As if from the cold, even though it wasn't especially cold this morning. It wasn't warm either, though. Some animals liked warm weather.

Maybe it was stressed out, Dave thought. Or scared.

"Hey," he said, before thinking about saying anything at all. Then he looked up and around him to make sure no one had heard or seen him talking to a slug creature. A few younger kids were in the yard, but they were far enough away that he didn't think he had to worry.

Dave surveyed the ground around him and picked up a short piece of twig. He thought about poking the thing very gently to see what would happen, but that didn't seem right; he wouldn't want to be poked, so why should the critter like it? He decided just to put the tip of the twig in front of where its face would be, if it had one (it didn't seem to), and see what happened.

For a few seconds nothing did. Then the front part of the critter raised itself from the surface of the maple tree's root, just a bit, and it almost seemed to sniff at the piece of branch. For just a moment the tip of the critter came into contact with the tip of the twig.

After that it withdrew, and stopped moving, and was completely still, like it was thinking about what it had just learned. Following a few seconds of this, it turned its "head," if that was the right word for it, toward Dave. It seemed to be looking up at him now, at his face, but, as far as Dave could tell, it had no eyes or face to be looking at him with. Its pudgy body rippled, once, and then again, and Dave watched with astonishment as a wave of soft, pastel colors (blue, peach, gentle yellow) moved over its surface like a breeze flitting over the surface of an otherwise placid pond. Then the colors were gone. More of its bulk lifted itself from the root. Almost as if it were the world's ugliest, clumsiest, smallest, slowest cobra rising up to strike, or at least threaten to do so. It was silly and scary all at the same time.

Dave's breathing paused. He felt his heart beating under his coat. It was freaky, this thing. Just because it was so different. He hadn't seen anything like it before. Its body was definitely pulsing now, regular changes, almost like a heartbeat. It bulged out some in the middle. He studied the part of it that was standing up and turning in his direction. It was *possible* he saw two rounded bubbles that might, could have been, eyes of some kind. Or the beginnings of eyes, anyway. But it was hard to tell.

Then the critter scrunched forward once, like an inchworm, pulling its backside up and pushing ahead, settling gently onto a bit of the twig that Dave was still holding in front of it. He felt the weight of it in his fingers, just a few ounces. And then—he swore this was true, even though it seemed crazy and ridiculous-- he not only felt but could sort of hear it sigh in a tiny way, like it was happy, or contented. It rolled over just a bit on one side, showing Dave it had a translucent, silvery, slick belly. And looked at him.

A moment later Dave realized that he was starting to cry.

A moment after that he thought he should stop, or someone would catch him crying by himself next to a slug and make fun of him.

A moment after that he decided he didn't care, and he went on crying and looking at the slug.

Except it wasn't a slug.

It was Something Else.

He realized then what the critter reminded him of more than anything.

A big, bloody booger. The type of booger you'd see on a tissue after honking into it when your nose was super dry and had sort of started to bleed but not quite. Dark crimson and nasty, stringy and wet. Dave wouldn't admit it in polite company, or any company, really, but he picked his nose somewhat regularly. He felt ashamed about it sometimes. He felt like he should have grown out of it by now. But it just came naturally, a longstanding habit, and he kind of liked it even though everyone made jokes about nose pickers being gross, and it didn't seem like it was hurting anybody else, so if he was alone, and felt like he could get away with it, he would do it.

The critter on the root looked like a big bloody booger, Dave thought, just a fat one with a cute little personality. This notion made him chuckle out loud, even as a couple of tears rolled down his cheek.

He heard a noise and looked up to see the first bus arriving. More would follow, one after another, he knew, almost all at once. Kids were filtering into the yard on foot, too. Billy Perry walked through the east gate, scanned the yard and saw Dave.

His lean face broke into a gooberly grin and he sorta waved and started to lope in Dave's direction.

Dave had to think fast. He picked a maple leaf off the ground, one that was still soft and not dried out, a reddish yellow one with a hint of bright green in patches, and gently laid it over the booger like a blanket.

"See you later, buddy," he said to it, not whispering, but softly.

Then he stood up, fist-bumped with Billy as his friend cheerily marched up, made a weird face in reply to the one Billy was making, and snatched his backpack off the ground with dramatic flair, being as cool about it as a boy like Dave Cooper could be. Which was not very cool at all.

He didn't risk looking back at the tree or the root or the leaf covering the booger as he and Billy walked together into the now open doors of the building.

Dave was a couple of minutes late getting outside at morning recess because Mr. Osborn pulled him aside after the bell rang to tell him he had heard "what had happened at home." Mr. Osborn told Dave he was sorry, and if Dave needed someone to talk to about it, Mr. Osborn was a good listener.

"I know it must be hard, and maybe it raises a lot of questions," he said, looking down at Dave through his professorish spectacles.

Dave had not known his parents were going to tell the school, although now that he knew it, it seemed like something they would do. He really didn't want this conversation to be happening. Mr. Osborn was a good guy. He taught English and History. He wasn't strict but he wasn't a pushover, either. He was fair and his classes could be fun sometimes. And Dave guessed he might even be a good listener about stuff like this, if anyone was. But Dave didn't have anything to say. To anybody.

Mr. Osborn said maybe Mrs. Tropton, the school counselor, was going to reach out to Dave later in the day or tomorrow. Just for a chat.

"Ok," said Dave. "Thanks for the head's up."

He stood waiting awkwardly for the encounter to end. Mr. Osborn looked at him, then clapped a hand warmly on his shoulder.

“All right, then, off you go, Dave. Get some fresh air.”

Dave left the room as quickly as he could without seeming rude, then scurried outside as fast as he could move without running and drawing the ire of Miss Newcombe, who was standing in the hall near the doorway.

He began heading over to the maple tree, but then he noticed that a small crowd of kids had gathered on the basketball court, just under one of the hoops. One of the kids, unfortunately, was Jake Hammond, his nemesis since second grade, who was four inches taller than Dave and about sixty pounds heavier. Jake, several of his normal doofus companions, and a couple of the girls were standing around looking at something on the asphalt. Through a gap between a couple of the kids’ legs Dave saw what it was on the ground that they were all looking at.

“Eww,” he heard Sally Kelleher say, and she made a grossed-out princess face. “I mean, like, total eww.”

“Step on it!” said Lionel Fairman.

And Jake Hammond nudged two people aside to do just that. A familiar, ugly, cruel sneer twisted his bovine face as he took a step forward and raised a leg. He was wearing his usual ratty old black work boots. The other kids grimaced, some squealed or groaned, and everyone stepped back, not wanting to be splashed with goo or to be too close to the killing when it happened.

“See ya, wouldn’t wanna be ya, you freaky little – “ Jake began.

And that was as far as he got.

Because Dave Cooper - Dave Cooper of all people, who was wiry thin and nerdy and quiet and never raised a fuss, Dave Cooper who put up with Jake Hammond pushing him around and shoving dirt in his mouth and pinning him to the ground and spitting stretchy loogies onto his forehead on the field in Waylen Park when they crossed paths on weekends and teachers were not around to intervene - *that* Dave Cooper had sprinted over and with all his earthly might (and, it seemed, a little something extra that had come from some other source) barreled into Jake Hammond’s elephantine torso from the side and shoved.

Hard.

And I mean, like really fucking hard indeed.

Jake’s pudgy, pseudo-muscular bulk, not expecting the assault and perched only on one leg, was sent hurling several feet in the direction of the circle at half court. He

was caught sufficiently by surprise that he managed to do very little to break his fall, too. His elbows hit the pavement first, then his hips, causing an “oof!” to explode from his mouth, and then the rest of him. His head bounced once off the ground. He rolled over twice. He lay there for a few moments, and was just in the middle of rising up on all fours, hair mussed, a red scrape blotch on his right temple, muttering something guttural and furious, when Dave Cooper – Dave Cooper! – ran over and kicked him, hard, really fucking hard, with everything he had, in his ample gut. With another explosive release of air, Jake collapsed to the asphalt on his stomach, then rolled over onto his back.

Dave leaned over him, closing the distance between his face and Jake’s.

“Stay down, you pig, or I swear to Christ I’ll kick your goddamn ass-breath shit-loving teeth out,” he said.

He didn’t shout the words. He spoke them. Coldly and calmly. And even Dave recognized that he didn’t sound like himself. At all. His natural voice was high-pitched and squealy, particularly when he was upset or excited. This was a hiss, with fangs. It had menace in it. Real danger.

Jake seemed to recognize that, at least enough for him to take a few seconds to catch his breath and ponder his next move. A crowd had gathered. Pretty much everyone in fifth and sixth grade was watching. Dave looked up from Jake and saw all of his classmates, and then some, staring, shocked, at the scene. He took in a sampling of the faces, one at a time, quickly, to get an idea of what he had just done to his place in the sixth-grade pecking order. One face stood out as different.

The face was Sarah Lin’s.

Sarah was a nerdy-looking, slender, moon-faced Chinese girl who wore big round owl glasses that seemed designed to advertise her intelligence. She was new to the school this year. Her family had moved to Lowendale from upstate New York at the end of the summer. She hadn’t made many friends yet. As in, any friends at all, as far as Dave knew. Sarah answered a lot of questions in class (correctly) but rarely spoke to anyone other than that.

Her head was tilted at a funny angle as she looked back at Dave looking at her. Her face wasn’t showing the same emotions that appeared on the other faces, which reflected back either shock or amusement, or both.

What Dave saw from Sarah Lin looked more like frank and unabashed curiosity, with a dash of admiration, and a heavy dose of no little bit of interest. Dave

had the peculiar thought that the way Sarah Lin was looking at him might have been something like the way he had looked at the booger earlier, the one he had at least temporarily just saved from being squashed by a Neanderthal idiot.

Right about then was when Mr. Valley and Mrs. Newcombe showed up. Moments later, Dave was escorted into the school for processing.

The school cut Dave some slack, a lot of slack, because they knew “what had happened at home,” and because the episode was so very out of character for him. It was, in fact, unprecedented. Jake, eager to preserve his reputation, also downplayed any injuries he might have suffered, which helped. Mr. Lewis, the assistant principal, still did his level best to chastise Dave and induce the appropriate amount of shame in him for his behavior. Violence of any kind was unacceptable, he told Dave. Mr. Lewis advised Dave sternly that he would be contacting his parents, so he could expect to hear about this at home. Dave would have to apologize to Jake. And write a five-page essay on resolving conflicts without resorting to physical violence, which he would read in front of his class the following week.

Dave put up no resistance and feigned an apologetic disposition. He felt no remorse for what had happened, but he wanted to get out of the office as soon as humanly possible. His legs were tapping and bouncing under the small circular table while Mr. Lewis droned on, because he wanted to get outside to see what had happened to the critter.

He didn’t get a chance to check on it until after school, because he was not allowed to go outside at lunch. When he was finally released at the end of the day along with everyone else, one small fish in a flood of fishies pouring from the building to make their way back home, he quickly found the spot on the court where the kids had surrounded the booger. The booger wasn’t there. He wasn’t surprised. But where had it gone?

Dave knelt to the asphalt and studied the spot as kids walked around him, some of them looking at him warily as they passed. He could just make out a faint, faded imprint of moisture, shaped roughly like a tiny croissant, on the cement. There was no trail leading away from the scene, though. It reminded him of police programs he had

seen, where the cops drew an outline with chalk or tape around where a murder victim's body had been found.

He looked around, moving in something like a spiral without thinking about it, trying not to bump into other kids while he searched for any trace of the critter. He saw nothing. He returned to the maple tree where he had first encountered it, the root. Nothing. He watched the buses leave, and all the walker kids, everyone except for those students who were part of the after-school program because their parents worked and were not home yet. He spent twenty minutes in the playground, looking everywhere. He found nothing.

Then two things occurred to him. The school would have called his parents about the fight in the playground. And he was already going to be pretty late. He better get moving.

So with a final glance around the yard, Dave Cooper headed home.

When he got there, his mom opened the front door before he reached the front steps. A moment later his Dad showed up in the doorway, too. He hadn't gone to work because of what had happened the previous day. Shoulders slumped, Dave slowly climbed the steps, dreading the conversation that was about to happen. He stood silently before the door and looked up at his parents. His dad stepped out, knelt down in front of him, gently rested one hand on each of his shoulders and looked him square in the eyes.

"You OK, buddy?"

Although Dave was furious about it and tried to prevent it from happening, tears began welling in his eyes for the second time that day. He just couldn't stop them

He nodded in a way that said *no, dad, I am 100% not OK at all.*

His Dad opened his arms and hugged him tight.

"You will be," he said. "I promise."

The next day was Saturday. Late in the morning, Dave was sitting on his bed in his room watching an internet video about meat-eating plants when his Mom knocked on the bedroom door.

“What?” he asked, pulling off his headphones.

Mom opened the door just a bit, peeking her head through the gap. She looked much better than she had the previous day. Her complexion had more color and she had done her hair and was wearing some makeup.

“There’s someone here to see you,” she said. Her face wore a strange expression.

“Who?” Dave asked.

“A young lady,” Mom said quietly.

Dave was flummoxed into something close to paralysis. A young lady? There was no precedent at the Cooper house for a visit from a young lady seeking to speak with Dave Cooper. He must have been flummoxed for longer than he thought because eventually his Mom felt the need to prod him.

“Are you going to come downstairs?” she asked.

Dave slid off the bed and started for the door. Then he stopped, went back, and put on his sneakers. For some reason, he didn’t want to confront this mystery lady in socks.

It was Sarah Lin.

She stood in the front hallway, her posture upright and elegant, the straps of a bright pink backpack looped over her frail shoulders. Her long black hair was in pigtails. The elastics in her hair were pink, too. She wore a long white button-down shirt with a collar, untucked, the shirt tails spilling over her light blue jeans. The shirt was unbuttoned at the top, enough so that he could see that a gold necklace resting against her olive skin.

She looked different. She dressed a lot more plainly at school.

“Hi,” Sarah said, with a tentative smile and a half-wave, looking up to watch through the owlish lenses of her glasses as Dave plodded hesitantly down the stairs.

“Hi,” he managed when his feet hit the floor.

This rich dialogue was followed by the mandatory period of awkward silence when a boy and girl around this age unfamiliar to one another convene in such a fashion. They both stood there. Looking around at things, only glancing at one another. Dave could almost feel his mother listening from upstairs.

“I have something I wanted to show you,” Sarah said eventually, rising to her tiptoes and leaning in his direction, then lowering her feet back down to the ground. It felt intriguingly conspiratorial.

“You do?” Dave asked.

“About yesterday,” said Sarah.

“Oh.”

Dave thought about this for a minute. He looked at Sarah’s bright pink backpack.

“Do you mean – “

Sarah nodded and a secretive smile bent her lips. Dave took note for the first time that her eyes were the color of dark chocolate. They held a surprising hint of mischief.

“Oh. Um, ok. Cool. Let’s, uh, do you want to hang out in the back yard, maybe?”

Sarah nodded again.

“We can go out the front and around,” Dave said.

And they did.

Dave didn’t notice he was still wearing his flannel pajama bottoms and the Marvel Avengers t-shirt he had worn to bed until they were seating themselves on his back steps. Ugh.

Sarah didn't say anything, though, or look disapprovingly at his silly outfit like a lot of the other girls probably would. She just took a seat next to him on the third wooden step, slipping off her backpack and putting it between her knees as she did. Her movements were precise and smooth, like she had planned them ahead of time.

"So – " Dave started.

"I have it," said Sarah.

"You –"

"The thing. From the basketball court. While everyone was looking at you being taken away and the teachers were helping Jake, I walked over, picked it up, and put it in a jar. It's in my backpack."

"Wow. That's, I mean, that's amazing," Dave said. And then his brow furrowed. "Uh, where did you get a jar?"

The slightest hint of rosy-pink color bloomed on Sarah Lin's olive cheeks. She smiled, seemed to think about what to say, and then tucked her chin toward her chest in mild embarrassment.

"I guess I like bugs," she said.

In response to this comment, something deep inside Dave Cooper popped, softly and quietly, like there had been a tiny, half-inflated balloony thing buried somewhere in his chest he had never known was there before, waiting for just this moment to take its first breath.

"Oh. That's cool," he said, all casual, like. "I like bugs, too. Doesn't everybody? So, you keep a jar with you in case you see a good one?"

"Yes."

"That's cool," Dave repeated.

(When he was nervous, Dave often found himself repeating things.)

Something about the way the trailing "s" had come out of Sarah's mouth when she said the word "yes" made Dave notice the gap between her two top front teeth. And then he noticed that he liked it. Very much. Another thought quickly followed. Watching Sarah Lin's face change when she was feeling a bit embarrassed a few seconds ago had been pretty much exactly like watching a sunrise happen.

Dave felt changes in the wind. All of this was new. Like, really new. A girl at his house. These thoughts. He didn't quite know what was going on.

"David, I don't know what it is," said Sarah. "I can't identify the species. But it's super interesting. And it's...changed since yesterday."

"Changed? How?"

"I don't think you're going to believe it."

"Show me," said Dave quickly. He had never been more interested to see something in his whole life.

Sarah unzipped her backpack and fumbled inside for a few seconds before meticulously extracting a glass mason jar with four rectangular holes punched in the gold metal lid, one near each corner. She held it up between them, perched on the tips of her five slender, elegant fingers like a treasured object on a pedestal. Dave whirled around to scan the windows of his house, to see if his Mom or Dad were watching. He couldn't see anyone.

He turned back and gazed into the jar, like a wizard peering into a crystal ball, trying with mixed success to ignore the warped reflection of Sarah's face, and her big glasses and full lips (which may or may not have been painted with a little red lipstick today) looking in from the other side. He saw the vague shape of the critter and a twig that Sarah must have put in the jar for it. Then he noticed what she meant about the booger having changed. Or thought he did. But it couldn't be. No frigging way.

"Whoa," he said after a few seconds.

And then he said it again.

"Whoa. Is that...?"

"Yeah," said Sarah quietly. "It is. They are."

The two sat in silence for perhaps a full two minutes, each of them admiring the booger, each of their faces close up against opposite sides of the glass. The booger was the same size, basically, as it had been yesterday. The same shape and color, too. It still had no recognizable facial features. But blooming from each side of its torso was the stub of a flat, wide pinkish-purple appendage. And each of those appendages was moving, ever so slowly, up and down.

There was no other way to put it. They were flapping.

The booger had sprouted wings.

And they kind of looked like they might be glowing.

“Don’t be so sensitive.”

Dave had heard that a lot growing up, mostly from his grandmother and grandfather and the aunts and uncles on his Mom’s side of the family, who were anything but. Once, when he was four, he was riding in the back seat of his grandmother’s car and a squirrel scampered out into the road in front of the vehicle. His grandmother – who Dave called Nana Janice to distinguish her from Nana Lucy, his Dad’s mother -- made an effort to avoid it, swerving to the right. It didn’t work. Dave heard and felt a sickening thunk beneath the rear wheel as they passed over the animal.

He whirled around to look through the rear window. The squirrel’s gray, limp body lay in the middle of the street, with its bushy tail sticking up and wagging in the breeze. A thick blob of crimson fluid and material like chunky cranberry sauce had burst from its abdomen and splattered onto the pavement.

“Shoot,” his grandmother said, and then sighed.

A few seconds later she pulled the car to a stop at a red light. Dave started to sniffle and wipe tears from his cheeks. Nana Janice, with her hawk-like face and stark gray eyes, regarded him in the rearview mirror.

“What?” she snapped, with no kindness in her voice. “You upset about that *squirrel!*?”

Dave didn’t respond at first, then looked into the cold eyes in the mirror and nodded as he wiped his nose with one hand.

“Oh, please, Davie,” his grandmother groaned, and a look of what felt to Dave like actual disgust passed over her unfriendly, avian features. “You gotta toughen up, kid. You saw. I tried to avoid him. It happens. It’s part of life. You’re too sensitive. It was just a squirrel.”

Tell that to the squirrel!, Dave thought of saying. Or maybe he only thinks this in his memory of the event. In any case he is certain in retrospect that he said nothing

else at the time. He just stared out the window quietly and tried not to make noise with his tears. There was no help to be had from the sad old lady in the driver's seat.

"You need to develop thicker skin, sweetie," his grandmother said as the light turned green. "Or you're going to be hurt a lot."

The car started moving again, and that was the last that was ever said about that anonymous squirrel, who had been squashed into gruesome pulp by the wheel of a callous pale blue Volvo sedan while it was merely trying to cross the street.

The next day, his grandmother, who was watching him for the weekend while his parents celebrated their wedding anniversary with a trip to Vermont, took him to a Catholic Sunday Mass. She paraded him up to the front of the church and they slid into the second pew. She smiled at what must have been a few of her Mass friends as they took their seats. After Mass would be a dog and pony show outside the front of the church with Dave starring as both, being fawned over and cooed at by old ladies and told what a nice little boy he was.

During Mass, Dave mostly gazed up at the massive crucifix looming over the altar like a T-shaped storm cloud. It was probably fifteen feet long, suspended maybe twenty feet in the air from thick metal cables. The wooden Jesus pinned to the wooden cross was bleeding from the crown of thorns on his head. His tortured face bore a look of agony, sadness, and despair. His hands were bleeding from the nails that had been hammered into them. His feet were bloody, too. And there was a crimson gash in his side from which more blood was oozing. It looked more than a bit like what had burst from the squirrel's stomach the day before.

Christ's skin didn't look very thick to Dave just then.

Not very thick at all.

"This is freaking amazing," Dave said finally.

"I know," Sarah agreed.

"What is it, some kind of larvae for a butterfly or something?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I have no idea. But I agree. It's totally amazing. Like incredible."

“You’ve been feeding it?”

There were crumbs scattered over the floor of the glass inside the jar, and bits of something bright, green and leafy, too.

Sarah peered around the side of the jar to look directly at Dave. Because they both had gotten so close to the glass, their faces were pretty close together now, without anything in between. Closer than Dave’s face had ever been to a real girl’s face. He almost recoiled, and moved backward. But didn’t. He tensed himself to hold his ground. He could smell something. Flowery. He guessed it might be perfume or something.

When Sarah spoke, he could feel her breath on his face.

He could *feel* her breath.

“Yes. I crushed up some walnuts and cashews into the smallest bits I could make, and also chopped up some basil and parsley and a little kale and threw that in, too.”

“What made you think of those things?” Dave asked.

Sarah’s face scrunched up. The skin around her wide, flat nose wrinkled.

“I’m not sure, really. Just something to try. It was stuff we had in our house.”

“And it ate them?”

“Yep. Pretty much all of it. It kind of wriggles over things, and then it sort of shakes a little bit, and then when it moves away the food is gone. I haven’t seen anything like a mouth on it, though. It must be on its belly somewhere, but see?”

She lifted the jar so they could both look at the underside of the booger. There was nothing that looked like a mouth. Just featureless gray-red pulp and oozy flesh.

“Huh,” Dave said. “Weird.”

“Very,” said Sarah.

They glanced at each other and laughed. This caused them to back away from one another. Sarah gently laid the jar down on the step between them.

“You can take it now, David” she said. “I saved it for you. After what you did.”

Dave looked down at the jar, and then up at Sarah Lin. Right into her almondy, dark brown eyes. He opened his mouth to start to talk but couldn't. He closed it, gathered himself, opened it and began again.

"I think you should keep it," he told her.

"Why?" asked Sarah.

"You're a lot more of an expert on bug stuff than me. Obviously. And you figured out what to feed it in less than a day. It's got wings now, Sarah. You seem like you make a better owner for it than I would be."

Sarah looked back at him. A beat of time passed. Then another. Something of the curiosity and interest from yesterday was in her expression. And maybe something more.

"You're different, David," she said to him quietly.

"Different how?" he asked her.

Sarah sniffed. She looked away from him, toward his back lawn.

"Different from everyone, I suspect," she said.

David let that sink in. He liked how Sarah had called him "David," instead of just "Dave," which was how everyone at school knew him. Maybe it was just because she didn't know any better, but he liked it anyway. Like it was her code name for him. Just hers. With the lower half of his peripheral vision, he accidentally noticed with something like panic that the top of Sarah's blouse had puckered open just a bit because she was bending forward a bit.

He changed the subject.

"Should we name it?"

"That's a good idea," she said.

"Do you think it's male or female?"

"No idea. Maybe both. Or neither. Maybe we can pick a name that isn't gender-specific, to be safe."

Dave nodded.

"That's smart."

They sat thinking.

“How about Sam?” he suggested.

“Sam?”

“Yeah. Sam can be a nickname for either Samuel or Samantha. I knew a Sam once who was a girl.”

Sarah nibbled on her bottom lip for a couple of seconds. Her eyebrows bent and she looked up at some passing clouds in the otherwise pale blue sky as she considered the proposal.

“Sam,” she finally said, in a conclusive tone of voice. “I like it. Sam it is. Should we shake on it?”

Dave smiled and held out his hand. Sarah grinned and held out hers, formally. He clasped it. They held one another’s hands and shook, pumping up and down a few times and laughing. Sarah’s palm was warm, and it felt light and fragile as Dave held it.

Then Dave let Sarah go - he remembered this later, clearly, he was the one who let go first - and the handshake was over.

A lot of things were over by that point, as it turned out.

And a lot of things had only begun.

“Well, I should get home now. I’m supposed to go to my aunt’s this afternoon,” Sarah said.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” mumbled Dave, trying to keep disappointment out of his voice. He could still feel the warmth from Sarah’s palm in his.

As she opened her pack to put the jar back into it, a few things spilled out. The bag was surprisingly messy inside, Dave observed. Sarah seemed so otherwise organized and meticulous. Seeing the crumpled papers and candy wrappers all stuffed in there haphazardly was like looking into her private space, like seeing behind her mask.

Sarah exclaimed and quickly moved to pick the items up.

“I’m sorry...,” she mumbled, shaking her head. “Clumsy.”

Dave bent to help her. A folded sheet of white paper had slid out of the bag onto the step at his feet. He picked it up. Words were handprinted in blue ink on one side. As he went to hand the sheet to Sarah, he looked down at it and read a snippet. It looked like a poem. The title was “The Experiment, by Sarah Lin.” He didn’t get to read anymore because she hurriedly took it from his hand with a quick, “thanks.”

After she had stuffed everything back into the bag, including the jar, they walked together around the side of the house.

Dave wondered if he should say it. Then he did.

“Do you write poetry?” he asked.

And that flush happened again. So quickly. Like two pink carnations blooming on Sarah’s cheeks, one just beneath each of her deep brown eyes.

“Not really,” she said, waving one hand dismissively. “I’m not very good.”

“How do you know that?” Dave asked. “Did someone say that to you?”

“No. I just compare my poems to ‘real’ poems, and my stuff is lame.”

They reached the side of front of Dave’s house.

“I bet it isn’t bad at all,” Dave said.

“That’s nice of you to say, David.”

There it was again. David. To Sarah he wasn’t Dave, he was David.

Like a king.

Before she left, they exchanged cell phone numbers so that Sarah could keep *David* up to date on how Sam was doing. They decided to use actual texting instead of social media to keep things as private as possible, because they both wanted the Secret of the Winged Booger to be just between them, at least for now. Sarah promised to let him know if anything important or interesting happened with Sam. Then she strolled away with a casual wave. Her black pigtails whipped around her head as she cast one final smile over her shoulder and disappeared around the bushes at the end of the driveway.

Dave walked back inside the house through the front door and into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door, took out a carton of orange juice and poured some in a glass. He heard someone in the hallway. Then that person was standing in the

doorway to the kitchen. He didn't turn around to look at who it was, but of course he knew.

"So. You have a new friend," Mom eventually said, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah," Dave said offhandedly, working to keep his tone of voice in check. "She's new at school and hasn't made a lot of friends yet, so."

"Well, new friends are always good. Her name is Sarah?"

"Yep."

A few moments of silence.

"Was it nice to have Sarah come over today, honey?"

Dave wanted to slough off this remark, make out like it was silly. He wanted to be cool about it. But instead he finally turned around. As he looked up at his mother his throat tightened. He squeezed the glass with the juice in it, then his hand relaxed. He laid it down on the kitchen table, went over to his mom and hugged her.

"Yeah. It was," he said, pressing the side of his face into her chest just below her shoulder. "She's cool. I like her."

"I like her, too, for whatever that's worth," Mom said.

Dave pulled away from the hug and managed a grin. He saw that her eyes were watering too.

"I love you, Mom," he managed.

"I love you too, little potato," Mom said.

Dave rolled his eyes and let out something like a laugh. That was an old one from the early days. Then he went upstairs to his room.

At 8:11 that night Dave was sitting cross-legged in bed, playing Tetris on a Gameboy (he was deeply mired in an old school video game phase at the time) when his cell phone chimed. A text message had come in.

It was from Sarah.

“Here’s the poem...” the message read.

Just as Dave finished reading that message another one showed up. This one was multiple lines.

‘The Experiment’

If an Angel should fall, would God stop to catch It?

If the Moon threw a Star, would her Dog run to fetch It?

Maybe, perhaps, and possibly so...

Probably? There’s only one way to know!

by Sarah Lin

David read the poem, and he re-read it, and then he read it again.

“Wow,” he typed back eventually, not knowing what else to say.

And then: “It’s awesome!”

“You’re just being nice.”

“No really, I like it. It’s really good. Is it finished?”

“LOL. That’s a good question! Good night, David.”

In the darkness of his room, the bluish phone light captured David Cooper’s face breaking into a very broad smile.

“Good night, Sarah,” he texted back.

Dave spent the better part of the next day working on a poem to send back to Sarah. After much effort and many drafts, he came up with four lines that he felt were possibly, maybe, good enough to send. They went like this.

*Once a dragon felt like sneezing,
So that dragon started wheezing,
Opened up his nostrils, and
Made a mess of the whole land.
By David Cooper*

After typing this masterpiece of modern literature into the messaging app, Dave proofread it, and then he read it again, and re-read it about twenty times more before finally sending it. He winced as his finger tapped the little blue arrow to do so. Then he laid the phone next to him in bed and picked up the paperback copy of the novel *Divergent* that he had borrowed from the library earlier in the week and tried to read that. But really he was just waiting. Five minutes passed. Ten. The delay became excruciating. He told himself that Sarah might be somewhere where she couldn't check her phone. Or she might not even have her phone with her. The wait hit the fifteen-minute mark. Ugh. He started re-thinking what he had sent. Was it too childish? Too goofy?

At 4:43 PM, nineteen minutes after he had sent his text, a text from Sarah arrived.

*"Oogie boogie booger gross,
What gushed from that dragon's nose!
But what them peoples didn't know...
Is how FAST dragon boogers GROW!!"*

A pink flower emoji appeared after the second exclamation point on the final line.

In later years Dave would look back on the minutes immediately following his reading of that message, and he would conclude they were almost certainly the purest happiness he had ever felt in his entire life. Joy and elation flooded into him, coursing through his insides like a blood transfusion. He felt filled with light, or with something like electricity. This was all so new for him. New and wondrous.

“Did you just come up with that?!?!?” he texted.

Sarah texted back a smiley face.

Then this from Sarah: “Big news about the little person!”

“Really?! What?!?”

“It’s 2big 2share on text. It’s YOOG news!!!! Tell u 2mrw at lunch. Actually I’ll *show* you.” With a gasp emoji.

“Aargh! The suspense is gonna kill me!” Stressed emoji.

“Surprises are good!” With a heart.

David looked at that heart, which startled him. Eventually he got past it, sort of, and thought about what Sarah had said. Were surprises good? Could they be? Not in his experience. Not the surprise he and his mom and dad had just gotten, with his mom miscarrying the baby, that was for sure. There had been other surprises, too, things he didn’t like to think about and had never talked about, to anyone.

But this was Sarah. He didn’t stop to reflect right then on how quickly it had happened, how significant that name, *Sarah*, had become to him in such a short period of time, how he had already put her, *Sarah*, into a category unto herself.

But he had. She was the one who was different, in his opinion. It was so obvious anyone could see it.

“If you say so,” he texted. And thought about responding to her heart with one of his own, but that seemed to be too much. He added a simple smiley face emoji instead.

After a few seconds, noticeably longer than she had taken between the last few texts, Sarah texted back a thumbs up.

The year Dave Cooper turned twenty-six years old his wife Jane became pregnant for the second time. The couple already had a son, Michael Vincent, who had just turned two. They decided to learn the baby’s sex at the anatomy scan. They had done the same the first time around.

So nineteen weeks into the pregnancy, they found out.

It was a girl.

They came away from the ultrasound with a single photo of her. It was typical, for a miracle. Grainy. Black and white. Enormous head. Tiny hands. Body curled up against the inner contours of her mother's womb. She looked like she was sucking her thumb.

They had previously agreed not to share their thoughts on prospective baby names until reaching this point. Now, it was time for the unveiling of their ideas. In the car on the way home, as Dave drove over the bridge taking them out of the city, Jane dug into her purse and pulled out a small piece of folded yellow paper. A list of candidate names was scribbled on it.

"Ok, ready?" she said. Her whole pretty freckled face was smiling with excitement.

"As ready as I am gonna be," Dave deadpanned amiably, looking away from the road for a moment to grin back at her, in a sidelong way.

"Ok, first one, currently my fave. It was my mom's suggestion, actually. What do you think of

Samantha?

During the thirteen months immediately following that conversation, eight stories attributed to the author “David S. Lin” appeared in various publications. Six were published in online magazines, one was included in an anthology with a theme involving experimentation with language, and one was published as a chapbook.

Sometimes those stories were accompanied by a brief author bio. No picture was ever provided. In each case the bio read as follows:

“David S. Lin consumes oxygen and other natural resources, but he won’t tell you where. More than anything else, he believes that life is unkind. He writes as an alternative to living it.”

After the publication of the last of those eight stores, no more works of the same ilk appeared under that name for a very long time.

“Do you love?”

I hear her voice saying this – sometimes I still hear it. In my dreams.

Do you love?

Yes, I answer, *Yes — and true love will never die.*

Then I wake up screaming.”

“Nona”

by Stephen King

“...most of them were just standing around in little groups, blinking at each other. Some of them were looking at the smear of blood where Carrie fell down. The water was washing it away.”

Carrie

by Stephen King

Evanescent

Six words, scribbled in blue ink, on yellow paper.

Six words, on a note taped to the screen door of their tiny, sagging lakefront house, fluttering like a flag in their pickup truck's headlights as they pulled up the driveway.

Betty had barely been able to see through her tears that night, but she had caught a glimpse of that note, and right then she had known.

She had remembered.

Six words rasped through a rictus full of sharp teeth.

Six words blown into her face like death smoke belching from a factory in Hell.

Six words, nineteen letters, one boy's life.

“I said I wanted him gone.”

...

The problem was, there was the way events actually happened, and there was the way Betty remembered them happening, and these two things might have been the same, but they might have been different, too, and Betty, it seemed, had no way of knowing.

There was also the way her dreaming mind remembered them happening, which was almost definitely *not* the way they happened, but which seemed real enough while she was caught up in the dreaming. She had re-lived this oneiric version so often that it had begun to gain as much credibility as the other two versions.

Each time she closed her eyes and drifted off, the dream came, an always-running movie that was just being unpaused, to twist Betty up like clay in the hands of some demented god, then to wake her up soaked in her own sweat and screaming, with her eyes and her crotch both burning, and with Jimmy -- dear little Jimmy, with his crisscrossed toes and ever so slightly bucked teeth, his perpetual impish squint and stick-thin white legs -- nowhere in sight.

Gone.

...

A little ham-colored arm came first, handless, and barely recognizable, ending in ragged, bloody stumps on either end. It slipped from Betty Traylor's birth canal with the ease of a bowel movement, flopping momentarily on the silver metal of the delivery room table before going still. Then a foot, its preposterously tiny toes still wriggling as if tickled, squeezed out with a gentle pop. A leg and a chunk of buttock wrapped tight in the elephant-gray umbilical cord. An incomplete heart that looked almost *chewed*. Three tiny fingers. And with a wrenching push from Betty, accompanied by tearing and burning and a surge of unthinkable pain, the utterly bald, wailing head tumbled from her like a bowled ball, rolling right off the table and into some dark corner of the hospital room.

The head did not stop crying.

Betty Traylor's legs were mounted to stirrups. Her legs were spread wide. She was screaming her birth pangs toward the dirty tiled ceiling and squeezing her eyes closed tightly enough to make them trickle dark blood down the sides of her face, but she still saw all of this, in the way you see things in dreams.

None of the details eluded her.

Try as she might to squeeze herself closed to it, she still saw it all.

...

Heart pounding, Betty Traylor looked down at herself, at two hands folded over the soft mound of her belly, at the dog-eared yellow piece of paper pinched by its corners between the bone-white tips of her forefingers and thumbs.

She sat up. The bed was drenched in sweat. Her crotch ached from where the pieces of the dream baby had emerged. Her throat burned from screaming. Her eyes watered and would not stop blinking.

It was another morning. A foggy morning of dim gray light and here I am, Betty thought, alone.

She shook her head, trying to shake loose the dream, knowing in advance how futile the gesture was. She had dreamed it for years now, ever since the day a sepulchral doctor with a long face and oddly fang-like canines had told her somberly that she would never be able to have children, that her physical equipment simply would not support the endeavor. For a woman who had dreamed of little else but having children of her own someday, it had been the worst news possible. She had not taken it well, to say the least, and the rest had followed.

The dream had stopped for a while, after she took Jimmy home from the hospital.

Now it was back to a nightly occurrence.

There was nothing to be learned from the dream. That was the worst of it. It was a broken record, simple pain replayed again and again with no point. It was a lament to her own sterility and dreaming it accomplished nothing.

Useless. Much like the letter she clutched now, clutched always it seemed, in her hands.

Betty stood and shuffled barefoot over plush orange carpet, down the short, shadowy hallway that led into her kitchen. A small room, filled with dark paneled wood and mustard yellow tiles, it was the type of space that could never seem clean no matter how diligently one cleaned it. She had long ago given up trying.

The fog-mud scent of nearby Lake Throw drifted through a small, half-open window over a stainless-steel sink. A half-filled coffee pot waited on a coffee maker next to an old stove. Under the coffee maker was a small piece of paper. A note.

Love you, it read.

Another meaningless note, she thought. It told her nothing she did not already know. But if one day it were not there...

Shaking her head again, Betty poured herself a cup. The coffee was cool; she knew without checking a clock that she had slept even later than usual this morning.

A single, antique-looking chair was pulled up to a small kitchen table near the doorway. The table had an olive Formica surface and thick, silver metal legs. The chair groaned beneath her weight. It was old, rickety, due to collapse any day now. She insisted on keeping it only because it had sentimental value; it was the first piece of furniture they had gotten for the house when she and John and Jimmy started their new lives. Betty had been driving through town and seen it on someone's curb, set to be thrown away, and she had not been able to resist taking it home. It was a turn of the century piece, dark pine, and while it had never been terrifically sturdy it had character.

Jimmy had sat in the chair most mornings, once he got big enough not to need the highchair, spooning Cheerios or Chex into his mouth and singing repetitive little kids' songs and swinging his pale thin legs back and forth above the kitchen tile. Some mornings when she sat down lately, she almost felt the warmth of his bottom on the seat, as if he had been there only moments earlier. As if she could call his name and he would come barreling down the hallway from his bedroom, everything at full-speed...

Betty rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. She shifted her weight and the chair cracked loudly. She pictured it giving way and crashing under her, and she herself sitting stupidly atop the pile of smashed wood like a witch about to be burned, her faded floral nightgown pulled up to reveal her thick pink legs goosepimpling in the cool morning air. The picture was almost enough to make her laugh, but not quite; she had heard herself laugh here before, alone in the cold echoless light of morning, and it was not a sound she preferred to hear very often.

Betty lay the small note carefully on the table in front of her now, pinning it to the Formica with splayed fingers. Squinting, she read it, slowly, her lips mouthing each word as her eyes passed over it.

Fool, part of her whispered, and it was hard to disagree. But it would be harder still, she knew, to ignore the letter. This reading and re-reading and re-reading the damned thing each day was a ritual she had fallen into and could no longer avoid, as involuntary and as futile as her dream. It was as if she had all this time been missing some secret code encrypted in the single sentence written in uppercase block letters lengthwise across the page.

She knew of course that there was nothing to be found. The letter was incapable of producing any more insight than it had four and half months ago, when it arrived. As an instrument of pain, like her dream, the letter remained effective, but as a source of information it had long been as barren as her own womb.

Still, she read it.

Then she read it again.

Then Betty Traylor lowered the letter and sighed.

The answers lay elsewhere, not in this crude document or in old dreams but in her own memory. She knew that. She was *sure* of it, thoroughly positive.

Memory was ripe with truth.

A careful consideration of the relevant facts, a turning over of the evidence, a rotating of the pivotal notions in a certain way, was what she needed to make sense of what had happened.

The answers were simple, only hidden.

Not ineffable, simply *unknown*.

A miracle, she had recently read, is the result of causes with which we are unacquainted. Once those causes are discovered, they are no longer miracles, but natural law.

The final explanation would not involve magic or voodoo or any other of the foolish, illogical notions the text of the letter seemed to imply. It would make sense, the truth of it would heal, the letter and the past would abandon their hold over her, and life, such as it could be, would begin again.

I need only feel as much guilt and shame and pain as I allow myself to feel, she told herself, her teeth pinching her bottom lip, sucking it inward. Stick to the *facts*, damn it, the *facts*. Remember something important. The facts!

Betty Traylor recited these things to herself now, as she had done over and over again in the quiet of her small kitchen each day after her husband left for work. She listened to herself, too; she deep-down believed herself.

That was why, as the days had turned into weeks and the weeks into months, she had puzzled endlessly over the finer points of what had happened at the Burnham County Fall Festival on September 23rd of the previous year. With the mindless compulsion of an animal lapping at an open wound, Betty Traylor had obsessed the details. She had pored over each character in the six-word message that had been waiting for them when they returned home that night. She had navigated the slim branches of recollection and possibility, and the fact that she reached an abject failure of comprehension over and over again did nothing to keep her from almost immediately beginning the process anew.

Eventually the pain of her loss and constant failure had become a fact unto itself, as tangible as the paper in her hands or the gelid coffee now pooling in her stomach, something to be felt and acknowledged and flexed each morning upon opening her eyes, in the same way she automatically squeezed her hands into testing fists. It was a key aspect of Betty by now, a descriptive attribute like her height, weight, gender, and birth date.

Her pain.

Betty put the letter down on the table and thumbed vigorously at her eyes again, sighing. She sipped again at her mug of cold coffee, picked the letter back up.

The letters, written in blue ink, began to blur. She squinted, but the fuzziness only worsened. The sensation in her legs began to recede, as if they were falling asleep; she felt herself begin to drift, to float. It was all familiar, the same routine. In moments, she knew, she would find herself wandering among the dizzying, expansive wilderness of facts and speculations and memories once more, a novice hiker caught exploring without a map or compass, blindly seeking a way out, staving off the lunacy of panic and despair with the myth that salvation, for sure, was always just around the next bend.

...

Betty Traylor watched soap bubbles drift past her mind's eye. They beckoned to her, and she followed. They were taking her away, back, all the way back, they always did, and she always let them.

...

Stick to the facts, damn it, she had warned herself.

The weather. The time. The witnesses. The Machine and how it happened and where Jimmy might have gone and most importantly, where he might be now. That was the only important thing, really – learning where Jimmy might be, finding out where the gone things go, and how to get there. Everything else was mere trivia.

The day's memory had become nearly as reliable as her birthing dream, always beginning in the same place: darkness lightening slowly like a cinematic fade-in to reveal Jimmy's pale five-year-old face across the picnic table from her, his thin-lipped mouth nibbling half-heartedly on a corn dog. Then John's big face appeared next to his, florid and pocked with glistening sweat beads, with dollops of canary yellow mustard at the corners of his lips. A half-drunk plastic cup of raspberry lime rickey soda fizzed in the center of the table between them. Sitting across from her husband and son, Betty felt the hardness of the picnic table wood beneath her buttocks. She felt, too, the warmth of the sun on her face, and soaked it in appreciatively, fully aware this late September dip into Indian Summer would be one of the last truly vernal days left for New Englanders to enjoy for a long while. Fulgent sunlight draped itself over the fairgrounds like a paper-thin curtain of polished brass.

A good day, she had thought; what we have here is a legitimately good day.

Carnival sounds seethed in the air: the too-loud blaring of amusement park ride music on bad sound systems and the screeching of young girls, the popping of balloons and the tireless badgering of rubes ("*Step right up*") by the vendors. The very occasional clang of a strong man bell. Everyone everywhere in the world, it seemed, laughing.

The fair was crowded; people came from all over the county for this celebration of autumn, and besides the residents a few out of staters, early leaf peepers, attended as well. There was one main thoroughfare, a long narrow street of carnival attractions. The ones closest to the gate involved food. Then came booths that sold things, then

the games and finally the animals and the rides. The entire fairgrounds was probably two hundred yards long.

It was two fifteen in the afternoon. Betty and John and Jimmy had only arrived at the fair a few minutes earlier, having just made the short drive from the lake house to the park. So it was two fifteen, or very close to it. That was a fact. It was two fifteen and they were just finishing their lunch when the first of the soap bubbles started to appear in the fair's main causeway.

"Huh," said John, pausing in mid-chew of his sausage and looking up. Betty turned her head to follow his gaze.

A few dozen strong and as big as baseballs, the initial wave of bubbles bobbed easily up and down in the breeze, following the flow of the crowd, but traveling just above it like spirits meandering the walkways of the living.

"Cool," said Jimmy. Distracted, he let the tip of his corn dog drop to the surface of the picnic table.

"Jimmy...", said Betty.

"That's okay," Jimmy said, not looking away from the bubbles, taking his hand from the corn dog and wiping it off on a napkin, leaving the uneaten chunk lying forlornly on the brick red wood of the picnic table. "I was done anyway."

He half-stood, looking for all intents and purposes like some pied piper somewhere was playing a tune that he, being a kid, could hear. And he was not the only one. Enchanted children all around them were ooohing and aahing, glancing eastward, westward, skyward for the source of the bubbles.

Like rock stars for little kids, Betty thought. God, they all loved bubbles.

The soap globes were multiplying steadily now, some of them drifting among the people and not just above them. None of them seemed to be popping. Betty wondered if whoever was blowing them was using that new soap they'd come out with, which extended the lifetime of the bubbles considerably but left hard to remove stains on your rugs and furniture; she had learned that the hard way when they had given Jimmy some of it for Christmas last year. Outside, she supposed, they were safer to use.

Someone Betty did not see yelled: "Hey look! It's a Bubble Machine!", and someone else to her left cried: "Over here, out in the field!"

In seconds a stampede was on. A throng of squealing halflings tore free from their parents' grasps and rushed headlong out toward the scorched-looking field that lined the eastern side of the fairgrounds. Betty followed the exodus with her gaze and eventually fixed on the childrens' destination, the source of the bubbles: a rickety-looking contraption about man-high, standing in the middle of that field like a scarecrow in a field of just-harvested corn.

A crooked wooden sign with red spray-painted letters she could just barely read declared it to be the *Super Presto Bubble Machine*. And that it was, by all appearances. The machine was churning out soap bubbles at an impressive clip. An ankle-high rug of foaming suds had already formed in the field around it. The air teemed with an ever-thickening, glistening cloud of glistening globes.

Hardly any of them were popping.

Betty was just close enough to see what the machine was made of. She could not help but admire the Yankee ingenuity evident in its design.

It was constructed entirely of everyday things. A long green broomstick with a small piece of black wood affixed to it somehow, probably glued, jutting out at a right angle at one end. Some rubber bands and half a roll's worth of silver duct tape. A small oscillating fan with black plastic blades. A white bucket of soapy water. A large multi-colored pinwheel. And a big plastic bubble wand, bright pink.

That was all.

Someone had shoved the broomstick into a patch of dry earth, so that the end with the jutting piece of wood was the end facing up. The handle of the water bucket had been slid over the piece of wood so that the bucket hung from it. The base of the fan was duct-taped thickly to the top of the broomstick pole and the stem of the pinwheel was taped to the inside of the water bucket while also being attached, somehow, to the bubble wand with the rubber bands.

The mechanics were simple. The wind blew the pinwheel, and the pinwheel moved the wand, causing it to dip into the water, then pulling it out, more or less rhythmically. Whenever the wand emerged, the fan blew the soap through its hole and the bubbles spewed out – dozens of small, transparent, rainbow-tinged globular miracles flooding out each minute, over the hay-colored field, floating outwards, downwards, eastwards, westwards, everywards.

No one seemed to have taken any notice of the Super Presto Bubble Machine until now, presumably because it had not yet been loaded up with soap and started. It

must have stood ignored for a while outside the ring of primary attractions, bereft, while the good folk of Burnham County tasted of the other fair's pleasures.

Or perhaps it had not yet been there at all.

Later, no one would claim to know where the machine had come from, or who put it in that field, or how it got started. *Someone* had to shove that stick into the earth and fill the bucket with water and soap and flick the fan's switch to 'on', but no one saw them do it. The other vendors and entertainers at the festival all assumed someone else associated with the event had put the Bubble Machine there, just another pleasant diversion on a day full of them. Not one of them acknowledged responsibility for its presence in any way.

It was if, said one sunburned farmer quoted in the newspapers the next day, the machine had appeared in the field of its own accord. Which was strictly supposition, but it was all one had in the absence of hard evidence.

The fan's oscillation and a shifting wind kept the small globes it produced flowing freely in a one hundred eighty-degree arc, so every child seemed to be getting his or her fair share. The face-painting booth near the fair's entrance had been busy that day, so a throng of diminutive clowns and cats and masked superheroes romped amongst the dense flow of bubbles, giggling, and jumping and grabbing, chasing each other and chasing the bubbles and falling and getting up and running some more.

Smiling parents started taking pictures.

"Clever," John Traylor said through another mouthful of sausage, sub roll, and mustard.

"Very," Betty agreed.

"Can I go see?" asked Jimmy. He was standing next to them now. He put a hand over his eyes and squinted into the afternoon sunlight as he looked up, first at Betty, then John, then back at Betty. His five-year old face was, as yet, unpainted. Betty's plan was for it to stay that way.

"Can I can I can I?"

John looked over at Betty, shrugged.

It's your call.

He plopped the last of the sausage into his mouth, licked a gob of mustard off his pink thumb, and glanced at a kite flying high above them.

Betty knelt down, getting to eye level with the child.

“You can go,” she said quietly. “Just remember to be careful. Don’t go too far. Stay where we can see you. And watch out for the bigger - “

She didn’t manage to finish the sentence until Jimmy was five galloping steps away.

“ – kids,” she whispered morosely.

“He’ll be fine,” John offered, behind her now, his meaty hand scratching her lower back lightly. “Just fine. See.”

And Jimmy did look fine. Already in the thick of things, so quick, he laughed along with the other kids and, Betty was proud to notice, pulled himself up short before bowling over a cluster of unsteady toddlers. You really wouldn’t be able to tell he was home-schooled and got so little interaction with other children, Betty thought.

Just this short distance hid so much.

Distance, she thought, was vital. Distance was a significant fact. Distance kept their family together.

Betty had just begun to untense, and was reaching out for her husband’s soothing hand, when the light breeze which had been a constant all day died down. The change was abrupt; Betty noticed it then and remembered it later, how rapid the stillness came on, how jarring it felt. The fan nearly stopped oscillating, the wand stopped dipping, and the machine began, slowly, to build a single, enormous bubble. Many of the children stopped frolicking, cooing in rapture as the monstrous shimmering globe grew. By the time the wind picked up again, perhaps a half-minute later, just as abruptly as it had stopped, like a movie being unpaused, and the bubble detached with an audible *pop* and began floating lazily over the kids’ heads, it was a good deal bigger than the mammoth beach ball Jimmy often played with by himself in their sheltered backyard.

Some little girl yelled: “Holy Moley! The biggest bubble I never seen!” A few grown-ups laughed.

A number of kids, Jimmy among them, were hot on the big bubble’s trail. It moved slowly, then quickly, tracing a swirling, winding roller coaster’s path across the field, leading its eager, diminutive pursuers on a merry, roundabout chase. Jimmy’s eyes were gleaming, his broad upturned face beaming as he sprinted.

“He’s loving it,” John laughed beside her. “I mean, look at him.”

And she did. She hooked her slender arm around her husband's muscled one and looked at Jimmy laughing and grasping for that big bubble, and she smiled with something, she supposed, perilously close to contentment.

It was a glorious autumn day, and her child was at play in a field full of glistening bubbles and her happiness was so pure it was nearly factual.

...

Her child. Their child.

Yes. Jimmy was their child.

They had raised him since he was an infant, carefully, and Betty thought, well.

They *had*.

He was well-loved, and he knew this, and he loved them back, with an openness and a warm, clingy ferocity.

It sometimes terrified her, how much he depended upon them, who had themselves proven so undependable in the past. But people change, she often reminded herself. Parenthood had been terrifying and lovely and consuming, and it had altered her fundamentally, worming its way into her DNA and reshaping her as it saw fit, almost always for the better.

They had both become good parents, very good ones in fact. Betty knew that. She was certain of it. Theirs was a good home and Jimmy was a good kid and a little bit of distance was all they really needed for it all to *stay* good.

She watched him now, running and jumping in the field. She watched him leap, leaving the earth, rising above the other children, puncturing that biggest of bubbles with the tip of his index finger before returning to the ground, drawing accolades from the surrounding crowd, and actually taking a *bow*, and suddenly she could not breathe.

John stopped her from stepping out onto the field with a gentle snatch of her left hand in his.

"Easy," he said softly, smiling, looking out at the field and flashing a hearty thumbs up. "He's having fun for once. Let him be."

"Having fun? John, he just had half the people on these fairgrounds looking at him. What if..."

“It won’t.”

“But...”

“It won’t,” John said again, wrapping his thick arms around her torso and giving her a loving squeeze.

“Live a little,” he whispered in her ear.

Live a little, Betty thought. *Yeah, right.*

But then she thought: *Maybe I should. Maybe we should all learn to live a little.*

Maybe. She just didn’t know.

She looked again at her child, Jimmy. He was resting for the moment, half-doubled over, with his hands on the knees of his grass-stained jeans, catching his breath. He gave her a sidelong wink, his little tongue sticking from the side of his grinning mouth, his one visible blue eye glittering in the brassy air.

Then someone yelled, just over her shoulder.

“Hey! Over here!”

It could have been the same anonymous voice that had directed the children to the Bubble Machine in the first place. It could have been that voice, and she might have recognized it. These were possibilities, glorified hypotheses, but would be worth considering later. Now, though, Betty turned instinctively toward the sound, which had come from somewhere amidst the pack of fair-goers milling about behind her. She saw nothing of interest there, heard nothing more, then turned blinking back to the field.

Like a bubble popped by some invisible finger, her child was gone.

...

Her child? Their child?

No. Jimmy was not their child.

Not quite. Call the evidence disputed.

Jimmy had in fact been born to a shrewish, nasty woman, a hawk-faced, snarling demoness covered in sinister, vivid tattoos who professed all throughout her labor and delivery to an active distaste for all children, the one in her uterus in particular, who screamed the entire time about the parasite inside her that had been trying to kill her for months, who clutched the front of Betty's scrubs and roared into her face how she just wanted it *gone*, how she didn't care what happened to it as long as it was *gone*.

All this she said, and more, to Betty Traylor, her delivery room nurse. Betty Traylor who wanted nothing more in the world than to have children but had been informed she could not. Betty did her best to be patient and supportive, making excuses for the mother-to-be in her own mind: the pain of labor, hormones, mental illness. It helped, a little, but still she could not help being horrified at what the woman was saying. Betty managed to maintain her professionalism, however; there was a baby to deliver, and it was not for her to judge. Or so she told herself.

After a protracted struggle, exacerbated, Betty thought, by the woman's poor attitude, the boy finally emerged squirming and wailing (and whole) from between her legs. The smiling doctor quickly brushed him off and thrust his pink body toward his mother, so that she could hold her new child against her chest, snuggle it, welcome it to her world. The blood- and mucous-covered newborn thrashed and cried, arms and legs cycling, while its mother eyed it like a piece of bad fish. Finally, she folded her arms across her gaunt chest, and said icily: "Take it away."

Betty nearly slapped the woman across the face. She envisioned herself dragging her nails across the woman's angular features or closing her hands into fists and beating some appreciation of the gift she'd just been given into her. How *dare* she reject this boy! How dare she!

Then the doctor deftly handed the child gently over to Betty, saying softly: "Take care of him, please."

And, having no choice, Betty did. She immersed herself in caring for him, feeling some of her rage dispersing as she did so. He scored a perfect ten on the Apgar test, he looked pink and healthy and from the volume of his cries there was no question about the state of his lungs. His eyes were the deep colorless dark she'd only seen in an infant's eyes - the sightless, uncomprehending gaze of a being freshly emerged from the primordial waters from which humanity had originated. He was a wonder, a miracle, perfect in every way.

Yet his own mother did not want him.

It was unthinkable.

Betty set him up in the nursery beneath a warming lamp, covered him in hospital blankets, and stood crying over him for a short time, thinking of his mother's loveless rejection, wondering what kind of future the boy could possibly have while saddled with such a parent. Even if she gave the woman the benefit of the doubt and considered potential causes for her behavior (the foremost among them being drug abuse, the more she thought about it), there were really no excuses for what she had seen in that delivery room. Whatever problems the mother had; they were certainly not the fault of this beautiful child.

Betty told John all about the woman that evening as they sat up in bed. He listened quietly as she ranted. At the end of it he put down the book he was holding but not reading, turned in her direction, and asked:

"And?"

She feigned confusion with the inquiry, pretending there was no *and*, that it was merely a story about her work she was relating, but the look on John's face told her he wasn't buying it.

"John....," she started to say.

"You can't, Betty. We can't."

"But John..."

"We *can't*," he repeated, gently, taking her in his arms and holding her warmly. He was big and soft and comforting and as usual, he was right.

"I know," Betty said miserably. "I know we can't."

...

But she had not known it, not deep-down known it, not really.

The fact that they couldn't was not a fact. The *fact* was that she *could*, and she knew it. She turned that knowledge over in her mind's hands the next morning on her way to work like a piece of forbidden fruit, well aware that she could take a bite at any time; aware that she *shouldn't*, but she *could*.

The day was heart-wrenching and in retrospect could not have ended any other way.

The woman (Betty refused to refer to her as a *mother*) refused to spend any time whatsoever with her son. When they finally brought the boy into her room against her will, she thrashed about on the bed like a vampire confronted with a cross until they took him back to the nursery. She spent her time sitting alone in bed staring at the wall across from her feet, arms folded across her chest, occasionally murmuring in a language none of them could understand. Nurses, doctors, psychiatrists came and went to no avail; she was insistent, intractable. No family or friends visited her, and so there was no one else to appeal to. The possibility of bringing in social services if she did not come around by the next morning was discussed.

Betty had to periodically check the woman's vital signs. At one point early in the afternoon, she had just wrapped the blood pressure sleeve around the woman's arm, concealing a startling black and red tattoo of some hideous, multi-eyed, genitalia-inspired beast that seemed to growl at her as she covered it, when she asked the woman how she felt.

"Much better," the woman said without emotion, looking out the window at a view of a smokestack spewing a charcoal-colored cloud into the sky. "Now that he's gone."

Betty felt her hand begin squeezing the woman's bicep above where she had placed the sleeve. Her fingers moved of their own accord, without her approval, but she found she agreed with their sentiment, so she let them continue.

"Hey...", the woman said.

"He's *not* gone," said Betty coldly, staring at her white-knuckled hand and the woman's pinched flesh around it. She squeezed a little more tightly, drawing a pained gasp from her patient. "He's in the nursery and he needs a mother. I don't know what your problem is, lady, but I suggest..."

The thin arm whipped out suddenly from her fingers' grip. It was like she had been holding a dozing serpent that had suddenly awakened and slipped itself free. The woman's other hand (Betty would think of it later as a claw) lashed out and clutched her by the throat; a long sharp fingernail pressed against her jugular like a blade. The woman snapped forward in the bed, springing to her knees and bringing her face so close to Betty's that she could feel the feverish heat emanating from the tip of the woman's pale nose on her own. The woman's breath smelled rotten, the stink of dead

things tucked away and left to stink. Betty gagged and tried to pull away, then stopped as the nail's pressure increased against her vein.

Betty's eyes widened, terrified. She glanced at the nurse call button, which was too far away to reach. Then, though she did not want to, she found herself looking the woman in the eyes. Something moved inside those eyes: small, slithering things lazily worming the expanse of the woman's pupils. Watching them deprived Betty of some of her will to resist, somehow. The sneer beneath broadened, revealing rows of small, sharp-looking teeth. A long tongue lashed out briefly, nearly licking Betty in the face before disappearing.

"I said I wanted him *gone*," the woman said, blowing another cloud of fetid stench into her nurse's face. "And I meant it."

...

Once the woman released her, Betty fled to a supply closet and sat weeping convulsively for a good ten minutes. She could not stop herself from shaking.

There was something horribly wrong with the woman. She was barely human, if that word could even be said to apply to her. She was something Betty could not explain, a monster, a demon, a freak. She had murder in her eyes when she'd wrapped her hand around Betty's throat; Betty had seen that clearly.

She was not fit to be a mother. The boy would be better off with almost *anyone* than with that woman, Betty was *certain* of that.

And so, her plan, such as it was, was formed. It was inevitable, really. There was only so much a woman could take, so many addicts and fruit loops and just plain assholes who churned kids out like cookies at a bakery day after day, kids that were doomed from the beginning to lead small, often short, unhappy lives, when she knew damn well what kind of home she could provide for a child and yet she, and the child she would never have, were deprived of the joys these people took for granted, and in cases like this woman, outright rejected.

She would have gladly adopted, but with John's criminal record this was not an option. He had not always been the warm, contented man she lived with now. He had done some things. He had changed, but this transformation was not quantifiable, and could not be conveyed to an adoption services agency. A man with a felony record

(and a violent felony at that – a brutal bar fight in which he had nearly killed two men over a pool game gone bad) would never be allowed to adopt a child.

This woman was evil, Betty knew that. Her evil was factual; she had breathed it into Betty's face. The boy needed to be saved from her, and Betty needed a child. The best the boy could hope for would be for the woman to give him up, at which point he would enter the system and begin a childhood of hopping from one foster home to another, never feeling like he truly belonged anywhere, always feeling like a burden, unwanted, quite possibly mistreated...

Fate had pushed her past her breaking point. It could not, she told herself later a thousand times, have ended any other way.

When Betty Traylor's shift ended three hours later, the little boy was in her bag, and no one noticed, or said anything, as she smiled her goodbyes to her co-workers and left the hospital forever.

The child did not utter a single cry until she reached her car. It was as if they were in on it together.

...

There had been a lot of work to do afterwards, though not nearly as much as she expected. She had stolen a couple of days' worth of diapers and wipes and assorted infant medicines from the supply closet before she left. She pulled the child from the bag and lay him down on the passenger seat as she headed home. She bundled him in blankets and used the bag to prop him up, making sure he would not fall off. He lay there looking content, moving his limbs lazily and cooing up at her. She looked over at him when she stopped for traffic lights and each time she cried.

She had no idea as to her long-term plans, refusing to look past the next few hours. John would not be home until six that evening. She planned her speech, her explanation, her pitch. She would give him the choice of opting out and plead only for a few hours' head start if he decided he needed to call the authorities. She wondered if he would give her that. They were close, as close as she could imagine two people possibly being, but she had done this on her own and could not expect him to risk spending most of the rest of his life in prison for a decision she had made.

As she stepped through their apartment door, John looked up from the couch. Two suitcases were propped up at his feet. He held a map in his hands.

“Hey darlin’,” he said, glancing at the infant, then at her. There was not a single droplet of surprise in his eyes. “Up for a ride?”

...

Trouble with the law ran in John’s family. His cousin Ed had done time for a series of small robberies a decade and a half ago. At some point long ago, Ed had bought a house in the woods. A getaway. He hadn’t put it in his name somehow, it wouldn’t have worked very well as a getaway otherwise, but it was his. He also hadn’t used it; he had straightened himself out, as far as Betty knew. Either that, or he had gotten smart enough not to get himself caught. The fact that he still kept the getaway around made her suspicious that it might be the latter; he never used it, not for vacations, not to stop in and maintain the place, not at all. It was being kept for something.

John had called Ed earlier that morning, and arranged for he and Betty (and the child Betty was likely going to kidnap; he had been stone certain of that the previous night; he had seen the drawing of her features and the sorrow in her eyes and knew very well that she had been pushed past her point and might just be coming home with the nasty woman’s baby) to stay there for at least the first few weeks. He had also emptied their savings and checking accounts and taken out the maximum cash advance on his credit card.

Betty was dazed by John’s unblinking complicity, his utter commitment to helping her. He loved her of course; she had never doubted that, but what he was doing for her now was of an entirely different order. She supposed it was part guilt; he knew well how much she wanted a child and was well aware that his own past was the obstacle to adoption. This was his way of making it up to her and committing to her forever. He had chosen her over the life he had managed to build since leaving prison, over his freedom itself. He had chosen her over everything.

As they drove out of the city, a maddening trip with at least two dozen eternities spent sitting at traffic lights in heavy congestion, just waiting for a police car to pull up next to them, they listened on the car radio to hear reports about the baby-napping, but surprisingly there were none. The big news story was a proposal by

the mayor to ramp up considerably the penalty for littering. There was nothing whatsoever about a baby missing from City General.

Betty wondered if the police might be keeping the story quiet deliberately, to fool them (labels flew through her head, hurled at herself like a disgruntled sport's fans invectives from the bleachers: the perpetrators, the criminals, the outlaws) into thinking they might be getting away with it. It was inconceivable that the hospital had not noticed the missing child yet, and they would have to call the authorities right away. Yet there was nothing.

This made Betty edgy. Eventually she couldn't stand the uncertainty.

Just after they'd cleared the city, Betty convinced John to pull over. She wanted to call the hospital and get a gauge on what was happening. She knew they would trace the call, but she had to find out what was going on. She called the front desk and got Lucy, one of her best friends on the ward. Lucy did not seem surprised to hear her friend's voice.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "I was wondering when you might call."

Betty didn't say anything. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing would come out. When Lucy spoke again, it was in a hushed, conspiratorial whisper.

"So, what do you think of all this?" she asked.

Betty gulped.

"Think?"

"Yeah. How do you think she got out?"

Betty's head began to swim. She? Who was Lucy was talking about?

"What," she managed.

"The witch lady. Don't tell me you haven't heard?"

"Heard?"

"That woman with the tattoos and the sunny demeanor. Ohmygod I can't believe you haven't heard." Lucy's voice began to accelerate as she realized she would be the one to deliver the news to Betty. Betty could almost hear her sitting forward in her chair. Betty had always thought Lucy should have been a reporter; she loved delivering news, especially bad news. "She disappeared today, right as the shifts were changing. Probably right after you left. No one saw her leave her room, no one saw

her in the nursery, she's not on any of the security cameras, but she's gone. And so is the baby. Vanished, both of them. Everyone here is freaking out, what with the way she was talking after the birth. They're talking to the police now; they don't have a friggin' clue what to do. It turns out the social security number and personal information she gave was all fake; they all belonged to some woman who died last year. So, they don't even know where to look. Can you believe that?"

Betty once again found herself speechless. Her mind chewed quickly on the information, evaluating its importance to her. The woman, in disappearing, had unknowingly provided cover for Betty while she kidnapped the boy. It was incredible. She wasn't sure whether to feel lucky or sick.

"Wow," she managed.

"Betty are you all right?" asked Lucy.

"Yeah," said Betty. Things were clicking into place in her head swiftly. "Fine. Listen. Is Tabby there?"

Tabitha Crane was the head nurse on the maternity ward. She kept the schedules for the nurses.

"Yeah. You are sure you're okay?"

"I just have...stuff going on, is all. I need to talk to Tabby about taking a little time off."

"Ohmygod. Is everything all right?"

"Fine, Lucy. Really, it's fine. I just need some time."

Lucy sounded doubtful.

"Okay, Betty. I'll try and find Tabby, but listen: if you need anything..."

"I know," said Betty, her eyes welling with tears. "I'll call."

...

"John..."

Betty looked over at her husband. The smile on his face was gone. He had a hand over his eyes, blocking the sunlight as he scanned the field with a frown.

“John...”

“Honey, don’t worry,” John said. “He’s in there somewhere. There’s just so many damn bubbles we can’t see him. He probably slipped...”

Logical words, all of them. They made perfect sense. But Betty got the distinct feeling that John spoke to comfort himself as much as to comfort her. Something about his tone, or the inflection, conveyed no confidence whatsoever. John was, if not exactly scared, nervous. This sent Betty’s heart into panic; John could not be nervous, he was the calm one, the unflappable one. If John was nervous...

Betty took a step forward, noticing with another flutter that John did too.

“Jimmy!” John called. “Jimmy Traylor!”

A couple of people turned around. The field was chaotic and noisy enough, however, that most folks didn’t yet seem to notice.

“Jimmy!” Betty yelled, trying hard and only partially successfully to keep shrill panic out of her voice. She broke into a half-run, her maroon skirt lifting up behind her in the breeze like a sail. She heard John begin fanning out behind her. Soon bubbles were tickling her bare ankles. She watched the undulating sea of bubbles near where she had last seen Jimmy, waiting for the sight of a head, an arm raised for help, anything.

She thought of stories she had heard about young children drowning in bathtubs. Was it possible to drown in knee-high soap bubbles, too?

“Jimmy!”

As she ran her eyes scanned the crowd over and over again. Her mind took snapshots that would stay with her forever, an album of details she would flip through over and over again later in a futile search for something useful. A small boy with curly blonde hair in a white t-shirt had a bubble in the palm of one hand and stood regarding it like a crystal ball. His eyes glimmered in the amber-colored air. Twin girls, about seven, were holding one another’s hands and swinging, heads tossed back and mouths open, a cloud of small bubbles drifting over them like the laziest, fattest raindrops the world had ever seen.

And the Bubble Machine itself, which was no longer standing up quite straight, but rather leaning like an increasingly drunk man, like a party clown about to collapse in front of the children it had been hired to entertain. The bubbles were spewing in irregular bursts from it now. She almost expected it to start smoking, then recalled

what it was made of. Just a broomstick and a bucket and a pinwheel and some tape, she thought. Nothing to smoke. Just ordinary things.

God oh god, why had she let him play in the goddamn bubbles...

"Jimmy," she called.

"Jimmy?"

"Jimmy?!"

...

Betty realized quickly how desperate their situation was. They could not involve the authorities, because the missing child was not theirs. Jimmy Traylor, in fact, had no legal name. No Social Security Number. No birth certificate Betty had ever seen. He was, in the eyes of the state, a pure persona non grata. He did not exist, and therefore, he could not be missing (gone, said some part of her mind she barely recognized).

A few of the other parents were now drifting toward her and John with concerned looks. She thought about enlisting their help, her overloaded brain incapable of performing the calculus necessary to make the decision. They needed to find Jimmy, that was it, if they went to jail afterwards then fine, but finding Jimmy, *now*, was paramount.

Swiping big handfuls of bubbles away from her legs, turning around over and over again and calling Jimmy's name, Betty felt the wildness bulging behind her eyes. She began to cry, a high-pitched mewling that she had as much hope of suppressing as her breathing. As she and John searched, calling, an awful certainty arose in her: that the balloon payment for the time she had borrowed by snatching Jimmy from his crib at City General that afternoon was being called due, that this was the inevitable result of a deed she had only ever been partially able to justify to herself.

"I said I wanted him *gone*," the woman had said.

And the hate in her eyes, the deathly stink of the air from her mouth.

Betty tried calling Jimmy's name again, but nothing but the sound of a caught breath came out. The bubbles had begun to pop now, the Machine had almost stopped making them, and she and John had swept a large amount of them away from the spot where Jimmy had last been, and he was nowhere, nowhere to be found.

Beyond that spot and all around them there was only empty field. There was no place to hide anything.

Out of the corner of her eye, Betty saw a female police officer heading their way. The officer was short and stout. She walked briskly, said something into a walkie-talkie, regarded John and Betty as if unsure of what to make of them.

It's all come due, thought Betty as the little cop walked up and began asking John questions Betty could hear but not comprehend. The woman's mouth moved, and generated sounds, but she might as well have been a garden gate creaking for all her intelligibility. All Betty could process was the panting in her own head, the desperate retching breaths of a woman seeing her dreams dissipate before her very eyes.

The dreams had been impossible to begin with, of course. Betty had known that all along. She had no right to expect happy endings when the story began the way theirs had.

It probably could not have happened any other way.

...

Facts are facts, this is true, but they are not forever.

It was a fact that the child John and Betty Traylor called Jimmy disappeared that day in the field, lost in a sea of bubbles. It was also a fact that, after nearly five months, he had still not been found.

Betty told herself these things, spoke them to herself in her head and labeled them, each of them: fact, fact, fact.

But everything, in the end, is merely believed. The winds of circumstance shift or the borders of knowledge get redrawn, and what once was no longer is, or vice versa.

Facts are not forever.

Betty Traylor resisted the supernatural in her quest for an explanation. She sought what she perceived to be a more believable solution. But over time Betty found conflicts between credibility and simplicity. The idea that the boy's mother was a witch or demon of some sort, that she had tracked them down and made him vanish

with some kind of dark magic that day in the field filled with bubbles, was preposterous, and insane, but simple. It was the shortest distance between any of the points. It strained credulity, but it fit the facts, while nothing else did.

This realization had dawned on Betty Traylor gradually; its strength waxed and waned over time but it had grown on the whole. She began each morning at the same point, desperate and damaged by her nightly dream, resisting even the prospect of magic or voodoo or any such foolishness, declaring it preposterous, yet each day it seemed she came closer to, if not accepting it, accepting it as possible.

Like a spiral, she thought; the entire process was like a spiral. You moved in what seemed like hopeless, redundant circles that only revealed themselves as progress over long periods of time. You traveled the same paths, *almost*, again and again and again. Eventually, if you were patient enough, you got to the center, where the answers were. And just maybe, you saw where the gone things go.

Betty stood now, folding the letter, and slipping it into the pocket of her bathrobe. The light filtering through the window over the kitchen sink indicated it was some time in the middle of the afternoon. She had been sitting at the table, unmoving, remembering, for hours. She had not yet eaten anything.

She walked out of the kitchen and into a small living room, moving almost guiltily, as if embarrassed of what she was about to do. She went to a corner of the room, lifted up a loose corner of the old carpet and underneath that, a damp wooden floor plank. A small space was below the plank. In the space was a book.

Vanishing Spells: How to Make Things Disappear (And How to Get Them Back!)

A page very near the front of the book was bookmarked with a slip of paper. On that paper were notes, scribbled in Betty's own handwriting.

Round and round we go, Betty Traylor thought. She brought the book back to her kitchen table, poured herself the last of the coffee, and began to read.