

Story #1

It's 4:38 P.M., eight minutes after I usually go home, but now I'm rooting around under my chair cushion, double-checking my shirt pocket, hunting for an unmarked baggie of white bars, which I shouldn't have left in my office, which I shouldn't have forgotten to lock, which isn't to demonize my clients but just to recognize that if you find yourself in a seventy-two-unit supportive housing facility for people living with HIV and with a history of homelessness, you are often in great need and without resources, and so it's not inconceivable that you would look around an unlocked office for something to pawn at the QuickCash, especially if you've run out of luck doctor-shopping and are trying to buy your own benzos off your neighbor who price gouges, in which case, jackpot, free Xanax courtesy of the acting case-management supervisor. I'm feeling dizzy, flipping through the PHQ-9s and the rent checks on my desk that it's not my job to process except the leasing and compliance man is always late. My boss is going to ask what I could have possibly been thinking leaving loose meds around, I'm going to get fired, so close to hitting my hours to become a LCSW and go private, maybe even start my own therapy practice, work for actual money with people who've never slept outside and don't have to know what a viral load is and haven't heard the word *Narcan*. I look up and see, out my window, beyond the hulking generator and the rusting fence, a bike-less Gracie with a bike helmet on, standing on the corner where everyone ashes into the bushes. She's jawing at Edwin, loud enough for me to hear what I think is "Got your fuck buddy Cristina fired," and then Edwin slaps Gracie not in her face but on her helmet and where the head goes the body follows. Gracie's on the ground, and the Xanax are on the windowsill, I realize, which is a new lapse for me.

I'd call the cops but it's a wild headache to call the cops and they're not fighting anymore, Edwin's just walking backward and yelling "See?" So I'm not calling the cops. I'm stashing the pills in my pocket with my phone and I'm not running but walking briskly out of my office. They're not on building property, so the security guard hasn't moved. I was never Gracie's caseworker officially, but I know her all right. She talks to everyone in this way that's aggressively direct and faux friendly and reminds me of hanging outside Wawa as a teenager trying to bum cigarettes off of anyone who walked by, like, "Hey man, do you smoke?" She slurs and can only move her left arm in these sudden jumps, and if she catches you looking she'll ask if you like her coarse, jerky tremors, because that was what the doctor called them and Gracie thought it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Gracie's stroke was one of the few facts listed in her psychosocial assessment, those things are usually inaccurate anyways, wrong ethnicity wrong antiviral wrong place of birth. Wrong age, too: she's not in her fifties but in her thirties, even if she doesn't look it. She stroked out on what she says was a normal dose, and woke up with the coarse, jerky tremors and the Wawa aphasia. It must have been before she got here. I can't remember anything on her medicals that said, As of today she's got the coarse, jerky tremors.

I'm leaving the building, picturing her assessment, date of appointment and client name and presenting problem categorization and history of victimization—the words *Please circle* in parentheses—and I'm thinking how Gracie always rides her folding electric bicycle up the disability ramp and through the lobby into the elevator. She got stuck once, the hoistway keyhole was jammed and the firefighters had to use the irons to pry the doors open to find Gracie fully nude because she had been wearing those leggings for two days and was chafing. She said it felt weird to be buck-ass naked with a shirt still on. You couldn't laugh, you shouldn't either. I had to take a lap.

What do I know about Edwin? In his fifties, button-ups and khakis, stained but always pressed. He does peer counseling work, but not too often. Maybe he was getting too close to going over on his hours and being kicked off of SSI for making too much money. Or maybe it's because of what he said during the "undetectable equals untransmittable" campaign, when we were all saying "U equals U," and the director didn't like it when Edwin scoffed—what was it?—"Who the fuck else would I equal?" Edwin probably would sleep with his caseworker, he's got a lot of machismo, a lot of what comes with that. Loves a homophobic slur, loves saying one in front of me like I'm in on it. Loves to preach, too. I remember him telling Hervé, the total sweetheart, that his opportunistic infections were from God, striking him down for the gayness but also for selling his meds to cover the meth. Edwin has strong feelings about both, the gayness and the meth, which means he has strong feelings about most of the building because many are gay, many frequently use meth, per the psychosocials but also per the security guards. The one in the booth today loves poking me in the chest and saying "Shit was fucked," which meant a dealer showed up and the younger tenants had a circuit party. Most of the building hates Edwin—maybe that's why he's been working less as a peer counselor. And he likes to lord, that's what the caseworkers say about him, he's a lord. Whenever another tenant's being reprimanded he'll be nodding his head, lording over, saying something like "Can't be doing that," trying to talk to us afterward, like "Can you believe these people?" Still, I can't believe that he slept with Cristina, can't believe that on Cristina's part, Cristina who did a passable job and commuted all the way from Yonkers and had a daughter at some school that sounded expensive, but what do I know? Especially if Gracie knew before I did. Cristina did suddenly demand a transfer to another facility five months ago, and the central office said yes because we're low on staff organization-wide and it was better to transfer her than lose another worker.

Gracie's only just getting up off the sidewalk, her face is loose, absent, eyes skyward and searching, like the slap was something beyond her understanding, a bolt from heaven. Edwin's crossing the street and I don't yell after him. Maybe next time, I think, though ideally there wouldn't be a next time, but it seems unlikely that I'll convince Edwin that assault's not something you're supposed to do, and convince Gracie that in the interest of harm reduction she should just shut up around him. I ask if she wants to call the cops and press charges, because they won't follow up unless she presses charges, though I know that even then they'll probably do next to nothing. They turn their noses up at stepping out the cruiser in front of the building, let alone coming in. Her eyes refocus, the divine intervention's ended, she says she doesn't want to press charges, just wants her bike and a Fanta, wants me to get the common room TV fixed so she can keep up with the Knicks. Just to make sure I'm covering the bases I point out that she's been assaulted, and she calls me a pussy and says it was a slap not a punch and starts walking away.

I'm standing there wondering about the slap-versus-punch distinction and whether I should file a report with HASA. The agency will send some poor asshole months from now who doesn't know what's going on and will be astounded at his own lateness, like "Oh, this happened when?" I reach into my pocket to check the time because maybe the director hasn't left yet and I could let her know, if only to cover my ass if this happens again but worse, although she's keen on self-starters and self-delegation, which is to say she's keen on covering her own ass so it's probably a dead end anyway, but wouldn't it be fantastic to have someone help me out for once? Not that a slap can get you booted out of the facility, it's near impossible to get someone out because then the homeless numbers go up and the homeless-living-with-HIV numbers go up and that's one of the few metrics that the mayor and the governor can agree on, insofar as it needs to stay down. If

you're in, you stay. But then what am I supposed to do if Edwin does this again, if Gracie's not wearing a helmet, if the hand closes into a fist?

Those electric bikes are silent so when Gracie comes up behind me and honks the horn that sounds like a MIDI thunderclap I jump and my hand jerks out of my pocket and the pills go flying onto the sidewalk and Gracie zips by laughing at me and then sees the baggie, shrieks, no malice, just delighted, "Ooooooh, what's that?"

It's an Elliot night. Elliot's a funny friend from college who is less funny now. He's an anxious drunk who lives rent-free with his long-suffering mother in Chinatown. He does freelance English-language branding for Asian companies trying to break into the North American market, and he only comes to our apartment when Tina's closing an issue and won't be home until late because he once told her that she published some of the most middling lumpen shit he's ever read on a toilet. "He can come over whenever," Tina told me after, "whenever I'm not here." Elliot gives me Xanax for free because he has a scrip he doesn't use and he wants to hear about my job so he can write something. He says there's a long line of cherished whites who have written about drugs to great acclaim, who have either overdramatized their vices or scooped others' stories wholesale from NA meetings, and why shouldn't he, an only partially white man? As he's saying this his voice gets high and his face gets small and I can't tell who he's making fun of, and he tells me that talking to me gives him unfettered access not to the real thing but to something proximate, which is maybe more interesting. He's just writing about me, the thirty-one-year-old supervisor from Delaware County. The white supervisor, he adds. "Can't forget that detail," he says, and there's that high voice again. He says that bit of distance covers his ass in case it ever does get published

and critics latch on to the power imbalance in his writing about the lives of these people he doesn't even know, about the calculus of what one has and what one doesn't, about who one is or who they think he is—he's going by his Chinese last name now to get more leeway, he can always crack a joke about opium dens. I don't care what he does with what I tell him as long as he doesn't name names or land me with a HIPAA violation.

Elliot's brought over two six-packs of canned highballs some Japanese whiskey company that he's freelancing for wants to sell in select East Coast cities. He tells me to start talking, and he's preemptively nodding even though I haven't started yet, which is something I do, too, it drives Tina nuts, the two of us nodding at each other in the living room like bobbleheads, and he gives the finger to the dog because he thinks that's funny, and the dog stares mutely at him. "Look," he says, "maybe I should write a story about the dog's ability to understand me giving it the finger, six thousand words in dog about a dog being told to fuck itself. Just kidding, I love you, what name did you give her again?"

I don't tell him the dog's name because he knows the dog's name but I chuckle and keep playing the video game we play when he comes over, where you control a paramilitary supersoldier who creeps around mercenary bases choking out lesser soldiers of fortune and then sends them back to your base for forcible reprogramming by hooking them to a reverse parachute that lifts their limp bodies, so that they're floating before you for an instant, before they're sucked away with a scream into the sky. "So, Rich, what's up, though? I want a thorough ethnography of your daily labor. I want, hold up, it's in my pocket," he says, and he throws me a travel-size cosmetics bottle with a Korean label, rattling with pills. "Someone else asked, so there's less this time. I've been looking up palindromic drug names—Raxar, Lexxel, Lozol, Merrem. Are you actually using these or are you selling them? Or does the dog get them? What happened with those

service animals?” Last time he was here a month ago I had told him the tenants figured out they can have pets if they’re service animals and now everyone wants service animals. It’s a zoo, the building. There are budgies, snakes, a ferret named Giuliani, this blue-nose pit bull named Tantrum that somehow got registered as an American shorthair feline, “How do you register a pit bull as a cat?” being a question I’m now asked two or three times a week. I keyed into an apartment two weeks ago because it had been three days without a word from the tenant, who usually complained every other day about Tantrum, and Tantrum was still wandering around unleashed, dick out, “brolic,” as his owner liked to say, snuffling at this tenant’s door. I knocked and I called and I got no word, so I keyed in. You’re supposed to key in if you suspect something’s off and can’t get in contact, and I didn’t think he used anymore but you never know, and usually you key in with two but we’re still down a caseworker and the director was at a meeting at the HRA office and it was the end of the day, so I keyed in by myself. That was what the smell was, I realized. I knew but I didn’t want to know, but then I knew, I found him on the floor, facedown, which is maybe why I’m okay, I think, because I never saw the face. Later I had a consultation with a mental-health-care professional per organizational procedure and I didn’t have anything to say besides, Yeah, definitely key in with two.

The EMS showed up first, and the police after, to seal the room off until they contacted next of kin. The father showed up immediately, he wanted to see his son, he said he’d worked for the MTA and he’d seen some stuff already, he didn’t care, he wanted to see his son, his son’s face, and he saw his son’s face. And then he wanted to know the last person who visited, he wanted to grab the building’s logs and watch the footage, and I told him that I was sorry, because I was, but that he’d have to subpoena the facility to get the logs and the footage, and he sobbed gravelly,

snotty sobs in the hallway that set off Tantrum's barking. His owner leaned his head out, saw the cops, and closed his door. I gave the father my number, maybe off by a digit.

I don't tell Elliot about the dead tenant. I tell him I'm figuring out how many hours I need to log with a supervisor before I can get my license. The director is leaving, though she hasn't told us when, exactly, and she's just drifting through the building looking blissful because soon she'll be gone.

"Are you going to bounce, too? Why do people stay? I mean, why does anyone start, actually?" he asks, and I tell him I have to use the bathroom. My legs feel semisolid walking and I urinate and afterward I have this warm memory of myself peeing, as if it had occurred long before. I realize we're both gone, me from the mix of the Xanax and the canned highballs and I think we'd opened some rye, and Elliot from whatever number of drinks he had before he showed up. I fall back onto the couch and start playing the game again. I tell him I know some people who thought it was a way to get a decent city job, others who had been caring for people for next to nothing since they were teenagers and figured why not get a degree and make a little more. There were those like me who weren't *of the community* or *from this background* or whatever euphemism you wanted to use, who had a talent, or at least they thought they did, for de-escalation, and a desire to work on the front line rather than go to law school or whatever. But now I don't know, I tell him, I'm tired, I have student debt like we all do, I keep getting promoted because people keep on quitting and so now I'm middle management. That means I get fucked both ways, the caseworkers delegate up, the director delegates down, and in any given day I'll have to do the coffee service because the food handler ghosted and I'm the only one with a permit, and I'll also have to spend two hours signing a sheaf of audit forms three inches thick because we have a backlog. I am every bit of care, I tell him, every bit of care and every bit of bureaucracy.

“Why do you keep squatting on that dude’s head?” Elliot asks. I look up at the game and realize I’m crouching up and down on some incapacitated Russian. I hook him to the parachute and he screams, and then he’s a blur and then a number on the user interface.

It’s weird working in someone’s home, I tell Elliot. There’s things they say that, if I was in some office they came into once a week, I’d note down and put in the forms you’re supposed to fill out when someone’s considering self-harm, but when you live with a person, essentially, and they say something like “I’d be better off dead,” what do you do? What do you do when they say it every month? Every week? Maybe, I tell him, I’ll just get the license and make bank doing private therapy for as long as it takes me to feel guilty enough to go back to what I’m doing now. I hook another soldier.

Elliot clears his throat and wags a highball can at me. “I feel like I know mad little about, well—could I come and visit? See for myself? Because I think about your building and it’s all, what’s that actress?” He scrunches up his face and I wait as I always do, wait for people to tell me whatever fucked-up thing they want to tell me, whatever outcropping of the brutal day-to-day, whatever outlandish, obviously unachievable desire, and then he says, “Pasta Muerte,” as if that’s someone’s name, and we both lose it, who is Pasta Muerte, and we laugh and laugh and laugh and the game makes a noise to alert us that we’ve left it dormant, and Elliot says it again and we laugh some more, until he says he has to go Pasta Muerte he’s gotta get home and write he writes best at night Pasta Muerte, and he lets himself out and I just lie back down chuckling on the couch until Tina gets home and wakes me, asking the little questions a partner asks, someone with a stake in and a responsibility for and a right to disappointment in someone, none of it professionally mandated, Why are you on the couch, what is all this drool, why did you say Pasta Muerte when you woke up?

It's 5:30 A.M., half an hour before I usually get up, and I'm still on the couch. Tina tried to move me, but said I stunk too bad to keep trying. I'm not so much in pain as I'm experiencing a pressure at the lining of my skull, like something is cohabiting with my brain. The dog gets a circle around the block, and won't shit. I reheat coffee. Tina's asleep still, and I text her that the dog won't shit. I can't imagine more than five minutes ahead.

On the train I yawn and the woman I'm standing in front of says, "Close your damn mouth," so I close my mouth.

An email on my phone from Elliot, empty body, just the subject "Pasta Muerte."

I walk into the building and start bobbleheading, nodding preemptively in case someone wants to talk, slight inclinations of the chin to acknowledge whoever it is while also conveying that I need to keep moving. I grab the incident-report folder. There is just one report, the guard's longhand describing screaming on the third floor, misgendering the tenant, who stopped screaming when the guard knocked. I log it into the case-management system, which freezes with an administrative error. The pressure in my skull seems to reverse, turning inward, and there is a pain that shoots from ear to ear.

I am going to sit all day, I decide. I am going to have a pencil-pushing, email-responding job for the day. I am not going to leave this desk other than to go to the bathroom and to grab food. I don't care if someone catches fire or ODs or needs me to sign for a package, I'm going to sit.

I get an email from a client who wants to let me know that he's been allowed to take home methadone from the clinic and manage his doses off-site instead of showing up daily to "that scrum of bombed-out noddies off." I don't know who wrote that last part, he's never said anything like that. I schedule a deep clean for an apartment whose bedridden tenant shat himself for days before

developing sepsis. He is in the hospital now. I start to warn the cleaning company, but the man on the phone stops me. “I don’t need a description to do the work.”

Tina texts me a photo. It takes me a moment to realize I’m looking at the space beneath our couch. A highball can is turned over onto the carpet.

The main office calls to ask about the discrepancy between EMS visits to the building and our clients’ reported hospitalization numbers. I don’t know why the director doesn’t take the call, why I’m the one responsible for telling them that when EMS comes, the person they’ve come for often refuses their services. Whoever I’m talking to is new to the job, they sound surprised, they tell me they’ll call again for more information. I am sitting back in my chair, phone cradled between chin and shoulder. The phone clicks, and I am still sitting back in my chair, phone cradled. People pass by, look in, and think I am busy. The director passes by and looks in, and I nod to her with a pained expression, whisper an apology for having to stay on the phone. I remember from my childhood a series of chimes that would play if you stayed on the line after a call ended, but the phone remains silent.

Gracie walks by, smiles, says, “Hey, man,” and keeps going. My stomach drops. I let the phone slide down my chest. But so what, I think, if she does tell? What if she says exactly what she saw? As long as she didn’t find and use or sell my medication, what problem could there be? And what if she did? How hard would it be for me to say that something didn’t happen? I look up drugs that look like Xanax, and find a dietary supplement for anxiety with *Piper methysticum*, passionflower, California poppy, valerian root, melatonin.

The intern comes by and tells me that the commissary bulk order was misdelivered and then redelivered and now we have a lot of rotting fruit. She doesn’t say anything about the phone on my chest but I remember and hang up, shrugging, telling her it’s that kind of day. She nods,

lingers, and says that Edwin told her he'd had a relationship with his former caseworker and that when she asked him what kind of relationship he'd just said, "You know," and smiled, and she wasn't sure what to do about it, and she apologizes for bringing it up only now, before apologizing for bringing it up at all. I ask her when exactly this happened and she says it happened last week and I sigh. I ask her whether she felt uncomfortable or if she felt he was trying to come on to her and she says she doesn't know, and I tell her that I'll write an email immediately, summarizing what I've been told. I tell her to let me know if Edwin does anything else.

I exit through the service door and go to Mi Sabor and eat *pollo guisado* and rice and beans until I'm so full I feel like vomiting. At some point I stop feeling like shit, but I don't know when exactly. I check my phone. Elliot emailed me again. "'God don't like ugly,' have you ever heard that? Around the building? I'm writing."

Danial, the super, is taking out the trash, and he lets me back in through the service door.

At my desk, I see Elliot responded to his own email. "You know what'd be better? You should let me come and see for myself."

I start in my chair. Maybe I swiveled in my sleep. I'm facing the window, away from the door. Outside, Gracie is sitting on her bicycle, helmet on, watching traffic. I see Edwin walk down the entrance steps, blood matting the side of his white crew cut like he was the one who was pushed to the ground yesterday. I wonder if I drank so much I forgot who slapped who. He's walking toward Gracie. I don't go outside, I just lean toward the open window, and I feel compelled, intervened upon, and out of my mouth comes "Edwin, Edwin, God don't like ugly?" Edwin looks around and then toward the building, not sure where this voice is coming from. There are plenty of windows facing him, and the generator is blocking much of mine, and I keep talking, not yelling, just talking loudly and clearly: "Edwin, do you know the phrase 'God don't like ugly'?" He starts

cursing in Spanish and now Gracie's out of her reverie and looking around, too, and for a gorgeous moment I feel like I've had a full night's sleep. They aren't hearing me as an LMSW, nearly an LCSW, the man who files the work order to fix their toilets, the whitest man they know, but instead are heeding each word, in awe, my voice the nonhuman inquisition rebounding from the great beyond or the beyond the generator. They're figuring out it's coming from one of the windows behind the clanking unit, Edwin telling Gracie, "*Mira,*" Gracie telling Edwin, "Look," and I hear "Edwin, you fuck Cristina?" come out of my mouth and feel somehow that I won't lose my job. They lean up on the fence and begin to converge upon the sight of me in the window, my bleary face barely visible through the dirty screen, and Edwin points at me silent and red-faced and Gracie shrieks, no malice, asking like she hadn't heard clearly, as if she wants to hear the question again, "Ooooooh, what's that?"

Story #2

As soon as Farley's collar was unhooked, he took the nearest, steepest slope down into the dell. By the time he reached the bottom, he was fishtailing a little, his looser back legs having descended slightly faster than his front ones. He fetched up between a black Lab mix named Scout and Scout's owner. To get between a rival dog and its owner was strategy. Cut off the opposing army from its supply.

"Seen anything good?" Scout's owner asked.

Jacob was in the habit of bringing his camera to the park, and it was around his neck. "A wasp's nest, but it's too high. Did you start that job at the hospital?"

"Yeah, you know, I don't think I like working with people. Too much politics."

"Because you're working on insurance?" The job had something to do with syncing the hospital's IT back end with an insurance company's.

"I don't mean politics politics. Hey, I'm just the tech guy." He spoke with a dad-like cadence. "I mean, just, *people*." He laughed at himself. Scout barked sharply, and with a curved plastic launcher, the man slingshotted a tennis ball. "Farley's looking good. I know for a while you had that . . ." He crooked an elbow to mime the sling with which Jacob sometimes had to support Farley's back legs.

"He likes the cold."

"Most of them do."

Farley trotted away toward a tree—a black walnut—on the far side of the dell, where the ground underneath was dark and raw. Maybe that was something black walnuts did to the ground

deliberately. The mud of the park was a famous delicacy, so Jacob followed, clapping his thigh to call Farley to heel.

A couple of weeks later, everything in the park seemed dead and already photographed, though Jacob didn't know whether to blame midwinter or his own inner seasonality. He and Farley crossed a field where dogs usually assembled to canter and face off with one another, empty that day because of the cold. At a boulder marked with dog pee, they turned onto a wooded path.

Out of a patch of bristles flew a small dark bird. The bristles still bore gummy-looking, dirty-pink berries from the fall. The berries sat directly, fatly on the sides of the bristles, without any intervening stems. Jacob had photographed them before and had once googled to find the name, which he had almost immediately forgotten.

"Teedt," the bird cried from the log where it had landed. "Teedt." Jacob brought his camera up to his face and took a Simon Says-like step. He heard the light scuffs that the nails of Farley's back paws made against the walkway's asphalt retreating behind him. Going back to sniff the pee on the boulder. To check his email again even though he had just checked it.

When the bird hopped, Jacob took another step. He didn't have a lens long enough for birds, but he tried to believe that wanting badly enough could make up for a deficiency in working capital. He took another step.

The bird flew away.

"Farley?" He looked around. "Farley!"

A woman in a camel-colored puffy coat turned onto the path. "He's looking for you," she said, pointing behind her.

“Farley!” Jacob shouted as he jogged past her.

Already deep in the field, Farley was holding his head high and swiveling it back and forth as he trotted away anxiously, faster and faster. “Farley!” Jacob shouted again.

Only when Farley happened to turn his head and catch sight of Jacob, and Jacob stretched out his arms, did Farley gallop back, relieved, his head bobbing.

“You dumb dog,” Jacob said. Farley must be almost completely deaf now.

The soil thawed and refroze, memorializing a constellation of dots poked by cleats. At a water fountain on the north side of the field, Farley didn’t ask for a drink. Winter had gone on so long that he had forgotten about the possibility.

A tree near the fountain was unfurling feathery red leaves, alien and primitive, like the fingers of a creepy, Muppet hand. Jacob and Farley turned onto a bridle path, which was paved with smooth gray stones. Jacob kept an eye out for appetizing chunks of manure.

The bridle path ran under a stone bridge and then swerved right, following the curve of a creek. Chattering male cardinals were trying to startle each other off their perches. The hollow dug by the creek seemed to be the cardinals’ domain. On the far side of a fence, a circle of smashed acorns crowned a flat boulder. In the center of the acorns sat a little rock that must have been used to crush them. Jacob took a picture.

“Why is your dog off leash?” burred the loudspeaker of a parks police SUV.

Jacob tapped his thigh and Farley bowed his head for his collar.

The SUV had snuck up on them from behind. Because it was a hybrid, the only sounds it

made were a faint whine and the crackle of stones shifting under its tires. It was still trundling toward them.

“It isn’t nine o’clock yet,” Jacob said.

“Dogs must be leashed at all times on the wooded paths,” the officer said, still through the loudspeaker even though his window was down.

“Oh, sorry.”

“You walked past a sign saying so.”

Jacob hadn’t walked past that sign, but it was true that he was playing dumb, so he kept his mouth shut. He was pretty sure he wasn’t still on probation for the last ticket he’d gotten with Farley, but not absolutely sure.

The SUV lumbered off. When it paused at an intersection, its brake lights were garish in the otherwise gentle morning. Jacob needed to have Farley on the leash for the next stretch anyway, because there was a deep, permanent puddle across the path. He had to make sure Farley skirted it; they had to walk single file along a raised strip of dirt on one side.

Someone had assembled a sort of triangular tent out of fallen branches. It was large enough for a child to sit in. A fairy house. Building structures, like being off leash, was against the rules. Jacob took a picture.

Jacob’s phone rang as he and Farley were crossing the circular drive just inside the park’s perimeter, the boundary beyond which his phone usually lost its signal.

“They told us to bring our work laptops home,” his husband said.

“Right now?”

“I don’t know. I’m still walking through the Oculus. They sent an email and I’m reading it on my phone. There’s like no one here.”

Jacob had a new lens—well, a used one, new to him. The wasp’s nest was still hanging out over the center drive where he had last seen it. Like a Chinese lantern suspended from a long pole. Was it empty, or did wasps sleep through the winter inside? When Farley yanked on the leash now, it was even more annoying because whatever Jacob was looking at through the lens lurched, under the greater magnification, that much more dizzyingly. “Just wait a minute,” he said to the dog. It was marvelous how rich and speckled the gray of the nest’s paper was. Its wattle. He worried, though, that the length of the new lens was going to flatten his images, collapse the relative distances. He had trouble reconciling himself to any kind of change.

“He’s like, Hurry up, Dad,” the owner of two Australian shepherds said. The shepherds, one brown and white, the other black and white, were scampering around her off leash, beating each other up, teenage replacements for two shepherds of hers that had died of old age three and then two years earlier.

“A new flaw in my character for him to put up with,” Jacob agreed. In fact, Farley’s leash was taut because just beyond his reach lay a spent condom.

“Did you do your shopping?” the shepherds’ owner asked.

“I panic-shopped last week but I went again yesterday. Whole Foods was ravaged.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “You know, it’s fine at the C-Town over here.”

“I know. So far it’s still only the high bourgeoisie panicking.”

“It’s not going to be all about him anymore, you know. He’s not going to be able to handle that.”

Jacob nodded. “It’s going to be terrible.”

He photographed daffodils, a nest from which a piece of polyester twine was unraveling, the skeletal radar antennae of last year's tulip tree seedpods, forsythias, the magenta pom-poms on a sugar maple, and a red-winged blackbird. Which was a sensible name for a bird that was black and had red on its wings. If only all bird names were like that.

He wondered if his photos were going to stop being—what was the word—lyrical? He was afraid he was going to become too focused on the get, on the thing, now that he could photograph from far away. Rather than on the way the thing was.

The following Monday, he took pictures of a squirrel's drey; honeysuckle; magnolia buds, which looked like furry miniature bananas; cardinals; starlings; and the brick underbelly of a bridge, upon which reflected sunlight was wobbling.

The park was full of parents and children he had never seen before. A few came back Tuesday, but by Wednesday, the mornings belonged again to dog walkers, runners, and seniors.

“Wait,” Jacob whispered to Farley, who couldn't hear him. A pair of robins were treading. Jacob and Farley were still on the avenue, not even in the park yet. In a tree just inside the park's cast-iron fence, the robins kept losing their balance and battering each other angrily with their wings. Jacob crouched to find a clear line of sight. Behind him, far away at first, an ambulance raised a high wail. Jacob listened to the wail being sharpened as the ambulance carried it toward him and then he listened to it being flattened and rounded after the ambulance passed. The Doppler effect

was hardly noticeable in the city in normal times, when an ambulance's progress through traffic was slow and fitful.

"My brother's family invited us, and I want to go, but my wife says we're staying here," the owner of a beagle named Dorcas said. He and Dorcas had stopped more than ten feet away.

"Where does your brother live?"

"Tennessee. She has a point, our kids are in school. Or they were going to be."

Crab apples were in bloom, pink and wholesome. In fourth grade, Jacob had drawn a picture of apple flowers for a science report, and ever since he had carried with him the guilty feeling that he hadn't really understood, that he had only copied an illustration out of the encyclopedia.

On a crooked dirt path, he photographed the skin of a crooked stream that ran alongside. On the skin, blue from the sky was interstriped with white from the clouds as well as with the olive green of the stream itself in a way that suggested but did not represent. Farley shoved his muzzle into last year's rotting leaves, snorting intermittently with interest and appreciation.

On a paved sidewalk, above the crooked path, a man with rounded shoulders walked past, his mouth and nose hidden behind the light blue pleats of a surgical mask. The parts that kiss. It was a pity to be so prudish, just a few days into spring, Jacob thought. To make such a show of valuing one's personal survival.

There was a standard poodle that hated Farley and whenever it saw him, snarled and snapped at the end of its leash while its owner repeated its name with soft dismay. One day, while Jacob was photographing grooves that rain had cut into a side of the dell, he heard the poodle's snarls and looked up to see Farley trailing his leash as he trotted with high steps toward the poodle, which was cartwheeling with rage at the bottom of the dell. Farley's chest was out. His ears were perked high. The poodle was taller and looked about twenty pounds heavier and probably didn't have a degenerative neurological condition, but a corollary to Farley's being always cheerful was that he was fearless. "Farley!" Jacob shouted as he ran.

He got there just as Farley lunged. The two dogs grappled, roaring, clacking their teeth. Farley had put himself and Jacob in the wrong, according to human accounting, by starting it, and now he toppled and briefly pinned the poodle, too. Every time Jacob reached for the leash, a pivot by Farley danced it away. The other owner was trying to kick Farley by the time Jacob finally grabbed him.

"Is your dog all right?" Jacob asked.

"I hope so."

Jacob ran his hands along Farley's neck, legs, and sides. There were no bite wounds. He bent one by one the joints of Farley's four legs. Farley's jowls were trembling, and his jaws were opening and shutting involuntarily, like a guppy's. When Farley tried to take a step, he stumbled, and Jacob gave his collar a little shake, to tell him to be still.

"Mine seems to be okay," the poodle's owner announced.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said. Farley had never hurt another dog, but over the years there had been a few that he had tackled this way.

Jacob's rule after a bad interaction was to take Farley straight home. On their way out of the park, however, they met a mother and daughter they knew who walked dogs for a living.

"How's he doing?" the daughter asked. She had taken a special interest ever since seeing his back legs being carried in a sling over the summer.

"Well, fine, except that five minutes ago he was a total asshole," Jacob said.

Farley gazed beatifically into her eyes. "Who, Farley?" she said with pretend incredulity.

"He pinned a poodle."

"One of Cathy's?"

"No, a guy."

"Oh, I think I know that poodle." She scratched Farley's neck and he nuzzled her. "So you still got it, is that what Daddy's saying?" she said to Farley.

It was bad for Farley's training to let him have so much pleasure so soon after a brawl, but maybe it would have been bad for his socialization to tear him away.

Hawthorn came into bloom, as well as another fruit tree, either cherry or plum—Jacob couldn't tell. In a box elder festooned with a drooping green confetti of flowers, Jacob heard braying and saw a blackbird. It was showing off its red epaulets, which blackbirds can choose whether to hide or show. Jacob pressed down on Farley's rump. Farley was always on leash now. About a week earlier it had become the unspoken consensus that it was unsafe to pet another person's dog, and people now stiffened if your dog came near. Jacob took a picture.

Farley found a stick to chew on, to express his impatience.

In the lee of a fence, there was some wild mint that had stuck its gnat-like little purple flowers out.

In the cardinals' hollow, Jacob found a Santeria offering: a wooden box containing a candle in a glass, coins, a single domino, colored rubber bands brittle from exposure, two metal tumblers half full of water (it had rained the night before), and a plastic tiger figurine. The box had been placed on a ledge on the outside of a bridge, where it couldn't be seen from below and could only be seen from above if one happened to lean out over the bridge's parapet.

"We have something for you," the daughter of the mother-and-daughter dog-walking team said. From a satchel where she carried squeaky toys and fabric frisbees, she took a yellow-and-green triangle folded up inside a ziplock bag.

She handed it to Jacob over the heads of the dogs milling around her. The yellow had pleats, the green was a pattern on the yellow, and there were also long, thin green strips to tie it with. "Did you make this?" Jacob asked.

"We wanted to make sure all our friends have one," she said.

"It has a wire in the nose bridge and everything," her mother added. "We spent the weekend sewing them."

"This is so great," Jacob said, though he didn't put it on. "We only have a few disposable ones, and we've mostly just been wearing them to the grocery store."

"Now you have one to wear to the park."

Jacob nodded. The mother and daughter were both wearing masks themselves, but Jacob didn't want to think masks were necessary outside. He put the mask in his satchel, where he was carrying a ball, Farley's sling, and the old lens, which he now used only for close-ups.

"He doesn't mind those?" the daughter asked, pointing at the purple rubber booties on Farley's back paws. They looked like uninflated balloons.

"He doesn't love them."

"Are they for salt?"

"In winter, yeah, but he drags his back feet so bad that he scrapes his nails down to the quick, and these give him a little protection."

At the first bend in the center drive Jacob saw a new flower: a little chandelier of violet trumpets, which in Texas he would have called a bluebonnet. But he was pretty sure bluebonnets didn't grow in Brooklyn. While he was fishing for the close-up lens, a robin landed on a tree limb above him. Pinned in its beak was an oak leaf that had thinned to gossamer during its transit through winter. Jacob took a picture. The robin jumped higher into the tree, and Jacob saw that it and a mate were building a nest, which was cantilevered out over the road the way the wasp's nest had been.

He circled underneath, looking for a sight line. A man standing on the side of the road, who had seemed to be waiting for someone, started following his gaze. "It's a robin's nest," Jacob volunteered.

"Is it?" The man walked over. To look where Jacob was looking, he had to put his head next to Jacob's. They both held their breath. "I see, yes," the man said. He had a sub-Saharan accent that Jacob didn't recognize. He had probably grown up with different birds and different trees.

In the traffic delta where the access road met the park's main circular drive, next to a green plastic portable toilet, a red placard extended between two stakes: KEEP THIS FAR APART. In previous springs, the toilet booth had gotten toppled almost every weekend, but no one was toppling it this year. Maybe hooliganism no longer felt rebellious, having become so closely identified with authority.

Once Jacob and Farley crossed the circular drive, Farley pulled them to a hydrant around which he liked to sniff and pee. In the fall, in the same place, a leafy weed had grown up that had smelled like coriander when Farley had trampled it. Every day was also becoming all the other days that Jacob and Farley had walked through, because Jacob found himself remembering at every step everything he and Farley had seen there, without having to make any special effort to remember.

Beside the crooked stream, spiky pink petals were shooting out of the sides of a tree's branches.

Another tree, hanging over the stream, was beginning to shove slender leaves out of the ends of its fingers. Jacob was trying to take a picture of it when suddenly his mind resolved a soft, dispersed piping that was in his ears and he realized that the tree was alive with tiny, impatient, unfamiliar birds.

He held his breath. Warblers, he guessed. Farley stumbled in front of him, as if curious to see what he was looking at. Jacob pressed his rump down. There were splashes of gold on the birds' crowns, under their wings, on their throats, under their tails. They were moving through the tree in a pattern each contributed to yet all seemed subject to. Jacob raised his camera. He felt alert. Everything in his mind was available. He was a hunter, after all. He was built to hunt, like any

carnivore, even the ones like him who had gone vegetarian. A quarter century ago, he had gone from bar to bar, night after night, doggedly, happily spending hours and hours in search of just the right stranger.

Three times, by the time he released the shutter, the branch was empty. He forced himself to take a breath. The birds had their own rhythm, he counseled himself; he had to entrain to it. On his fourth try his picture caught one of the birds cocking its head just after landing.

The crooked dirt path, as it followed the crooked stream, clambered up over tree roots and then dipped back down again to the water, over which snarls of fishing line, ornamented with bobs and lures, hung tangled in branches. One day, while photographing a lotus growing toward the surface from the bottom of the stream—like a knotted rope being lowered upward—Jacob noticed, and also photographed, a fish with a circle on its face nosing around the lotus.

He photographed a bed of new poison ivy unfolding its densely red wings. He photographed the lemon-curd yellow of a magnolia warbler and the auburn filigree necklace on the breast of a northern parula. He taught Farley to wait by always returning to him with a treat held high in a raised fist, which for some reason made the treat more fascinating. He photographed a green heron and a black-crowned night heron sharing a branch. Because his mask fogged up his glasses, sometimes, while he was hunting, he held his breath, without even knowing that he was holding it, until a thudding in his ears and in his chest reminded him to breathe again.

If no one was around, he unlooped one ear.

When he saw a cat prowling in a hilltop meadow, he was surprised by how angry he felt. Did birds represent something? his husband asked, trying to understand. But it seemed to be their

presence that Jacob liked, rather than anything they referred to. One day, on the crooked path, a black-and-white warbler, intent on hunting grubs, let him come so close that if he had reached out he would have been able to touch it. The barbs of the white feathers, where they lay over the black ones, were as fine as spider silk.

The light was always different a second later because the sun was always moving and so were the clouds, if there were any. Trees, too, though their motion was less irrevocable—a pattern that for a while sometimes almost repeated, like a theme and variations.

One day, he saw two squirrels embracing, one behind the other. He dropped Farley's leash; Farley ambled obliviously ahead. The female had backed her haunches into those of the male, one of whose forelimbs was cupping her belly, holding her to him. Did squirrels have thumbs? Immobile, the two regarded Jacob. They were afraid enough to pause but not afraid enough to separate. He took a picture.

One of the ways home went past a playground where lilacs came into bloom.

“At least you were already homeschooling,” Jacob said to Scout's owner.

“Yeah, now everyone knows how hard Jenny has to work at it.” Scout barked over him, interrupting. “Okay, okay, jeez.” He launched Scout's ball. “Iris misses her friends, though.”

“Did her friends leave the city?”

“A lot of them. Not really an option for us. The hospital gave me the remote visits portal. One day they were like, This was supposed to go live a month and a half ago. Could you fix it?”

The trill of a house wren sounded from the edge of the dell, near a break in the fence where a few Rastafarians had recently started sitting together again, now that it was warmer. As the wren flew along the fence, Jacob and Farley followed. It alighted in the torso of a pine that had broken in a storm the previous fall. While Farley smelled the spill of wood chips left from where the parks workers had sawed up the fallen treetop, the wren hunted and caroled in the pine’s still-erect soft yellow splintered-open core. Before each song, the wren yanked up its tail like a parking brake, contracting its body almost into a ball.

A long flight of stone stairs wound uphill around a Revolutionary War obelisk, and Jacob was able to jolly Farley halfway up before having to carry him the rest of the way. In Jacob’s arms, the dog’s ears flopped in time with Jacob’s steps. Farley didn’t struggle anymore when Jacob carried him; he just enjoyed the view. At the top of the hill was a meadow. Jacob took pictures of three redstarts (yellow ones, which were either females or juvenile males), a thrush that wasn’t a hermit thrush and would have to be looked up, and a pair of sullen cowbirds.

It was a beautiful day, and neither he nor Farley wanted to go home, where Jacob’s routine was to do back-pain exercises, read the horrible news, and sit at his desk and not write. The warblers were going to be leaving soon and Jacob was a little afraid of how he was going to feel when they did. For the first time he was going to be aware of losing them. In France the authorities had closed parks, and he thought he would probably break the law if they closed them here.

In front of the building where he and his husband lived, a warbler lay on the sidewalk. Jacob pulled Farley away, to stop him from investigating. The tiny legs were stiff, the black eyes still bright and open.

“Is it all right?” a neighbor shouted from above. “I was in the other room and I just heard this thump on the window.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s dead,” Jacob shouted up to her.

He took Farley upstairs, switched to his close-up lens, and put on one of the white nitrile gloves that he and his husband had bought and already weren’t using. His heart was pounding. He had never touched a warbler. He was guilty of feeling happy about its death because it meant that he was going to be able to.

He was afraid that someone would step on it while he was upstairs but no one did. He circled it until his own shadow didn’t fall on it and then took a picture. He laid his gloved hand next to it and with his thumb pulled it onto his open palm. It was lighter than a pair of glasses. Russet throat, russet crown, black face. The little claws curled around nothing. At the corners of the beak were little crosshatched wiry bristles, like the whiskers of a minor eighteenth-century nobleman. With his ungloved hand he took more pictures.

The handling disordered the feathers, and a part opened along the breast in a line parallel with one of the folded wings. Jacob crossed the avenue and laid the bird on its side not in a trash can but on a piece of cardboard that happened to be lying flat on top of a trash can, so that if the bird were to come back to life, it would be able to fly free. On a park bench right next to the trash, a man was working on his laptop and smoking a cigarette. In the evenings the man smoked there while talking on his cell phone. White butts littered the ground around him. Jacob thought of telling him about the warbler—he wanted to tell someone—but it might seem morbid, especially if the man wasn’t interested in birds, and anyway the man wasn’t wearing a mask. Jacob turned away.

A couple of weeks later, all the interesting birds left. Or that was how Jacob felt about it. If he were to write down whenever he had the feeling, which always came with a doubt about the reality of it, maybe the dates would show a pattern. A cyclicity of some kind, lunar or otherwise. But he had wondered this for it must be thirty years without writing down any dates, so maybe he didn't actually want to know.

Someone was heading toward them. Jacob had to make an effort not to scowl now whenever anyone came close enough to oblige him to raise his mask.

He saw a weed blossoming that he remembered from childhood. It was called campion, like the poet. It grew along fences. In the suburb that he was from, where there had been a fair amount of abandoned farmland, not yet developed, which he had liked to wander in, mostly alone, he had found it growing at the edges of fields just where they stopped being mowed. If you took a campion flower that had just started to go by and gently tugged down the loose striped sack that was its outermost layer, exposing the dark green nut inside, and then folded down the petals, one by one, where they attached to the base of the green nut, leaving a tight inner posy of stamens sprouting from the top of the nut, the altered flower looked like a little cartoon alien. The nut was the head. The inside-out calyx was a balloony dress it was wearing. The bent-down petals were its multiple arms. And the stamens were its antennae.

He didn't pick one of the flowers now. He remembered it too clearly to need to. Maybe the number of things that he was ever going to know so well was finite, because maybe you could only know things that well if you came to them before a certain age. The way there seemed to be a finite

number of pieces of music that he was able to cry to. This impromptu but not that one, because he hadn't listened to that one in time.

He wondered whether he had ever shown the way he altered the flower to a childhood friend of his whose little sister had called that morning. The friend had died unexpectedly at home. He hadn't been well, the sister said; the isolation had been weighing on him.

It had been a few years since Jacob had been in touch with him. When they had last seen each other, the friend had said he wanted to write a book that explained consciousness—"the way some tubes in your brain make you feel like you are." He had said it in a way he had of letting you see that he was almost embarrassingly in earnest while also preemptively making fun a little of his own ambition. If Jacob had ever shown the flower to him, he would have bothcackled goofily and taken the discovery very seriously, treated it very gently. They had hiked together sometimes in the suburban scrub forests that Jacob had liked, the skinny trash trees that sprang up in land that had stopped being farmed and then stopped even being mowed. They had come up with names for things they found that didn't have or even really need names. A tuft of grass in a marsh, if the tuft held together well enough to support standing on it, was a mugwump. Jacob probably had shown him the flower, but you always lean on the other person a little for help in remembering what happened in a friendship, and now there was no way to know for sure.

A bird that was blue drifted into the meadow and landed in a stand of tall weeds. They were the same weeds that had been growing around the hydrant on the park's circular drive last fall, the ones that had smelled like coriander. The blue was both dark and bright. Indigo bunting? Jacob was at the stage where he knew names without always knowing which birds they went with. He took a picture. It was supposed to be a sign when one saw a bird that was blue. But maybe it wasn't

a sign if you were seeing it as late in life as Jacob was seeing this one. He was being very Wordsworthian about everything today.

For the funeral he put on a suit but no shoes, which it turned out was overdressed. For years, it turned out, his friend had been recording piano improvisations and sharing them with another friend. After the service, that friend sent copies to Jacob by email.

With Farley straining on the leash against him, Jacob leaned out over a railing and clicked and clicked as a black-crowned night heron, holding its head still, gingerly walked its body up to its head, compacting its neck, loading it, until, abruptly, the neck shot out. The heron raised a dripping fish, impaled through the eye.

Under a bridge, on the brick of one of its piers, someone had pasted posters of Black people who had died at the hands of police. The Black faces were given crowns, in contrasting colors, and they were framed in heavy black borders that looked like the perforations that edged postage stamps when Jacob was a child.

Near the top of a little hill, flat chartreuse flowers lay on top of flat green leaves, like playing cards dealt onto spread-open palms. Pearls of rain from the night before were lodged in the flowers. Jacob dropped Farley's leash to switch to the close-up lens.

“Do you know what that is?” a blond woman asked. She never petted Farley because her dog, a gray mastiff, had behavioral issues.

“I don’t.” Jacob stepped on Farley’s leash.

“Do you ever use that app?” she asked, taking out her phone.

“Hi, Farley,” a friend of the woman’s who often walked with her said, coming around the corner. The friend had known Jacob so long she had known the dog before Farley, but she couldn’t pet Farley either, because her current dog, a white American Staffordshire, also had behavioral issues. It was deaf and didn’t like to be surprised. “How’s he doing?”

“Slowing down, now that it’s getting warmer.”

“Aren’t we all,” she said. “I forget, is what he has the sort of thing that gets any better?”

“No, but it’s slow.”

“Bursting heart or strawberry bush,” the first woman said. “Oh, it’s invasive.”

“I’ve given up hoping for flowers that aren’t invasive,” Jacob said.

“I know, right?”

A butterfly was staggering under the black walnut trees. “Wait,” Jacob told Farley, who did pause for a few seconds.

The wings were pale yellow, smudged dark at the edges as if with mascara. With spots of blue and orange. It landed on a fallen branch, flexed its wings three times, swiveled on its numerous feet, and inserted itself again into the air.

When Jacob looked through the viewfinder, it kept zigzagging out of the frame. He had to follow it with his naked eyes.

It landed on the knotty knee of an exposed root. Jacob took a couple of pictures for insurance, walked closer, took a couple more. He had started training himself to keep a weather eye open for sticks underfoot that could snap or leaves that could rustle. It was like the game of not stepping on the cracks in a sidewalk.

At the edge of the largest black walnut's skirts, there was a manhole cover that overflowed when it rained. Downstream, weeds shot up faster than in the surrounding grass, and Farley seemed to be preoccupied with sniffing the marks that other dogs had left on the taller weeds.

Jacob crouched down. The knees of his pants were going to get muddy, but he had been wearing them for more than a week already, a pandemic habit. Or maybe a middle-aged one. The butterfly arched the little worm of its body and dabbed the rear tip of it against the root. With each dab it squeezed out of itself a glistening white drop, as if its worm-body were an old-fashioned funnel for frosting a cake. It was laying eggs. She was laying eggs. This hardly seemed like a safe place for them. Or for the butterfly herself. Presumably the strategy was to lay so many eggs that safety was irrelevant, but Jacob was fifty-three and he came to the park every day and this was the first time he'd ever seen a butterfly laying eggs. He held his breath not because his mask was up, it wasn't, but because he didn't want the butterfly to feel the pressure of his breath on her wings.

She pinched shut her tip and launched herself—Farley was sauntering up. A human at dog level was an opportunity for a dog's neck to be scratched.

A few days later, the something else that Jacob was trying to photograph went out of the pictures again, and he kept taking them only because of the little snick of gratification that the hunter in him still felt when his camera caught something. A starling feeding a white mulberry to its chick.

A blackbird dive-bombing a swan for sailing too close to its nest. For better or worse Jacob was the sort of person who when he didn't know what he was doing repeated himself instead of stopping, and of course Farley still needed to go on walks.

Spotting the mother and daughter, Farley got so excited that his back legs tangled. His rear slumped to the ground sideways, one leg doubling under him and the other sticking out even more awkwardly. He waited, panting, eyes fixed with love and greed on the women and the fanny packs where they carried treats. Jacob picked up Farley's rear end and propped him back up on his hind legs. It was like setting a derailed toy train back on its track. Sometimes it took a few goes before Farley was able to find his way again into a rhythm and momentum that held him up and carried him forward.

"It's lamb lung. We really love it," the daughter said.

Farley bowed his head while he was chewing so that none of the mother and daughter's dogs could even get a look at the morsel.

"That's all," the daughter said when Farley looked up at her again. "Unless you want to ask your dad why he's so strict."

"Here, this is pretty good, too," the mother said. "Duck."

When Farley went back to the daughter, she scratched in the ruff of fur around his neck. "Oh, is it okay that I'm doing this? Touching him? I probably should have asked first."

Jacob said he didn't mind. The things he had done once upon a time in the face of a much worse plague.

The surface of the crooked stream that day was peopled with tiny green leaves. The shell of a turtle crawling up onto a log to sun itself was dripping with them.

To get to the far bank of the crooked stream, Jacob and Farley crossed over a bridge that they usually went under. Jacob was looking for a swamp rose, blowsy and cheerful, that he had seen from the near bank the day before. A black-crowned night heron had been standing next to it.

But there had been a storm overnight, and when Jacob and Farley got to the rosebush, they found its pink petals and yellow stigmata fallen into the water. The litter wasn't picturesque; it was compromised by sticks and trash.

Jacob took a few pictures of dragonflies, as a consolation prize, but he already had photos of both of the only two kinds of dragonfly there ever seemed to be. Was the heron still around? In search of it, he methodically went down every dirt side path that led to the water. In the last of these cut-ins, almost resigned, he squatted at the water's edge and photographed dragonflies again. Maybe there was a picture worth taking in the turquoise of the dragonflies against the green of the algae. It would be a little simpleminded, but he already knew his photographs were all *studium* and no *punctum*. When he stood up to retrieve Farley, whom he had left leashed to a fence post, there was a confused fluttering: the heron was emerging from a bush that Jacob had been squatting beside.

It flew along the shore just the length of the cut-in. At the far end, stepping down from the air, it folded its wings deliberately. Behind Jacob, Farley was alert but still sitting. Jacob had never been so close to a black-crowned. He raised his camera.

Three teenage boys, shirtless, muddy, talking loudly, trundled mountain bikes into the heron's end of the cut-in. The heron froze.

Jacob pointed. The boy in front saw him point and looked and did a double take. All three fell silent. They wheeled their bikes past the bird and under a tree. The heron, as if indifferent, fluffed itself, settled itself. Jacob, crouching, stepped forward slowly. Conscious that he was being a picture of taking a picture. Conscious that he couldn't count for too long on the patience of the boys, the heron, his dog. The heron preened, carving quick-vanishing lines into its wings with its long bill. It bent its head down as if inspecting its yellow claws—as if counting them, admiring them. The horseshoe it curled itself into filled the field of vision in Jacob's camera. Only after he had taken a dozen photos did he remember to check the exposure. He had it wrong; he shifted it up a notch. He took a dozen more shots. He always tried to take more than he thought he needed because his hands shook so badly that sometimes the bird wasn't even in the frame.

He stepped back. He nodded at the boys.

“What kind is it?” the one in front asked. He and another of the boys raised their phones and started taking pictures of their own. Jacob told them. He left the heron in their company.

On Jacob's birthday, Farley pooped in the middle of the park's circular drive. Bicyclists whistled past. “When you have to go . . .” a runner commented.

“Good boy,” Jacob said. He had recently downsized Farley to medium booties, since he had lost so much sensation in his back paws that he no longer objected to a snug fit. Blue instead of purple. They didn't flap around as much or catch as often on sticks or leaves.

Jacob photographed an eastern comma, which was an orange butterfly that wasn't a monarch. The one he photographed was so torn up that the lower half looked like an old dishrag that had gone black and was rotting out. He photographed a cylinder of green-and-white pokeweed flowers. He photographed a fertilized milkweed pod, as turgid and pimped as a ballsack.

That evening he walked Farley to a greensward that they never went to in the mornings, and on the side of a hill, he and Farley lay down on the grass and Jacob, thinking about what had happened to his childhood friend, looked straight up into the blue sky where, as the sun was descending, its rays going horizontal, chimney swifts were gamboling in the light, chasing each other and soaring higher and higher until they were so high that, Jacob realized, there was no reason for them to be up there. There was nothing for them to eat—insects don't fly that high—and swifts aren't raptors that need a predator's vantage on the ground below. They could only be caracoling that high for the pleasure of it. In exaltation. Because swirling and wheeling in the sky made them feel alive. Who wouldn't want to feel that, if you could? There are species of birds capable of living decades, Jacob had read, but most individuals only live a year or two, because of the odds against them.

Story #3

She'd been going by Julius since the previous October, when a man cornered her after AA to ask how she got a name like Juke.

Before, she'd have explained that Juke was short for Jukebox, a nickname her daddy had given her, and when asked why Jukebox, she'd tell the usual lie—that it was because she was always singing as a little girl. Instead, she renamed herself on the spot.

Actually, she said, I'd rather you called me Julius.

It was interesting, lying less. Julius chalked up the change to a fight she'd had, a couple of weeks before the meeting, with a woman she'd been seeing, Ilyana. They'd broken up soon after—Julius had sent a text, Look, this isn't working out and you deserve better—but that October they were still in the thick of it, blots of blood in an egg yolk, and Ilyana was finding out what it meant to date Julius.

So it turns out everything that comes out your mouth is fucking bullshit, she said.

At forty-six, Ilyana was a couple of years younger than Julius but looked older from the years of hard living. Julius had lived hard, too, but dark skin, chubbiness, and a lucky genetic allotment had protected her from the worst of the visible degradation. The toll had been primarily internal.

I'm honest about the stuff that matters, said Julius, and Ilyana said, It all matters, and Julius said, No it doesn't, nothing matters really, we are all atoms arranged arbitrarily and soon enough we will die and come to be arranged differently.

Does what we've been doing—this—this relationship—does it mean anything to you then? Do you feel anything at all for me?

She shoved Julius backward, testing, then shoved again, this time so hard that Julius went into the wall of the bus shelter, where they were waiting for the 221 along with four other people.

Please just do something, say something, anything, Ilyana begged. She was crying now, her makeup smearing, wet mascara thickening her long eyelashes into black shadows thick as baby crow wings.

Stop it, said Julius.

She didn't mind Ilyana getting physical. Julius lied a lot, fair enough, and Ilyana had the right to be angry about that. No one wanted to be in a relationship with a person who said they didn't have kids, or siblings, and then find out, from someone they ran into at the supermarket, that they had both.

But for Julius, lies, however insignificant, flowed from her more easily than truths: whether she'd eaten that day or not, which places she'd traveled to or hadn't, whom she'd voted for (she'd never voted). Julius understood why Ilyana was angry. She just didn't want to be scrutinized in public—let the two of them do this whole thing at one of their apartments. That way, after they were done fighting they could have problematic sex.

Stop? Why the hell would I stop? It doesn't matter, does it? Nothing does, right? It's all just atoms? She gave Julius a little slap. Then another.

Ilyana breathed in a ragged, ugly breath. What are you afraid will happen if I know the truth? she asked.

Julius's cheek stung where Ilyana's palm had connected, but it was a minor sensation compared to the prickling heat of shame coursing up from her shoulders to her neck to her ears. She remembered, of all things, the film *Good Will Hunting*, in which Matt Damon plays a prodigy with a tragic backstory. He lies to Minnie Driver's character about his past, and when she calls

him on it, he accuses her of not wanting to know what's really going on because what's really going on is very unpleasant. She doesn't want to hear that shit.

It was embarrassing that a Gus Van Sant film featured a character whose psychological profile wasn't that far from Julius's own. It made her feel not real, like a trope, like one of those paper doll things. But there it was, the pulse of it: her tendency to meet every personal inquiry with fabrications came out of a core belief that she was worthless and abject, and that if she let people witness her for who she really was, they would leave, or gut her like a dead doe for meat.

It was this realization that had disrupted the automation with which she typically lied, and the next week in AA, she told the man her new name.

She'd picked Julius on the fly because earlier that day her home health aide had been reciting Mark Antony's "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech from *Julius Caesar* while filling up the pillboxes, and Julius had been listening, listening intently, rather than walking to another room to be by herself, which was what she often did when confronted with an object of cultured society.

Well, I'll be damned, my mother's name was Julia, too, said the man, who was the type to find significance in everything, especially where there was none.

It's Julius. With a *u-s*.

Oh, my bad, my bad. Okay, so is Juke short for Julius? How did you come to have a name like that?

I made it up just now.

Julius was two years and three months sober and badly wanted to walk to the convenience store across the street from the meeting and buy a bottle of Jim Beam. It felt like a better use of

her time than this conversation. That was why she'd tended to drink in the past, because it was a more appealing way of spending time than whatever else life had going on.

She pulled up her hood to signal she was done with the conversation and jammed her hands into her pockets, where her phone was awaiting her, full of notifications. She'd tried to kill herself the night before. The hospital was asking her to fill out a survey rating her care, and her next-door neighbor was asking her if she was all right, and Julius's son's girlfriend, who had been notified as next of kin, was asking if there was anything she could do.

She texted back, Yeah, I'm all right. Gonna try to go to meetings more regularly again. That should help. Just left one.

Are you supposed to be out of the hospital yet????!! asked her son's girlfriend.

Julius didn't get why that mattered. Whether she was meant to be or not, she was out of the hospital.

All this was a while ago anyway, but Julius thought of it as she lay in bed—the fight with Ilyana, the suicide attempt, the meeting the following morning where she changed her name—because she'd just received a call from a coroner explaining that her brother, Petey, was dead, and so she would have to go to his funeral, and no one from her old life would know her new name, and they would all call her Juke.

With a name like Julius, gender came up. It had before, too, being that Julius was never a feminine woman in the traditional sense, and while she preferred to just get on with life, life itself never let her. It kept on harping and harping at her, in the forms of stares, paperwork, awkward conversations, slurs.

That's not life, that's society, said Wilbur the first time they'd met, at an LGBTQ+ sober social. It was the November after the name change, after the attempt. They were the only two over thirty—Wilbur thirty-one, she forty-eight. They were also the only two Black ones.

Wilbur was transmasculine and nonbinary, which Julius didn't understand. She got it even less when he tried to explain it to her during one of their early hang-outs, because everything he said about being nonbinary also applied to her as a woman, but when she asked more questions, she could tell Wilbur found them invasive and that he was writing her off as a person who didn't and never would get it, as a person with whom he could never be close, and this devastated her.

So Julius told her, as it seemed relevant and like something that would make him love her, that she'd had a double mastectomy. Breast cancer. And she wasn't particularly upset about it. Had declined reconstruction. She'd never felt attached to her breasts anyway.

I'm sorry to hear that you had cancer, he said solemnly.

The next day he sent her a message, a picture of a very angry sodden cat in a bath. There was an arrow pointing to the cat alongside the words "me, trying to get on with my life" and there was an arrow pointing to the bathwater next to the word "society."

Julius laughed and replied, Why are memes always so specific to my exact emotional state?

Because we're all connected, Wilbur said, and you're not alone. Would you like to go to a poetry reading with me tonight?

She didn't reply, and that night she cried until she made herself sick and vomited in the toilet, God knows why, and then went to an AA meeting, which was useless, then walked all night until she could not walk anymore and fell asleep on a park bench, only to be woken at dawn by the sound of a jogger, music bleating from their headphones.

Wilbur was a poetry-readings type, and Julius wasn't. She was a sick type. Her small apartment was subsidized by the state. She got disability. She looked after the babies and toddlers in her apartment complex for extra cash. She went to the hospital for treatments. She wasn't a great reader. It took her ages to get through a page, and though her son had suggested audiobooks, she found them tiresome and dull.

Her son's girlfriend, Georgia, was always trying to get her to go to things. It was she who'd suggested that LGBTQ+ sober social. A few weeks later, she told Julius about a local amateur basketball league for disabled people.

You like basketball, don't you?

Julius did. Of course she did. It was a great game. For her birthday, her son and his girlfriend had given her season tickets for the Rockets.

Her son, Leland, was very successful. A lawyer. He worked for a nonprofit focused on supporting undocumented immigrants. Georgia was in medical billing and had lived with her parents until moving in with Leland a few years before. She was sensible, organized, and had a YouTube channel directed at millennials, about managing finances.

Julius and Leland had a strained relationship, and Georgia considered it her responsibility to mend it. Julius often wanted to say, The boy hates me and has every right. I was a shit mother, hardly there when he needed me, a bare minimum sort of mom. Let him have his hate.

But as she got sober, she'd found out the boy wanted to fix things as much as Georgia did. He longed for Julius's approval, though Julius couldn't fathom why. She wasn't in any position to bestow judgment on anyone.

Even so, he yelled at her sometimes, and said snide things. Not long after October, licking his wounds over the fact that his mother had, once again, tried to abandon him, they got into a spat

when Julius complimented him on how well he'd handled a case. He said, some of us actually care about people and will do what it takes to care for them, that's all. Georgia said, *Leland*, her voice full of reprimand.

Julius said, No, he's right. He's right.

And Leland said, Oh, so *now* I'm right, I wasn't right all those years I begged you to be better, but when it's about you, all about you, you care and actually begin to clean up.

He was referring to the diagnosis of kidney failure she'd received a couple of years before, which coincided loosely with the beginning of her sobriety. In his mind, she'd started recovery to save herself from dying. She'd never told him that she'd stopped drinking before the doctor's visit.

You can't seriously think I care about myself, son, can you? Is that a fucking joke?

Then she laughed, laughed harder than she had in a long time, certainly since being sober, and she had relished making her son feel a damn fool for saying something so stupid. Goodness knows she would've been happy to die, to go gently from this or that sickness. She got sober because she was bored of drinking, and it hurt. It hurt her whole body. And it was dull, and she wanted to find out if there was a way of living that was less dull. Drinking used to make her feel like she was more than just the cavernous gut of a starving jackal, but it had been years, decades, since it had made her feel anything like good.

You're a real bitch, Leland said when she stopped laughing, then he left the table. It wasn't the only dinner Julius was invited to at her son's apartment that had ended this way.

But a couple of weeks later, he took Julius to her first practice with the disabled basketball league. There, she ran into Wilbur, whom she hadn't seen in months, not since he'd invited her to the poetry reading. He came up to her after the practice was done and said he'd missed her.

She said, I'm sorry. I've had a lot going on.

I'm having some friends over for dinner tonight. I'd love it if you came.

She would've said no, but Leland was there, and she wanted him to see that she was putting in an effort. An effort to be less put upon by it all.

That night, Wilbur's boyfriend served things Julius was not excited to eat. A watermelon salad with basil and vegan feta. A tofu-based stir-fry. Dessert was fine, a vegan key lime pie, but then it wasn't fine, because Julius had the thought that it wasn't as good as her mother's key lime pie, not nearly, which got her thinking about her mother, which got her thinking about her father, then her brother, Petey, then life and life and life, none of the thoughts hopeful or helpful.

Now we commence the salon, said Wilbur. He deliberately avoided eye contact with Julius as he said this, because he knew if he'd told her this wasn't just a normal dinner but a salon, whatever that was, she would've found a way not to come.

One of the guests played guitar, a young woman who had a pleasing singing voice. Listening to her wasn't bad at all. It was nice, so nice that Julius closed her eyes and found herself in the elated, dreamy state she'd occasionally felt at church as a little girl when the choir performed. A kind of feeling like God was real, and so was Heaven, and so were things like purpose, meaning, beauty, connection.

But the song was over after about five minutes, and one couldn't go on listening to music that made you feel like that forever, and worse, even if you found music that made you feel like that, it wouldn't always make you feel like that. Everything had its life span.

Would you like to share something, Julius?

That was Wilbur's boyfriend, Hank.

Share what? She'd spoken that day at AA. She could recycle what she'd said there, maybe, say it in a rhythm that gave it a poetic feel. She'd been quite impressed with some of her own turns of phrase. None of her insights were things that hadn't been said many times before, but it was the first time they'd been said in that room, with that exact group of people, and that situation would never happen again, and, it occurred to her, that was something not so boring. That moment, that unique moment, would end. Like all things did. And most of the time that made things feel meaningless, but earlier that day, it had made things feel inconceivably precious. Everything was so heartbreaking.

You can share anything. A poem—any poem, doesn't have to be one you've written. You can read it off your phone. Or sing a song. A knock-knock joke. Whatever.

Julius felt like she was back in school, which she'd been good but not great at—just short of being a star pupil, which was worse than being an awful student, because she was never the teacher's favorite nor their least favorite. She was just Juke. That Reginald girl. Decent. A bit of a hanger-on and a know-it-all, though she didn't actually know anything.

We'll come back to you, said Wilbur, and you only have to share if you want to share.

They never came back to her because she pretended to go to the bathroom a little while later, then left. She messaged Wilbur to say she was sorry but it wasn't really her scene.

Wilbur texted back right away, apologizing for ambushing her with the salon thing. Lunch soon?

Yeah, OK.

After that, they became close. Wilbur told Julius about his childhood in Arkansas, where he was raised by his great-uncle Dennis, who was a long-haul truck driver. Julius shared her memories of growing up in Texas and only lied two or three times about specifics. She even told

him painful things, like how her family could only afford school lunch for one of the two children and they gave it to Petey, because Julius needed to lose some weight anyway.

He came with her to dialysis and read her articles and blog posts and tweet threads.

She told Wilbur that she liked to eat sand, that she had since she was a child. She craved it more than bourbon.

Pica, he said.

Yes. It just—Wilbur, it tastes so fucking good.

I bet you taste so fucking good, he said, looking at her. She laughed, but he didn't. Shortly after, they began having sex, mostly in the form of Wilbur going down on her for hours at a time. He'd tell her that she was his good little girl. He'd put her in the bath and wash her, then take her to his bed. He asked her to call him Daddy, and she did.

His boyfriend didn't mind, they were polyamorous, and she once had sex with both of them at the same time. Hank licked Julius's mastectomy scars, nibbled the mangled skin. After coming, she cried and shook, and Wilbur held her, and Hank kissed her cheek and whispered something into Wilbur's ear, then left the room.

She liked Wilbur's laugh, and he had good taste in memes, and he got her onto Instagram and sent her posts by mental health influencers, with eye-roll emojis and comments like: Julius, have you simply tried noticing your feelings, experiencing them, and letting them pass through you?

When Wilbur killed himself, Julius didn't take it well, not at all, and while she didn't relapse into drinking, it was only because she was too mentally sick to do so, unable to get out of her bed except to use the Tupperware her aide left on the side table for her to piss in.

His death brought on one of the bigger depressions of her life, which perhaps was unfair to say, since most periods of her life could be characterized as one of the bigger depressions of her life. Still, pissing in a bowl instead of the toilet—that was a low. Too lethargic from grief to walk to the corner store to buy booze was a special level of dire. And this because of someone she hadn't even known a year. Life was full of possibilities.

Wilbur had never asked how she came to have a name like Julius, and she hated herself for the fact that if he had, as much as she loved him—yes, she loved him—she would not have been able to tell him the truth of it, that she'd made it up because the name she'd gone by most of her life had a history that outed the ugliness of her.

Juke was short for Jukebox, but Julius never sang, couldn't sing, and the full nickname Daddy had given her was Broken Jukebox because, he said, she was always repeating things or stuttering over things or going silent for no reason or making noise when she shouldn't, and even when you gave the old girl a few hard knocks, he said, nothing changed. And what was horrible about it all was not the nickname itself, or that her Daddy had given it to her, but that she'd gone by it for forty-three years and had not even thought to change it. That was what she'd never have wanted Wilbur to know about her, how cowardly and weak and pathetic she was, and now he never would know that, because he was dead. But that fact was not a relief; rather, it made her want to follow him to the grave.

Georgia worked from home, and she took to visiting Julius at her apartment multiple times a week. She helped the aide give Julius sponge baths and she cooked food that Julius sometimes did and sometimes didn't eat. On the days Julius refused to leave the bed, Leland came over, carried her

to his van, and drove her to dialysis. She was limp through it all, and for a few months after Wilbur died, she was silent, hardly able to speak, until the day the coroner called to tell her about Petey. A few minutes later, Julius's aunt Dessie called and said, Juke, baby, I'm so, so sorry.

Had Julius been any kind of person at all, she'd have said, It's Julius now, don't call me that fucking name, especially when you know how I came to have it, and I'm not sorry, because it's not a loss, I fucking hated Petey, and I'm glad he's dead, glad he drank his liver to rot, and glad he was tortured to his very last moment, even though she wasn't glad, she loved him, and she was already sobbing for the loss of him, as much as if not more than she had for Wilbur.

Thank you, Aunt Dessie. He will be missed, said Julius.

It's gonna be so good to see you around here. It's been a minute since you was home.

It had been twenty-six years. She'd left home for the final time when Leland turned five, the year Petey got out of his three-year sentence.

You've got to pull it together for the family, for all of us, said Aunt Dessie. Now, when are you getting here? Today or tomorrow? We've already got the body to the funeral home, but you're the only one who can make the decisions, baby. You know he didn't have no one in the world left but you.

Petey had been six years older than Juke, which was enough of an age gap that the two could've grown up without having much to do with each other, but Petey was in love with his baby sister from the very beginning. He doted on her and took care of her. He was musical, and he would play for her all the time—guitar, banjo, and fiddle. It was one of the few things that calmed her as a fussy, angry toddler.

Petey was mischievous and a troublemaker, but so charming that everyone loved him. He was the type of boy people said was smart as a whip, handsome, a ladies' man. He never called

Julius *Juke*; he called her by her birth name. Being that Petey treated her with such tenderness, of course she doted on him, too. He was fifteen and she nine when he started having sex with her.

I'll be there tomorrow, Julius told Aunt Dessie. I don't think I can get there any sooner. I need to arrange a ride.

Can't that son of yours drive you? Or will he be too busy working? He'll come down for the funeral, of course, but I understand if he can't get down sooner than that.

How very gracious of you, said Julius.

Aunt Dessie snorted. There she is, there's my niece.

I'm sorry, said Julius. It's just—

It's a lot. I know that, baby. Let it out.

Leland won't be able to come to the funeral, Julius said.

Don't be silly now.

I'm not being silly. He's got an important job he needs to focus on.

He needs to say goodbye to his uncle.

At that moment, at that word, *uncle*, there was a small silence between the two women, and Julius knew for certain then that Aunty knew the truth, and Aunty knew now that Julius knew that she knew the truth about the relationship between Petey and Leland.

I love you, Juke, said Aunt Dessie. I love you so much.

I know, Aunty.

You got to try to not let things get to you so hard. Things happen to everybody, you understand?

I do.

Call me back as soon as you know when you're going to be here, all right?

Yes, Aunty.

I love you.

I love you, too. Talk soon.

Julius heard a knock on her bedroom door. It was Georgia, with a small glass of water and a plate of food, reheated leftovers, corn bread, macaroni and cheese, succotash, and garlic chicken thighs.

My brother is dead, said Julius.

Oh, honey, said Georgia, rushing over. She put the plate down and sat on the edge of Julius's bed.

What can I do?

You do too much as it is, said Julius.

I don't mind it.

I know you don't. What happened to you that makes you want to solve everybody's problems?

Nothing happened to me, said Georgia. I like people, and I like caring for them. I like you.

I'm supposed to go back home, said Julius. She took a sip of the water Georgia had set down and swished it around her mouth to cool her gums, which were sore from jaw clenching.

I'll rent a car. It's not far, is it? Four hours' drive? We can be out of here in less than an hour. I can take a few days off.

Do you think when they look at me, they know?

They who? And know what?

Everyone. Everything. About me.

I've known you going on five years now and I don't know a damn thing about you, said Georgia. So I'm going to say no, they won't know. They don't know shit. And if they did, and they judged, would you really care? You hate everybody.

I don't.

You do.

I do, said Julius, with a little smirk. And you *do* know a lot about me. You know I like basketball. You know I have a son. You're painfully familiar with my many medical maladies. You know what foods I like and don't like.

I mean, I know what you'd put on your Tinder profile, sure.

Oh, do you?

I've thought about it a lot, actually, Georgia said, then put on a little voice. *Just another late-forties dyke entirely too into basketball, dogs, and memes.*

It was true that Julius liked all those things. She also liked fried catfish, banana pudding, and romantic comedies. As a child, she'd liked *Looney Tunes*, especially Daffy Duck, and she had a holey, thinning, faded T-shirt with a picture of him on it. It was the oldest garment she owned.

She wondered what else there was to her. She'd once fostered kittens and their adult mother, Junebug. She was an alcoholic. A breast cancer survivor. A woman with kidney failure, awaiting transplant. She had good skin, bad hair—which was shaved. She liked the water but never learned to swim, and before Wilbur died, he'd encouraged her to take lessons, which she'd begun at the YMCA but stopped attending.

Via social media, she knew words and phrases like *gaslighting, trauma-informed, disorganized attachment, kink-friendly, pinkwashing*, and could use them all in a sentence.

She was drawing near to the end of her life, and couldn't imagine living more than another ten years. In that time, sick as she was, there wasn't much she could accomplish. This was what she was. This was what she got.

Sometime later, several months after Julius announced that she would not be coming home, that Petey should be cremated, as that was what she could afford, and that it was up to the others if they wanted to arrange a memorial, Georgia did convince Julius to get on Tinder.

She went on a few dates, all of them fine. One night, she met Sofia, a woman who'd grown up in a large townhome in San Francisco. Wild strawberries and citrus, apple, and plum trees grew in the backyard. Sofia had gone to a private high school, where she took Mandarin and Spanish, calculus, statistics, English literature, Chinese American literature, clarinet, and political science, and later to Harvard, double majoring in East Asian studies and economics. She'd led a life.

Sofia was white but in a Greek, Italian, or Albanian way, with skin that wasn't brown but wasn't not brown. Her hair, worn in a short bob with severe bangs, had gone gray. She had on thick-rimmed glasses that frequently fell down her nose. She owned a vineyard, but a very small one, she assured Julius as she slid a forkful of balsamic-dressed arugula into her mouth. The bulk of Sofia's income came from hosting retreats and bachelorette parties on the property.

Sorry, I know I sound like an asshole, Sofia said. She had an aggressive way of eating, licking her fingers and guzzling her wine, and Julius found it intriguing. It was the most interesting thing about her.

After dinner, Sofia asked if Julius would like to grab a drink at a local bar where a great jazz band was playing. Sofia was nice and pretty, and did have that cute habit of eating rather

roughly, but any number of things sounded more appealing to Julius than spending the rest of the evening with her.

Still, she said yes. Sofia seemed to expect this and Julius didn't want to disappoint. Following this logic to its conclusion, she went home with Sofia later that evening and had sex with her.

Once Sofia fell asleep, Julius arranged a ride back to her apartment, where Leland and Georgia had let themselves in and were waiting, watching TV. They asked how the date was, and she said it was fine.

Late night, isn't it? said Georgia.

Very late, Leland parroted.

I'm not talking about this with you two, said Julius.

Oh, you are, said Georgia. You very much are.

You're telling us everything, young lady, said Leland.

Julius smiled.

Perhaps Georgia and Leland would get the story out of her, every detail of the abysmal date, and years and years later, long after the two married and had kids, then divorced and remarried other partners, they'd look back upon this evening and laugh, look back on Julius, dead now, with a little bit of fondness.