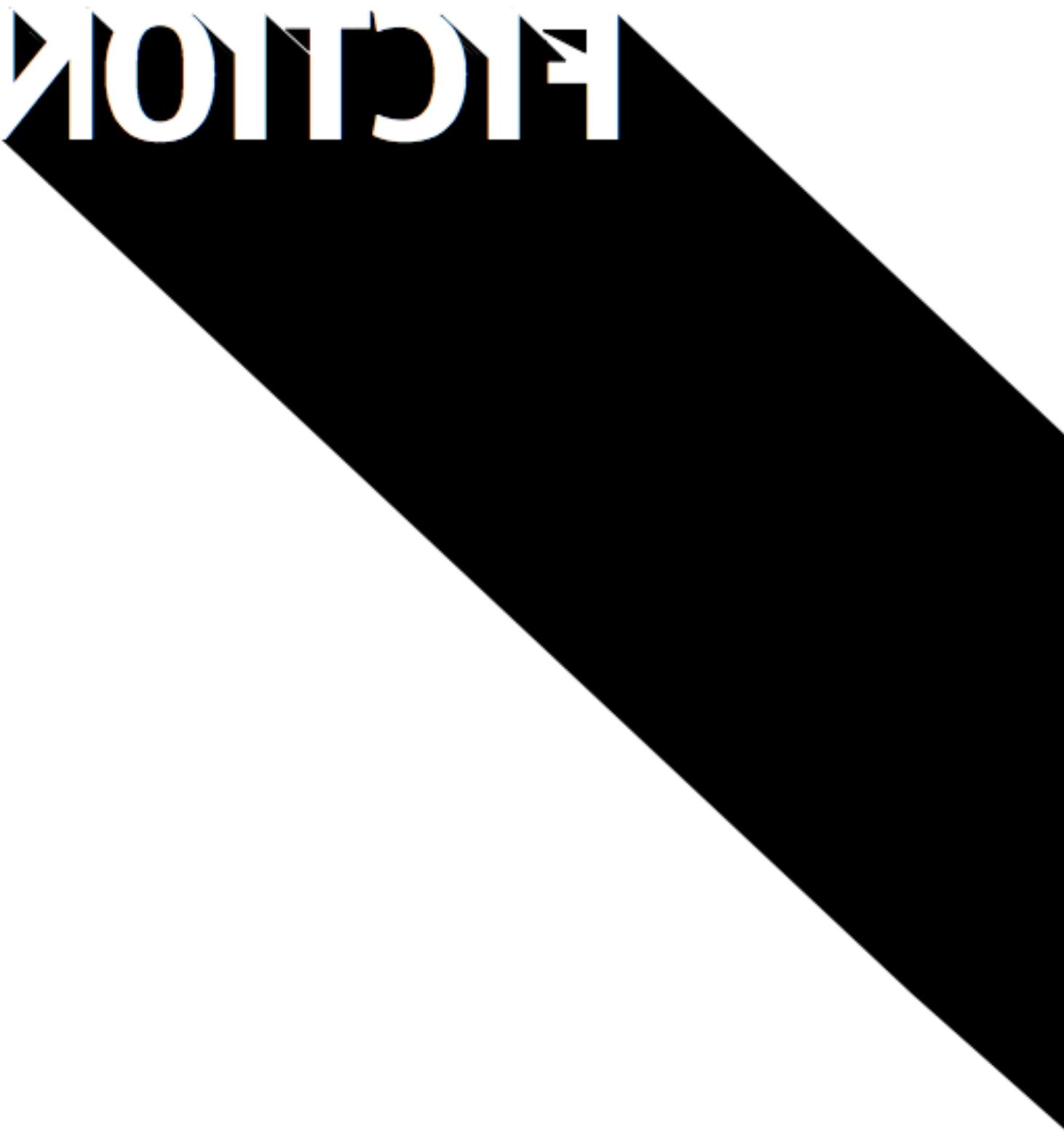
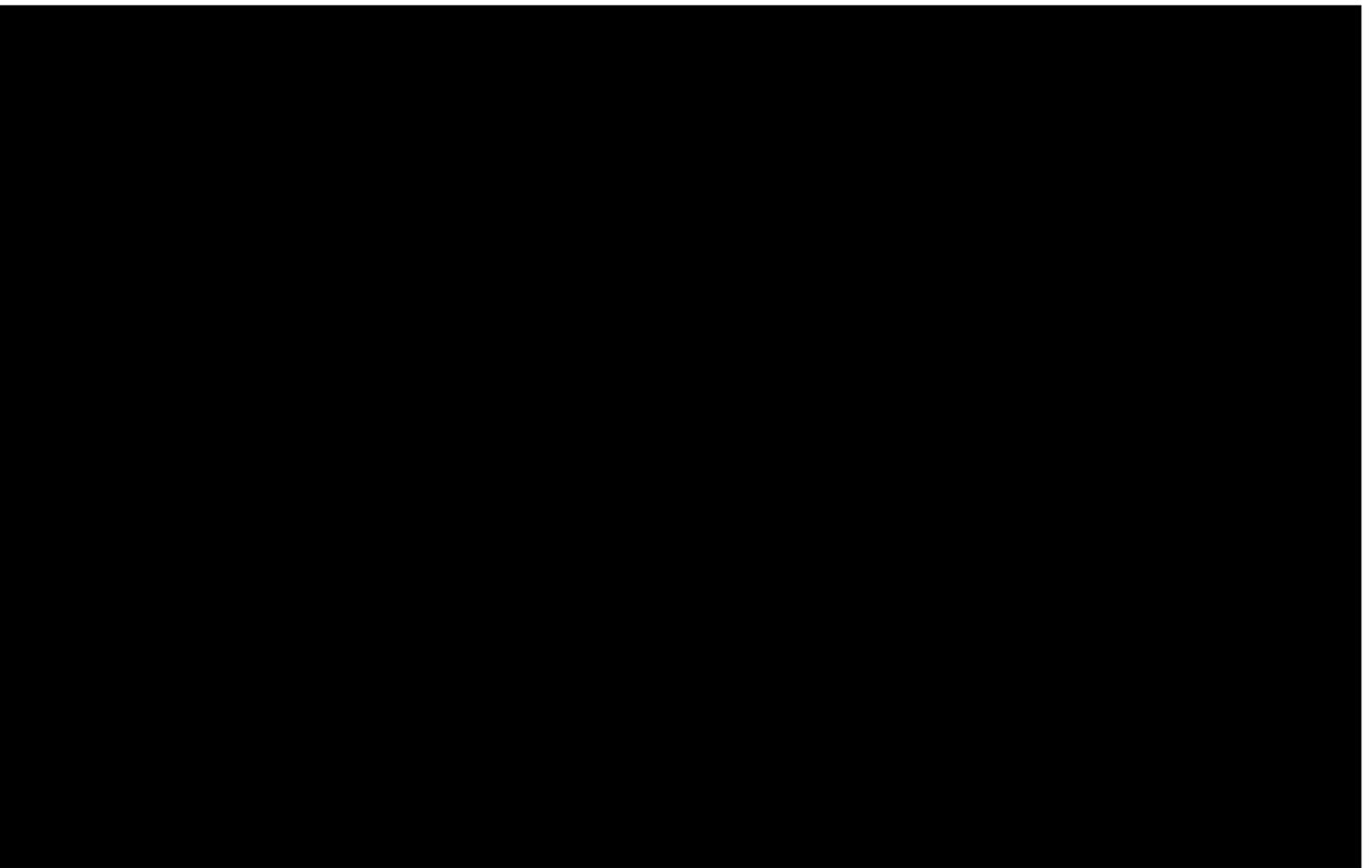


FICTION

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1. all people. all stories.

Daniel Pena & Amanda Grosgebauer
Editors, Co-founders

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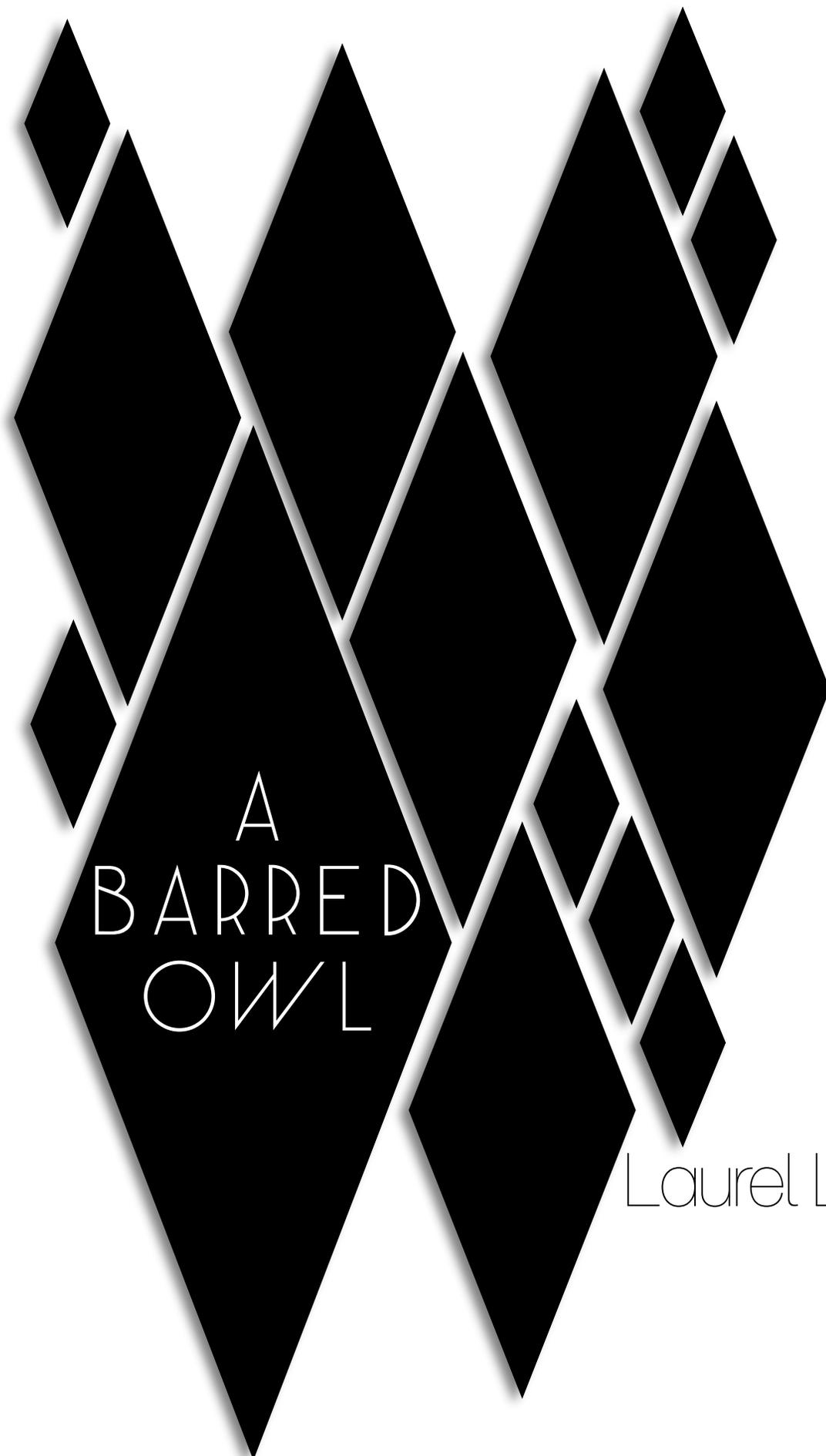
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John Searcy



A
BARRED
OWL

Laurel Lathrop

Mr. Bausch is an English teacher. He has been an English teacher for nearly forty years. He has weathered, in addition to the general decline of literature, various ludicrous fads in its teaching—the celebration of mediocre achievements by those considered “disadvantaged,” the emphasis on querulous self-expression—and has emerged intact. His middle-school students receive a traditional education, the canonical texts of boys’ and girls’ literature, with no self-esteem-boosting fluff. He does have them write poetry, to teach them form, meter, rhyme. It used to be easier to get them to versify; these days all they want to do is text each other and draw pictures of video-game monsters and pop stars. Society around him seems to wish to move backwards from words to pictograms. On the first day back from winter break (no longer “Christmas,” oh no) he asked his sixth-graders what books they had read over the holidays, and the majority answered none. Or rather, they did not answer at all, but glanced at each other with dumb cunning, waiting for someone else to speak up.

He spends his days like this, waiting for a response that does not come. He has grown more patient. As a young man he would slam his open palm onto a slouching student’s desk, toss a rubber ball to the chattering girls in the back of the room, demand some verbal indicator that the students were mentally present. These days, in his thirty-eighth year of teaching, he is content, sometimes, to let a whole class period go by without a murmur from the pubescents. If no one

wishes to engage with the book, to volunteer an answer to the reading questions he offers in the first few minutes of class (this does not include the fewer and fewer bookworms, generally homely girls, whose outstretched, quivering hands he has learned to ignore—for his sake and theirs, he thinks), he leans back on his stool and reads aloud. The students nod off, or take out paper and begin to draw, and he imagines the literature seeping into their ears and through their stubborn brains like rain moistening the soil.

He teaches six classes a day, pausing at noon for an egg and tomato sandwich in the teachers’ room—a large, wallpapered kitchen with some of the larger appliances removed. The middle school is housed in the mansion of its founder, Henry LaMoyne, an eccentric atheist who willed that his property be turned into a private secondary school unaffiliated with any church. His gloomily secular portrait hangs over the fireplace in the former living, now School Assembly room. They have added a row of low classrooms snaking around the house’s back courtyard, a cafeteria, a cloverly lacrosse pitch, but the overall impression as one enters the circular driveway is still of a house, with a few too many garages or garden sheds. Class sizes are so small—the seventh grade, the largest class, contains thirty-six students—that there seems no need for further expansion.

The tuition for one term of middle school is more than Mr. Bausch paid for his college education. It is a school for professional athletes’ children, for the children of orthodontists and

lawyers; the parents swing through the driveway in black SUVs and jade-green Jaguars. Nothing Mr. Bausch does will change the destiny of these children. They will go on to LaMoyne High School, then upper-crust colleges (usually Princeton, sometimes Harvard, the weakest shuffled off to UPenn and UVA) whether or not their souls are set aflame by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and as a rule they are not.

But LaMoyne has been kind to Mr. Bausch. As the most senior of the English faculty, he is allowed to oversee the campus literary magazine (the inanelly named *lower case*). His worries of being pushed into retirement in favor of a better-qualified younger teacher are always smilingly deflected by administrators; he is told he is a pillar of the school. So he teaches his six classes and goes home to a neighborhood where every house has been torn down and rebuilt larger so many times that his postwar bungalow now looks like it could be one of their fallout shelters, if anyone still had fallout shelters.

This year the spring term progresses no better or worse than usual: the same bored, spoiled faces; the same hopeful trickle of doggerel into the submissions dropbox for *lower case*, the rejection of which, with flicks of his red pen, is one of Mr. Bausch's last remaining joys. Then one day as he is finishing his sandwich a woman enters the teacher's room, no one he has seen before, wearing a dress the color of mustard and brown opaque stockings. She is smiling. She pulls out the chair opposite Mr. Bausch and sits

down, her legs canted sideways. Mr. Bausch thinks of nineteenth-century ladies on horseback. She places on the table a paper napkin, a fork, and a clear plastic container holding a brown indeterminate food and holds out her hand.

"Clarissa Vogel," she says. "Interim history teacher. You must be Jerome."

He grasps her hand, realizing too late that there is tomato juice on his fingers, a crumble of egg at the corner of his lips that he attempts to lick away as he replies, "Yes indeed. Interim?"

"Yes, for poor Helen." She snaps open her plastic container. Mr. Bausch recalls receiving a letter from the administration two weeks ago detailing Helen McIntyre's stroke, the search for a substitute teacher to finish out the school year while everyone waited to see whether and to what degree she would recover. He had taken a moment to reflect on Ms. McIntyre, whom he had watched transform, over the twenty-five years she worked at LaMoyne, from a stoutly handsome woman to a hunched, turtle-necked creature.

Spinsterhood was a wasting disease, he thought. She had approached him at a faculty meeting soon after she arrived, had let it be understood that she was available. She had suggested dinner; he had countered with drinks, at a bar near his house. Her coyness had made her ridiculous—her fleshy body and thick black shoes and mannish haircut, pantomiming coquetry. Yet she had allowed him to sleep with her, only turning her face away as he unbuttoned his pants as if she would ignore what was about to

happen. The next day he made a point of striking a friendly, collegial tone with her in the hallway, and she seemed to understand. Only from time to time, even years later, she would look up at him with injured spaniel's eyes. The stroke had seemed inevitable when he read about it—she was the kind of nervous, frantic woman who would have a stroke—and he had soon put it out of his mind.

Clarissa Vogel is eating her brown substance with pleasure. It seems to contain several varieties of bean. Her face is striking but not pretty, a wide mouth, wide forehead, a small upturned nose whose nostrils are somehow too visible, unseemly. Her dull brown hair falls over one shoulder as she leans down to eat; she continually tucks it behind her ear.

"How long have you worked here, Jerome?" she asks, with her mouth full. Mr. Bausch notes that she wears a delicate gold chain with four charms, but he cannot tell what they are.

"Oh, quite a while," he says. "Thirty years."

"Were kids this dull in the old days? Can we blame the video games and the rap music?"

The thought, so close to his own recurring complaint, catches him off guard: he laughs, a wheezy cackle that embarrasses him. He opines that these surely didn't help, but that the problem lies deeper, in the home. When children are raised by a nanny rather than by a mother... He allows himself to trail off. Clarissa is looking at him with interest, almost fascination. He is no longer used to being the recipient of someone's full attention. The

students regard him sideways, from under half-closed lids; strangers' eyes glide over him as over the wrong book on the shelf. The invisibility of men over sixty. Mr. Bausch excuses himself and gets up to leave. She waves goodbye with her elbow tucked into her waist, a girlish gesture. She can't be more than twenty-seven.

While teaching his next class, Mr. Bausch thinks of things he could have told her, ways to have kept the conversation rolling along. He could have joked about their mutually Germanic names, reminded her that "vogel" means bird. He wonders how she will get along at LaMoyne, as one of the few pre-menopausal women on staff. The old biddies may band together against her as against a common threat: her youth, her vivacity. If this happens, he resolves to stand firmly on her side, take her under his wing. There: he could have made that pun, "wing" to "bird". In the middle of an anemic eighth-grade discussion of *Wuthering Heights* he sees the glow of a student's phone, held under his desk so it illuminates his denim-clad crotch. Mr. Bausch leans back on his stool.

"Mr. Park."

The boy shoves the phone back into his pocket and looks up. "Yes sir," he mumbles.

"To the front." Park leans sideways from his chair, straightens up slowly, then lopes to the front of the class with the exaggeratedly slow, rolling walk so many of the boys affect. A thug's walk, on a boy wearing an \$80 T-shirt. Mr. Bausch holds out his hand.

"Your texting device," he says. Park feigns ignorance for a

moment, then hands it over. Mr. Bausch puts it into his desk drawer, shuts it. "Back to your seat."

Park stays put. "When will I get it back?"

Mr. Bausch shrugs. "When I'm done updating my Facebook status."

It's a gamble, and it works; the class giggles, gasps, shifts in its seats, the tension released. Park returns to his desk, crosses his arms over his chest, stares straight ahead. Mr. Bausch can sense all the phones in pockets and purses, the hands reconsidering reaching for them. The rest of the class belongs to him.

That night he masturbates for the first time in months, to a series of short web videos, a minute long, or two, clicking through to the next as soon as one has finished. They are made to look like the work of amateurs, dimly lit, the cameras fumbling, the set a rumpled bed or stained couch. He finds this makeshift quality incredibly arousing, even as he recognizes its artificiality; the squeals of the women and the pneumatic pumping of the men are, in their own way, polished. When he has finished he goes out to the kitchen and drinks a glass of milk. He can hear his heart thumping beneath the thin skin of his chest. He feels a mixture of shame and resolve, as if he were about to change his life.

He sees Clarissa in the teacher's room nearly every day at lunch. She is always eating something that looks like animal food. One day he asks her why she eats this way.

"I'm a vegan," she says. "No animal products. And I avoid processed foods, so I mostly eat fruits and veggies, beans, grains."

Mr. Bausch doesn't respond; he's thinking of the word, "vegan," how lovely it is; he's seen it written but hasn't heard it before. She must take his silence as incredulity, because she explains further.

"It's weird, once you start eating healthy, junk food doesn't do it for you anymore. When I first went off dairy after college, I used to crave cheese doodles and nachos. Not real cheese, just the processed shit. One day I caved and ate a whole pack of Kraft singles, and spent the rest of the day pooping bright orange. It was like my body was throwing up its hands. So I said, Okay, body, I'm sorry. I won't do that to you ever again. And I never looked back."

She shows him what she's eating, sliding it across the table so he can peer into the Tupperware like a miniature aquarium. The little grains look like rolled-up condoms.

"Quinoa with tomato and kale," she says. "Try some," and hands him her fork, a flimsy piece of pressed metal. Mr. Bausch thinks of his family silver, left to him reluctantly by his mother when she realized he would never marry. The grain—another new word, "quinoa"—is springy against his teeth, the kale crunches thickly, the halved tomato bursts and releases tart juice. He chews and nods. "Not bad," he says.

Each day she wears a dress and tights in two different colors: lavender and gray, black and cobalt blue. Mr. Bausch learns to guess with some accuracy which color combination she will wear on a given day; when she surprises him he is pleased. She wears boots and a large, shapeless parka with fake fur around the hood,

and the necklace with its dangling charms. Without seeming to look too closely Mr. Bausch tries to determine what they are. There is one that looks like a ring, one like a raised hand. The others he cannot decipher.

He is anxious to know what the students think about her, but he cannot ask them directly. His fourth period class comes to him right after History; one day he asks them with feigned casualness what they are learning these days.

“The Huguenots?” a girl says. “And the Jesuits, and the Puritans? How this area was settled by religious refugees?”

“Interesting,” he says.

The girl continues. “And how some of them thought the Native Americans should be forcibly converted to Christianity? But most people just thought they should be killed?”

“Well,” Mr. Bausch says.

“It was like the Jews turning around after the Holocaust and oppressing the Palestinians,” someone else chimes in, a sharp-faced boy who is either a frustrated genius or a manic-depressive.

Inadvertently Mr. Bausch glances at one of the Jewish students in the class. She shrugs.

Clarissa laughs out loud when he tells her this story over lunch. “Frankly, I’m thrilled they remember any of it,” she says, stirring her soup. “I do jazz it up by tying in contemporary issues, I do give my own opinions. Kids this age crave being told what to think. If they disagree, all the better: they discover they have opinions too. The discussion you’re talking about actually led us interesting places, like the politics of Native American sovereignty.”

Mr. Bausch, ashamed not to know what she is talking about, furrows his brow and nods. She smiles brilliantly and blows on her spoon.

Submissions to *lower case* always pick up in February and March, squeaking in before the April 1 deadline. At that point, Mr. Bausch will pass along the small batch of poems and stories he finds less heinous than the others to the student editors, who, in addition to fundraising and layout, are responsible for final editorial decisions. Almost without exception, they choose the most sophomoric pieces, but there is nothing Mr. Bausch can do. The magazine comes out the week before eighth-grade graduation and sells most of its 200-copy print run at \$5 apiece to the same parents who have already bought ad space in its pages on behalf of their businesses. This ingeniously circular moneymaking logic pleases Mr. Bausch, or would if the money weren’t funneled into increasingly extravagant, increasingly awkward graphic design.

In late February, he receives the first love poem. Submitted anonymously, it’s a roughly Shakespearean sonnet, praising an unnamed woman for a catalog of plagiarized virtues that nevertheless strongly recall to Mr. Bausch his lunch companion. She is described as possessing “laughing eyes,” a “slim figure,” and, the clincher, “vibrant attire”. The writer expresses a desire to be close to his lady fair, to kiss her cheek and stroke her hair; in reference to a teacher it is obviously inappropriate, and Mr. Bausch rejects it. Then he reads

another poem, a fractured attempt at Cummings, conveying similar but incrementally less chaste desires. He begins to see references to Clarissa even in the pieces he has already approved. One poem’s insistence on capitalizing the word History, which he had crossed out each time, now makes sense; a short story describes a female visionary with flowing chestnut locks leading a youthful army to liberate captive animals. There is, in fact, an abundance of literary output glorifying Clarissa Vogel. It is a vertiginous feeling, this realization, not unlike the discovery fifty years ago when it was his class’s turn to put on the Christmas pageant that the serene Virgin Mary under the blue cape could simultaneously be a sixth-grader with a runny nose.

Mr. Bausch decides to tell Clarissa what he’s discovered immediately so she can nip any inappropriate fixations in the bud. If necessary, he’ll also tell his classes that pieces submitted for the magazine cannot refer to current students or faculty in a recognizable way. He can turn it into a libel argument, if it comes to that. But these logical reassurances don’t quell his sudden anxiety, his feeling that an uncontrollable force has been set in motion.

She’s not in the teachers’ room at the usual time the next day, so he brings his sandwich to the cafeteria and searches for her. He finds her sitting at a table of sixth-graders, laughing at something, her head and shoulders rising cleanly above the upturned faces around her like Titania among the fairies. He picks his way over to her and taps her shoulder.

“Ms. Vogel, I wonder if I might have a word with you,” he says.

She peers up at him with alarm. “Jerome!” she says. “Something wrong?”

The students at the table are utterly silent; he knows they’ve noted her use of his first name.

“Could I speak with you in the teachers’ room?” he asks. “It’s sensitive.”

She rises, making an apologetic face to the students as if they are charming guests at a cocktail party, and walks with him only as far as the cafeteria entrance, where she stops. “What’s up?” she asks.

Mr. Bausch stops too, reluctantly; nevertheless they are out of earshot of the children, so he tells her what he’s discovered, the adoring poetry and fiction. She looks into his eyes deeply for a moment after he finishes, wrinkling her brow as if trying to discern whether he is joking.

“But why is this a crisis?” she finally asks. “They’re kids, they fixate on things and people. Aren’t you happy they’re writing poetry at all? Isn’t that what you try to get them to do?”

He attempts to explain that the merest suggestion of inappropriate behavior on her part, which includes doing nothing to stop the inappropriate behavior of students towards her, could be grounds for suspension. He tries to make her imagine if the situation were reversed, and twelve-year-old female students were writing—publishing, in a school literary magazine!—love poems about a young, attractive male teacher.

She smiles again, differently; she has a different smile for each occasion. This one is charming,

understanding, and condescending all at once.

“Jerome, I appreciate your concern,” she says, placing her hand on his arm, “but I think you’re overreacting. God knows I had crushes on teachers when I was in junior high, wrote terrible poetry about it, and caused nobody but my parents any trouble at all.”

While she talks, her hand slides almost imperceptibly down and up his upper arm. Mr. Bausch becomes aware of a background noise, a low hooting that rises in pitch until he realizes it is not a ringing in his ears but something external, and turns to see dozens of impish student faces, leaning over tables to see better, whooping and howling at this display of affection. Clarissa turns as well, and makes a mock-scolding face, pointing her finger at the nearest table as if she has discovered the ringleaders. Mr. Bausch flees.

When his fifth-period class, sixth graders, enters the classroom, a few of the boys resume the hooting. Mr. Bausch, having had time to consider a plan of defense, waits at his desk with his eyes lowered to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; the sound grows bolder and louder with his lack of response. Once all the students have entered the classroom, he gets up, walks to the door, and slams it shut with all his strength. Silence follows. He turns to the class, their half-shocked, half-smiling faces.

“Your actions today in the cafeteria were unacceptable,” he says. “Ms. Vogel and I disagree on many things, we were disagreeing today, but nevertheless you owe her respect. I had hoped that you had

outgrown such behavior when you left elementary school.”

The glee on their faces turns to disappointment and embarrassment, and he knows he chose the right tack. With sixth-graders, he has learned, one appeals to their vulnerability, their awareness that they are the lowest in the hierarchy, the implication that they must prove themselves. With eighth-graders, it would be the reverse: call on them to set an example, remind them of their imminent departure, the necessity of leaving the campus better than they found it. With seventh-graders one can sometimes hedge one’s bets, appealing to both the dignity of no longer being pitiful sixth-graders and the desire to impress the powerful eighth-graders, but this does not always work; seventh-graders are anarchists.

So of course it is the seventh grade that is rewarded each spring with Nature Weekend, a 90-minute bus ride to the Delaware Water Gap for a two-day course in environmental education. They sleep in cabins, sit around campfires, take laborious hikes and ask the park staff insipid suburban questions. Each year Mr. Bausch is in charge of the boys’ cabin, having acquired a reputation for being no-nonsense, which he is, and outdoorsy, which he is not. The girls’ teacher-cum-counselor is usually the math instructor, a forbidding lesbian with whom Mr. Bausch would not trust his hypothetical daughters. This year, he is informed by the letter sent to the seventh-grade parents to get their permission and \$100 fee, it will be Ms. Vogel. The decision shouldn’t surprise him; she is the students’ clear favorite. He supposes he hadn’t

realized how much the administration has taken her popularity into account.

By the time April comes around, the *lower case* crisis has blown over. After the speech to the sixth-graders, he made a slightly different one to his seventh- and eighth-grade classes, emphasizing the legal angle: harassment, libel. He thinks the lack of all references to Clarissa in the submissions received after that date probably has more to do with the students' embarrassment at having their obsession pointed out to them by old Bausch—they often seem to forget that he is their first reader—but he'll take what he can get.

The Saturday of Nature Weekend is warm and clear even at seven in the morning, when the students gather on the front porch of the school with their sleeping bags, looking sleep-deprived and sweet. Mr. Bausch isn't fooled for a second; he knows the drowsiness will transmute, in the closed environment of the bus, into mass hysteria. He has brought Kierkegaard to pretend to read so it won't look like he's outright ignoring his charges (in reality he suffers from motion sickness and spends the whole trip trying not to vomit); he's also brought *Kidnapped*, to read to the boys tonight in the cabin.

At 7:27, minutes before they are supposed to leave, when Mr. Bausch has already told the students to pile their sleeping bags by the luggage bay of the bus and line up by the doors, Clarissa comes running from the parking lot.

"Sorry I'm late, Jerome," she gasps, dropping her black duffel bag on the driveway, bracing her hands on her thighs and leaning

over to catch her breath.

"You're right on time," he says. She is wearing high-top sneakers, jeans, a tank top and hooded sweatshirt, the first time he has seen her out of her dress-and-tights uniform. Her posture and the low cut of her tank top make it easy to stare down the front of her shirt, as Mr. Bausch catches several of the boys doing. She straightens, flips her hair out of her face, breathes deeply through her nose, claps her hands. "Load 'em up, move 'em out!" she calls. The students obey, shoving forward in line so the ones already on the steps of the bus are nearly crushed. She herself boards without waiting in line, slipping ahead of a cluster of girls who make no complaint. Mr. Bausch brings up the rear, and by the time he boards all the seats have been taken except for the one Clarissa is saving for him, in the front row. In the past he has sat up here while Ms. DiMattei, the math teacher, sat in the back, but it's too late to ask Clarissa to move, and he won't switch seats with a student in the back for reasons of both propriety and nausea, which worsens toward the rear of vehicles. So he makes his usual speech about proper bus behavior, is ignored as usual, nods to the bus driver that they can begin, and drops into his seat. Clarissa beams at him as if he is her ideal traveling companion, as if she hasn't noticed his monosyllabic replies at lunch over the past weeks. Mr. Bausch gets out his book and opens to a random page, but as the bus pulls out onto the road he has to close his eyes and begin breathing deeply; already he feels sick.

After a minute he feels a hand on his arm. "Are you all right?" He nods. "Carsick?" He nods again. He hears a rustling. "Try these."

He opens his eyes to see Clarissa holding out a small plastic bag containing translucent brown lozenges.

"I always bring these with me on trips," she says. "Ginger drops, great for nausea."

He takes one and puts it in his mouth. It tastes of ginger and lemon, more pungent than sweet, like a strong tea. He sucks quietly for a minute, embarrassed, but worried that if he tries to speak he'll gag. She looks at him intently. Finally he nods. "Thank you."

She puts the bag on the seat between them. "Take as many as you need."

Ginger floats up into his sinuses and burns down his throat as he swallows. It's strong stuff, and it helps. The dreadful clamminess is gone. Clarissa smiles at him.

"Back to the world of the living," she says. She is still wearing the charm necklace, he notices, despite her outdoorsy outfit.

"What's the story there?" he asks, nodding towards the necklace.

"Oh, this." She fingers the chain, hesitates for a moment. "It's a gift from my partner. One charm for every year we've been together."

For a moment Mr. Bausch is frozen: the gender-neutral choice of words, the mystery of her domestic life; he's heard of lesbians very different from Ms. DiMattei, but never encountered one. Clarissa laughs, clarifies: "My boyfriend," and Mr. Bausch

feels himself reddening at the obviousness of his thoughts. He blusters, "I was just surprised. You've never mentioned him before."

Clarissa nods gamely. "I try to keep my personal and professional lives separate," she says. "Plus, you know, the school wouldn't be thrilled if the kids started talking to their parents about how Ms. Vogel is living in sin."

He chuckles, but it sounds like a car failing to start; all the moisture has left his mouth. He clears his throat.

"Here," Clarissa says. She unclasps the necklace and holds it out to him. "Each one is a blessing from a different religious tradition."

She takes him through the symbols: the Christian fish, the hand of Fatima, the Om, the eight-spoked wheel of Hinduism. As she passes each charm through his fingers, their hands brush together.

"We'll be celebrating five years together in June," she says. "I'm hoping for a yin-yang." It sounds so silly, preposterous, that he laughs again, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"You won't mention this to anyone, will you, Jerome?"

"You're safe with me," he says. She smiles at him, tenderly, gratefully, lowers her head to re-clasp her necklace. He allows himself to imagine leaning over to smell the nape of her neck, then puts such thoughts out of his mind for good.

The rest of the drive is uneventful. Clarissa plugs a small music player into her ears and closes her eyes. Mr. Bausch studies the necklace again, running the symbols through his mind: the fish, the hand, the Om,

the wheel. The children sing several rounds of something that gets more vulgar with each verse; it takes Mr. Bausch four verses to realize this, upon which he stands up and glares at the back of the bus until the song dissolves into laughter.

Then they arrive at the campsite, and Mr. Bausch steps again into the role of weary despot: directing the children to get off the bus and retrieve their luggage, then dividing them by gender, a few of the rowdier boys, as always, attempting to sneak into the girls' line. Clarissa handles it, waving them out of the line with an indulgent gesture. The boys follow Mr. Bausch to their own cabin, and almost knock each other down with their duffel bags trying to claim the most desirable beds. The boys' cabin is split into four rooms with three bunk beds apiece, and as always the question of who sleeps in what room with which roommates is a major social undertaking. Since there are only seventeen boys, a few of them claim bunk beds all to themselves. Mr. Bausch chooses last, and is amused to see how the sleeping bags are rearranged once he's chosen his bed, boys grudgingly allowing refugees from the "teacher's room" to bunk above or below them on what was previously a private bed. In the end three boys are left in his room, all of them the lowest of the low: boys who still play Pokémon, boys who are failures at sports. It is to these boys that Mr. Bausch will start reading aloud later tonight, allowing the sound of his voice, the allure of the story, to draw the other boys into the room. Mr. Bausch likes to think that

this show of favor might go some way towards rehabilitating these boys' social image, but he acknowledges that it probably won't make a difference one way or the other.

After lunch there is a series of outdoor activities, to burn off the energy of the bus ride and try to forestall nighttime rowdiness—in the past there have been "raids," in which either the girls or the boys run screaming into the other sex's cabin with no clear goal apart from mayhem. There is a two-hour nature hike, a demonstration of Native American fishing practices by the water with an imperturbable environmental educator, an examination of owl pellets and arrowheads in an "outdoor lab" consisting of magnifying glasses on picnic tables.

At first the children behave themselves, stunned into temporary docility by the vaguely threatening outdoors—on the hike the students at the back of the line actually hurry to keep up—but by the end of the afternoon they are more comfortable and the horseplay begins again. During the fishing demonstration a boy pushes a girl backwards and she splashes into the water, shrieking that he has ruined her shoes. Clarissa puts her arm around the girl, slips off her own shoes and offers them in exchange. The environmental educator casually mentions the number of fatalities the park sustains each year from people falling into the river, and the offending boy lowers his head. Mr. Bausch admires the way Clarissa moves in socks over the rocky beach as if nothing has happened, helping the environmental educator hand out lengths of a weighted fishing net

for the children to hold, the girl's expensive flats tucked under her arm.

After dinner, which is even worse than the food at LaMoyné but which the children enjoy because of the novelty of a hot cocoa machine, there is a one-hour rest period before the campfire. Twilight is falling as they walk back to the cabins, and Mr. Bausch hears crickets, the velvety coo of an owl. "Listen," he says, and stops, and the line of boys behind him and the line of girls behind Clarissa stops, and in the silence the owl calls again. A dark sap rises in Mr. Bausch's chest, and, helplessly in thrall to something larger than himself, he declaims a poem he first read twenty years ago, when he still bought new books of poetry, when he still committed poems to memory.

The warping night air having
brought the boom
Of an owl's voice into her
darkened room,
We tell the wakened child that all
she heard
Was an odd question from a forest
bird,
Asking of us, if rightly listened to,
"Who cooks for you?" and then
"Who cooks for you?"

Words, which can make our
terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to
sleep at night
Not listening for the sound of
stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing
in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch
and eaten raw.

There is silence after he has finished. Then a voice: "Creepy." Clarissa says nothing, but he can see her smile, her glittering eyes, in the fading light as they begin

walking again. He could take her hand, but does not.

Back in the cabin, he tells the boys to be ready to head out in fifty minutes, then lies down on his bunk with his hands clasped behind his head. He begins to see his role clearly now, the older man, the steady friend. He is flattered that Clarissa has chosen him as the bearer of her secret. He allows himself to imagine more lunches, greater confidences, the slow swell of trust. As he drifts off he sees confused images, her coming to him with a tear-stained face, pleading with him, clasping his shoulders with her hands.

When he wakes it is dark and silent. The boys are gone. He sits up quickly and fumbles for the switch by the bed. Squinting in the sudden flood of light, he searches for his shoes, his jacket, wanders into the other rooms to be sure he is the only one left behind. A piece of paper flutters off of the top of a duffel bag, and he picks it up. It's a drawing, the crudest of caricatures: a hunched, balding figure, with extended tongue and crossed eyes (represented by a slashed x), clutches his ballooning penis. Two thought bubbles above his head display, respectively, an open book and a smiling female figure with extravagantly globular breasts, whose hand rests invitingly on her cocked hip. The paper is wrinkled and smudged; it has passed through many hands. The original drawing is in black ink, but other artists have been inspired to add further detail: outflung sweat drops in blue ink surround the head of the male figure; a thick pencil has added nipples to the female figure and

coiling hairs to the base of the male's penis. Mr. Bausch sits down on the bunk and rests the paper in his lap. The shapes of the drawing seem to fade in and out of meaning. Circle, teardrop, spiral, x. He folds the paper in half, then in quarters, sharpening the folds between his fingers. He tucks the drawing into his pocket and stands up again.

Outside the cabin, Mr. Bausch can hear a distant snapping and popping, a muffled roar. He follows the sound through the trees until he can see the campfire's orange glow. As he approaches, he can hear above the sound of the flames a single, melodious voice, speaking in long, rolling phrases that rise and fall. When he first emerges from the trees into the clearing, he sees only the roaring pillar of flame and smoke; then, around it, a ring of faces. The faces turn towards him, appalled; then he watches their expressions slacken and release as they all realize, in the same moment, that it is only him.

CHANNEL 59

Andrew Boryga

—Least you got one, he said.

Yeah, but she nags me all fuckin' day. Marc feed Krystal; Marc watch Joy, don't let her play with that; Marc, get your ass up stairs! Don't make me come down and embarrass you in front of your friends; Marc, do I have a boyfriend at Con-Ed? Turn off these fucking lights; Marc, clean the cat litter, please; Marc, ask Juanita next door for Sazón, and some oil too; Marc, Marc, Marc, Marc, Marc.

Whiner, he said, punting an empty Heineken up the block.

Seriously, she annoys me.

Mine fell asleep; fell asleep in the tub and drowned.

You keep telling me that story, you tell everyone that story, Ozzy.

So?

My Titi Nilda drowned at the beach when I was eight. I met her one Christmas. She gave me a shitty present and her breath smelt like onions.

Better than yours. Yours smells like the crack of my ass, Ozzy said, plunging his fat hand down the back of his shorts. Come here, smell it, smell it!

He chased me up the block, across the street and into our building where he found me crouched in the lobby pounding my downstairs buzzer for dear life. Chill, don't do that, I said, as he stood in the doorway, tightening the straps of his book bag.

Give me a dollar, he countered, aiming one, foul, finger at my face.

He was fat, with pudgy fingers and a round face — and he was short. His cheeks puffed and his mouth curled a curl as tight as the ones cluttered atop his fat fuckin' head. He inched closer, and with each inch I fought, grabbing his wrist and pushing it toward the ceiling.

Who's ringing my bell like that, said Moms on the speaker.

We stopped our struggle and looked at each other. I let go of his wrist. He took his finger and shoved it in his pocket.

Hello?

It's me, Ma.

Coño, you ring like the police. Listen, before you come upstairs go to the bodega and get milk.

I don't have money.

Tell Papo I'll pay him back.

Before I responded, Ozzy poked me in the rib, Ask her, he whispered.

Can I go to Ozzy's house after? It's been two weeks.

You spent the day at school with him, that isn't enough?

It's Friday.

Fine. But pull some shit with eggs, or stink bombs, and you're punished for the rest of your life. Got it? And, you have to eat dinner first; Mercedes isn't responsible for feeding you, she has enough to deal with.

Ozzy and I smiled.

Ok, Ma.

#

I gave Mercedes a quick hug when she opened the door. She was a small woman, with a halfpenny size mole below her left nostril, short, neat grey hair, and for a while I thought her left hand might be glued to her waist because she always held it there as she spoke.

You eat? I'm giving Ozzy money to go down to Kennedy Fried Chicken.

No thanks.

I skirted around her, into the apartment, past the kitchen and past Gerry.

Marky Marc!

Gerry, why you call me that?

That's grandpa Gerry to you. He placed a hand on the back of my neck and led me in the kitchen. Listen, Marky Marc, I need you to do something for me, and I need it done fast. His body smelled sour and bitter. He took his hand off my neck and placed it on his belly. Ohh, ohh, it hurts so bad, Marky Marc, he said, coiling, taking a seat on his wooden stool. Oh the pain, ohh the pain.

What?

I need you to do this thing, Marky Marc, will you do it? There's something inside me, it needs to be released. He put forward his other hand, the glossy hand that stayed open all the time, the one Moms warned me not to stare at. Pull my hand, please, he said clenching his stomach, Please, oh please.

Fine, I said, gripping the hand.

Harder, Marky Marc, harder, harder.

I pulled with all my might and the hand popped off, sending me flying backwards and Gerry into a fit of laughter, and flappy farts. Boy, Marky Marc, you sure are strong. You popped my hand right off. Ozzy, be strong like Marky here, stop eating that greasy chicken. Ozzy stood in the doorway of the kitchen and I stared up at Gerry's ashy stump before standing and giving back his hand.

I ever tell you how this fell off, he asked, sticking it in place.

Wasn't it some war?

War? No, not war, boy, he leaned forward and whispered in my ear, I chopped it myself! Then, another fit of laughter, coughing and coiling.

The fuck's wrong with him, I whispered to Ozzy as we left the apartment.

Too many bombs in Nam Grandma said.

#

Wanna play basketball, I asked.

Where?

Fire escape.

Nah.

Stickball?

Not today.

Manhunt?

Eh.

What the fuck? I'm bored.

Ozzy pulled out the crinkled bills Mercedes gave him and began counting as we walked. You ever drink?

What?

Alcohol, beer; like my Grandpa.

Once, at a barbeque, my Tio Ralph let me sip his Corona.

I wanna get drunk. Grandpa's so happy all the time.

That'd be hard to steal from the bodega. I just got off punishment.

At recess Nick told me Mr. Levy said regular things have alcohol in it, like mouthwash.

Mouthwash burns my mouth.

If we forced ourselves to drink it, we'd get drunk.

You think?

It has alcohol in it. If you drink something with alcohol you get drunk.

What if it's nasty and nothing happens?

I'm older than you; trust me.

You got left back.

Whatever, we're gonna check out Papo's after I eat.

We pushed open the tall glass door plastered with pictures of chicken, hamburger and pizza combos, and a small bell rang, announcing our entrance.

#

Mouthwash is too hard to steal from the bodega. It's on a small wall near the counter, since no one goes to the bodega to buy that shit. We would've had to wait around for Papo to go to the back for something and try sneaking behind the counter and grabbing it — way too much work. Plan B, was to walk down the Concourse for a bit, check out the payphones, see if any quarters were left in them; no dice. So Plan C, Ozzy decided, was to steal money from Mercedes.

Ozzy's windows were around the back of the building, near the abandoned lot we played manhunt in, and by climbing the fire escape and jimmying a window, he could get inside his apartment. I stayed on the ground to keep lookout and had a ball watching his fat ass climb the rusty, paint-chipped ladder. He crawled on his hands and knees to his grandparents' window, pecked through cracks in the dusty blinds making sure no one was inside, jimmied it, grabbed ten bucks from Mercedes' purse and zipped out as fast he could.

Got some extra, for snacks, once we feel nice like my Grandpa, he said, jumping off the ladder's final rung.

We walked to C-Town and searched the personal hygiene aisle, comparing prices and flavors, ultimately deciding on regular black-capped forest-green Listerine.

Doritos, I said.

Juice too, he added, Might need to wash out that taste.

In the snack aisle we dodged abuelas with shopping carts, pillars of discount cereal and twenty-pound Vitaroz rice bags, and while debating between Ranch and Nacho Cheese flavoring, Nikki interrupted us.

Coming outside?

Don't have time, said Ozzy, got something better planned.

Wasn't asking you. Wanna play catch, Marc?

Before Ozzy could retaliate, I nudged him quiet and nodded toward Ms. Rivas not too far down the aisle, picking out snacks for Nikki.

What is it, Nikki asked, noticing our shift in gaze, Ya'll are acting weird.

It's a secret, I grinned, flicking her creased Yankee cap with the tip of my finger, We'll tell you later.

Yeah, we'll tell you later, Ozzy chimed, squeezing a hand around her cap's brim.

Losers, she said, removing the cap.

#

Mortal Kombat.

Spider-man.

Mortal Kombat, we play fucking Spiderman all day. Come on, Ozzy.

Fine. He dug around for the cartridge in a crate full of games and when he found it, took a big breath and blew the inside before jamming it in his Super Nintendo.

Think Nikki's cute, I asked, as the main menu appeared on his small black T.V.

She's a tomboy.
Her eyes are nice, hair too; she should lose the hat.

Tomboy. But don't worry, I'll change her. I'll show her my dick one day.
And if she doesn't like it?
She will. Especially when it gets big like the guys on channel 59.

Channel 59?
You don't know about channel 59?
I shrugged, and as he was about to speak Mercedes barged into the room.
You boys OK?
Grandma, leave me alone, Ozzy snapped, not looking toward the door.
I paused the game for a second, Yes, we're fine. Want something to eat?
I literally came back from Kennedy an hour ago. I'm not hungry, Mercedes.

Mercedes nodded and began to pace around Ozzy's room, picking up and folding a couple dirty t-shirts from the floor. How about some Tang, she asked coming forward and rubbing the back of his head.

Ozzy stared at the screen. Grandma, leave us alone.
She stopped rubbing and looked for a second at her reflection in the mirror above his dresser. Marc, if you plan on staying over, call your Mom. She left the room and closed the door.

What's with you? My mom never asks if I'm hungry more than once.
She's not my mom. She shouldn't act like she is. In some ways she—
She's my Grandma. My mom died eight years ago. Call yours so we can drink.

I shrugged and reached for the cordless phone lying near the bars of the firescape window. Wish I had my own phone, my own room; sharing sucks.
He said nothing as the phone rang.
Hello.
It's me.
When are you coming home?
I want to stay over.
Did you ask Mercedes?
She said yes.

You have that dentist appointment tomorrow at 12 and you can't miss it. You've missed your last three. I'll knock your ass out and drag you to the office myself this time.

I'll be home before 12.
This can't be one of those sleepovers that goes to next week.

I get it.

See you tomorrow.

#

An hour passed before Mercedes came into the room for her final checkup. We'd switched to Spiderman. When she closed the door Ozzy grabbed the mouthwash from under his bed and unknotted the plastic grocery bag we'd concealed it in. We studied its shape, untwisted the black cap, peeled away the protective covering and took a whiff.

Burns my nose, I said.
It'll be worth it, he said, snatching the bottle back and studying it some more, It'll make us happy. He placed the bottle between us on the floor. We're gonna need cups.

Don't forget juice, I said, scowling from my whiff.

He stood and placed his ear to the door. It's clear now. He opened it slowly and tiptoed his way to the kitchen, careful not create too much creak on the wood floors, and returned with two plastic cups and a carton of fruit punch. After each of us filled half our cup with mouthwash, we looked at each other.

Ozzy grinned. Let's do it.
I thought of the movies and lifted my cup towards him, Toast.

Fuck that. He clutched his cup with both hands and lifted its bottom toward the ceiling. I did the same. The green liquid made its way down our throats, engulfing it in flames that furiously spread down to our stomachs. We coughed uncontrollably, we teared at the eyes, then reached desperately for the carton of juice.

I'm crying, give it to me, I said, struggling to get a firm grip.

I'm crying too, he said, tugging the juice away and guzzling gulp after gulp as I watched helplessly until he decided to pass it my way.

I can't drink this shit, I said.

Me neither, he replied.

We devised a plan to steal some brown liquor Gerry kept in a dusty living room cabinet. Ozzy sneaked back into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest coffee mug he could find, which he handed to me, being the lighter of foot to go down the hallway, past Mercedes and Gerry's door and the soulful ballad radiating from their boom box speakers. I opened the cabinet and randomly chose one tall glass bottle, and poured its contents in the cup. When I returned we mixed the brown liquid with the remaining fruit punch in our cups and created a concoction.

This burns too, I said, taking a sip and grimacing.

Not too bad, better than that, Ozzy said, pointing toward the Listerine.

We took small sips, taking a few minutes in between each to give our taste buds a breather and our contorted faces a chance to return to normal. Spiderman was one player, which was why I hated it so much. Ozzy was a lot better at games than I was. He stayed alive longer, and left me sitting there, twirling my thumbs like an idiot. I continued to drink, the sips becoming more bearable as time passed. When Ozzy finally lost, he drank too, leading to a back and forth that ended with an empty coffee mug and both of us feeling woozy and lightheaded in separate corners of his bedroom.

#

Channel 59, do you wanna see it, Ozzy asked. Still haven't told me what it's about.

It's. Just watch, just watch. He stood, unsteadily, and patted the navy blue comforter of his bed until he found a firm grip of his black television remote. He flipped to channel 59 and a woman appeared on the screen.

She was pretty, with straight, pitch-black hair. But she seemed scared. She walked barefoot along a path of ice. Her body was bare too, for the most part, minus a fur coat covering her tits and privates. The ice seemed cold, but for some reason she didn't; wasn't shivering or anything, weird since she had no shoes and barely any clothes. Music played in the background, trance like, similar to the Sonic theme song, way too upbeat for the situation. She kept walking, passing large pointy (obviously fake) ice sculptures — they weren't even moist.

This is weird, I said.

Shhh, just watch.

I did, and a few moments later, the camera expanded out and revealed a man on the left hand side of the screen, unseen by the woman, but walking in her direction. A built guy, with bulging forearms and calves and long dirty blond hair that tickled the small of his back.

Tarzan on steroids.

Pay attention.

They didn't notice each other until their paths crossed, and when they did, they stopped in their tracks and looked at each other like they'd never seen such a species before.

Why aren't they saying anything, I asked.

Ozzy kept his eyes fixated on the screen, It's gonna get good.

The man moved closer, and delicately touched the woman, uncertainly, like he thought she might disappear. He lightly stroked her face and ran his fingers through her hair.

She's letting this random dude feel her up?

Ozzy shot me a quick and brutal stare.

The woman moaned softly, and my face flushed red. A weird stirring sensation grew in my gut. I thought it was the liquor, but as the man's hands moved from her hair, to her arms, to her shoulders, and down to her tits, and my mouth became dry as the desert, I realized it wasn't.

The man kissed the woman, and with one wild, yet easy motion lifted off her fur coat and unveiled her huge, round tits he forcefully palmed like basketballs. The stirring sensation moved below my stomach and down to my cargo shorts.

Told you this channel is good, Ozzy said.

I took a big gulp, searching to no avail for a drop of saliva. They gonna?

Watch.

They stopped kissing and the man moved his lips down from the woman's cheeks to her neck and to her chest where he circled around her dark nipples with his tongue. The woman moaned louder and louder and louder, so loud Ozzy had to grab the remote and lower the volume. The man looked up from the woman's tits and the camera focused on his fierce eyes. With each hand he grabbed a handful of butt cheek and lifted her off the ground, laying her down on a nearby slab of ice as tall as my desk at school.

He kissed her again, moving from her tits down to her bellybutton and looked up slightly before shoving his face between her legs and shaking his head back and forth. She moaned and tightened her limbs. I felt red. The stirring sensation in my cargo shorts grew and grew and grew. I stood, disturbing Ozzy's trance for a moment and took a pillow off his bed, draping it over my lap. He looked my way but remained quiet.

The man lifted his head and removed the cloth shorts he wore and positioned himself between the woman's legs and began thrusting, violently, forward and back, forward and back, forward and back. The woman stopped moaning and shifted to a seizure-like noise much closer to screaming. Her eyes bulged and she clawed at the fake ice with her fingers tips. The stirring sensation in my shorts evolved into a pointy bulge that throbbed uncontrollably. I lifted the pillow to take a peek.

Is yours big, Ozzy asked.

What?

He pointed toward the pillow, Bet it's small,
Nikki would probably laugh.

Fuck you.

Let me see it.

No way.

He reached toward the pillow and I pushed him
aside. Stop, seriously.

He giggled and tried to force his way on top of
me, Don't be a baby, let me see.

I pushed him again, but harder, sending him
backwards to the ground. Seriously, stop.

Ozzy stopped giggling and his face became as
fierce as the man on channel 59. We both stood and
he charged at me, sending me flying into his dresser,
knocking my head against a gold plated knob. He
grasped both my wrists and struggled them into
submission, Just let me, he said, Stop being
a—

I squirmed and kicked, creating enough space
between us to swing my elbows violently enough to
hit his face. He jumped off me and his fat hands
shot straight up to his mouth. We heaved and
struggled to catch our breath, but continued to glare
at each other. When he removed his hands there
was blood on his lip. He looked down at his fingers,
the tips were stained red.

Told you to stop, I said.

He delicately touched his lip with one finger,
checking it to see if blood stuck, and looked into his
mirror before sitting on his bed.

My mom didn't drown in a bathtub, Marc.

I straightened up and looked at my elbow, red
and bleeding, not as bad as Ozzy.

They just tell me that. Grandma says it to be
nice. It wasn't an accident.

What do you mean?

She didn't love me. She didn't want me.

How do you kn—

There's no other reason.

But Mercedes loves you.

It's not the same, Marc. You don't understand,
you'll never understand.

I remained silent and looked toward the
television where the man and the woman had
stopped thrusting and lay together, side by side on
the slab of ice. Ozzy watched too and when the
scene faded to black, he stood and turned off the
television.

I'll get the sleeping bag out now.

Papo raise the security gate in the bodega; the loud
crash it made when it reached the top of the
awning. I gathered my things quietly as Ozzy lay
sprawled on his mattress, clutching his pillow tight,
and tiptoed out the apartment, careful not to let the
door slam.

I took the stairs down to the lobby and crossed to
the west side of the building, riding the elevator
seven flights to my apartment. I rang my doorbell
for five minutes before Moms answered, sleep still
very much on her mind.

Marc, she said uncertainly, looking through the
peephole.

Yeah.

She unlocked the door and opened it slightly,
What time is it?

Early.

Wasn't expecting you for a few hours. Is
everything OK?

I nodded and watched as she ran her fingers
through her matted hair and fiddled with her
glasses. Yeah, I said, everything is fine.

#

I woke at 8am. The apartment was silent, and
outside was an overcast Saturday morning. I heard
vandal v // page 22



EVERYTHING FOR
EVERYONE

NOTHING FOR
OURSELVES

Jason Rocha

Albert Cama's house (which was really his parent's house) was a small two-bedroom bungalow strangely situated in that its front door faced exactly the corner of Carnation Street and Bay Street. So when anyone sent a letter to the Cama's, the front of the envelope was always addressed *Carnation and Bay Street, San Antonio, Texas, 78226*. As an added oddity—and because the Cama's house was strangely set farther back from its neighbors—anytime one of the family came out, they were greeted with a view of their neighbor's backyard instead of front lawns and driveways. This weird set-up was especially frustrating for Albert since, whenever he stepped out the front door and onto the porch, he could never clearly see what was on his right or his left—only the backyards and only the street directly in front of him.

Behind the Cama's house was a small wood which let out to a fenced-in auto junkyard that Albert sometimes broke into. He'd sit on the stacked heaps of rusted Fords and Dodges, smoking a joint by himself, thinking about pussy. Just past the junkyard, on the other side of a two-lane road, was Kelly Air Force Base.

A couple weeks ago a makeshift camp had been set up for the people of hurricane Katrina. When they first arrived, Albert climbed onto the junked cars and watched volunteers guide in the long busses that brought them. For days, he would wake up and watch the people from New Orleans, all black, amble around in the Texas sun, shielding their eyes from the brightness and holding onto their children—

little girls and boys in oversized clothes—close to their hips or by the hand. Men and women, old and young, milled around the fenced in field, and sometimes they sat under umbrellas and erected tarps before retreating into the tents for the night. Albert had watched one day a few of the old ladies from the varrio, in their faded aprons and shirt-dresses, shuffle to the fence carrying aluminum containers of food, foolishly trying to pass meals over the fence to the volunteers but failing because they were too short and too old. For several days he watched the people from New Orleans, but soon he became bored with them and now didn't care what they were up to, forgetting about them altogether.

In the morning, Albert woke up at 9:30. Freshly washed, in his creased shorts and hooded sweatshirt, he sat on the front step of his porch and lit a roach that he chose from a lump of roaches and half-joints he kept hidden in an empty molé jar behind his stereo. It was late September and unseasonably cold even for the morning. The sky was a stone gray; dark heavy clouds crowded up on each other like soiled laundry. Most of the people in the tiny varrio were already off at work, leaving only the old people and the handicapped people and the unemployed people to do whatever in the quietness of the near empty neighborhood.

Albert was seventeen. He was tall and thin to the point of almost gaunt, and he wore oversized clothing to give the illusion that he was larger—stronger—than he actually was. He had been promising his parents for months that he

would get his GED and join the Army, but mostly he just hung around with his friends drinking beer and getting high at Kennedy Park. Sitting on the porch, Albert watched the clouds gather. He caught the loamy smell of rain and thought he might have to go inside if it pours down too strong. But for now he decided he would smoke his marijuana in the chilly breeze and wait for something interesting to come find him. Finally, something recognizable came into view from the house across the street. Mano was a short man, dark and mustachioed and known around the varrio as many things: a laborer, a mechanic, a drunk, a thief, a heroin abuser. He was a quiet guy who sometimes played catch-football with the younger kids. Mostly, though, he just shuffled around the neighborhood mowing the lawns of old men and women, washing their cars for five or ten bucks—whatever he could get. And whenever he was done with his job, he'd jump on his mountain bike with only one working gear and ride to the Stop-n-Go at the corner for some beer. On hot days, Mano would ride to the store with his shirt draped over his shoulder, exposing his worn body and sloppy tattoos. His quarts of Busch beer would clink like tiny bells inside the plastic bag which hung off the handlebars. Though he was already forty-two, he was unmarried and lived with his diabetic mother.

Albert watched Mano step out of his mother's house and into the front yard, which was nothing more than a sad patch of bad soil and Texas wrightwort. In his hand, he had a small coffee can. In the other, a rusty

trowel. Albert watched Mano get on his hands and knees and scoop up some of the dirt with his trowel, bringing it closely to his bagged eyes as if to inspect every grain of earth. Mano shook the dirt from the blade. He slouched his shoulders and continued pacing around his front yard, kicking at the dirt with his shabby tennis shoes.

"Oralé, Mano," yelled Albert, waving at him.

Mano stopped what he was doing, looked at the young man then went back inside the house. He did not wave back or smile or even cock his head to say "what's up." He just looked at Albert and went back into the house and closed the door.

"Who you waving at, Caca?" asked George. He was walking his mountain bike between the two houses and up to Albert's fence. George was a fat, nineteen-years-old, and he lived a few streets down from Albert with his mother and her boyfriend. He refused to call Albert by his given name even in front of Albert's parents. Instead, George called him Caca with the same ease and nonchalance you'd address your girlfriend or a cousin.

"Mano was just outside."

"I dunno why you talk to that dude," said George, coming into the yard. "I heard he's got AIDS and shit."

Albert had heard that too and shrugged his shoulders and passed his roach to George who licked the tips of his fingers just before taking it. Sounds of wind chimes tinkled in the air and the two smoked what was left of the marijuana roach. Albert went back inside and pulled another small joint from the molé jar and the two boys smoked that too. The sky got a bit darker as the

clouds became heavier and meaner and closer to the ground. The wind also picked up and blew some of the trashcans into the street. A few houses down, an old woman came lumbering out to chase her garbage can. It was an old tin can, and it made a loud racket as it scraped and toppled down the asphalt. Albert and George chased the can down and brought it back to the old woman and put it inside her garage. The old woman in the apron thanked them. The two boys, feeling they had done something good for the day, rewarded themselves with another roach from Albert's jar.

George puffed at the marijuana cigarette. "Why you up so early?"

"I was gonna go and take my GED test."

"But?"

"No bus fare."

"Oh," said George.

"Why you up so early?"

"I came over to meet with Eugeño and his dad."

Eugeño was Albert's next door neighbor to the left. He lived with his father Hernando. Eugeño was the same age as Albert and was from Mexico just like his dad. He was a quiet young man who only spoke Spanish. He and his father worked digging ditches for a septic company in Boerne, Texas. But times were slow and people were not building houses out in the country as much, so some weeks they did not work digging holes.

"You gonna dig shit holes with them?"

"Chalé, Caca" said George. He threw his hands in the air as if to shoo away the accusation. "Eugeño and his dad are picking up a pig from a friend that has a

farm. The farmer told them they could have the pig if they'll come pick it up."

Albert took a big drag from the roach and coughed and passed it to George. He thought about the reasons why someone might want with a pig in their yard and tried to run every possible scenario in his head so that he did not sound stupid asking his next question.

"What's he want with a pig?"

"Pa comer, Caca, what else?"

Albert shrugged and picked at the paint that had begun to chip away from the porch floor. He felt embarrassed that he did not know what George and Eugeño and Hernando were going to do with the pig, and so he didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"Well what do they want you for?"

"They said I could help. Plus, I wanna see them kill it."

"Kill it?"

"Yeah," said George.

"Here?"

"Simón, Caca. Where else? Hernando said if I help, they'll give me some of the meat to take home."

"They're gonna cut it up here?" asked Albert horrified.

George laughed at Albert and asked him what time it was. Albert said he did not know and went into the house and yelled from inside that it was 10:30. When he came back out, he found George standing and staring across the street at Mano.

"What is that dude doing over there?"

Mano was out again with his coffee can and trowel. This time he was in another part of the yard picking at the earth and holding it up close to his eyes. He put the tin can down and took some of the dirt in his palm and examined it. Then he

scooped up some of the soil with his trowel and took it with him.

George giggled at him and held his hand up to his mouth as he did. Albert didn't say anything. He thought what Mano was doing was strange, but he was drawn to his hustles and liked that the man cut corners to get his. The kind of guy that said "chingate" to the system and didn't give a fuck who knew, a cruel rebel—a kind of tecato César Chávez.

"Oralé, Mano," yelled Albert.

"Don't call that dude over here, Caca."

Mano looked at the two boys then went back inside and closed the door behind him.

"What's his problem?" said Albert.

"Who cares. That dude's crazy."

Albert thought to defend Mano but instead took the joint back from his friend. A loud engine rumbled down the street. Eventually, Eugeño and Hernando came growling into view in Hernando's rust-patched Chevy Silverado. At the wheel was a dark man with a bushy mustache and small dark eyes. He had on a button shirt tucked into a pair of dirty Wrangler jeans and some cowboy boots. Together, Hernando and Eugeño walked to the back of the truck and pulled the tailgate down and reached in and lugged out a pig in a wire cage. Albert and George got up from the porch and walked over. The two helped Eugeño and Hernando pull the cage from bed. Then the four of them grabbed the cage by the wood bottom and carefully set it down on the ground. All the while, the animal screeched and howled and shook the pen. The four of

them stood for a moment and caught their breath.

"I've never seen a pig before up close," said Albert.

Eugeño's dad smiled.

George tapped the cage lightly with his foot. "I've seen pig's feet at the store. And even the head in a bag."

"Sí," said Eugeño. He wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve.

"Mi friend says I can have. But to peek up," said Hernando, motioning with his small hands.

Albert nodded.

The pig squealed and banged its spotted body against the cage, and Albert jumped back from the pen. The others laughed.

"It's in a cage, Caca. It can't get you."

"Ta enojado," said Eugeño, tapping the wire with his boot.

"Yes," said Hernando, "he es berry angry."

The loud shrieks from the pig made Albert want to put his hands over his ears. The four of them waited for the pig to stop crying. When it finally calmed down, Eugeño's dad pulled the beast by its front legs from the cage and kept it from thrashing by putting his body on top of it. Albert and George tried to hold its hind legs. Albert turned his head away and felt sick from the tickling soft hair that sprouted from the pig's body. It felt too much like human hair. Eugeño took a long rope from the truck and swiftly tied a lead around the pig's neck. When it was secure, Hernando told the boys to let go. Still holding the animal, he took the rope from Eugeño and wrapped it tight around his arm. When he felt the rope was firm, he raised himself off the pig's back. The animal shot off like a rocket, stumbling and falling over and

screeching. Hernando pulled back on the rope and used his body to anchor the animal. Soon he had control of the thing and guided it to the backyard and tied it to a stake. Out of the corner of his eye, Albert saw Mano come out his house wearing a trash bag poncho over a heavy green coat. He had his bike with him and tied to his handlebars was a long stick like a cut broom handle. Mano jumped onto his bike, peddling away under the clouded sky. Albert waved. George slapped Albert on the chest. Hernando and Eugene went inside their house and told the boys they'd be out in a short while with a knife and a bucket of hot water. Albert and George said okay and that they'd be on their porch waiting.

Sitting on the porch, Albert and George drank R.C. Cola. George pulled out a cigarette from a backpack he had hitched to his mountain bike and the two of them shared it. A cool breeze came through again. A low crack of thunder tumbled softly through the sky, and Albert felt it in his body. Later, he brought out two more cans of soda, and he and George drank them and then smoked another Kool cigarette.

"Mano's back," said Albert.

George did not answer because he was too busy watching Eugene keep the pig quiet by feeding it some corn he got out from the truck. "I wonder what his new hustle is."

"I don't care," said George.

Albert walked to the edge of his front gate. Mano was out in the yard again. He was bent down, sitting on his heels, looking at the dirt. He rubbed it in between his fingers and then threw the soil into the air.

"He's looking at the dirt again."

"I smell like pig now," said George.

By now Mano had walked back into his small house and closed the door behind him.

"What's he doing?"

"Do you think I smell like pig?"

"Maybe he's getting ready to bury something. Maybe his mom died and he's gonna bury her right in the front yard." Thoughts of old ladies in black dresses paying their respects to a grainy lump in the front yard flickered in Albert's head and it all seemed bright and possible to him. Sitting back down on the porch he laughed out loud.

"I'm gonna go change, Caca. I smell like pig." George walked away.

Albert, never taking his eyes off Mano's house, hardly noticed. When he came out again, Albert watched him with his trash bag poncho and tethered stick speed away on his bike like some horseback hero—a Chicano Lancelot, he thought. Albert waved, but Mano didn't even look back.

Then, all was quiet.

Albert sat up and listened closely to the thunder that boomed far off. He could already hear in his head the rain that had not come yet. He got another roach and smoked it outside on the porch steps. He enjoyed the stiff wind that came and went, whipping around him like a school of fish. He thought to hang out in the junkyard wood and watch the angry sky. But he did not want to look back at the airfield and all the poor souls from New Orleans who lived in tents and used portable bathrooms and had to walk to fast-food joints just to get their

breakfast and dinner. He remembered how one day he rode with his mother on some errands. He saw them walking up and down the street, carrying bags of fast food and toilet paper and soap. And when his mother offered an old black woman and her granddaughter a ride to the grocery, he did not talk to them. He saw in the old black woman's eyes a drooping helplessness. He was scared, and the woman reminded him of how rudderless he was. He remembered looking away from her, ashamed that he should compare himself to her. He wished his mother had not stopped for the old woman and began to feel a growing terribleness in himself that he would have rather had her walk then to face those eyes. He was not sure what to say. He was afraid that he might offer something to remind them and himself of the heartache they were all in. As if they needed *him* to remind them.

It was past noon now, and the sky grew darker. Albert watched the pig eat, amazed that it never did look up from its food. It just kept on pushing through the scraps. And every time the beast got near to being done—every time it came close to the cool and hard earth beneath the corn—along came Eugene with more feed. And Albert did feel sorry for the animal. That it could not know that its grim slaughter was as close and as sure and as mean as the clouds that gathered just above them both. Albert heard a bike approaching and stood up. But it was only George. He saw he still had the same clothes on.

"I thought you went to change?"

"I did. But then I thought what for if I'm gonna be around that pig still. I didn't want to stink up new clothes."

"Yeah," said Albert.

From around the corner, just into his sight, Mano returned. He could see that Mano's trash bag poncho had been ripped. The man walked his bike back into his yard.

"Don't call him over here. I'm serious, Caca."

"It's just Mano."

"If you do, I'm going over with Eugeño and his dad."

"Well forget you then," said Albert. "More weed for me." Albert whistled at Mano and threw his arms up. "Oralé, Mano."

Mano paused and looked around like a paranoid alley cat. George rested his bike against Albert's porch and walked next door without saying anything to Albert. Albert walked across the street and rested his body against Mano's gate and greeted the man with a hand which Mano took with some pause. The two spoke quietly of the neighborhood. Mano said he had run off some black kids strolling around just the other night, he spoke of how they needed to stay on the air base.

"I didn't see them," said Albert, "What's up with the coffee can?"

"Don't worry about it, little homie," said Mano with some nervousness. "It's just a little side project I got going."

Staring at his face, Albert noticed Mano's eyes were red and glassy and the left side of his face seemed pink and agitated. There was also a fresh scratch on his neck like something horrible had tried to pull the skin away. It was then that Albert noticed Mano had the stick in his hand

and that it was broken and splintered.

"Like a new hustle?" asked Albert.

"Yeah, like a new business I got running."

"You need any help?"

Mano seemed more nervous now. He looked around as if waiting for someone to come get him. He threw the stick in the yard, and picked some of the dirt from his pinky nail and then bit off the cuticle from his thumb and spit it out.

"Nah. Just go home. I'll catch up with you later."

Albert tried to answer back but Mano stopped him. Albert dropped his shoulders, and his thin body looked like the air had been swept out.

"I just figured you could use another guy. You know, for your new your hustle."

Mano stepped away from the fence and went back to his front door. His trash bag made a funny noise as he walked. Albert pushed himself off from the fence and waited for a car to pass. He started across the street.

"Okay, little homie," Mano said. He walked back to the fence and threw his arms, like snakes, over the top rail. "You wanna make some easy money?"

"Yeah," said Albert with a grin. He came back and undid the fork latch on the gate and let himself into the yard. Mano stopped him.

"You gotta be cool though. You gotta follow all my instructions. Meet me here in five minutes with a bicycle."

Albert nodded and the two shook hands. He smiled the short walk back across the street to his house and found George sharpening a wood-handled butcher knife on a block of flint.

The blade kissed and slid down the flint, irritating Albert's ears.

"What you doing?" asked Albert.

"What's it look like I'm doing? I'm sharpening this knife."

"What for?"

"To kill the pig, Caca, what else?"

Albert looked over into Hernando's yard. He saw the father and son lift a large plywood plank and place it on top of an old unpainted picnic table. They secured it with thick twine. There was a tin bucket by their feet. Next to that, the pig ate.

"Why you sharpening it over here for?" said Albert. The scraping seemed to get louder.

"Smoke me out another joint."

"No way, man," said Albert.

"Why not?" said George.

"Let me use your bike."

George scoffed at Albert.

"Tas loco. It's my mom's boyfriend's bike. He'd kick my ass if anything happened to it." He went on sharpening the knife, keeping his eyes to the task.

"I'll pass you a joint," said Albert.

"Two joints," demanded George.

Albert agreed. He went inside and used the old roaches to roll two whole new joints. Albert took the bike from the porch and walked over to Mano's.

By now the sky had almost turned black. The outside seemed dull and stunted under the heavy cover. The smell of rain seemed so close that Albert could almost taste the moisture—primitive and earthy—in his mouth. The bottomless roar of thunder came. It was louder

now, more often. Mano came out. He had on a new trash bag poncho. He patted his pockets then picked his bike up from the ground. This time, he fastened a metal pipe instead of a broom handle to his handlebars with electrical cord.

“What’s the stick for?” said Albert.

Mano walked his bike out the yard, mounted it, and pedaled slowly down the street.

“We gotta hurry or they’ll be gone, little homie.”

“Who?” said Albert.

“The mayatés,” said Mano. And he pedaled away.

Albert flipped through the bike’s gears. He and Mano pulled out of the varrio and onto the main drive with all the traffic and fast-food joints and gas stations. Cars whipped by the two as they moved. The naked smell of coming rain became distant and lost amid the exhaust and rubber of the moving vehicles. Even the smell of cooking-grease from the hamburger and chicken joints seemed to hold the air hostage. Some of the cars turned on their headlights. A light mist fell.

Albert and Mano biked three blocks away from the main drive, less than a quarter-mile away. They pulled into the parking lot of The Texas Meat Market, a ramshackle convenience store made of concrete and connected to a laundromat. Texas Meat Market was the kind of place that hung hand-painted, wooden signs advertising mollejas and tripas next to faded posters of happy men and women smoking Newport Cigarettes. A half torn ad for King Cobra beer rapped in the wind. The parking lot itself was pot-holed and made of

dirt. Concrete stoppers, about three-feet tall, surrounded the market’s front door to keep thieves from driving their car through the shop window and looting the place. Outside, minding their own business, were a group of five older black men. They were drinking quarts of Miller High-Life outside the laundromat and chatting under its tin awning. To Albert they looked tired and grizzled and unhappy. One man sat completely on the ground, his back against the wall. He rested his forehead on his knees. He became startled when the cigarette in his long fingers burned down to his knuckle, so he flicked it and lit another one.

Mano and Albert walked inside the store. Mano took a sixteen-ounce can of Busch Light from one of the ice-bins in the middle of the store. He paid with exact change.

“When we come out the store,” Mano said, “don’t say anything. Just watch my back.”

The clerk, a thin Indian boy with wire glasses, put the beer in a paper bag and handed it to Mano. The two walked out of the store. Gone was the delicate mist. Soft drops of rain began to stain the dirt parking lot. Mano popped his beer and drank. Two sips into it, a black man with a beard approached them.

“Say man, what you think it’ll take for you to run up and buy me one of them beers.”

“Gimme the bread for it,” said Mano with a kind of laugh.

“Man, all I got is this card. I can’t buy no beer with it.”

“Sorry, homie, I spent my last dime on this one,” said Mano, pointing to the can.

The man rubbed his beard and put his hands in his pockets

and appeared to curse his luck under his breath. Albert thought that if he could he would buy the man a drink. He put his hands in his pockets and felt only fabric and a few balls of lint. The man with the beard came back.

“Tell you what, if you can get forty dollars, I’ll let you use this card to get fifty dollars worth of groceries from the store.”

“I ain’t got no money,” said Mano.

“What about your friend there,” said the man, pointing to Albert.

Albert’s heart shook in his chest.

“Maybe he wanna get some groceries for his momma.”

Mano took a sip of his beer. Without moving his eyes, he pulled his hand from his jacket pocket.

“We ain’t got nothing but this here *boy*.” In Mano’s palm were four tiny packets of dark brown heroin.

Albert’s stomach sank. He brought his hand up to scratch his neck and found it shaking. Weed was one thing, he thought. But this was heroin—bad shit. Jail time. Murderous shit. Albert watched him. The bearded man’s face lit up, and Albert could tell that whatever scheme the man had was now gone. Real business had arrived.

“What you want for it?” asked the man.

Mano jammed his hand back in his pocket. “Twenty for one. Thirty-five for two. I got enough to put you and all your friends to bed.”

“Lemme talk to my council,” said the bearded man.

“Don’t talk too long.” Mano took the last drink of his beer, tilting his head back to get the final drop, and chucked it into

an empty oil-drum that served as the market's trashcan. He wiped his mouth and whispered, "Get on your bike. And when you see me go, you jet down the other way."

Albert felt his legs wobble. His hands shook so nervously he could barely grip the handle bars. He slipped once trying to mount the bike. He did not look at Mano or the group of men talking. The dirt jumped alive with the hammer of fat rain drops. Then, as if someone had turned it on, slabs of rain came hissing down. The bearded man broke from his group and returned. He pulled up the collar to his jacket.

"What about four for fifty?" he asked.

"Sixty, homie," said Mano.

"Fifty is all we got."

"I seen you hustling them cards, taking thirty in cash for forty in food, sometimes less. I know you got the sixty."

"Lemme see it then," said the bearded man.

"Either you want it or you don't. I got no time for games."

The bearded man scowled and Albert thought that he might just hit Mano and take his drugs. What would stop him? Mano was small and feeble from his own addiction. Albert thought to pedal away now. But he did not.

"Alright," said the man, "four for sixty." Mano looked around and quickly made the exchange with the man in what would've looked like to anyone else like a simple handshake. Mano did not count the money. He pocketed it hurriedly, nearly dropping one of the bills. He jumped on his bike and whipped off, water kicking up from the bike's worn tires as it moved. And off into the dull grayness, Mano the hustler was gone and

lost among the traffic. Albert was stunned. He had heard no signal like Mano had said. No one had said go. The men outside the laundromat assembled in a circle. The man with the beard held out his hand. Albert got on his bike and pushed the thing forward and was half-way out the parking lot when his foot slipped from the pedal almost bringing him to a tumble. The rain fell on his head and into his eyes and down his face in a drape. He righted the bike and put the crank into motion when a voice came screaming through the rain.

"Get that punk!"

That is what Albert heard, or something close to it. Now, the men were out from under the awning, their heavy feet splashing the puddled ground as they ran. Albert's eyes grew big. They were after him, pointing their fingers even as they broke towards him. Albert brought his body up and tried to bring his feet upon the pedals. He missed them completely. He looked at the men and saw they were close—almost upon him. He struggled to get the bicycle into motion but his foot slipped again off the slippery plastic.

He could hear the men screaming for him, "Don't let him get away!"

They were in the rain and closer. Their faces were angry. Tired. Fed up. Albert did not know what they wanted with him, nor did his body care. His heart raced. His vision was precise. He saw across the street, down the block, past McMullen Drive and into his neighborhood. Now if he could just get his body to take him there. He got the bike up to speed, rocking it from side to side as he stood pumped the pedals. He felt the rush of air.

He was moving. He felt fingers at his back—close but now gone, their tips like spider legs narrowly missing him. A bottle crushed him in the temple. The side of his face burned. He felt glass shards sprinkle his arm and fall to the ground. He sped into the blur of the rain. He could still hear their angry voices. He did not look back until he had crossed the street and was down the block. Still he expected the men to be behind him, seething. But there was nothing but afternoon traffic and the barren sound of the bike's cassette ticking in the rain.

When Albert arrived, Mano was at his house. His bike was tucked close to the wall, under the eaves. Albert's legs burned. His head pounded. The rain washed the blood from his face onto his hoodie and farther down even onto his shorts and tennis shoes. Albert threw his bike down in front of Mano's gate. Mano, as if owing the boy, walked out into the rain and met him.

"Why?" said Albert. He held his hand to his head and felt warm blood seeping out between his fingers.

Shielding his eyes from the rain with his hand, Mano spoke. "Cause it wasn't real heroin, it was just dirt—tierra," he said, giggling. He put his other hand out. Tucked in between his fingers was a single twenty-dollar bill.

Near tears, Albert asked Mano again. "But why? What for?"

Mano's forehead pinched, his dry and old skin furling over his eyes. "What do you mean *what for?*?" His eyes blinked furiously in the rain. There was a soft rumble around them. Mano shook the bill at Albert, "Tómallo. Andalé."

Albert did not take the money.

Mano looked away for a moment; a strange tint of shame took his face. He huffed. "Cause they're there," said Mano. A horrible ease came over his face. He crumpled the twenty into his pocket and walked back into the house and slammed the door behind him.

Albert slowly walked George's bike back to his parent's home. Shame and disgust bored their way into his head; perhaps, Albert thought, entering through the very wound he received earlier. Like a cloak, he felt a heavy sense of regret on him, that he had served a low humility to those already humbled—death to the dead. The bike clicked as he pushed it.

George was still on the porch, smoking one of the joints Albert had given. Albert brought the bike up the porch steps and out of the rain. He stared at Albert with his mouth slightly open.

"You okay, Caca?"

"I'm gonna wash up and change."

"What happened to your face?"

Albert shrugged. "I fell."

George laughed and stood up. "You should have seen it, Caca," said George, "we were all ready to fuck that pig up, when it started raining. Hernando said we'll do it once it stops."

George followed Albert to the door. Albert stopped short of going inside. He looked at George's fat smile. George continued talking. "So you didn't miss nothing. You can still come see us kill it if you want. You wanna see?"

Albert turned away and went in the house where it was dry and warm. Behind him, through

the closed door, he could still hear George chirping.

"Hey! Hey, don't you wanna see?"

THE
PROPHET

John Searcy

When they found him in the wall near Janna's cubicle, he was cold, nearly frozen, beard thick with the rustling of parasites and eyes like a cloudless winter morning. We used a mail cart to bring him to the conference room and laid him on the table, watching as he came urgently to life, coughing, blinking, wiping raw fingers along the stitches of his hairshirt. No one knew what it meant—a prophet, here, in our sad little office. We'd thought they only appeared in darker places, emerging fully formed from sites of calamity and suffering, like moths disgorged from subterranean cocoons. "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world," he choked, voice rasping, still unsure of itself. We gave him coffee, peanuts from the snack machine. He took a beam from a product display module and held it as a staff, standing on the sideboard near the half-raised projector screen and looking furiously past us, as if menaced by things vast and invisible.

"You have greatly suffered and will suffer still more in the future. The calamities that you hope so fervently to wish away grow stronger from your fervor, and these trials will bring out your cruelest inclinations..."

As he spoke, we shot each other glances. Surely, they were meant for others, these morbid prophecies. Not us, with our petty problems—our layoffs, hiring freezes, the temporary wall set up by the design area, behind which the sound of jackhammers, the rough, low din of construction. Cynthia was the first to give in, falling to her knees and asking if he could save us. Tim followed after, but the prophet seemed not to hear them, speaking on right through the lunch hour of sorrow and debasement, becoming gradually ever more personal: "And what know you of love, oh Charles from accounting? Have you once confessed your feelings? And Angela, Rachel, who will read your weekly inventory reports when you do not read the inventory of your hearts?"

After work, we whispered by the elevators, bundled in outerwear. Mostly practical matters: Where would he sleep? Who would clean up after him? As we spoke, the smell of sealant

wafted down from the construction zone, astringent, slightly sweet.

"You think he's dangerous?"

"Why would he be dangerous?"

"I don't know. They're dangerous, aren't they? I heard there was one up in White Plains who supposedly assaulted a woman."

"You heard that? Really?"

"I heard it on the radio. And there was one on Long Island who bit a three-year-old kid on the arm."

Two weeks later, he was still among us—pacing the hallways, interrupting meetings with his stentorian declamations. Before long, he grew tiresome. We had business to attend to, numbers to crunch. Security was called several times, but he always managed to slip through their fingers, so they'd end up in the lobby holding jumbled rags, a lamp, a pile of soot. Finally, we decided to confront him. He was in Gary's old office, standing at the window with the lights turned off, looking up Fifth Avenue at the endless black river of umbrellas. We approached him slowly, a crowd of five or six of us. Look, we told him. He turned to us, eyes muted in the half-light. Look, we told him. We appreciate what you're trying to accomplish, but the thing is we've got work to do. He raised his eyes, making a careful study of the ceiling panels.

"Is there..." He stopped, cleared his throat. "Is there some other business you'd prefer me to engage in?"

We started giving him little tasks around the office. He'd make copies, organize files, water plants, put together mailings for the sales reps. He worked hard, almost faultless in his diligence, as if he saw these jobs as penance, a form of self-mortification, and we felt vaguely guilty when he passed us in the hallway, head lowered and arms piled high with printouts. Eventually, we installed him in the little room near the copier, where we'd been storing samples from the warehouse. He had a desk, a computer, a cot behind the boxes where he lay in the nighttime—no one was sure whether he slept or not. Someone thought of calling him Jones, and the name stuck around: Where's Jones? See if Jones can take care of it. At first,

only Cynthia seemed interested in getting to know him; she would visit him occasionally in his white plaster hermitage and bring him snacks from the corporate cafeteria.

“What’s up, Cynthia? Going to see Jonesy?”

“Yeah. You know. I just wanted to check on him. Bring him food.”

“Food, right—good idea. I hadn’t thought of that. What does he eat, anyway? Is he like a dog where you can’t feed him chocolate?”

It’s true he had trouble with technology, always sending emails to the entire company at once, or getting his sleeves caught in the rollers of the fax machine. Such slip-ups were to be expected, but there were other problems too, of a more ominous nature—papers catching fire, adders creeping out from the undercarriage of cubicles, inboxes filling up with loaves and fish. They raised some eyebrows, these inconvenient miracles, but for the most part we accepted them—their presence no more intrusive than the sound of jackhammers coming in each day through the palisade of wallboard, the weekly missives from Human Resources, full of coded references to “stability” and “restructuring,” the sense of doom, gently impending, in the faces of the people in the halls.

At times, we sought his counsel, though few would admit to it. We’d sneak into his quarters when no one was looking, in search of some small assurance that things would ultimately be OK. He was kind to us, but firm, refusing to foster illusions or false hope and speaking only in oblique revelations. Sometimes, Cynthia would visit him for longer than the rest of us, and sometimes she would do this with the door closed. This led to talk, of course, and upon cross-examination she confessed that she’d been lying with him on his cot—chastely, she insisted, like brother and sister—and that when she lay next to him there with his arms wrapped around her, she was transported to the edges of the universe, and could hear angels singing, and feel the holy breath of God running over her. Tim, for his part, made no such bold claims, but said simply that Jones could make things with his hands—little scenes or tableaux from the past and the future, created from office supplies and pieces of

bread. And Tim would sit after work on the coffee-stained carpet and watch transfixed as Jones ushered his figures through the phases of history, building up citadels of whole wheat and push pins and then tearing them down again to lay in scattered ruins beneath the chairs.

One day, we came in and there was an email from Rob announcing an emergency departmental meeting. It was too soon, we agreed, for yet another round of layoffs, so we assumed it had something to do with Jones.

“Look,” said Rob, pacing awkwardly at the head of the conference room. “I realize this hasn’t been an easy year for us. And I think the powers that be, they realize that too. So we’ve tried to be lenient about the small stuff—you know, coming in late, taking long lunches or whatever. It’s cool. You know, do whatever you need to do. But this Jones thing...it’s problematic.” He frowned. “I mean, *legally*, it’s problematic. We had a woman come in here for an interview the other day, and her résumé turned into salt...”

Once again, we confronted him, once again crowded around him—filing into his office with faces low and guilty, chests heavy with the task that now fell to us. He looked up from his computer, seeming to know what we had come for. Jones, we said. He smiled, and took a sip of coffee. Jones, it’s not easy having to do this.

He stood up, raising an open palm. “It’s OK,” he said. “I understand.” As he spoke, a flock of doves burst from his hair. “No prophet is accepted in his own country. I shall walk the earth, like my fathers before me, spreading the word across the hillocks and the furrows of the land. It will be a time of testing, and of great tribulation. Is there any among you who would join me on this path?”

We looked at each other, with uncertain faces. A couple of doves came to roost on the upper surface of the half-open door.

“I would,” said Tim. “But I can’t really afford to lose this job now. You know. It’s a recession...”

Jones nodded, sympathetically. We cleared our throats, avoided eye contact.

“I’ll come,” said Cynthia.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

“We will suffer great hardship—begging for our supper, sleeping in doorways...”

“I think I’m OK with that.”

Charles turned to her, sharply. “*Doorways*, Cynthia?”

“What’s wrong with doorways?”

He gestured broadly toward her shoes, nails, bracelets, haircut. As she examined these aspects of her physical presence, she gave a puzzled sigh, as if she wasn’t really sure where they’d come from.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. Then, turning to Jones: “It might not work out. I’d need showers, breakfast—I’ve never lived outside the city.”

Again, Jones nodded. “Each of us serves in his own way.”

He left with a minimum of ceremony, shutting down his computer and walking quietly out to the elevators. The next day, they moved most of the furniture out of his room. It was strange working without him, but things returned to normal pretty quickly—the last of the doves was captured on Tuesday, and the dead locusts in the break room were swept away at the end of the week. By the time we moved into our new open-plan office space, we’d all but forgotten him—the memory of his face grown coarse and illegible, like a document run too many times through the copier. Then one day in June, when we were busy getting ready for the sales conference in Baltimore, he was drawn back temporarily into focus.

“I’ll be darned,” said Tim, his voice reverberating through our bright, communal space.

“What is it?” asked Charles.

“It’s Jones,” said Tim. “He sent us a postcard. I didn’t even think he knew our address.”

On the back, the bold, hen-scratched letters were packed tight within the margins. The front featured a picture of the Santa Monica pier. We all took turns reading the postcard, then left it with Cynthia, who kept it taped to the bottom of her computer screen for several months next

to a *New Yorker* cartoon until she was let go at the beginning of the fall.

To my friends at Lysander Media:
Greetings from Sunny California!
Did it finally warm up there? I remember it always being so cold. Someday I must tell you the story of my travels, but for now, I just wanted to let you know I’m doing well. The people here are kind, and the tourists on the beach are excellent listeners. There are other prophets here too, would you believe it? They wandered out here like me, and after a day of solemn preaching, we get together and start bonfires on the beach. We lie on the sand, and drift to sleep amid the whispering of mackerels. Oh, my friends, it is good here. The days are so warm, and the sea just at dusk is so beautiful.

With love
and deepest
affection,

JONES

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ALL FEMALE ISSUE.
STAY TUNED.

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