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Giant Things

Cliff drove up to the clinic in my beat-up Datsun, its windows wide open like mouths gasping for air. He was late. I'd been waiting outside, standing, then wilting to the curb beside a planter of browning marigolds and cigarette butts. The city was a kiln. Asphalt and glass and metal turned sunlight supernatural, warping yellow warmth into a harsh white glare, burning the very dust in the air to gray ash which settled, gritty and dry, over everything. Too ill to be angry, I brushed off the back of my skirt and got in the car.

"No problem, right?" he asked, after we were back on the road. He shouted over the rush of wind and whine of gears wound out too far.

"Shift into third," I said.

"What?"

"Third!"

"I hate this car." He shoved the stick high. "Your brakes are about shot—I almost rear-ended some guy on the way over here."

I put a protective hand on the dashboard. "At least it's not a Gremlin."

The car smelled hot. Seared flesh on the hood hot. It stung my eyes and throat and spread like a blooming rash of nettles into my lungs. Perspiration and my thin sundress stuck me fast to the melting vinyl seat. I sat forward, peeled the fabric away from my skin, and let the stale air circulate around me.

"Dana. You need a Coke or something?"

"Yeah. Something."

"You look green."

I leaned back against the headrest. "Thanks."

"I'm sending you out for a D&C" was how Dr. Casler put it, which sounded to me like I was getting ice cream. I'd been seeing Dr. Casler since birth—as had my mother, and every other woman in town under fifty. "This early it's not a hospital procedure," he said, erasing and rewriting notes in my chart, "and I don't do them myself, you understand. But I will make sure your records don't reflect anything untoward. This will be the first and last time, won't

it, Dana,” he said, meeting my eyes for the first time that appointment. “Yes, sir,” I’d answered, as if he were my father. Ellen, his receptionist, made the appointment and gave me directions, and I showed up at the clinic at 2:00, in nonrestrictive clothing as instructed. Funny how the post-op headache was exactly the same headache I got from eating ice cream too fast.

Cliff made a quick turn into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven. He hulked inside, his shaggy hair tucked behind one ear and brushing his shoulders, the T-shirt and jeans loose to hide his thick waist. My mean friend Jeannie said he looked like he belonged hanging off the back of a garbage truck.

Meatcliff—I called him that sometimes after Meatloaf, the rock star—Meatcliff and I had been together a long time. We’d had what people might call a shared family tragedy. Cliff’s parents had separated, and soon after their divorce was final, Cliff’s dad got laid off work and came to my dad, an officer at the local bank, for a loan. My dad gave it to him with no collateral, a bit of red tape slight-of-hand he’d pulled off for other friends down on their luck—and had been previously reprimanded for—and Cliff’s dad paid it off a year before it was due. When the early payoff paperwork came across the desk of a certain secretary, my dad was immediately terminated. We lost our house. Cliff Sr. got my dad on at the packinghouse inspecting citrus with him. They started drinking together a lot, and my mother left. I was twelve that year, Cliff thirteen. The kicker was this: the bank secretary who got my dad fired was Cliff’s mom. The double kicker was this: our moms moved in together.

Small world.

Small town.

Tidal wave scandal. Cliff and I were bound by hell and high water.

Cliff handed a Coke Slurpee through the open window. “Thanks,” I said. The first sip slid through me, cold and sweet. In the recovery room I’d vomited—overwhelmed by the smell of antiseptic and blood and dark, drugged denial—then I’d cried, the impossible work of *not thinking about it* finally breaking me, and a nurse held a damp cloth to my forehead. When she offered a cup of water I recognized her as my neighbor’s stepdaughter, ten years older than me and darker and prettier. Now as my head cleared I realized she would know the

worst thing about why I was there, and the thought made me more nauseous. I exhaled slowly, dropping my jaw as the surgical assistant had demonstrated to “relax through the discomfort,” and forced the last air from my lungs. I felt no impulse to fill them again.

Cliff slung himself behind the steering wheel and slammed the door too hard. “I hate this car,” he said again, low. The rubber striping around the door’s perimeter had long since crumbled away, and the frame of the car groaned in protest at being jarred. It was a familiar sentiment. My dad hated the car too. “I’m sorry, baby,” he’d say, walking me out each morning. He’d run his hand along the driver’s side where the rust was worst. “I’m sorry I can’t do better than this for you.” I always answered the same way. “Daddy, it runs.”

“They oughta make root-beer Slurpees,” Cliff said. “Hey Dana, you remember the A&W drive-through? Where the roller girls brought your food right to the car—you know, up from the Ford dealership?”

I took the plastic dome from my drink and stabbed at the slush with the straw. “Uh huh. That big Don Hart thing scared me.” Don Hart, owner of the dealership, had built a gigantic fiberglass bust of himself in the parking lot. Three stories tall, green checked sports coat, stark white crew cut—and a mechanical arm that stretched over Highway 50, waving in time to Hart’s recorded chant, *I want to sell you a car!* “I always closed my eyes when we drove under it. I dunno how that arm didn’t fall off.”

“Pronto Pups. Damn those were good. I always wanted to work there. Wish they hadn’t shut it down.” He shook his cup to loosen the slush from the sides. “One time me and Dad were sitting there in his truck eating burgers, and the speakers you order through started picking up the movie from the drive-in next door. It was cool. We listened to *The Blues Brothers* all the way through. Dad got us two rounds of chocolate shakes so we could sit there till the end.”

Cliff’s dad looked just like crag-faced Dickie Gray, the foul-mouthed owner of the only shoe store downtown (or any place I’d ever heard of) that sold a quadruple wide size 22 shoe. *We Guarantee To Fit Any Human*. That slogan, painted right on the building wall, could be heard on every radio station in the area along with his catch phrase, *Big feet ain’t pretty, but Gray’s shoes are*. When I razzed him about the

resemblance, Cliff said, “So what, your dad looks like Barney Fife,” which was true, so I shut up. Cliff hadn’t wanted our dads to know about our situation and the decision we’d made, and for the same reason he didn’t, I did. One of them might have talked us out of it.

“*Blues Brothers* was a good movie. Akroyd wasn’t so fat then.” I shifted in the seat and arched my back, twisting to relieve the pressure that gripped me there, low and steady. The release papers I’d hesitated over listed twenty-seven different complications, including severe hemorrhaging and blood clots to the brain, resulting in death. No shit it results in death, I thought. This pain is nothing. It should be worse.

“Is it still there?” Cliff asked.

“*The Blues Brothers*? Drive-in’s gone, Meatcliff. We just drove past there.”

“No, I meant the Don Hart thing with the arm. All of it. The head, the body—where’d it go?”

I closed my eyes, my whole body throbbing against the heat. “Secret monolith burial ground. How should I know?”

When they’d dismantled the bust, the arm came down first and was off for about a week with the voice recording still blaring, *I want to sell you a car!* before they broke down the rest of the structure. Driving past it like that was even more intimidating than when the arm had stretched over the highway, ready to fall onto passing cars like Sky Lab. The giant Hart amputee, staring vacantly across traffic, waving the phantom limb at a distant sunset—I still imagined it sometimes, stalking the city, clumsy and fire-breathing like Godzilla, or wild and furious, a strange headless horseman in a leisure suit, thrashing about and screeching for its lost arm.

Cliff finished his drink, and tapping my leg, handed the empty cup to me. “Listen,” he said. “I know you don’t want to talk serious right now, but later when you feel better . . .”

“Now is fine,” I said. Thank God, finally, was what I wanted to say. Cliff never wanted to talk about anything difficult. Not our parents, not our future, and especially not this. Over the years I’d become an absolute genius at pulling vital information from his cryptic silences, reading psychic nuances in the length of a pause, decoding a myriad of meanings behind a single word choice. Not talking about our past I could live with. The future, well, considering whether we had one or not was another topic for contemplation.

Cliff had the idea that because our mothers had split town, the two of us were genetically predisposed to abandon our children as well. Like there was an unstoppable biological timer set in each of us. On our kid's twelfth birthday our heads would "ding!" and we'd walk out the door like a couple of automatons. Granted, we'd probably be more prone to parental crisis than other couples. But Cliff was convinced the flaw was a working part of our DNA. "There's no way," he'd said, and "it can't happen." *It could happen*, I wanted to hit him with now, *it did happen*. Another future had dared present itself. Temporary as it had been, I'd held a whole realm of new possibilities within me. "Go ahead," I said, hoping, against all known odds, he could see it now, too. "What is it?"

"I've been thinking about next semester," he said.

I bit my lip and watched out the window, wondering how it would feel to go mad.

Next semester was always an issue. Thanks to the coordinated stunt of our cohabitating moms, both dads had filed Chapter 11, money was scarce, and anything with the word "loan" in it gave Cliff a nervous tic. We scrounged cash for tuition on a class-by-class basis, and funded our education almost exclusively from the profits of Cliff's money-making schemes. The most lucrative had been two semesters previous. Cliff bought a secondhand airbrush and started spraying designs on anything that would hold the paint. T-shirts, clay pots, spare tire covers on the backs of Jeeps and vans, anything. My role in that fiasco was to house the project in my dad's garage since Cliff's place only had a carport, then to work our flea market booth on the weekends and make sure the "tortured artist" ate more than Yoo-hoos and pork rinds. He was good, and we made enough money to pay for two rounds of classes each before he developed a severe respiratory infection from not wearing his mask while he worked. After his cough cleared up he tried painting again, and had an allergic reaction so horrible all the hair on his hands and arms fell out. If he hadn't been so miserable it would have been funny.

Now, with graduation finally upon us, I'd gotten sick and couldn't work. Then Cliff's Gremlin, the curse of American Motors, choked up one final gush of gritty oil, seized itself by the drive shaft and cracked its engine block. That took care of Cliff's next semester.

"We are gonna make a book," he said.

“Oh God.”

“Just listen. I was stuck on Lee Road right next to the citrus cluster—you know what I’m talking about?”

“No.” Each time traffic slowed, I dripped with sweat, each time it sped up, the wind dried and tightened my skin. I touched my forehead, the mask of salt like sandpaper under my fingers.

“Yes you do.”

“A *book*?”

“I’m looking at it, and I started thinking about the welcome center at the state line. It’s like, a whole building in the shape of an orange. You can stop there for free juice. And then I started thinking, are there other sculptures like that around here?”

I just stared at him. What he was talking about, the citrus cluster, was a fifteen foot tall, plaster-covered chicken wire conglomeration shaped like a grapefruit, an orange, a lemon and a lime, all snuggled up together in some artist’s idea of a still life. Every year the weather wore at it, rain and hail chipping the surface, sun bleaching the colors to dull pastels.

“I think those lumpy plaster fruits are about the best representation of this place you can get.”

“Your *head* is lumpy. A fruit book. Pop-up or scratch and sniff?”

“Smart ass. A book on giant things. Like the Tire Kingdom Lady on Highway 50 and the Michelin Man down the road from her. I’ll take the pictures. You’ll write the history of how art in Florida has been affected by tourism.”

My head was starting to really pound, and it felt like there was a fist shoved into either side of my spine. “What the hell does the Tire Kingdom Lady have to do with tourism?”

“Who needs tires more, somebody who drives to Florida from New York, or somebody who drives down the street once a week for pizza?”

“You want me to kill myself, don’t you.”

This was how he always got past me, with some wild distraction. Any time I pressed him to discuss something he didn’t want to, he’d point enthusiastically over my shoulder then fake left and tear away, knowing soon I’d be running hard, right at his heels. He’d done it again, this time innocently hitting on a pet distraction of my own. For years, I’d secretly imagined the Tire Kingdom Lady and the

Michelin Man getting married. The Frisches' Big Boy could carry their rings on top of his giant hamburger, and Don Hart would conduct the ceremony, pointing and chanting, "*I now pronounce you man and wife!*" They'd hold their reception at the citrus tower, there'd be controversy over her taking his last name. Replaying this scenario soothed me like humming soothed my father. In the face of all that was upsetting me, Cliff's talk of grouping the giant sculptures was a welcome reprieve, so for a moment I let myself go along with him. "What about the red horse?" I said. "The mustang over the commerce center playground."

"Too small. But there's the strawberry in Plant City, and The World's Largest Board in front of Red's feed store—"

"You don't know how big it is."

"I knew you'd dig this," Cliff said. "Have you seen that water tower on the east coast painted to look like a golf ball on a tee?"

I shook my head. "I love that horse. I'm no trig whiz but I do know something about perspective, and from mine, the horse makes the cut." Turning toward him, I moved my seat belt down over my hip and pulled my knees up. The pressure in my back had become a hard ache that wrapped around me like a corset, tightening and tightening. This would have never happened to the Tire Kingdom Lady. I shifted again, trying to shake the feeling of metal invading me. I could taste it in my fillings. It rang in my pulse. Flooded every pore in that smothering summer heat. I needed him to keep talking. "What about publishing?"

"I'm still working on that part."

Dr. Casler had said, "You get a shot, they dilate your cervix, use a tiny, spoon-shaped instrument called a curette to clear everything out, and you're done. No problem." Except there was a problem. I was prepped and given the anesthetic, all according to plan, but when the clinic physician began the procedure, he sat back with a grunt. "Her records didn't say she was tipped, goddamnit." He got more irritated when his nurse leaned in between my stirrups, praying mantis-like, to corroborate. "Get up there and help her breathe," he said, then muttered, "goddamn Casler and his goddamned records."

The nurse's mouth was small and tight. I focused on where her lipstick bled into the crevices surrounding her lips, concentrated on anything, anything outside my body while she pressed above

my pubic bone with her fingers, pushing my uncooperative uterus forward.

“Cliff. How long till we can get to a pharmacy?”

“For what?”

I pulled two slips of paper from the front pocket of my skirt and handed them over.

“Amoxicillin. QID,” he read. “Four times daily. This one’s for Tylenol-3. Why didn’t you tell me you had prescriptions to fill? Are you hurting?”

“I wasn’t before.”

“That’s because you were still numb. Jesus.”

He shook his head and I saw the muscles in his jaw working. The speedometer crept toward sixty and he shifted into fifth gear. Normally he drove like an old man, signaling a half mile before a turn, braking slow and deliberate, handling the steering wheel lightly, as if his square hands were long and slender. Now the wind whipped through the open car windows, and I held my hand to the side of my head to hold my hair out of my face. Loose strands stung my mouth and cheeks.

He squinted into the sun. “How long was the local supposed to last?”

“Don’t know. Seems like after the dentist you stay numb all day.”

“Jesus, Dana.”

Red cars surrounded us, a herd of them racing past. Cliff slowed a little to let them around us, and I watched as they pulled smoothly by.

I had agreed to this. Dr. Casler was the same doctor who’d delivered me. There were nature posters tacked to the ceiling over his examining tables. He talked about baseball scores or the latest movie or what had happened to him during lunch. He warmed his hands and said, “Tell me if this is uncomfortable,” and “we’ll take care of you,” and “don’t worry—everything will be fine.”

“Cliff.”

“Hm.”

“It wasn’t how I thought it would be.”

He pulled the visor down and tilted his head back a little to avoid the yellow glare beating in on us. “Wonder if we can find an aerial shot of The Booby Trap. Seems like I remember somebody making a giant lace bra for it once. Some kind of big promotion, or a joke about them closing down the strip club part. Maybe I’m making that up.”

I fished through the glove box and a wad of fast food napkins fell to the floor. In the middle of the mess, I found my old sunglasses and tapped the back of his hand with them. He took them without a word and slipped them on.

“They acted like it was nothing,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

“Cliff, please.”

“Who?” he said, finally, as if it hurt his throat to answer.

“The receptionist. The nurse. I don’t know. The lady who took me back to the interrogation room. She sat me down in this metal folding chair, and then a counselor person came in and started saying how I shouldn’t feel bad for what I was doing, that I should think of ‘this thing’ as something else, like a—a rat, like a mouse in the corner. She said, ‘think of it as something under a chair in the corner of your room. We’re just going to take a broom and sweep it out.’ And then she told me not to talk about it to anybody.”

Cliff kept quiet and I read judgment in the tenseness of his hands. “Look,” I said, “it’s wrong for them to make it seem like nothing, is what I’m upset about, and it’s wrong for you to act that way too. It’s not nothing. It’s not calling in the fucking Orkin man. How could they say that?”

He pulled up the front of his shirt to wipe his face, flashing a roll of flaccid white stomach knitted with dark hair. “You’re gonna be mad no matter how I answer this.” Looking over at me, he sighed. “They say it like that so you get over it. It’s done. You can’t take it back. They’ve got a lot of women to get through there. They don’t have time to coddle every one of you.”

He considered the driver’s-side mirror for a moment before adjusting it. His mouth was a firm, wide slash, drawn on, like with a permanent marker. God’s dramatic flourish, signing off the last face at the end of the assembly line. “Not being there today doesn’t absolve you,” I said. “It doesn’t.”

“I’m not asking.”

Glaring at the useless air conditioner dials, with the useless picture of a spinning fan and the useless blue-to-red hatch marks underneath the broken temp lever, I thought how satisfying it would feel to break it for real, to punch it with my heel and see the brittle plastic of the faceplate splinter down all over the worn rubber floor mats. In recrimination, probably, my back spasmed. “How can you be so hateful?”

“I’m not trying to. I’m just saying. Dana, we always agreed there would be no kids. We agreed. The parenting issue—we don’t need to go through that again. If you hadn’t gone in today, there’d be a kid. What you did was to stick to the plan. That’s it.”

“It wasn’t a contract,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “it’s life. Life changes.”

“You tell me what to say and I’ll say it, will that fix this?” he said, and then, “Damn it!”

I started to fire back when I saw what he was swearing at. The green and red lights of the East/West toll plaza blinked into view, and traffic suddenly slowed to nothing. Cars were backed up at least forty deep. Cliff downshifted quickly and the gears of my poor old car screamed and struggled but grabbed hold, and we braked hard behind a white Bronco with a bumper sticker that read, *My kid can beat up your honor student*. The guy driving it looked up sharply and gaped at us in his rearview mirror. Cliff yanked up on the parking brake.

“Jesus,” he said, “that was close. You okay?”

My heart thumped hard, but there was no new pain south. “I think,” I said, then folded down the vanity mirror. The sudden stop had thrown me against the seat belt, and the edge of the shoulder strap had sliced a diagonal on the right side of my neck—like a huge paper cut. The mirror showed a long thin welt rising on my flushed skin. “Except the seat belt almost decapitated me.” I turned my head so he could see.

As he leaned over, the Datsun shuddered and stalled. Cliff sat back quick and turned the key in the ignition, and the engine revved willingly but couldn’t catch hold. “God, not now,” he said, turning the key again. I held my breath. My arm brushed against exposed metal on the doorframe and I jerked away fast, covering the burning with my other hand. Cliff didn’t say a word. He just stared into the center of the steering wheel like he was listening to some inner voice of the car, and kept trying the ignition. Like his brain waves

alone would spark the engine. After the sixth attempt, the only response was the click-click-click of the dying battery, and blaring horns surrounding and cutting through our open windows as traffic began to move again.

Cliff leaned back and closed his eyes. Vehicles pulled around us impatiently, drivers staring into the car as they went past with their radios too loud and air conditioning blowing so cold that condensation laced the edges of their windshields. Some shook their heads, sympathetic, some were angry and cursing, some stayed intently focused on the car ahead of them, oblivious to us at all. It was silly, I know, but I was scared. So the car died. We'd get it towed. Worse things had happened, millions of things worse than this—the difference was I'd never seen Cliff look defeated. His posture, the stiff, resigned tuck of his chin, the way his chest and shoulders sagged as he pulled away, damaged. All the time, for me, he pointed beyond hills and roadblocks. Now I saw a chunk of him missing, his symmetry gone and balance toppling, and I was pulling on the tie lines that kept him standing. I bit the inside of my lip until it was raw and swollen. Cliff opened his eyes and turned to look at me without lifting his head. Sweat had stained his shirt dark and patchy. His hair was soaked. "It's no use," he said.

Hot air and exhaust fumes poured in the windows, threatening to drown us. I thought maybe he didn't mean the car. But I said, "Can we try to push-start it?" anyway, and he nodded, stuck his head out the window to check behind him and then opened the door and got out. When I asked if he needed me to drive, either he didn't hear or we were back to mind reading, so I pulled my skirt up around my waist, climbed awkwardly over the stick shift and settled, with a tangled knot of barbed wire low in my abdomen, into the driver's seat.

In our whole long history, Cliff and I had never argued about anything that might damage our relationship. He never came right out and acquiesced, and I never came out and fought, and things floated fine in our stagnant, man-made retention pond. Maybe the way we guarded our closeness was unnatural. Maybe we had clung to each other so tight while our wounds healed, the scars had meshed and fused us together. Maybe we feared any rift would tear us back into two. There was no telling what would happen to us if we parted. We'd already lost so much blood.

“When I get up enough speed, you pop the clutch.” Cliff began to push, one hand on the open car door, the other gripping the frame. His desert boots slipped on the black highway asphalt.

I learned to drive the Datsun the day I bought it. Dad and Cliff took me to pick it up from a young couple who looked like they might cry as we pulled out of the driveway, and instead of him driving the car until I could handle the standard transmission, Dad put me in the driver’s seat and told Cliff to follow behind. He talked as I struggled to get the rhythm of the clutch and stick and gas, talked calmly through the jerks and surges as I stalled the car at every traffic light. Pretty soon I relaxed into listening, the ride smoothed and Dad talked on. “There’s a thing called Florida ice,” he’d said. “The road gets so hot it absorbs the oils the cars leave. When the summer afternoon rains come, the water sits on top of the road oils, the surface becomes slick and your tires can’t grip the surface. Cars skid and pile up like accordions, one behind the next. It looks like patches of ice glinting in the sun—it’s a mirage, but it’s the only warning you get before you’re on top of it. Stay sharp.”

Even though there had been no rain, that’s what I thought of when I saw Cliff’s boots slip, the Florida ice. We were slipping. The mirage came when another set of big cracked hands appeared on the passenger’s side door and began helping him push, and a wide, bearded face smiled briefly through the window. I smiled back warily and mouthed “thank you.” The man, huge, barrel-chested and all plaid shirt from what I could see, said, “You wanna make sure it’s in neutral?”

I nodded and rocked the stick. My forearm grazed the parking brake—still on. I released it fast and looked up at Cliff who was, thank goodness, focused straight ahead, then I looked over at the man and winced in apology. He put a finger to his lips, then he straightened and his face disappeared from my view. The car started picking up speed and Cliff said, “Now!”

Slipping the stick into first gear, I let go the clutch. The Datsun convulsed once and started up with an indignant roar, and the door Cliff had been holding slammed shut as the car lurched forward. Behind me, I heard him yell thanks to our plaid-shirted Samaritan. I waved into the rearview mirror and kept the engine revved while Cliff jogged to the driver’s side of the car. “Jump back over,” he said, and opened the door.

“I’m afraid it will die again—I can drive.”

“You’re not supposed to. It might mess you up.”

“I’m already messed up,” I said. “Just get in.”

He hesitated, then gave up and went around to the passenger’s side. Like a receding wave, traffic seemed to open up just for us, and in less than five minutes we pulled into the pharmacy parking lot.

“If it doesn’t start, to hell with it,” Cliff said, when I told him I’d stay in the car and keep it running. “We’ll get a new one.” I gave him a look. “All right,” he said. “A better one. Come on. You need to get into the air conditioning for a while.”

Of course, after the prescriptions were filled and we got back to the car, it wouldn’t start. Cliff used a nearby pay phone to call his dad. We sat outside the drugstore on a green cement bench directly in front of the car and waited to be picked up. The bench was under shade, and despite the day’s heat, the cement was cool and firm against my back.

I opened up the pain medication. “Says do not operate heavy machinery.” I took the pill with a swallow of bottled water and read the rest of the prescription insert to myself.

“Feels like we should be playing checkers. I feel like an old hick sitting out here.” Cliff slouched down on the bench. He looked around as if scanning the horizon. “Kinda makes me wanna spit.”

I continued to read.

“Yep,” he said, when I didn’t respond. “I got a real hankerin’ for a banjo.”

“Pretty coordinated, playing checkers and banjo at the same time.”

“Well,” he said, stretching his arms over the back of the bench and pretending to pull a hat down over his eyes, “I figger you ain’t much of a checkers player. I kin play a song while yer thinkin’.”

“Thanks.”

He sat that way for a while. Like the first night he got up the nerve to put his arm around me. So still I could almost hear the hum of ‘what next?’ inside him. “Have you thought of anything else for the book?”

“You still want me in on that?” I said, refolding the papers.

He straightened up. “Doesn’t get done otherwise.”

I held the bottle of water to the scratch on my neck. The condensation came together and ran a slow bead along my collarbone and down my chest.

“Dana, this isn’t going to ruin us, is it?”

A hot breeze blew past, rattling the blue striped awning overhead. It rippled across my dress, lifting the skirt hem gently and settled it on Cliff’s knee, the way my hand might if it were so inclined. He moved his arm from the back of the bench and touched the scattered pattern of tiny flowers with his fingertips.

I shrugged, and began peeling up the edges of the label on the water bottle. The label came off in one piece, and I smoothed it onto the dark green of the bench. I had no idea what to say to him. Bad things happened to people, but hadn’t we had our share? I truly believed we’d already been given our lifetime supply, and if we kept our heads down, kept a low cosmic profile, we could stay under the radar of who or whatever was out there smiting the ruthless, ambitious daredevils for seeking fame, fortune, true love. It was only those audacious enough to demand big things from life that got hurt. If we didn’t dream, we wouldn’t have nightmares.

Two mockingbirds settled on the curb in front of us, and one hopped onto the bumper of my ex-car. We sat and watched the birds dance about in a jerkily choreographed two-step, picking at the ground and flinging bits of fluff that displeased them. Cliff nudged me with the back of his hand and motioned toward them. “Look. That one’s only got one leg.”

The soothing effects of the Tylenol-3 had begun to take effect. The pain in my back was at a low ebb, and in my front, only a sense of heat and tenderness. I hadn’t once, during the whole ordeal, let myself entertain notions of what I wanted. Now, confronted, I couldn’t let the image focus. I wasn’t afraid anymore to challenge Cliff’s ironclad version of our future, I wasn’t afraid to attract the attention of the cosmic IRS. I was afraid once I knew what it was I wanted, I’d start the chain of events myself. I would leave.

A familiar “shave and a haircut” honking scattered the birds. At the far end of the parking lot, Cliff’s dad pulled in and headed toward us. Cliff got up and walked over to the car. With his back to me he watched his dad approach, propping one tan desert boot on the front bumper, like a big-game hunter posing with his kill. I checked the sky for little one-legged mockingbird vultures, but they

were gone in search of more fruitful pastures. The carrion here had been picked clean. I pressed the pads of my fingers against my eyelids to ward off coming tears, and centered a thought in the darkness. *I'm so sorry I couldn't do better than this for you.*

When his father pulled up, Cliff helped me into the truck, and in a rare show of tenderness, slipped his arm around, pulled me close, and shifted his body to accommodate mine. Delicious air conditioning surrounded us, and I breathed the cold air in deep. Cliff and his father talked about tow trucks and fuel pumps and junkyards while I gazed foggily out the window, hoping I'd feel better after I slept, hoping it was the day and the drugs making me feel so disconnected, wondering if all of this could pass—and what would become of me if I let it.

We'd only been on the road a few minutes when I saw Chuck's Seafood. On the roof of the restaurant perched the same monstrous, fiery red lobster that had been there for fifteen years. "Look," I said, pointing groggily in its general direction. "Put him in—after the horse."

"The horse is too small," Cliff said.

"Your *mom* is too small," I said, and patted his dad's arm with the back of my hand and pointed again. "Look."

He leaned forward and adjusted the air vent so it blew directly on me. "What, are you hungry?" He hit the blinker and slowed as we approached the restaurant. "We can eat."

"No, Dad," Cliff said. "She can't eat right now."

"Son, you don't tell a woman when she can and can't eat."

"It's bigger than you, for sure," I said.

Cliff's dad looked at me. "What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing," Cliff said. "An idea."

"Tell him," I said. Cliff's dad made the turn into Chuck's parking lot and the lobster loomed over us, snapping its terrible claws, waving its long antennae. "Just tell him."