



balance of
fragile things

a novel by
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ON THE WING

Watching the Butterfly

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Today, people are blind. Our age is less introspective than the previous. We worry neither for the small things nor the large things but rather for the *now* things.

In order to observe her closely, one must make amends with solitude. Not by walking alone but by approaching her with a singularity of mind and the purest of intentions. She delights in our awe, when we come to her without vanity or an architect's eye. She mourns us, too. You can see it in the wings of the swallowtail as she soars with a melancholic flight from one flower to the next. There is a desire for an audience that somehow is lost on those who can no longer see the smallest things. Does she wish for sun? It is wrong to assume she has disconnected from us. Each time we walk past an oak, mourning cloak, field of spring-time grass, or newly snowcapped mountain, she sees.

To be human is to be a part of nature. To feel separate is to be the anomaly. In her presence we feel the sorrows

of modernity fall away like the chrysalis giving way to time. In her presence we feel once more hers, a thing belonging—simultaneously a child and an elder.

Why would we watch a butterfly? When we don't have time to look up and cannot let go of modernity, why would we try? These delicate things are indicators of the forest's health. They tell stories of flood and drought. Their wings are maps to worlds unseen. They are cartographers and pollinators. When the forest and soil are healthy, they are, too. Adults lay their eggs on one kind of plant. The caterpillars eat that one kind of plant. They mummify themselves on one type of plant. The adult then flies in that area eating the nectar from flowers, rotting fruit, or mineral-rich rainwater collecting on the ground. If the host plant is suffering, water is toxic, ground quality is poor—then the butterflies are directly affected. Watch them, and watch the health of the forest and land. When we watch a butterfly flutter from flower to leaf to sky, teasingly, as though its wings are attached to invisible thread that some unseen puppeteer is pulling, we can also see the strength of those living things around it.

When we see an ancient butterfly nearing the end of its life with wings tattered like sails, still searching for nourishment, we may come to a greater understanding of what connects us all. Even battle-scarred, we all still seek the sun, try to avoid pain, and attempt to find food. Thus, all life is connected: Insecta, Lepidoptera, Mammalia.

The insects beneath your feet are managing the earth on which you walk. The trees you pass are providing food

and shelter for hundreds of living things in addition to the shade they provide you and your home. The bees busy in your flower bed are carrying with them saddlebags of pollen and pollinating every other flower, including vegetables growing in your area. What most people don't know is that butterflies and moths aren't just flying flowers: They are the second most important pollinator next to bees. They, too, have a job in the world, and looking pretty is one of their lesser engagements. What we choose to notice about these connections differentiates us as a species. Perhaps many of us no longer see her as she is; rather, she has become a reflection of how we see ourselves.

0 COMMENTS

Vic

When Joe Balestrieri landed a solid right on Vic Singh's nose, the entire student body of Cobalt High probably heard the crack. The sound echoed in Vic's ears as his face went hot, stomach dropped, tears gushed, and copious amounts of blood splattered the front of his T-shirt as well as his assailant's.

Vic's first reaction was worry as he gingerly put his hand in the pocket of his corduroy jacket and felt for something. Then, relieved, he balanced himself against the lockers so he wouldn't faint. The blow had loosened the *patka* that enclosed his unshorn hair; it fell like an autumn leaf to the linoleum floor among blackened splotches of gum. His braid tumbled halfway down his back, a precursor to an imminent turban-wearing future. The length of his hair shocked even Vic as he stood with it naked to the world. He could have dodged the punch and prevented a broken nose; he actually thought of this option as he watched Joe's fist—in slow motion, like a heat-seeking missile—follow the trajectory to his face. But Vic was more concerned with what was in his pocket than with Joe's simian fist.

Vic spit blood, and the crowd of rubbernecking students *ooh'd* and *ahh'd*, then moved closer. The pain from his septum sped through his nerves and reached his toes. This had been the worst day of his life, and at that precise moment, he wondered why he'd gotten out

of bed at all. It had begun with a freak rainstorm that had drenched him on his walk through the abandoned industrial park on his way to school. He'd taken refuge under a gathering of trees.

"Jerk," Vic said under his breath. He looked at Joe and imagined what it would be like to grow four inches and be able to stare down into his soulless eyes. It wasn't fair. Vic was just trying to get by, like everyone else, but Joe had singled him out long ago with tired teasing and insults like "Ali Baba" and "Babu"—though this was the first time he'd physically assaulted him. Joe was Goliath, and he had to have a weakness. Today Vic's EYE FOR AN EYE AND THE WHOLE WORLD'S BLIND T-shirt had ironically attracted Joe to him like a huffer to an open jar of glue.

"You need glasses or something?" Vic said.

Joe laughed, though he took a few steps back.

Vic would get his revenge. He wouldn't react carelessly. He'd craft a plan that would show up Joe in the end. If he couldn't best him with strength, he'd take him down with his brains. Like Batman, who went full-throttle against any and all evil in Gotham, Vic would have his day, he vowed to himself.

He adjusted his nose and realized that this already large feature on his face was now even larger from the swelling. Vic had his father's nose. It was a sometimes trunk-like proboscis, depending on the time of day and allotment of shadow. His mother had told him his profile illustrated his relation to great rulers across oceans and time. These rulers, she said, were conquerors who led their people to victory. Vic had never learned more about these rulers, their names, or their empires, so his mind had constructed disembodied kingly faces with enormous noses, lips with wide moustaches, and heads with heavy crowns. Vic's eyebrows, soft as tufts of rabbit fur and bushy like the wool behind the ear of a yak, were also the exact eyebrows that framed the moon-shaped face of his grandfather, Sardar

Harbans Singh. Vic knew this only from photographs; his grandfather lived in India, and they had never met. But here, now, on this North American continent in the tenth month of the year, the vessels that kept Vic's beak alive were bringing forth a torrent of blood.

"Oh my God." Katie, the freckle-faced object of Vic's affection, put her hands over her mouth.

"I'm okay," Vic said through the blood and tried to smile, which made Katie cringe again. The posse scattered, though Joe stood frozen.

For once Vic was thankful for the robust size of his nose, as he assumed the size allowed a particularly shocking amount of blood to flow. To him, it seemed, his dissimilarity was the cause of his bully magnetism. He'd never cut his hair, because *kesh* was one of The Five Ks of Sikhism, and he wore a *patka* to keep his hair neat and clean. Or perhaps it was the language Vic spoke when he'd first entered school, something he called *Engjabi* that was halfway between English and Punjabi. He uttered words that no teacher could translate when he was in first grade and just beginning to learn that the first letter of the alphabet looked like an apple and the second letter could be turned into a bumblebee if doubled on its side. Or perhaps it was the fact that his father made him follow the traditions of Sikhism when most kids were taking their fashion tips from MTV, not Guru Gobind Singh of the seventeenth century. Every time his parents were called into the school to discuss matters pertaining to Vic, they defended their son passionately with more foreign words like *starpība* and *jhuthá*, but the principal would have no idea they were pointing out the finer points of their family's culture, or that they thought what was being said was mostly untrue. Vic thought they'd set him up for the worst thing any teen could endure—*difference*.

All of these thoughts flooded his mind as the blood poured out. One of Joe's friends pulled him away from the sight of Vic's gore.

"Stupid camel jockey can't even bleed right." The brilliant Joe

Balestrieri had to say something. He didn't know that Vic wasn't even 100 percent Indian.

Joe's racial slur made Vic's face burn with an unearthly desire to defend his culture, his father's religion, his mother's heritage, and his grandparents' existence. But he would not throw a punch. He imagined what his father would want him to do: Vic would let out a war cry—"Jo bole so nihal!"—and with juggernaut speed he would charge Joe and hit him, dead on. Then he'd unsheathe his knife and stab Joe in the gut. But in this reality, Vic simply smiled at Joe with fire in his eyes and stuffed his anger down deep in his belly.

"See ya round," Joe said.

Joe walked away with a sneer, and Vic stared at his back; he hoped his eyes would ignite a flame that would lead everyone to believe that Joe spontaneously combusted. Paranormal scientists would use Joe's remains for proof of the phenomenon and add Joe Balestrieri as a footnote to a contemporary version of the *De Incendiis Corporis Humani Spontaneis*. Vic imagined them standing over a glass table that was lit from beneath, each holding a different scalpel or knife while they pieced together what little was left of Joe's adolescent combustion. Vic laughed because he imagined that would be all Joe would amount to one day—a pile of volatile organic garbage.

"Come on, let's get some ice." Mrs. Stein, the English teacher, took Vic by the arm. The gym teacher, Mr. Smith, grabbed Joe as he made his way down the hall and dragged him forcefully to his office without saying a word.

When Vic and Mrs. Stein arrived in the nurse's office, she let him go into the bathroom to clean up. After he closed the door behind him, he opened his jacket once more and retrieved a very small blue butterfly from his pocket. No larger than a nickel, its light blue luminescent scales sparkled. Vic puzzled over the markings and the difference between the left and right forewings and hind wings.

This inconsistency made Vic uneasy. He analyzed the antennae. Looking more closely, he realized that it was not moving as much as it had been when he'd first found it, at lunch, in the gutter outside of Cobalt High on a pile of dead leaves. It had appeared injured then, but he assumed if he got it home he could give it some rotten fruit or salt water to revive it. But now, noticing its broken antennae, he felt the need to rush home to get it under his microscope. The previous year Vic had identified a Red-Spotted Purple, and it had been, up until this moment, the most amazing butterfly he'd seen. Its wings were akin to majestic glass windows, with shades of burnt orange, sky blue, and eggplant all framed in black. The butterfly had been so enthralled in drinking juices from a sap flow on a deciduous tree that it had barely moved while Vic observed it.

This one, though, was different from anything he'd ever seen. The left and right wings were slightly dissimilar in shape. It was so very fragile. Science usually offered Vic comfort because it explained the world. But this—this was unexpected, and the sight of it made him anxious.

He sighed, folded a large piece of paper towel into an envelope, and slipped the butterfly inside. He changed into his PE shirt and threw his favorite one, now bloodied beyond repair, in the wastebasket. Then he twisted his long braid on top of his head and wrapped the dusty *patka* around it before exiting.

Ms. McClasky, the nurse, handed him an ice pack and said, "Sit down and let me take a look." She lifted his face into the light and looked into his nostrils. After she packed them with gauze, she said, "Put pressure on your nose with the ice."

Vic's wandering eyes landed on a poster on the corkboard to the right of the door. The flyer read: YEARBOOK CONTEST. ART, PHOTOS, ALL SUBMISSIONS CONSIDERED. WIN \$20 AND SEE YOUR ART ON THIS YEAR'S INSIDE COVER! Katie was in charge of the yearbook, and Vic thought

of the possibilities. Maybe he could finally speak with Katie properly and, well, bask in her honey-colored aura.

“Stay still, head back, Mr. Singh,” the nurse said. Just then the principal, Mrs. Cohen, whose disapproving look spoke volumes, entered the room.

“At least school is nearly over for the day. Here.” Mrs. Cohen handed him a letter. “Give this to your parents when you get home. I will call this evening to make certain they received it.”

Vic’s thoughts turned to his father, who, in his mind, was going to kill him, not because he was in a fight but because he was injured—which very specifically meant that he *didn’t* break his opponent’s nose.

Paul

Ikpaol Singh looked out the window of his Kwicky Fill gas station. His eyes traveled down Sycamore Road, across the graying asphalt and beyond the line of cars that had been rerouted around the massive hole in the road. He noticed the frost had arrived early this year, and he tried to rub the serpentine ice patterns from the double-paned windows with his shirt's cuff. The ice wouldn't budge; he realized he was rubbing from the wrong side of the glass. He looked above the trees that grew perilously close to the power lines and frowned at the bruise of clouds gathering. As his longing for a glimpse of the sun grew, he wondered how long it would take to walk to the Punjab if, of course, he could walk on water. He imagined walking with extraordinarily large feet the length of battleships. He would cross seas, continents, and mountains. In an old oak he saw a *pippal* tree, with a trunk the size of an elephant's waist and bark the texture of a riverbed in drought. Paul saw beyond concrete; he saw the suffocated earth under the palimpsest asphalt and gravel.

The construction on Sycamore was as constant as the cloud coverage. And now the prehistoric machines were at it again, with their shovel-toothed mouths and their smoke-puffing blowholes, right outside his gas station. This time the traffic wasn't caused by the new construction in the Heights. The title of the article on page A9 in

the *Daily Mirror* in Paul's hands said the hole was the beginning of a sinkhole. He couldn't believe it. A sinkhole in Cobalt, New York? What next, he thought, an earthquake? The mess was already preventing drivers from entering his station from Sycamore. It caused business to decline, as it always did every time they ripped up the road, even though he'd climbed up the ladder at five that morning to lower his gas prices below the Stop and Go station's by nine-tenths of a cent. Those stupid-bastard city councilmen were just wasting money lifting and repaving roads every year, he thought. The title of the article was "Sinkholes, Man vs. Nature: Who's to Blame?"

"It'd better be nature," Paul grumbled, "or else I'll chase down the idiot who started this mess. Pothole, sinkhole, asshole, same difference." He decided to write a letter to the *Daily Mirror*; his wife, Maija, had a friend who worked there. She'd be obligated to rescue his letter from the slush pile.

He glared at the expanding pile of debris and soil alongside the gaping hole. What they were digging up, he had no idea. What he did know was that he would send another e-mail to the city complaining of his loss of business since the construction began. His station's peripheral location, like a useless appendix to Main Street, already had poor traffic. It now suffered aesthetically from the dust and debris, and he feared the Kwicky Fill was beginning to look like a halfway house for construction workers and their temporary defecation rooms. He would have to do something clever to draw the customers inside the convenience store, and quick. Winter would cut the construction project short, as it usually did, and when the snow melted in the spring he'd see the gash in the road once more. Where were the moderate seasons, like autumn? Seems we have only two seasons in this town, Paul thought: sticky-hot summer and freeze-your-tatte-off winter.

He shrugged, used a pencil to scratch his scalp under his turban,

and flattened his blue dress shirt down a stomach that was just beginning to show the roundness of middle age. Then he stuffed the newspaper into the drawer under the counter and turned his attention to the boxes of windshield fluid that needed unpacking. Today he would make a pyramid of the blue bottles that would entice everyone to make an impulse purchase in his c-store. Perhaps he could sell the whole lot of them in one day. He smiled. Goals made his day speed by.

His knife was in his back pocket, as always. He took it out gingerly, holding it weightlessly, like a child, and unfolded the blade from the handle. He'd bought this knife with his own money when he was a young man. He ran his thumb along the blade. It was getting dull; he would sharpen it soon. On the silver handle was a poorly sketched chain of elephants carrying a man and woman atop their backs. The vendor had said it had special powers, but Paul just liked the handle. He dug the blade into the flesh of the cardboard, then moved it down and away from himself until the box surrendered its contents. He would usually display the first case of windshield fluid at the earliest sign of winter, but today he knew that the debris from the construction would stick to motorists' windshields when they passed by, which would in turn remind them to check their fluid levels. He would be ready. They would buy his windshield fluid. Maybe, if he was really lucky, they'd get flat tires and have to purchase new ones from Paul's inventory.

When he bent toward the first group of blue bottles, something crunched in his back pocket. He pulled out the nuisance, an envelope. One quarter of its face was covered in stamps, and the rest displayed the gaudy handwriting of someone who had recently learned English.

It was another letter from his father.

PLEASE RESPOND was written in bold on the back of the envelope near the adhesive lip. Paul's heart sank. Even from across the world, his father could make him feel inadequate. Paul's father had

been nicknamed “Papaji” decades earlier by a British-educated head of their Punjab village as a term of endearment. Even when relatives attempted to use the common “Dadda” or “Daddaji,” the man scoffed and protested, demanding to be called Papaji by all. Paul had yet to open any of the letters, and they were beginning to pile up. He wondered what Mr. Sardar Harbans Singh wanted so desperately that he’d felt the need to mail one letter per week for the past two months. Paul wanted to leave India and his father behind him—that’s why he’d come to America years earlier. The letter rustled when he shoved it back into his pocket. The sound was familiar, like wind rushing through wheat.

At least there aren’t any snakes here in this village, he thought. This barely comforted him. He looked at the sinkhole and imagined a monstrous basilisk jutting through the surface and swallowing the construction workers. The bell on the convenience store door jingled him back to the present, and he returned to his position behind the counter.

“Marlboro Mediums.” A gruff teenager stared at Paul’s crimson turban as if it were a second head and handed him a wad of crumpled dollars.

Paul sized up his customer with a pointedly critical squint and ran his fingers through his beard in contemplation. He saw his torn jeans and stringy blond hair; he saw a blue jacket with a license-plate-shaped patch on the lapel that read JOE. He saw his buddies waiting for him in an old Mazda outside. Joe smelled as if his backpack were filled with garbage. Who would let their child leave the house looking like this? No shower? No clean clothes? Paul couldn’t understand, even after twenty years of living in this little town, what went on, if anything, in parents’ heads to just give up on their offspring. He told Maija the other day, *These kids smoke like it is some sort of privilege. And their parents think they can blame our little*

stores for selling to minors? Their precious children dress like no-good beggars on the street. And here they have been given so much. Paul lifted a pack of cigarettes from the display and slid them across the counter without taking an eye off the grungy kid.

“I’m eighteen, man.”

“And I’m not your father, *samajhna*?” Paul turned his back to his customer and mumbled, “And don’t read the warning label.”

“What did you say?”

“Have a nice day.”

As he got the kid his change, Paul reread the form that the corporate Kwicky Fill office sent last month, which stated the four Ks of customer service: kindness, konsideration, kalm, and kare. Paul didn’t find the misuse of the letter K particularly funny, but since his station was just a drop in the Kwicky Fill bucket he had to post the list where he could see it at all times. His religion’s use of the letter K was meaningful, not vulgar (*kaccha, kesh, kangha, kirpan, and kara*). By the time he finished reading the list, Joe had already disappeared into the Mazda. The car coughed black smoke out of its tailpipe as it cut off an old lady turning into the station.

The green Salem Lights clock read two-thirty. Paul looked outside and saw his fifteen-year-old son walking past on his way home from school. He decided Vic looked more like a twelve-year-old, but his growth spurt would surely be on its way. This was going to be his big year. He looked at Vic, who had his backpack on and his tidy jacket zipped up all the way. Now, that’s how children should look. They should be proud to be seen, not filthy and smelly, he thought. But today there was something different: His *patka* was dirty, and his nose was no longer symmetrical.

Vic waved and kept walking.

“Oi, *puttar*, where are you going? Come here!”

Vic stopped before crossing the road construction and turned

toward his father.

“What happened? Come inside!”

“I tripped and fell at lunch.” He moved slowly toward his father. Unlikely, Paul thought. “Who did this?”

Vic’s lips tightened until they turned white.

Paul put the BACK IN A MINUTE sign on the door, then inspected his son’s face, bruised and broken as it was, just like his own had been after a fight. “Assholes are a dime a handful.”

Paul took him quickly into the unisex bathroom inside the station and locked the door. After washing his hands, Paul straightened his son’s back and brought him closer to eye level. He placed his large hand flush against Vic’s nose.

“Brace yourself. This will hurt, but only for a second, *puttar*.”

Vic leaned against the tiled wall.

“Don’t worry; I’ve done this to myself twice.” Paul rested his large hand across Vic’s nose and, in one quick movement, he thrust it back to center of his face.

Vic screamed. Tears poured. Paul handed his son a towel for the tears and blood. Paul removed the stained *patka* and took out a white handkerchief from the back pocket of his brown slacks.

“*Puttar*, you need to cover your hair and keep it clean. Otherwise you’re going to have to wash it like the Americans, okay? There are ten gurus, Vic; the first one brought us peace and education, but Gobind, the tenth, brought the *Khalsa*.”

He spoke of the sacrifices the gurus had made to better their lives, and how this unshorn hair, this *kes*, was a symbol of his connection to their martyrdom and willingness to protect those who were unable to protect themselves. He tucked the handkerchief around the braid that was wound into a bun at the very top of Vic’s head, took a pin from his own turban, and bisected the small yet adequate pile of hair and fabric.

“*Puttar*, you will stand up to the *págals* that have been tormenting you. Yes, you will fight back.” Paul’s hands dug into Vic’s shoulders a little too deeply.

“Papa, just—”

Paul took out his knife and held it to his son. “Sometimes the only way to protect yourself is to make others fear you first.”

Vic put his hands in his pockets. The ancient-looking blade glimmered dangerously.

“Take it.”

“No.” Vic’s voice cracked.

“Look”—Paul put the knife on the counter and sucked in his stomach—“I want you to remember that running only makes them chase you faster. They are like hyenas. Stand your ground. Aim for their weaknesses: their knees, their necks, and their feet. It’s not the biggest one that you should attack first but the smallest. Once they see you defeat one of their own, they will back off.”

“Papa?” Vic motioned to the door.

“Yes, *puttar*?”

“Um, nothing.” Vic cleaned his glasses with the edge of his shirt.

“Okay then. Now go home; your mother is waiting. Where’s your sister? You’re supposed to walk with her.”

“She has play practice.” They reentered the store.

“Oh, *achchhá*. She’s your responsibility, you know.”

“I have to study, Papa. I have an exam tomorrow.”

Paul held Vic’s face in his hands. He looked forward to the day when his son would become a man. It was difficult for Paul. How could his son—the son of an ex-boxer, an ex-farmer, and an ex-warrior—allow someone to break his nose? This was not possible. He thought of his Papaji, with the shotgun slung over his shoulder and his knife at the ready to cut whatever needed cutting. Vic’s snake was this bully, and Paul was going to help him stand up to him

regardless of the consequence. They would both have their day, and the other kids would fear his name: Varunesh Dzintar Singh. Paul's eyes glowed, his large nose tingled, and his calloused hands pressed the cheeks of his son just a little too firmly.

"I will make you stronger, *puttar*. Tonight I will show you how to fight." Paul beamed; Vic looked terrified. "Okay then, *chaliá*. Go home and see your mother. I will be home later."

He watched Vic maneuver across the construction and turn onto their street, a cul-de-sac. He noticed that Vic bounced on his toes just a little bit. That would not do. Not for his son. Paul would teach him how to walk, talk, punch, and box. He would show him how to have honor. Paul opened the cabinet under the cash register and caressed his cricket bat; he'd never used it, not once since they'd moved here. He had wanted to whack many of his customers on the noggin several times over the past week, but it wouldn't have been right. But defending oneself, yes, that would be acceptable. The bell on the door jingled, and an old lady entered.

"Hi, Paul. How's life treating ya?"

"Living the dream, Mrs. Carmichael, as always." He gave her his million-dollar smile.

Mrs. Carmichael, an octogenarian, walked around the convenience store, checking the expiration dates on each bottle of milk before pouring a small cup of coffee and topping it off with the freshest milk, which she then returned to the refrigerated section.

"That racket outside is going to raise the dead!"

"You're telling me." Paul stretched his arm out and looked at the foreman through the inch of space between his pointer finger and thumb. Then he squished the man in the distance.

"One day they're going to dig too deep and find what they're looking for."

"Eh, what do you mean?"

“Oh, you know.” She slurped her hot coffee. “Every town keeps their secrets in the ground. You’ve heard the rumors about PMI, right?”

Paul’s blank look said it all.

“Never mind. Hey, am I going to win that trip to Mexico this week?”

“Guaranteed—I see it in your future.”

“Did your wife tell you that? Then it’d mean something. Otherwise, I’d think you just want a cut of my winnings!”

Mrs. Carmichael placed the correct change on the counter, took a sip of her coffee, and tucked the scratchers in her purse. “Keep the change.”

“Have a nice day.”

“All righty. See you next week, Mr. Singh.”

Paul Singh knew two things: One, he would train his son to defend himself; and, two, he would find out if his psychic wife could see what was written on lottery tickets.

Maija

Empress of Multitasking, Goddess of Kitchen and Garden, Countess of Costco—in her mind, Maija Mazur Singh listed all the appropriate titles that she could stitch on her zip-up cardigan’s lapel. On this, her day off, she’d cooked, cleaned, and learned a few things—and it was only the afternoon, which meant she still had time to appraise her children’s secret lives before they returned from school.

Maija had managed to concoct a beautiful sauerbraten and had even remembered to add a few extra peppercorns to quench Paul’s incessant need for spice. To Maija, it seemed he had long burned all the taste buds from his tongue, that the little buds had all waved their white flags after decades of interpreting the scorch of raw chili peppers. Paul claimed capsicum was good for his gums, and Maija wondered what good gums were when the tongue was collateral damage.

She’d also baked an Alexander cake and glazed it to perfection. She’d vacuumed the house and even spent an hour watching Montel Williams’s self-help parenting program. Maija felt as if she could do it all, at least when she was the only one at home. The other inhabitants, her family, made getting things done difficult. No matter what she did or how hard she tried, she could not control everything; she was far from all-knowing, and she had not been blessed with strong parental communication skills. She had the sight, that was

certain, but she rarely saw futures for her family, which was even more frustrating and led to her snooping. Instead of inquiring about Isabella's female changes and Vic's experiences at school, Maija held it in. Birds and bees remained bottled up, and they stung and ate each other. Since she couldn't discuss these difficult topics, she was forced to infiltrate their personal things and read them like runes.

Maija inspected the shoebox that she'd found tucked deep beneath Isabella's bed. It was, of course, more than a box—it was a portal into Isabella's brain, and Maija, mother of no words, parented as she mushroomed: once in a while and when no one was looking. She told herself it was out of love, but deep down she knew that entering dresser drawers and lifting dust ruffles with the intention of unearthing clusters of fleshy chanterelle fragrant with teen angst was necessary. Maija's mother, whom she called Ma while almost everyone else referred to her as Oma, wouldn't have even paused before looking, Maija reassured herself. If she'd bothered at all.

Oma's interest had always been, in Maija's eyes, in the lives of others. After Papa had passed away, it was as though Oma's identity as a mother had vanished along with her identity as a wife, leaving Maija alone. When they had first immigrated to Cleveland through the sponsorship of a Latvian Baptist church, Maija would go through Oma's things in hopes of feeling closer to her. Sneaking Oma's cameo around her neck had comforted her as she'd fought through the Ohio school system's remedial classes with disabled students, students branded as "slow" and other immigrants who struggled with the English language.

Oma would open this box and say that everything in her house was hers anyway, Maija thought as she sat at the foot of Isabella's bed. But still she hesitated.

She could still hear Montel Williams telling mothers that snooping was not right. His eyes had glimmered, his teeth had glistened, and his

hairless head had glowed. Though she knew Montel meant to defend teen privacy to an audience of mothers, his piece only motivated her to scour Vic's and Isabella's bedrooms for secrets.

She imagined all the possible terrors stashed within Isabella's box: marijuana (the devil's weed), weapons (perhaps a gun), or, worse, the Pill. Like Pandora, whose all-gifted hands released the evils of the world and left poor Elpis, hope, in the jar, Maija opened the lid. She puzzled at the contents. If they were emblematic of her daughter's inner self, they weren't going to expose their secrets easily. She perused the items that belonged in the garbage: bottle caps, bits of string, paper clips linked together in a circle, a leaf, a ball of used rubber bands, Band-Aids, and gauze pads. Maija caressed the ordinary office supplies, searching for signs of rebellion. What did these items say about Isabella? It could mean she had a strange desire to collect dirty things; there was a term for that affliction—yes, hoarding. Or perhaps these were simply here to throw someone like Maija off a trail; she was a clever girl.

Maija dug further, and under the odd collection of stickers she found the treasure of all parenting treasures: a diary. She opened the first page and shut it immediately. Then she slowly opened it again and flipped quickly through the whole book. She saw some sort of code: BFF, 2GTBT, 459, 4EAE, BTWIAILWU. None of these codes made sense to Maija. Was Isabella in trouble? The only codes that Maija knew were pharmacological: OTC (over the counter), QOD (every other day), PO (for the mouth), and BID (twice a day). She closed the book and tried to forget everything that had taken place over the previous few minutes. She wished she'd never opened it in the first place.

The phone rang, and Maija jumped. In a rush, she rearranged the box the way she had found it and put it back under Isabella's bed in the same place. Guilt and regret began to build in her heart. She

wished she could forget what just happened and pretend that there wasn't a code to decipher. It was her deepest flaw, that she could see the futures of others but not of her loved ones. What good was being a psychic at all? She shuffled her slipper-clad feet to the piss-yellow kitchen to the phone. The walls looked dreadful during the afternoon, when the fluorescent lights had to be turned on above the sink. "Summer Apricot, my *dūre*." Maija rolled her Rs. "Curse you, Lowe's employee who sold me this paint."

The phone rang a third time, and Maija picked it up.

"Hallo? Yes, Paul, my dear, what did you say?" Her heart pounded in her chest. "No, I've never played the lottery. Well—" Maija squinted, hoping the adjustment would increase the acuteness of her large ears, which hid beneath piles of thick brown curls.

"You want me to look at some lottery tickets? Why, darling? You know *it* doesn't work that way." She scrunched her nose into a button-sized embellishment between her two high cheekbones. Maija's blue eyes were murky like the sea, and her hair, particularly on humid fall days like this one, would mat together like seaweed tossed in a ruthless current. But an ocean goddess she was not. She was no mermaid or undine. She was stout, like her favorite beer, which she drank warm.

"Fine, yes, sweetie, I will look at them. Oh, bring home a gallon of milk, will you, dear?"

She cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder as she stacked the mail in a neat pile next to the computer in the kitchen nook. There was a notice from Cobalt High inviting parents to join the PTA, a few coupons from Dante's Hops and Pies, and another letter from India. "What? My *putns!* Poor Vicki. Okay, I will wait for him." News that her son was coming home with an injury was upsetting. At that moment her heart raced, and the letter from India began emanating light. It flickered opal like a small galaxy. It was

irresistible to Maija.

“Uz redzēšanos,” she said, then hung up.

This letter was different than the others from Paul’s father. She lifted it to the fluorescent light and looked at the thin piece of parchment folded into a square inside. Maija had never met Paul’s family because, he’d told her, they were poor and couldn’t afford the plane tickets from India. Paul and Maija had met in a pharmacy in Cobalt years and years ago. He’d crushed his hand while fixing his car, and he’d been getting antibiotics to ward off infection. She’d fallen in love with him after their first picnic date in the park, when he told her she was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen and then kissed her. He told her she tasted like strawberries. They were married in the Cobalt courthouse by a justice, and only a couple friends were in attendance along with Oma. Her day was far from the wedding she’d imagined, but they were in love. Yet every time Maija asked him about his family, Paul turned to ice. Once, he’d mentioned something vague about his father’s anger, and she took it to mean that his abusive nature had caused Paul to immigrate to America. Not knowing the details allowed Maija’s imagination to run without reins.

Don’t you think it would be good to make amends now? she’d asked years earlier. *Whatever happened, happened so long ago.*

Piyar, you should be thankful I am not speaking to them, he replied. *Otherwise they might decide to move in with us like other Indian in-laws.*

She’d kept her mouth shut after that.

The letters had begun to arrive a couple months ago, and their frequency was increasing. Why didn’t Paul’s father just call like a normal person? Maija shrugged and took a deep sniff from the letter’s edge. The glue on the envelope’s lip smelled like a journey across a sea by steamship.

At that moment, everything within Maija’s vision froze, and her

lips became icy, as though a cool breeze had blown across her face. The saliva in her mouth vanished. Her perspective was slipping, and she was being pulled gently backward into herself. It was an uncanny feeling. She thought it must be similar to the sensation Alice felt as she grew taller in the bottom of the rabbit hole.

Inside her mind, Maija came upon a scene. She felt rain pelt her face as she approached a dense forest. The trees bent and swayed under the wind, then parted to expose a dirt path. Maija moved forward, frightened. Her feet were bare. It felt as if the trees were watching her as she intruded into their home. A lion appeared up ahead, and she knew to follow. The dirt beneath her feet turned to water that began to rise. The lion vanished under the water, and in its place was something shiny in the soil. Maija was pushed into the water, which turned into an ocean. She swam under the water toward the shiny object, and when she reached for it, the edge cut her finger. Suddenly the water rushed away, and she was left, cheek down, in the mud. A small aluminum butterfly lay in her hand. She heard a tearing sound. A tall man wearing a *kurta pajama* was dragging a long *kirpan* along the forest ground in the distance. The blade was slicing open the land as he walked. Reddish brown soil bubbled up from the gash.

The vibrations of his steps shook Maija back into her kitchen. She sat up on the floor in front of the open refrigerator. A pitcher on the top shelf lay on its side; iced tea pooled around her bare feet. The slippers were across the room.

“*Vīratēvs?*”

From her vision, she knew that her father-in-law was coming to her home, and there was nothing she could do about it. She shook her head. Maija hoped he wouldn't pollute her home with his violence. Now she knew what was written in the letter: The man whom Paul called Papaji was coming. There was more, much more to decipher,

but one thing was clear: His presence would change her home.

Maija wiped up the iced tea and threw the dishtowel in the sink. Dammit, she could work and plan and cook, and still she felt she had no control over life. She could see silly things in the future—the way she saw Mrs. Carmichael win fifty dollars on her scratcher, and now the strange vision about her father-in-law—but rarely anything to do with her immediate family.

Maija took off her reading glasses and looked at the letter. She focused her eyes, those penetrating steel orbs set perfectly apart with almond-shaped lids that suggested her relation to Mongolia. She was a woman of few words; she spoke through grin or sneer. Slow to warm, her stare, chilly as though it trickled from some mountain up on high, would grip others' smiles and greetings. And no, her eyebrows wouldn't curl, her eyelashes wouldn't flutter, and the uncanny, unabashed line one could draw from her eyes to those of her acquaintances could have been traveled by icicle. Maija's corneas, irises, lenses, retinas, and optic nerves rested precariously atop centuries of Latvian political oppression—they were the peaks of glaciers of her forced suspicion for all who were free to flash their teeth, for they might be the ones reporting to the KGB.

Okay, she said to herself, deep breath in, and deep breath out. Focus on the positive. Be present. She chanted a slogan: Where is my happy place? She dodged images in her head of Vic being beaten at school and of Papaji hitting Paul as a child.

Maija curled her toes and relaxed them, donned her slippers, and shuffled along to the pots with the makings of *sivēna galerts*, her favorite aspic loaf, on the stove. She relished the few days a week she could spend at home from her part-time job as a pharmacy technician—and nothing would ruin her day. Her feet would swell to a half size larger when she worked; during one shift, she would stand for at least ten hours. So, over the four days a week she spent at home,

she kept her prettily painted toes nestled deep within her fuzzy, size-eight sheepskin slippers. Her feet were a size six. As she shuffled in the too-big slippers, she made a rhythm with her feet: one-two-three, one-two-three. She loved dancing. And though Paul did, too, they literally moved to beats from very different drummers: his was a *tabla* and sitar, hers a *kokle* and woodwind. As she shuffled across the kitchen floor, she wondered whether she should tell Paul what she'd seen. Better not, she thought; he needed to read the letters himself. Maybe she'd ask him about them. And in her kitchen, with the aroma of her sauerbraten wafting in the nostrils of her button-sized nose, she waltzed across the linoleum floor and directly, accidentally, into Vic.

“Oh, *mans zvirbulis*, you are home.”

When Vic was born, he'd weighed only a few pounds, and as Maija held him in her arms she decided he resembled a little bird. Now, she gasped at her son's battered face and had to steady herself against the counter. “Vicki, who did this?”

She lifted his face under the light. His nose had been broken. Black eyes were forming. His cheek was bruised and swollen. Maija began to cry without a sound. This was the work of a villain. “Oh, my baby!”

“Mama, can we talk about this later? Ouch!” Vic's voice was nasally, and Maija pushed him to sit at a kitchen stool and turned his face this way and that. She looked into his nostrils, cut pieces off a new sponge, and carefully shoved the sponge inside. Then she piled a bag of frozen lima beans on his face and told him to sit still.

“Oh dear, does it hurt much?”

He did not respond.

“Where is your sissy Queen Isabella?” Maija asked while nervously dumping a pile of ibuprofen into her hand; a few fell to the floor, and she didn't pick them up.

“Rehearsal. The play.”

“Ah, yes, will Michelle give her a ride home, then?” She tried her hardest not to say anything about the fight because that was Paul’s department, though it was difficult. “You know, you are lucky to have such a nice little sissy, Vicki; you should take care of her. Ninth grade can be very difficult for kids these days.”

Maija’s fountain of parenting knowledge reached the end. She considered the archetypes she’d learned from television, including the troubled teens, pregnant teens, druggie teens, and even prostituting teens. Just earlier that day, she’d watched a special on the Internet and teens, and she was thankful neither of her children spent much time on their one family computer in the kitchen, except when papers were due. Oh yes, Vic had an obsession with a video game that had something to do with building a city, an entire simulated world. That and his blog he told her about. This sounded nice to Maija—so creative, not destructive—but Vic would never show his mother his creations.

“Please don’t call me Vicki, Mama. Call me Vic.”

“Oh yes. Sorry, *mazs dēls*.” Maija put her hands on Vic’s cheeks and concentrated in an attempt to see something, anything—but the other world gave her nothing, as usual.

“Mama, quit it!”

“Who did this to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Your father will fix it.”

“It’s like I’m asking for it, wearing this stupid thing on my head and all.”

“Vicki!”

“There isn’t even a *gurdwára* in this town—why should I have to wear this?”

“You want I should start one? You’re lucky I don’t send you to

Latvian camp. There's one in Pennsylvania, you know. Or maybe you'd rather." Maija's cold eyes found Vic's pupils.

He looked unfazed. "You don't get it. Do kids in Latvia wear this?"

"I know how difficult the teen years are."

Vic went to his room without looking back at his mother. She knew he wouldn't emerge until his father requested his presence in the backyard later. She knew he thought it was unfair that his sister didn't have to display an element of their father's orthodox religion. But wasn't that part of being a teenager, thinking the world's against you and wondering why it's so unfair?

Maija wondered how having a grandparent in the house would change her children. She went to his bedroom; the door wasn't closed all the way, so she peeked inside. His hair was flowing down his back in curls, rebelling against the turban. He looked small under all that hair. He was sitting on the edge of his bed reading a comic. She wanted to go in, wanted to talk, but she wouldn't. What was he reading? A story about a rabbit samurai? She couldn't read the rest of the cover. *Ach*, she wanted to enter, but she remembered hearing somewhere that it was best to give space to teens. She just hoped he wasn't imagining what it would feel like to hold a sword in his own hands. But then she remembered his aversion to sharp objects and felt better.

Isabella

The stage was a collection of loosely assembled wood, nails, and glue, its floor covered in thick black paint, dulled and scratched by a thousand feet that crossed it in productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Crucible*. Behind the curtained walls: four metal chairs, six bowler hats, broken track lights, a working stepladder, and a podium. Stage left: a wooden cutout of a leafless willow tree painted black and gray. Stage right: petite Isabella Singh, with long black hair and caramel eyes hidden behind glasses, and sixteen-year-old Erik Fritjof, who looked like a scrawny descendant of Vikings.

Isabella's surroundings were standard as far as high school theaters went, but she had never been inside a real theater. The Royal Cineplex 5 didn't count; that was where she'd sneak in the back door with a bag of sour gummy worms tucked in her pocket and stay all day long, bouncing from one movie to the next as if it was her job. This theater was different. Its smell, for one thing, was a combination of dense mothballs and Elmer's glue. Isabella imagined that the stage was pasted together and wondered if it might collapse under the six drama club members and one rotund teacher. She estimated the distance to the exit was thirty seconds away at a sprint, and she wondered, if she ran fast enough, whether she could

defy the space-time continuum and go back in time to three weeks earlier and not join the drama club.

“Are we square? One more time.” Mr. Tewkesbury rubbed his belly over his red flannel shirt. Mr. Tewkesbury’s Worcester accent caused him to avoid Rs as though they were arsenic, so his *square* sounded like *sk-way*.

Isabella adjusted the bowler hat tipped on her head. The black circle drawn over her left eye with face paint was running down her cheek. Rumor had it that the face paint was left over from when Tewks had done a stint in the circus as a clown. That was after his off-Broadway days, which he reminded his students of often. They’d been practicing the scene from *Waiting for Godot* because it would, as Tewks put it, help them intellectually understand his own play, *1,001 Cries*, which they would be performing in three weeks. Each week, he’d cast a different actor as Vladimir or Estragon. Now it was Isabella’s turn as Estragon.

Isabella read her line. “Where are the leaves?”

Erik said, “It must be dead.”

Isabella said, “No more weeping.”

Tewks screamed, “No, no, no! You both sound like robots. Put some feeling into it. Remember what I told you earlier.”

Isabella pushed her glasses higher on her nose. The rest of the club held its breath, too afraid to express their lack of comprehension. “Um, no, Mr. Tewkesbury. What do you mean by ‘defiling plot,’ and what does, er, something about ‘rupturing representations of reality’ mean?”

He growled and clumsily cleaned his round spectacles on the edge of his shirt. “I knew my gift to you all would go unappreciated.” He twisted his copy of *Waiting for Godot* into an object appropriate for hitting students, then spread his hands and pushed outward at the students, as if through this action he could blast them all off the

stage and out the rear door. “The author is a postmodernist. He is destroying the grand narrative.”

“I get it, Mr. Tewkesbury. They don’t, but I do.” Tracy Finch’s voice was cotton candy.

“No, I understand that part,” Isabella said. “It’s minimalist. But what’s the point? Is it a play about nothing?” Isabella moved closer to Erik for support. Michelle, her best friend, moved toward her as well.

“Well—in a way.” Tewks squinted.

“Like *Seinfeld*?” Erik ventured.

“Nothing like *Seinfeld*. Take five.” Tewks clapped his hands, then pointed to Tracy, and they both went toward his office.

“Fun, fun,” Michelle said to Isabella.

“What’s he thinking, anyway? High school theater is about the big five.” Erik shrugged.

“Big five?”

“*The Crucible*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and of course, if you’re daring, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I didn’t sign up for postmodern drama. I hate the way that Tewks is forcing it down our throats. And, like, we should be spending time rehearsing *1,001 Cries*.”

“Yeah, and what’s up with Tracy? She’s so obviously his lap dog.” Michelle tousled her blonde pixie haircut and stuck her finger down her throat in a faux gag.

Isabella nodded in agreement. She thought about Tracy. Isabella found herself hesitant around Tracy, always afraid she would see signs of the girl who had lived next door when they were children. What if Isabella got the urge to remind Tracy of the day they’d played hide-and-seek and Isabella had lost her pink My Little Pony in Tracy’s backyard? What might happen if she mentioned the time they’d dressed in Mrs. Finch’s clothes and pretended to be mommies to their baby dolls?

Reminiscing was only meaningful between two friends. Isabella would be a fool to ask Tracy how she liked living in the Heights, across the river. She would be even more foolish to ask how her life had changed since PMI closed and her father, who was a PMI director, was laid off and given enough severance to begin building the Heights development. The Finch flock had sold their house next to the Singhs on Peregrine Court, moved to their gated community across the river, and ascended the social ladder into the upper echelon of Cobalt. Isabella's father used to obsess about what Mr. Finch did to receive such a massive severance. It gave him little comfort to know the Finches had inherited the land on which they'd built the development from Mr. Finch's great-grandfather.

As Tewks and Tracy returned, Isabella looked at Tracy—in spite of the downpour of doubt, not because of it. Tracy's golden hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her slender back. Aside from the hair and eyes, Isabella couldn't find a trace of the girl she had known five years earlier. It was strange to realize that so much time had passed, yet this was the first moment Isabella had studied her ex-friend unabashedly. The sightings in the school halls were fleeting. Getting a good look at Tracy was like trying to spot a gazelle in a field of reeds. The divide between the microcosms of student society didn't allow them to interact.

Tewks had returned with a stack of paper, sweaty with determination. The students gathered around him eagerly.

"This should be good." Erik nudged Isabella's arm. She felt sparks all over her body.

Michelle gripped Isabella's arm. "Isabella, I have to tell you something."

"What, Michelle?"

Her friend looked nervous.

"Now," Tewks said, "I have to reassign the lead role, since the

lead will no longer be with us. No complaining, no trading, and no crying.”

Tracy scowled at Isabella.

“Isabella,” Tewks continued, “since you’ve shown some promise, and I assume you’ve spent time with Michelle as she worked on this role, you will play Samantha from now on.”

Gasps rose from the group.

“What? Me? Why?” Isabella turned to her friend. “Michelle?” Samantha was the President’s daughter, who during the play was trapped in the bomb shelter with the Vice President, trying to talk him out of pressing the doomsday button.

“You will be perfect.” Tewks grinned and clapped his hands together, making it so.

“I’m sorry,” Michelle whispered. “I just found out and wanted to tell you before this, but all my teachers got a letter from my dad. I’m moving.”

Isabella felt as if she’d been hit twice by a truck: Her best friend was moving, and she had to take her role. She’d signed up for drama club for three reasons: Michelle, Mrs. Stein, and Erik. First Michelle had wanted her to join. Then Mrs. Stein had ultimately convinced her to join after Isabella had neglected to turn in a paper about Charlotte Brontë. Isabella had tried to use “religious holiday” and “my grandmother’s sick” as excuses, but Mrs. Stein had seen through it and suggested that she join the drama club for extra credit, adding that this extra credit would, in fact, be required in order to receive a decent grade in the class. And then Isabella had met Erik and decided she wanted to stay.

“You’ve made a mistake,” Isabella said to Tewks. She was fine with a bit part like Girl #3 or the Explosion, which stood to the rear of the stage and didn’t have to do much but scream *Bam* and shake a tambourine at a particular moment.

“Why, are you not comfortable playing the lead?”

“No, it’s just—”

“Look, figure out if you want it by tomorrow morning. I’d really like to see you as Samantha. She’s the Lolita of the play, okay, and you’re perfect for the part.”

Isabella blushed. Erik whispered, “That’s hot.”

“I’ll have to think about it.” She fought the urge to vomit; her heart raced.

“Okay.” Tewks rolled his eyes. “You have one day. The show is scheduled to begin in three weeks. And now that we’ve changed things, we are in a crunch.” He continued reassigning a few of the smaller roles.

Dammit! Isabella’s thoughts were so loud she wondered if others could hear her. She couldn’t possibly manage the lead role. She couldn’t even remember her homework, much less an entire script. It was Tewks’s fault they were behind schedule; now they all were going to be punished for his lack of connection to reality.

“No, not okay, Tewks.” Tracy was the only student who had the permission to call him by his nickname. “She’s all wrong for the part. I should be Samantha. Look at her! She totally can’t even handle us looking at her right now. How is she supposed to manage an entire audience?”

Isabella laughed nervously. Her nose, which was a smaller, feminine version of her brother’s, turned scarlet. When she was born, Isabella had looked just like her father’s second cousin’s mother—a woman named Rani who everyone said was *sohná*. When Isabella was eight, she began to look more like her mother’s side of the family; her eyes appeared more unintentionally intense day by day. Now, as a teen, she finally looked like herself, independent of the Singh or Mazur tribes, aside from the nose.

“Shush up, Tracy. Samantha’s Best Friend is a great role for

you.” He turned back to Isabella. “We’ll have to do something about that overly responsive nose of yours. Do you have contacts?”

“You’ll be great,” Erik said before tossing his backpack over his shoulder and leaving with the other students.

In the hallway, Michelle held her hand and said, “Remember that time we told our moms we were sleeping at each other’s houses and went to the haunted house in Oswego instead?”

“Yeah, brilliant idea. We didn’t even make it until dark.” Isabella rolled her eyes.

“And we thought we were going to sleep there through the night and take pictures of the old woman ghost.”

“Mrs. Fletcher. Yeah, that was super creepy.”

Then Michelle changed the subject. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to tell you first,” she said. “My dad had to tell Tewks because he’s a teacher.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s my immune system. They don’t know what’s wrong with me. They think I’m—”

“Don’t even say it.”

Michelle had been sick for months, but Isabella had just assumed it was mono or the flu or something that teenagers get. She never thought it was serious.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ve got something bad in my blood.”

“Where are you going?”

“New York City. My dad got transferred there so we can be close to NYU and Columbia hospitals. I’m scared, Iz.”

Isabella hugged her friend. “It’ll be okay. I know it will.” She said a prayer in her mind. She held Michelle’s hand as they walked. “The city isn’t far. I can take a bus there in three hours.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. I’ll ride the bus even if I have to sit next to a weirdo.”

“You’re gonna do great as Samantha.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. Do it for me.”

Isabella’s stomach turned, and her head shook no.

“You want to come over?”

“I should head home. Mom’s all into QT together. I’ll walk.”

“I have to pack anyway. I’ll call you before I leave.”

“I can’t believe—” Isabella stopped, her words flat in her mouth.

She walked the long way home from school. The cold air was heavy with moisture. Isabella let the tears come without fight. They rolled warmly down her cheeks and around her mouth, then collected at the delicate point of her chin. She wished her run-down suburban surroundings were a desert, ocean, or forest. The houses she passed in the neighborhood around Cobalt High seemed to be watching her, judging her with their chipped-paint faces. Instead of inducing visions of comfort and apple pie, the word *neighborhood* twisted Isabella’s stomach into knots.

She ducked into the clearing that ran between an old factory and the river near the Flats. Nature ignores us, she thought; it doesn’t watch us. The wild had reclaimed the factory-turned-brownfield. Concrete slabs, rebar, and other remnants of the booming assembly of computer parts were almost fully appropriated. Tall grasses, young sycamores, and ivy sprouted from gaps in the walls and tilted cement blocks. A steel rod stabbed an oak tree that had grown too close to a wall. How slow the pain must have been, Isabella thought. The bark looked as if it had parted and made way for the metal that embedded itself into it—but it grew beyond that point; its branch made a detour around the steel. The tree continued.

She slowed her steps and peered into a glassless window of the factory. It smelled sweet inside, as if the last person who’d left had dumped a barrel of clover honey on the floor. They must have left

quickly, she noted, because telephones, folders, desks, and other typical office equipment were still inside, as if an atom bomb had vaporized all the humans. She heard the *whoo-who* of a barn owl that was perched high in the rafters. It stared down at her with its ghostly, heart-shaped face. Humans leave permanent stains on the spaces they use, she thought, then turned her back to the brownfield and walked toward the thicket.

She'd learned in fourth grade that the cougar, *felis concolor*, and the wolf, *canis lupus*, were common in New York State—even here in the Southern Tier. Isabella looked for an imprint of these animals, but they'd left nothing. She imagined the cougar slinking through the tall grass and the wolf leaping through the forest. The image was so foreign, like trying to imagine an elephant or a grazing triceratops. She'd also completed a report on the Iroquois in that same class. Her mind was filling with absent lives. She took in her surroundings, extinct and otherwise.

As she continued along, the ground grew wet because of the Chautauqua River. A large black willow moaned with the wind. It looked nothing like the black cutout on the stage; this one still had most of its leaves. The wind blew, but the tree stood still. The roots ruptured the earth as though the spine of a creature were rising to the surface. Then Isabella noticed the long thin branches lift gently with the breeze. Just a moment before, she hadn't noticed this slight movement. She refocused her eyes, as though she were watching it for the first time, and was amazed: A beetle dove under a root. Ants marched in a line to the water's edge. Her shadow caused night to fall upon a forest of reeds. If she focused too hard, she could no longer see the details, but if she allowed her peripheral vision to lead, everything moved—like when she tried to count the number of stars in the Pleiades and they would disappear, then playfully reappear a moment later when she focused on something else.

Isabella bent over and picked up a rock at her feet. The rock wasn't special, but the moment was. She memorized the rough, reddish-gray surface. The rock would find a place among her collection in the shoebox or her locker at school. She wanted to remember this moment because she felt present. Some moments she wanted to remember because of their pain—like the ball of rubber bands she'd "borrowed" from Ms. Simm's desk after she'd passed away at ninety—or because of their joy, as in the paper clips she'd "borrowed" from Erik. These items embodied the essence of people, and when she perused her collection, it felt like communing with friends. She'd collected so many little things, and she never forgot the feeling of the moment to which it was attached.

Her path took her along the river; in this light the water looked black as tar. She met up with Main Street in the Flats and followed it all the way to her house on Peregrine Court, the split-level at the end of the cul-de-sac. As she turned her key in the lock, she heard strange metallic noises *twang* and *ting* from the backyard. She didn't check to see what it was; she just stood and listened instead.

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