

at a time. I put the jewelry in special silk pouches. The sweaters she had knitted in yellow, pink, bright orange—all the colors I hated—I put those in moth-proof boxes. I found some old Chinese silk dresses, the kind with little slits up the sides. I rubbed the old silk against my skin, then wrapped them in tissue and decided to take them home with me.

After I had the piano tuned, I opened the lid and touched the keys. It sounded even richer than I remembered. Really, it was a very good piano. Inside the bench were the same exercise notes with handwritten scales, the same secondhand music books with their covers held together with yellow tape.

I opened up the Schumann book to the dark little piece I had played at the recital. It was on the left-hand side of the page, "Pleading Child." It looked more difficult than I remembered. I played a few bars, surprised at how easily the notes came back to me.

And for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side. It was called "Perfectly Contented." I tried to play this one as well. It had a lighter melody but the same flowing rhythm and turned out to be quite easy. "Pleading Child" was shorter but slower; "Perfectly Contented" was longer but faster. And after I played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song.

MELANIE RAE THON

First, Body

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Two nurses with scissors could make a man naked in eleven seconds. Sid Elliott had been working Emergency eight months and it amazed him every time. Slicing through denim and leather, they peeled men open faster than Sid's father flayed rabbits.

Roxanne said it would take her longer than eleven seconds to make him naked. "But not that much longer." It was Sunday. They'd met in the park on Tuesday, and she hadn't left Sid's place since Friday night. She was skinny, very dark-skinned. She had fifteen teeth of her own and two bridges to fill the spaces. "Rotted out on smack and sugar. But I don't do that shit anymore." It was one of the first things she told him. He looked at her arms. She had scars, hard places where the skin was raised. He traced her veins with his fingertips, feeling for bruises. She was never pretty. She said this too. "So don't go thinking you missed out on something."

He took her home that night, to the loft in the warehouse overlooking the canal, one room with a high ceiling, a mattress on the floor beneath the window, a toilet behind a screen, one huge chair, one sink, a hot plate with two burners, and a miniature refrigerator for the beer he couldn't drink anymore.

"It's perfect," she said.

Now they'd known each other six days. She said, "What do you see in me?"
 "Two arms, two ears. Someone who doesn't leave the room when I eat chicken."

"Nowhere to go," she said.

"You know what I mean."

He told her about the last boy on the table in Emergency. He'd fallen thirty feet. When he woke, numb from the waist, he said, *Are those my legs?* She lay down beside him, and he felt the stringy ligaments of her thighs, the rippled bone of her sternum; he touched her whole body the way he'd touched her veins that night in the park, by the water.

He sat at his mother's kitchen table. "What is it you do?" she said.

"I clean up."

"Like a janitor?"

Up to our booties in blood all night, Dr. Enos said.

"Something like that."

She didn't want to know, not exactly, not any more than she'd wanted to know what his father was going to do with the rabbits.

She nodded. "Well, it's respectable work."

She meant she could tell her friends Sid had a hospital job.

He waited.

"Your father would be proud."

He remembered a man slipping rabbits out of their fur coats. His father had been laid off a month before he thought of this.

Tonight his mother had made meatloaf, which was safe—so long as he remembered to take small bites and chew slowly. Even so, she couldn't help watching, and he kept covering his mouth with his napkin. Finally he couldn't chew at all and had to wash each bite down with milk. When she asked, "Are you happy there?" he wanted to tell her about the men with holes in their skulls, wanted to bring them, trembling, into this room. Some had been wounded three or four times. They had beards, broken teeth, scraped heads. The nurses made jokes about burning their clothes.

But the wounds weren't bullet holes. Before the scanners, every drunk who hit the pavement got his head drilled. "A precautionary measure," Dr. Enos explained. "In case of hemorrhage."

"Did the patient have a choice?"

"Unconscious men don't make choices."

Sid wanted to tell his mother that. *Unconscious men don't make choices*. He wanted her to understand the rules of Emergency: first, body, then brain—stop the blood, get the heart beating. No fine tuning. Don't worry about a man's head till his guts are back in his belly.

Dr. Enos made bets with the nurses on Saturday nights. By stars and fair weather they guessed how many motorcyclists would run out of luck cruising from Seattle to Marysville without their helmets, how many times the choppers would land on the roof of the hospital, how many men would be stripped and pumped but not saved.

Enos collected the pot week after week. "If you've bet on five and only have three by midnight, do you wish for accidents?" Dr. Roseland asked. Roseland never played. She was beyond it, a grown woman. She had two children and was pregnant with the third.

"Do you?" Enos said.

"Do I what?"

Enos stared at Roseland's swollen belly. "Wish for accidents," he said.

Skulls crushed, hearts beating, the ones lifted from the roads arrived all night. Enos moved stiffly, like a man just out of the saddle. He had watery eyes—bloodshot, blue. Sid thought he was into the pharmaceuticals. But when he had a body on the table, Enos was absolutely focused.

Sid wanted to describe the ones who flew from their motorcycles and fell to earth, who offered themselves this way. *Like Jesus*. His mother wouldn't let him say that. *With such grace*. He wished he could make her see how beautiful it was, how ordinary, the men who didn't live, whose parts were packed in plastic picnic coolers and rushed back to the choppers on the roof, whose organs and eyes were delivered to Portland or Spokane. He was stunned by it, the miracle of hearts in ice, corneas in milk. These exchanges became the sacrament, transubstantiated in the bodies of startled men and weary children. Sometimes the innocent died and the faithless lived. Sometimes the blind began to see. Enos said, "We save bodies, not souls."

Sid tasted every part of Roxanne's body: sweet, fleshy lobe of the ear, sinewy neck, sour pit of the arm, scarred hollow of the elbow. He sucked each finger, licked her salty palm. He could have spent weeks kissing her, hours with his tongue inside her. Sometimes he forgot to breathe and came up gasping. She said, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

And he said, "You think you can kill me?"

"Yes," she said, "anybody can."

She had narrow hips, a flat chest. He weighed more than twice what she did. He was too big for himself, always—born too big, grown too fast. Too big to cry. Too big to spill his milk. At four he looked six; at six, ten. Clumsy, big-footed ten. Slow, stupid ten. *Like living with a bear*, his mother said, something broken every day, her precious blown-glass ballerina crumbling in his hand, though he held her so gently, lifting her to the window to let the light pass through her. He had thick wrists, enormous thumbs. Even his eye-

brows were bushy. *My monster*, Roxanne said the second night, *who made you this way?*

"How would you kill me?" he said. He put one heavy leg over her skinny legs, pinning her to the bed.

"You know, with my body."

"Yes, but how?"

"You know what I'm saying."

"I want you to explain."

She didn't. He held his hand over her belly, not quite touching, the thinnest veil of air between them. "I can't think when you do that," she said.

"I haven't laid a finger on you."

"But you will," she said.

He'd been sober twenty-seven days when she found him. Now it was forty-two. Not by choice. He'd had a sudden intolerance for alcohol. Two shots and he was on the floor, puking his guts out. He suspected Enos had slipped him some Antabuse and had a vague memory: his coffee at the edge of the counter, Enos drifting past it. Did he linger? Did he know whose it was? But it kept happening. Sid tried whiskey instead of rum, vodka instead of whiskey. After the third experiment he talked to Roseland. "Count your blessings," she said. "Maybe you'll have a liver when you're sixty." She looked at him in her serious, sad way, felt his neck with her tiny hands, thumped his back and chest, shined her flashlight into his eyes. When he was sitting down, she was his height. He wanted to lay his broad hand on her bulging stomach.

No one was inclined to offer a cure. He started smoking pot instead, which was what he was doing that night in the park when Roxanne appeared. *Materialized*, he said afterward, *out of smoke and air*.

But she was no ghost. She laughed loudly. She even breathed loudly—through her mouth. They lay naked on the bed under the open window. The curtains fluttered and the air moved over them.

"Why do you like me?" she said.

"Because you snore."

"I don't."

"How would you know?"

"It's my body."

"It does what it wants when you're sleeping."

"You like women who snore?"

"I like to know where you are."

He thought of his sister's three daughters. They were slim and quick, moving through trees, through dusk, those tiny bodies—disappearing, reappearing—those children's bodies years ago. Yes, it was true. His sister was right.

Better that he stayed away. Sometimes when he'd chased them in the woods, their bodies had frightened him—the narrowness of them, the way they hid behind trees, the way they stepped in the river, turned clear and shapeless, flowed away. When they climbed out downstream, they were whole and hard but cold as water. They sneaked up behind him to grab his knees and pull him to the ground. They touched him with their icy hands, laughing like water over stones. He never knew where they might be, or what.

He always knew exactly where Roxanne was: behind the screen, squatting on the toilet; standing at the sink, splashing water under her arms. Right now she was shaving her legs, singing nonsense words, *Sha-na-na-na-na*, like the backup singer she said she was once. "The Benders—you probably heard of them." He nodded but he hadn't. He tried to picture her twenty-four years younger, slim but not scrawny. Roxanne with big hair and white sequins. Two other girls just like her, one in silver, one in black, all of them shimmering under the lights. "But it got too hard, dragging the kid around—so I gave it up." She'd been with Sid twenty-nine days and this was the first he'd heard of any kid. He asked her. "Oh yeah," she said, "of course." She gave him a look like, *What d'you think—I was a virgin?* "But I got smart after the first one." She was onto the second leg, humming again. "Pretty kid. Kids of her own now. I got pictures." He asked to see them, and she said, "Not *with me*."

"Where?" he said.

She whirled, waving the razor. "You the police?"

She'd been sober five days. That's when the singing started. "If you can do it, so can I," she'd said.

He reminded her he'd had no choice.

"Neither do I," she said, "if I want to stay."

He didn't agree. He wasn't even sure it was a good idea. She told him she'd started drinking at nine: stole her father's bottle and sat in the closet, passed out and no one found her for two days. Sid knew it was wrong, but he was almost proud of her for that, forty years of drinking—he didn't know anyone else who'd started so young. She had conviction, a vision of her life, like Roseland, who said she'd wanted to be a doctor since fifth grade.

Sid was out of Emergency. Not a demotion. A lateral transfer. That's what Mrs. Mendelson in personnel said. Her eyes and half her face were shrunken behind her glasses.

"How can it be lateral if I'm in the basement?"

"I'm not speaking literally, Sid."

He knew he was being punished for trying to stop the girl from banging her head on the wall.

Inappropriate interference with a patient. There was a language for everything. *Sterilized equipment contaminated.*

Dropped—he'd dropped the tray to help the girl.

"I had to," he told Roxanne.

"Shush, it's okay—you did the right thing."

There was no reward for doing the right thing. When he got the girl to the floor, she bit his arm.

Unnecessary risk. "She won't submit to a test," Enos said after Sid's arm was washed and bandaged. Sid knew she wasn't going to submit to anything—why should she? She was upstairs in four-point restraint, doped but still raving; she was a strong girl with a shaved head, six pierced holes in one ear, a single chain looped through them all. Sid wanted Enos to define *unnecessary*.

Now he was out of harm's way. Down in Postmortem. The dead don't bite. *Unconscious men don't make choices.* Everyone pretended it was for his own sake.

Sid moved the woman from the gurney to the steel table. He was not supposed to think of her as a woman, he knew this. She was a body, female. He was not supposed to touch her thin blue hair or wrinkled eyelids—for his own sake. He was not supposed to look at her scars and imagine his mother's body—three deep puckers in one breast, a raised seam across the belly—was not supposed to see the ghost there, imprint of a son too big, taken this way, and later another scar, something else stolen while she slept. He was not to ask what they had hoped to find, opening her again.

Roxanne smoked more and more to keep from drinking. She didn't stash her cartons of cigarettes in the freezer anymore. No need. She did two packs a day, soon it would be three. Sid thought of her body, inside: her starved, black lungs shriveled in her chest, her old, swollen liver.

He knew exactly when she started again, their sixty-third day together, the thirty-ninth and final day of her sobriety.

He drew a line down her body, throat to belly, with his tongue. She didn't want to make love. She wanted to lie here, beneath the window, absolutely still. She was hot. He moved his hands along the wet, dark line he'd left on her ashy skin, as if to open her.

"Forget it," she said. The fan beat at the air, the blade of a chopper, hovering. He smelled of formaldehyde, but she didn't complain about that. It covered other smells: the garbage in the corner, her own body.

They hadn't made love for nineteen days. He had to go to his mother's tonight but was afraid to leave Roxanne naked on the bed, lighting each cigarette from the butt of the last one. He touched her hip, the sharp bone. He wanted her to know it didn't matter to him if they made love or not. If she

drank or not. He didn't mind cigarette burns on the sheets, bills missing from his wallet. As long as she stayed.

The pictures of his three nieces in his mother's living room undid him. He didn't know them now, but he remembered their thin fingers, their scabbed knees, the way Lena kissed him one night—as a woman, not a child, as if she saw already how their lives would be—a solemn kiss, on the mouth, but not a lover's kiss. Twelve years old, and she must have heard her mother say, *Look, Sid, maybe it would be better if you didn't come around—just for a while—know what I mean?* When he saw her again she was fifteen and fat, seven months pregnant. Christina said, *Say hello to your uncle Sid*, and the girl stared at him, unforgiving, as if he were to blame for this too.

These were the things that broke his heart: his nieces on the piano and the piano forever out of tune; dinner served promptly at six, despite the heat; the smell of leather in the closet, a pile of rabbit skin and soft fur; the crisp white sheets of his old bed and the image of his mother bending, pulling the corners tight, tucking them down safe, a clean bed for her brave boy who was coming home.

Those sheets made him remember everything, the night sweats, the yellow stain of him on his mother's clean sheets. He washed them but she knew, and nothing was the way they expected it to be, the tossing in the too-small bed, the rust-colored blotches in his underwear, tiny slivers of shrapnel working their way to the surface, wounding him again. *How is it a man gets shot in the ass?* It was a question they never asked, and he couldn't have told them without answering other questions, questions about what had happened to the men who stepped inside the hut, who didn't have time to turn and hit the ground, who blew sky-high and fell down in pieces.

He touched his mother too often and in the wrong way. He leaned too close, tapping her arm to be sure she was listening. He tore chicken from the bone with his teeth, left his face greasy. Everything meant something it hadn't meant before.

She couldn't stand it, his big hands on her. He realized now how rarely she'd touched him. He remembered her cool palm on his forehead, pushing the hair off his face. Did he have a temperature? He couldn't remember. He felt an old slap across his mouth for a word he'd spit out once and forgotten. He remembered his mother licking her thumb and rubbing his cheek, wiping a dark smudge.

He thought of the body he couldn't touch, then or now—her velvety, loose skin over loose flesh, soft crepe folding into loose wrinkles.

His father was the one to tell him. They were outside after dinner, more than twenty years ago, but Sid could see them still, his father and himself

standing at the edge of the yard by the empty hutches. Next door, Ollie Kern spoke softly to his roses in the dark. Sid could see it killed his father to do it. He cleared his throat three times before he said, "You need to find your own place to live, son." Sid nodded. He wanted to tell his father it was okay, he understood, he was ready. He wanted to say he forgave him—not just for this, but for everything, for not driving him across the border one day, to Vancouver, for not suggesting he stay there a few days, alone, for not saying, "It's okay, son, if you don't want to go."

Sid wanted to say no one should come between a husband and a wife, not even a child, but he only nodded, like a man, and his father patted his back, like a man. He said, "I guess I should turn on the sprinkler." And Sid said, "I'll do it, Dad."

They must have talked after that, many times. But in Sid's mind this was always the last time. He remembered forever crawling under the prickly juniper bushes to turn on the spigot as the last thing he did for his father. Remembered forever how they stood, silent in the dark, listening to water hitting leaves and grass.

He was in the living room now with his mother, after all these years, drinking instant coffee made from a little packet—it was all she had. It was still so hot. She said it. *It's still so hot.* It was almost dark, but they hadn't turned on the lights because of the heat, so it was easy for Sid to imagine the shadow of his father's shape in the chair, easy to believe that now might have been the time his father said at last, *Tell me, son, how it was, the truth, tell me.* It was like this. Think of the meanest boy you knew in sixth grade, the one who caught cats to cut off their tails. It's like that. But not all the time. Keep remembering your eleven-year-old self, your unbearable boy energy, how you sat in the classroom hour after hour, day after day, looking out the window at light, at rain. Remember the quivering leaves, how you felt them moving in your own body when you were a boy—it's like that, the waiting, the terrible boredom, the longing for something to happen, *anything*, so you hate the boy with the cat but you're thrilled too, and then you hate yourself, and then you hate the cat for its ridiculous howling and you're glad when it runs into the street crazy with pain—you're glad when the car hits it, smashes it flat. Then the bell rings, recess is over, and you're in the room again—you're taking your pencils out of your little wooden desk. The girl in front of you has long, shiny braids you know you'll never touch, not now, not after what you've seen, and then you imagine the braids in your hands, limp as cats' tails, and Mrs. Richards is saying the words *stifle, release, mourn*, and you're supposed to spell them, print them on the blank page, pass the paper forward, and later you're supposed to think the red marks—her sharp corrections, her grade—matters.

He could be more specific. If his father wanted to know. At night, you dig

a hole in red clay and sleep in the ground. Then there's rain. Sheets and rivers and days of rain. The country turns to mud and smells of shit. A tiny cut on your toe festers and swells, opens wider and wider, oozes and stinks, an ulcer, a hole. You think about your foot all the time, more than you think about your mother, your father, minute after minute, the pain there, you care about your foot more than your life—you could lose it, your right big toe, leave it here, in this mud, your foot, your leg, and you wonder, how many pieces of yourself can you leave behind and still be called yourself? Mother, father, sister—heart, hand, leg. One mosquito's trapped under your net. You've used repellent—you're sticky with it, poisoned by it—but she finds the places you've missed: behind your ear, between your fingers. There's a sweet place up your sleeve, under your arm. And you think, *This is the wound that will kill me.* She's threading a parasite into your veins. These are the enemies: mud, rain, rot, mosquito. She's graceful. She's not malicious. She has no brain, no intentions. She wants to live, that's all. If she finds you, she'll have you. She buzzes at your head, but when she slips inside there's no sound.

It's still so hot. He wants to bang the keys of the out-of-tune piano. He wants a racket here, in his mother's house. He longs for all the dark noise of Roxanne, his plates with their tiny roses smashing to the floor two nights ago, his blue glasses flying out of the drainer. She wanted a drink, and he said she could have one, and she told him to fuck himself, and then the dishes exploded. He thinks of her walking through the broken glass, barefoot but not cutting her feet, brilliant Roxanne. *Roxanne Roxanne.* He has to say her name here, now, bring her into this room where the silent television flickers like a small fire in the corner. He wants to walk her up the stairs to that boy's room, wants her to run her fingers through the silky fur of rabbit pelts in the closet, wants to explain how fast his father was with the knife but too old, too slow, to collect tolls for the ferry. He wants to show her the tight corners of the white sheets, wants her to touch him, here, in this room, to bring him back together, who he was then, who he is now.

So he is saying it, her name. He is telling his mother, *I've been seeing someone*, and his mother is saying, *That's nice, Sid—you should bring her to dinner*, and he understands she means sometime, in some future she can't yet imagine, but he says, *Next week?*

She sips at her too-hot coffee, burns her pursed lips, says, *Fine, that would be fine.*

Roxanne will never agree to it. He knows this. He sees the glow of her cigarette moving in the dark, hand to mouth. He knows he won't ask because he can't bear the bark of her laughter. He doesn't turn on the light, doesn't speak. He sees what's happening, what will happen—this room in winter, the gray

light leaking across the floor, the windows closed, the rain streaming down the glass.

He lies down beside her. She stubs out her cigarette, doesn't light another, says nothing but moves closer, so the hair of her arm brushes the hair of his.

He knows she hasn't eaten tonight, hasn't moved all day, living on cigarettes and air, a glass of orange juice he brought her hours ago. Roxanne. But she must have stood at the windows once while he was gone, he sees that now the blinds are down; the darkness is complete, final, the heat close. There's only sound: a ship's horn on the canal; a man in the distance who wails and stops, wails and stops, turning himself into a siren. She rolls toward him, touches his lips with her tongue, presses her frail, naked body against him. He feels the bones of her back with his fingers, each disk of the spine. He knows he can't say anything—now or forever—such tender kisses, but he's afraid she'll stop, that she'll break him here, on this bed, so he holds back, in case she says she's tired or hungry, too hot, though he's shaking already, weeks of wanting her pulled into this moment. He touches her as if for the first time, each finger forming a question: *Here and here, and this way, can I?* He's trembling against his own skin, inside. If she says no, he'll shatter, break through himself, explode. She's unbuttoning his shirt, unzipping his pants, peeling him open. She's tugging his trousers down toward his feet but not off—they shackle him. And he knows if they make love this way, without talking, it will be the last time. He wants to grab her wrists and speak, but he can't—the silence is everything, hope and the lack of it. He wants the dark to come inside him, to be him, and there are no words even now, no sounds of pleasure, no soft murmurs, no names, no gods, only their skin—hot, blurred—their damp skin and the place where his becomes hers no longer clear, only her hair in his mouth, her eyes, her nose, her mouth in his mouth, her nipple, her fingers, her tongue in his mouth, brittle Roxanne going soft now, skinny Roxanne huge in the heat of them, swollen around him, her body big enough for all of him and he's down in her, all the way down in the dark and she has no edges, no outline, no place where her dark becomes the other dark, the thinning, separate air, and he doesn't know his own arms, his own legs, and still he keeps moving into her, deeper and deeper, feeling too late what she is, what she's become, softer and softer under him, the ground, the black mud, the swamp swallowing him—he's there, in that place, trying to pull himself out of it, but his boots are full of mud—he's thigh-deep, falling face down in the swamp, and then he feels fingernails digging into his back, a bony hand clutching his balls. He tries to grab her wrist but she's let go—she's slipped away from him, and he knows he never had a chance—this swamp takes everyone. He's gasping, mouth full of mud, and then there's a word, a name, a plea: *Stop, Sid, please*, and then there's a body beneath him, and then there's

his body: heavy, slick with sweat, and then there's a man sitting on the edge of a mattress, his head in his hands, and then there's the air, surprising and cool, the fan beating and beating.

He opens the shades and rolls a joint, sits in the big chair, smoking. She's fallen asleep—to escape him, he thinks, and he doesn't blame her. If his father moved out of these shadows, Sid would say, Look at her. It was like this, exactly like this. After the rain, after the toe heals, after you don't die of malaria. The sniper's bullet whizzes past your ear, and you're almost relieved. You think this is an enemy you'll know. Bouncing Bettys and Toe Poppers jump out of the ground all day. Two wounded, two dead. The choppers come and take them all. You expect it to happen and it does, just after dark: one shot, and then all of you are shooting—you tear the trees apart. In the morning, you find them, two dead boys and a girl in the river. Her blood flowers around her in the muddy water. Her hands float. Her long black hair streams out around her head and moves like the river. She's the one who strung the wire, the one who made the booby trap with your grenade and a tin can. She tried to trip you up, yesterday and the day before. She's the sniper who chose you above all others. Her shot buzzed so close you thought she had you. She looks at the M-16 slung over your shoulder. She looks at your hands. She murmurs in her language which you will never understand. Then she speaks in your language. She says, Your bullet's in my liver. She tells you. Your bullet ripped my bowel. She says, Look for yourself if you don't believe me. You try to pull her from the water. You slip in the mud. The water here knows her. The mud filling your boots is her mud. Slight as she is, she could throw you down and hold you under.

How would you kill me?

You know, with my body.

But you get her to the bank. You pull her from the river. Then the medic's there and he tells you she's dead, a waste of time, *unnecessary risk*, and you tell him she wasn't dead when you got there, she wasn't, and you look at her lying on the bank, and she's not your enemy now, she's not anyone's enemy—she's just a dead girl in the grass, and you leave her there, by the river.

Sid thinks of the doctors at the hospital, their skills, how they use them, their endless exchanges—merciful, futile, extravagant—hearts and lungs, kidneys and marrow. What would they have given her, what would they have taken?

If his mother had looked out the window soon enough, if Sid had been there to carry him to the car, his father could have been saved by a valve; but the man was alone, absolutely, and the blood fluttering in his heart couldn't flow in the right direction. So he lay there in his own back yard, the hose in his hand, the water running and running in the half-dark.

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Sid no longer knows when Roxanne will be lying on his bed and when she won't. She's got her own life, she tells him, and suddenly she does: friends who call at midnight, business she won't describe. One night she doesn't come home at all, but the next morning she's there, downstairs, hunched in the entryway, one eye swollen shut. *Mugged*, she says. *Son of a bitch*. And he knows what's happened. Even her cigarettes stolen. She forages for butts, checking the ashtray, the garbage. There aren't many. She's smoked them down to the filters almost every time, but she finds enough to get by while he runs to the store for a carton, for juice and bread, a jar of raspberry jam. He wants her to eat, but she won't. She doesn't give a shit about that. She doesn't give a shit about him. One line leads to the next. He nods, he knows this. She says she loves whiskey more than she loves him—the park, the tracks, the ground more than a mattress on the floor. She says the bottle's always there and sometimes he's not and who the fuck does he think he is, Jesus? And he says no, he never saved anyone. And then she's crying, beating his chest with her fists, falling limp against him, sobbing so hard he thinks her skinny body will break and he holds her until she stops and he carries her to the bed. He brings her orange juice, the jar of jam, ice in a rag for her swollen eye. She eats jam by the spoonful but no bread. He combs her tangled hair. He lays her down and she wants to make love but they don't, he can't, and he doesn't go to work that day but he does the next and then she's gone.

Days become weeks become winter, the one he imagined, the rain on the window. She's here but not here. She's left the smell of her hair on the pillow, her underpants twisted in the sheet at the foot of the bed, the butts of her cigarettes in the ashtray. He sees her everywhere. She's the boy in the hooded sweatshirt huddled on the stoop, whispering *I got what you need*, trying to sell crack or his own thin body. She's the bloated woman asleep on a bench in the park, the newspaper over her face coming apart in the rain. She's the bearded man at Pike's Market who pulls fishbones from the trash to eat the raw flesh. She's the dark man cuffed and shoved into the cruiser. She turns to stare out the back window, blaming him. She's the girl on Broadway with blond hair shaved to stubble. She's fifteen. She wears fishnets under ripped jeans, black boots, a leather jacket with studded spikes along the shoulders. She smacks gum, smokes, says *Fuck you* when he looks too long. He wants to stop, wants to warn her of the risks, wants to say, *Just go home*. But she can't, he knows; at least it's strangers on the street, not someone you know. *And anyway, what about you?* she'd say. She'd drop her cigarette, grind it out. She'd whisper, *I saw Roxanne—she's not doing too good, she's sick—so don't be giving me any shit about risk*.

She's the scarred man on the table with his twice-cleaved chest and gouged belly. When they open him, they'll find things missing. She's the woman without a name, another body from the river. He knows her. She rises, floating in the dirty water.

Dr. Juste says, "Shove her up there on the slab any way you can."

This one's fat. That's the first thing Sid notices. Later there will be other things: the downy hair on her cheeks, the long black hairs sprouting from her blotched legs, the unbelievable white expanse of her breasts. And she's dead, of course, like the others.

But she's not exactly like them, not dead so long, not so cold or stiff. He'd thought he could no longer be surprised, but she surprises him, Gloria Luby, the fattest dead person he has ever seen.

She weighs three hundred and twenty-six pounds. That gives her eighty-three on Sid and the gravity of death.

Dr. Juste turns at the door. He's lean and hard, not too tall, bald; he has a white beard, the impatience of a thin man. He says, "You'll have to roll this one." He says, "She won't mind."

Now they're alone, Gloria and Sid. She was a person a few hours ago, until the intern blasted her eyes with light and the pupils stayed frozen. Sid can't grasp it, the transformation. If she was a person in the room upstairs, she's a person still. He imagines her upstairs, alive in her bed, a mountain of a woman in white, her frizz of red hair matted and wild, no one to comb it. Blind, unblinking as a queen, she sat while the interns clustered around her and the head resident told them about her body and its defeats, the ravages of alcohol and the side effects of untreated diabetes: her engorged cirrhotic liver, the extreme edema of her abdomen, fluid accumulating from her liver disease, which accounted for her pain—were they listening to her moan?—which put pressure on her lungs till she could barely breathe—did they see her writhing under the sheets? It was the gastrointestinal bleeding that couldn't be stopped, even after the fluid was drained from the belly.

She pissed people off, getting fatter every day, filling with fluids and gases, seventeen days in all. If she'd lived two more, they would have taken her legs, which Dr. Juste says would have been a waste because it wouldn't have saved her but might have prolonged this. Sid wanted to ask what he meant, exactly, when he said *this*.

She's valuable now, at last: she's given herself up, her body in exchange for care. In an hour, Dr. Juste will begin his demonstration and Gloria Luby will be exposed, her massive mistakes revealed.

Sid thinks they owe her something, a lift instead of a shove, some trace of respect. He won't prod. He isn't going to call another orderly for help, isn't

going to subject Gloria Luby to one more joke. *How many men does it take to change a light bulb for a fat lady?*

Later, he may think it isn't so important. Later, he may realize no one was watching, not even Gloria Luby. But just now this is his only duty: clear, specific. It presented itself.

None, she has to turn herself on. He knew what Juste would say when the interns gathered: *Shall we cut or blast?*

A first-timer might be sick behind his mask when they opened her abdomen and the pools of toxins began to drain into the grooves of the metal table, when the whole room filled with the smell of Gloria Luby's failures. But everyone would keep laughing, making cracks about women big enough for a man to live inside. He knew how scared they'd be, really, looking at her, the vastness of her opened body, because she *was* big enough for a man to crawl inside, like a cow, like a cave. Hollowed out, she could hide him forever. Some of them might think of this later, might dream themselves into the *stagnant* swamp of her body, might feel themselves waking in the warm, sweet, *rotten* smell of it, in the dark, in the slick, glistening fat with the loose bowels *mangled* around them. They might hear the jokes and wish to speak. Why didn't anyone notice? There's a man inside this woman, and he's alive. But he can't speak—she can't speak—the face is peeled back, the skull empty, and now the cap of bone is being plastered back in place, and now the skin is being stitched shut. The autopsy is over—she's closed, she's done—and he's still in there, with her, in another country, with the smell of shit and blood that's never going to go away, and he's not himself at all, he's her, he's Gloria Luby—bloated, full of gas, fat and white and dead forever.

It could happen to anyone. Anytime. Sid thinks, The body you hate might be your own; your worst fear might close around you, might be stitched tight by quick, clever hands. You might find yourself on this table. You might find yourself sprawled on a road or submerged in a swamp; you might find yourself in a bed upstairs, your red hair blazing, your useless legs swelling. Shadows come and go and speak, describing the deterioration of your retinas, the inefficiency of your kidneys, the necessity of amputation due to decreasing circulation in the lower extremities. *Extremities.* Your legs. They mean your legs. You might find yourself face down in your own sweet back yard, the hose still in your hand.

He doesn't think about God or ask himself what he believes—he *knows* he believes in her, in Gloria Luby, in the three-hundred-and-twenty-six-pound fact of her body. He is the last person alive who will touch her with tenderness.

The others will have rubber gloves, and masks, and knives.

So he is going to lift her, gently, her whole body, not her shoulders, then

her torso, then her terrible bruised thighs. She's not in pieces, not yet—she's a woman, and he is going to lift her as a woman. He is going to move her from the gurney to the table with the strength of his love.

He knows how to use his whole body, to lift from the thighs, to use the power of the back without depending on it. He crouches. It's a short lift, but he's made it harder for himself, standing between the gurney and the table. If he pressed them together, they'd almost touch—a man alone could roll her.

He squats. He works his arms under her, surprised by the coolness of her flesh, surprised, already, by her unbelievable weight.

For half a second, his faith is unwavering, and he is turning with her in his arms; they're almost there, and then something shifts—her immense left breast slaps against his chest, and something else follows; her right arm slips from his grasp—and he knows, close as they are, they'll never make it: an inch, a centimeter, a whole lifetime, lost. He feels the right knee give and twist, his own knee; he feels something deep inside tear, muscle wrenching, his knee springing out from under him, from under them. And still he holds her, trying to take the weight on the left leg, but there's no way. They hit the gurney going down, send it spinning across the room. The pain in his knee is an explosion, a booby trap, a wire across a path and hot metal ripping cartilage from bone, blasting his kneecap out his pants leg.

When they hit the floor, his leg twists behind him, and he's howling. All three hundred and twenty-six pounds of Gloria Luby pin him to the cold concrete.

She amazes him. She's rolled in his arms so his face is pressed into her soft belly. The knee is wrecked. He knows that already, doesn't need to wait for a doctor to tell him. *Destroyed.* He keeps wailing, though there's no point, no one in that room but the woman on top of him, insisting she will not hear, not ever. There's no one in the hallway, no one in the basement. There are three closed doors between Sidney Elliott and all the living.

He has to crawl out from under her, has to prod and shove at her thick flesh, has to claw at her belly to get a breath. Inch by inch he moves, dragging himself, his shattered leg, across the smooth floor. He leaves her there, just as she is, face down, the lumpy mound of her rump rising in the air.

Dr. Enos is trying not to smile while Sid explains, again, how it happened. Everyone smiles, thinking of it, Sid Elliott on the floor underneath Gloria Luby. They're sorry about his leg, truly. It's not going to be okay. There'll be a wheelchair, and then a walker. In the end, he'll get by with a cane. If he's lucky. It's a shame, Dr. Roseland tells him, to lose a leg that way, and Sid wonders if she thinks there are good ways to lose a leg. He remembers the boy on the table. He remembers all the boys. *Are those my legs?*

He's drifting in and out. He hears Roxanne laughing in the hallway. Then he sees her at the window, her mouth tight and grim as she sucks smoke.

She wants to know if it's worth it, the risk, the exchange: Gloria Luby's dignity for his leg. The *idea* of her dignity. She laughs, but it's bitter. She tells him he's a failure; she tells him how they found Gloria Luby. It took six orderlies to get her on the slab. They grunted, mocking her, cursing him.

He sleeps and wakes. Roxanne's gone. Even her smoke is gone. He asks the nurse, a thin, dark-skinned man, *Where is she?* And the nurse says, *Where's who, baby? Nobody been here but you and me.*

His father stands in the corner, shaking his head. He can't believe Sid's come back from the jungle, nothing worse than shrapnel in his ass, only to get it from a three-hundred-pound dead woman in a hospital in Seattle. *Three hundred and twenty-six*, Sid says. *What? Three hundred and twenty-six pounds.* His father looks as if he wants to weep, and Sid's sorry—not for himself, he'd do it again. He's sorry for his father, who's disappointed, and not just in him. He's been standing in the closet in Sid's old room all these years, sobbing in the musty dark, pressing his face into the soft rabbit fur. He's been in the other room, in the summer heat, listening to Sid plead with Roxanne, *Just let me lick you.* He's been in the kitchen, watching Sid's mother fry pork chops, chop onions, mash potatoes. He's tried to tell her something and failed. He's stood there, silent in the doorway, while she and Sid sat at the table chewing and chewing. Now, at last, when he speaks to his son, he has nothing to tell him, no wisdom to impart, only a phrase to mutter to himself, *What a waste, what a waste*, and Sid knows that when he says it he's not thinking of the leg. He wants to forgive his father for something, but the old man's turned down his hearing aid. He looks befuddled. He says, *What is it, Sid?*

The nurse shows him the button to press when the pain comes back. *Straight into the vein, babe. No need to suffer. Just give yourself a little pop. Some people think they got to be strong, lie there sweating till I remind them. Not me, honey—you give me one of those, I'd be fine all the time.* He grins. He has a wide mouth, bright teeth; he says, *You need me tonight, honey, you just buzz.*

Gloria Luby lies down beside him. She tells him, *I was exactly what they expected me to be. My brain was light, my liver heavy; the walls of my heart were thick. But there were other things they never found.* She rolls toward him, presses herself against him. Her soft body has warmth but no weight. She envelops him. She says, *I'll tell you now, if you want to know.*

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The blond girl with the spikes on her jacket leans in the doorway. Outside, the rain. Behind her, the yellow light of the hall. She's wearing her black combat boots, those ripped fishnets, a sheer black dress, a black slip. She says, *Roxanne's dead. So don't give me any of that shit about risk.* He turns to the wall. He doesn't have to listen to this. *All right then*, she says, *maybe she's not dead. But I saw her—she don't look too good.*

She comes into the room, slumps in the chair by the bed. She says, *I heard all about you and that fat lady.*

She's waiting. She thinks he'll have something to say. She lights a cigarette, says, *Wanna drag?* And he does, so they smoke, passing the cigarette back and forth. She says, *Roxanne thinks you're an idiot, but who knows.* She grinds the cigarette out on the floor, then stuffs the filter back in the pack, between the plastic and the paper. She says, *Don't tell anybody I was here.*

The nurse brings Sid a wet cloth, washes his face, says, *You been talking yourself silly, babe.*

You know what I did?

The nurse touches Sid's arm, strokes him from elbow to wrist. *You're famous here, Mr. Elliott—everybody knows what you did.*

Roxanne sits on the windowsill. She says, *Looks like you found yourself another sweetheart.*

Sid's forehead beads with sweat. The pain centers in his teeth, not his knee; it throbs through his head. He's forgotten the button on his IV, forgotten the buzzer that calls the nurse. Roxanne drifts toward the bed like smoke. She says, *Does it hurt, Sid?* He doesn't know if she's trying to be mean or trying to be kind. She says, *This is only the beginning.* But she presses the button, releases the Demerol into the tube. She stoops as if to kiss him but doesn't kiss. She whispers, *I'm gone now.*

Sidney Elliott stands in a white room at the end of a long hallway. He's alone with a woman. He looks at her. He thinks, *Nobody loved you enough or in the right way.*

In some part of his mind, he knows exactly what will happen if he lifts her, if he takes her home, but it's years too late to stop.

He tries to be tender.

He prays to be strong.