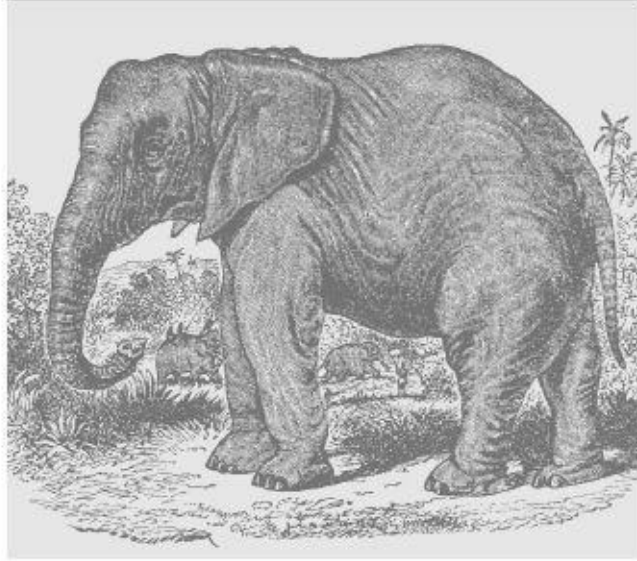




Animal Crackers

Hannah Tinti

animal
crackers



Hannah Tinti

DELTA
TRADE PAPERBACKS

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Praise for Hannah Tinti's

animal crackers

“The animals of Tinti’s imagination are not merely symbols but phantoms. They stalk the shadows of her characters’ worlds, conveying what it feels like to have your heart broken.”

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“[These] vignettes show off Tinti’s gift for the quick study. They also establish her theme of animals as the secret sharers of humanity, the unwitting repositories of our desires and fears.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Hannah Tinti is not just a masterly writer—though her wondrous debut certainly proves her to be *that*. No, what really floors you is the span, the variegation of her gifts. This book reads like a first-class greatest-hits compilation, the work of many distinct, enviable virtuosi. *Animal Crackers* ushered in the arrival of a giant.”

—Darin Strauss, author of *Chang and Eng* and *The Real McCoy*

“Tinti’s suburban gothic recalls Joy Williams. . . . A redeeming generosity underlies the harsh realities in these stories, and it is to Tinti’s credit that her zookeepers and pet owners, as flawed as they are, are as sympathetic as her wise giraffes and gentle bunnies.” — *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Hilarious . . . luminous . . . whimsical . . . an enjoyable set from a writer on the move.” —*People*

“Within each story is a mystical communion between animals and human beings as they struggle for equilibrium in their lives. . . . Tinti’s stories serve up an anomalous blend of psychological, muddled and intuitive characters as sympathetic as they are flawed. These stories not only entertain, they startle, they illuminate.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Exhibiting a range and control unusual for a young writer, in *Animal Crackers* Hannah Tinti offers nearly a dozen tales: sweetly macabre, adroitly surprising. You’d be crackers yourself not to indulge.”

—Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked*, *Mirror Mirror*, and *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*

“In this marvelously strange debut, Tinti welcomes her reader into a world in which zoo animals stage protests, rabbits fly from third-story windows wearing capes, and stuffed black bears stalk the museum muralist....Fans of Aimee Bender’s dreamy collection *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* can find a new friend in Tinti.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

“[Tinti’s] style recalls Flannery O’Connor; the stories embedded with incidental Gothic details . . . [and] considerable writing skill.” — *The Independent (UK)*

“Almost every piece in this volume will interrupt your thoughts and invade your sleep [but] it is highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Under Tinti’s pen, the seemingly mundane is disrupted by the suddenly shocking. . . . *Animal Crackers* is a gruesome yet surprisingly captivating read. Each bone-chilling plot pulls us in, leaving us unable to renounce the glimpse of our dark side that Tinti so expertly portrays.” — *Columbus Spectator*

“These are marvelous stories. Hard-edged, big-hearted, they glitter and gleam with a rare clarity of vision. Hannah Tinti is a generous and enormously gifted writer. She will make you see the world differently.”

—Dani Shapiro, author of *Family History* and *Slow Motion*

“Ambitious and imaginative.” —*Pages* magazine

“*Animal Crackers*’ stories are compelling and beautifully shaped on the surface, but they reward

further analysis; the more complex narratives resemble fractal patterns, with neatly crafted metaphors that repeat on several levels. . . . A terrific debut that weighs down airy, high-concept thought pieces with animal flesh and human blood alike.” —*The Onion*

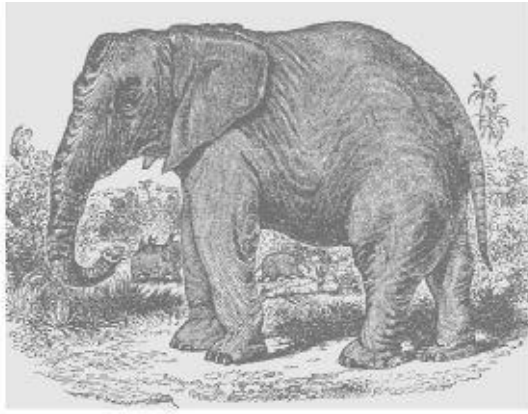
“Hannah Tinti is who you want around a campfire or on a long road trip. The stories in *Animal Crackers* will make your head spin, your skin crawl, your heart jump.”

—Helen Ellis, author of *Eating the Cheshire Cat*

“Tinti boldly parses primal emotions in her stealthy short stories, which, like cats’ paws, conceal weapons of great precision....Tinti’s fables are dark and wily, grim yet morbidly fascinating exposures of both our animal selves and our uniquely human psychoses.”—*Booklist*

*This book is for my parents,
Hester and William Tinti.*

animal crackers



It's time to wash the elephant. Joseph has dragged out the hoses and I'm trying to prod Marysue out the door to the place we do it. Hup, I say, and poke her with a broom. I need to be careful—there is a part of me that steps into traffic—she eased her weight onto the last keeper's foot and the bones were crushed to pieces. I imagine my ex-wife lifting that giant ear and whispering, *Step there*.

When I started, the staff treated me to a beer and showed me their scars. They said it would happen sooner or later. They said watch out. Everyone who works with animals has a mark somewhere.

Joseph says big animals are like big problems. He should know, he's had his share—eighteen years old when the army shipped him to Cambodia. He came back okay, he says, only to get his arm chopped off by a Senegalese lion in a traveling circus. He's got a little stump coming from the end of his elbow that bends up and down. Like me, Joseph used to have a wife who isn't in the picture anymore. She left him for a soldier who'd also been in Cambodia. Joseph says it was his fault. He doesn't blame the lion.

It's a warm day and I'm sweating in my coveralls. We scrub Marysue's legs and Joseph tells me another story, this one about his friend Al he met in the service (not the one who drove off into the sunset with his wife). I listen to him describe the jungle and turn my hose on the ground to make some mud. Marysue likes to roll in it. She scoops some up, throws it across her back, and I take a long-handled brush and rub it in. She looks at me with her mouth open and I think she is saying thanks.

Joseph's friend Al was stationed near Phnom Penh and had a pet cockatoo he'd bought off the street for a buck. It would sit on his shoulder and squawk, feathers rippling, but mostly it just looked around and moved its feet back and forth. Al taught it to shit on command. He'd make it go on his friends as a joke, or on people he didn't like, for a different kind of joke.

One day they were at a bar with the cockatoo flying around and it suddenly landed on Al's shoulder and let loose some of its sparkling white fruit. It had never done this before—Joseph laughed—but Al just sat and stared at it spackling down the camouflage green of his army jacket. He said, I'm going to die, and he did—somebody had booby-trapped his bike and it blew when he turned the ignition. Joseph said he saw the cockatoo flying around after that, looking for its master, and finally Joseph got so mad he knocked it out of a tree and broke its neck. He still had both his arms then.

I watch Joseph to see how he's feeling, but he doesn't seem angry anymore. He slides a sponge across Marysue's feet and says that manatees have the same kind of rounded nails on their flippers. He says they're the closest thing elephants have to a relative. I try to imagine Marysue floating in the water, suddenly free of all that weight. Elephants can swim for miles, Joseph says. Somehow they know they're not going to sink.

Sandy runs the monkey house. She is an attractive woman if you look at her from the left. When she turns, you can see the puckered skin and the crooked white line across her cheek into her chin where a gorilla took a bite out. The scar just touches the corner of her mouth, so when she smiles, the

skin stretches and it looks like something's still holding on to her.

~~She studied biology and zoology in college. After graduation she got hired by one of her professors as a research assistant and headed into the African jungle. She was thinking she had the touch, and made her do things she shouldn't, like get too close to a newborn gorilla and have the mother charge out of the bushes and bury her teeth in Sandy's face until the team they were traveling with shot her down. Sandy woke up in a hospital to doctors clicking their tongues as they sewed her skin back together over the bone.~~

We went out on a date once. I took her to dinner and a movie and we got a drink afterward. She told me her old boyfriend used to make her keep her head turned when they made love, so he wouldn't have to look at it. Hearing all this made me uneasy, the way people can tell you secrets about themselves too soon and make you feel responsible. I took her home after that and left as soon as I could.

Mike takes care of the sea lions, George and Martha. He has a master's degree in poetry and has worked here, scrubbing the tank, for seven years. Each day at noon he performs a show, throwing fish from a pail to George and Martha as they bob on the surface of the water. Afterward, if the boss isn't around, he tries to sell copies of his chapbook to the crowd.

One evening after we split a bottle of schnapps, our pants rolled up and our feet in the sea lion pool. Mike told me about how he went diving at night off the coast of Mexico with a few of his buddies. He said jumping into the ocean after dark is like stepping down into a graveyard, falling through the earth, bumping into coffins and bodies, and feeling all of the lost bits and pieces of souls that have seeped into the soil come looking for you. He said he'd never do it again.

The men brought underwater lights to look at things. They attached glow sticks to their tanks, each a different color— green, yellow, purple. They held on to their masks and regulators and fell backward.

The group went down about eighty feet and let the current take them. Bugs swarmed the flashlights, and Mike could feel little insects wiggling against him as they got caught in his wet suit. He saw giant lobsters, jellyfish, skates, sharks, and other strange things he didn't know the names for. Creatures that only come out at night.

Mike swept the light below. Just beyond the beam was an enormous scaly movement that didn't seem to end—part of a manta wing, or the curve of a tail. The animal churned steadily beneath him and there were things hanging—spines or leeches—bits of detritus in its wake. Mike willed himself not to panic. He turned off his light, as if caught spying on his neighbors, and paused in the stillness of the water. Then he swam as fast as he could.

He stopped at thirty feet for safety, to keep from getting the bends. He clicked on the flashlight and looked behind him. There was a tiny eel. A school of fish. Mike watched the green glow of a light stick slowly moving toward him and felt a gathering of relief. Together he and his friend treaded water, back and forth, while they waited for their buddy to join them. They could see the purple color of him in the distance.

When he didn't come any closer, they got nervous and went after him. He wasn't there. It was only his tanks settled on the ocean floor, the glow stick swaying like a weather vane in the direction of a bad wind. They went back to the boat, but he wasn't there either and by then they were out of reserves. They radioed for help. Mike used a snorkel and his flashlight to keep looking, but he stayed close to the boat. They never found the body.

Mike threw the empty schnapps bottle into the pool. We were both quiet for a while. I had my fingers wrapped around the railing and I thought about all the little kids who would be pressing their faces against the glass tomorrow. We had some more quiet between us and then he waded in to fish me out.

You hear animal stories every day. How a bee stung little Johnny and he went into cardiac arrest. How a snake bit Cousin Tom and it shriveled up his toe. How a pack of dogs chased Aunt Shirley down the street until she climbed through an open car window, rolled it shut behind her, and watched the animals circling, pawing the doors, their wet noses leaving streaks on the chrome. These stories are supposed to give warning.

Joseph scrapes away at the bottom of Marysue's foot. He touches her below the knee and she lifts her leg automatically, as if his fingers are telling her something important. I know not to make any sudden movements now. She watches me as if I might attack, because this is when another animal would come, when she is not ready to protect herself. Her eyes seem too small for such a large body. She keeps her trunk on Joseph's back, feeling around, making sure of what is happening to her.

Joseph says that in the wild when elephants feel threatened, they put the young and the weak in the middle and form a circle around them. I wonder if Marysue has family somewhere. If they tried to save her from being tagged and shipped. I picture her searching for a tail to hold on to while the other paw the ground and get ready to charge.

Ann runs the ticket booth. Her cat, Stinky, comes to work with her every day. Ann keeps a small basket by her feet, where he sleeps. Stinky doesn't have any fur. His skin hangs down between his legs like an old man wearing a diaper. Ann says Stinky saved her life.

She tells me about one night in September when she woke up to a blazing light in her room. Her bed was vibrating and she thought it was an earthquake until she felt her body rise and start to move toward the window. The sash flew up and the screen was ripped off. Ann says what came next was like the sting you get before frostbite, followed by a numbness that crept from her fingers and toes and moved through her thighs, her shoulders, and on toward her heart. She tried to scream, but her throat was swollen tight.

Stinky jumped onto the windowsill and started hissing. He had fur then, Ann says, orange and yellow swirled together, and it stood on end, prickling against the beam like needle points. Stinky bared his teeth and Ann says his eyes reflected the light so intensely it looked like lasers shooting out of him, and suddenly everything went dark and Ann dropped to the ground, hitting the back of her head on the bedside table. She clutched the rag rug on the floor around her and crawled underneath the mattress, where she lay stunned until morning. When daylight came and she had enough courage to come out, she found the window still open, shreds of the screen in the bushes outside and Stinky, bare and quivering, under a pile of dirty clothes in the closet.

When she isn't collecting tickets, Ann travels around the country going to abductee conventions with her cat, holding on to his hairless body as truth. She will not go anywhere without him. I watch Stinky through the glass while he is sleeping and I think about devotion. I know Ann worries what will happen when he dies, and why shouldn't she—she knows what it's like to live alone—and when he's gone and the light comes back into her room, she'll know as she's being pulled through the window that this time she is being taken away because there is no one who loves her enough to stop it.

I pick up a bunch of alfalfa and hold it in the air. Marysue reaches with her trunk and takes it out of my hand. As soon as the food is in, she's back to see if I have any more. Her trunk searches my palm as if she is reading my lifeline.

Joseph says that elephants can recognize dead relatives by feeling their bones. They spend hours turning over the remains, stroking the curves of the skull. Sometimes, they will take pieces away with them and carry them for miles before letting them go.

Ike is the owner. I like him fine, as do most of the other people who work here. He's got a story too, and he told it when he interviewed me. Ike asked if I had experience with animals and I told him that I could communicate with dogs. He had a miniature dachshund asleep at his heels and I said Watch this, and started making groans in the back of my throat. The dog wouldn't even raise his head.

to look at me. Ike said, You need the job that bad, or are you just plain crazy? I said I needed the job and he said, Okay then.

Ike's part Eskimo. He grew up near the Bering Sea, in Unalakleet, Alaska. Many of the men would work on the oil rigs and be gone for months at a time. This gave the village an abandoned feeling even with all the women and children around, but it also gave Ike a lot of freedom. He liked to hang with boys who were older. The Iditarod sled dog race came through each year, and when that happened, the kids would go crazy, building ramshackle sleds and hitching up their dogs, who more often than not knocked them over and escaped, dragging pieces of sheet metal behind them for the rest of the day.

To get around this problem, Ike's friend George decided to strap his little brother onto the sled first before tying it to the family dog, a young husky with a habit of running away. The dog took off dragging George's little brother screaming into the distance, and the two boys had to track them down. They'd gone a mile out and were about to bridge a hill when they found a little blue hat, the kind that ties under your chin. Ike picked it up and they went over the top, and there was a polar bear ripping the guts out of George's little brother. He'd already torn apart the dog—the snow was covered with blood—the sled overturned, the rope hanging loosely from the husky's neck. George started screaming and the bear turned to look, its muzzle wet with red, and that was it—Ike ran.

He got about ten feet away when George passed him. George was older and his legs were flying fast. Ike got this feeling down the back of his neck between his shoulder blades and he knew the bear was coming and it was almost as if he could see the arm reach out and knock him over. Ike's feet fell off from underneath him. He landed on his face, his lips stinging in the snow. He didn't move. He felt the lumbering body of the bear crunching next to him through the powder and he lost it; he pissed all over himself.

Ike heard the nose. It started at his feet and snorted between his legs. It snuffed and panted over his body and sounded like a person getting ready to tell a secret as it moved closer to his ear. He felt the warmth of the bear's breath and closed his eyes. There was snow on his wrists between his mittens and his jacket, and he thought about the skin there, how it got red and itched by the fire while his mother cooked him oatmeal and when she wasn't feeling lonely played the spoons, rattling the backs of the silverware against her knee, then down between her fingers, until she got a rhythm together and she could sing. The nose was at his crotch again. He listened to the bear walk away.

He stayed there in the snow for a long time. When he raised his head, it was dusk. In the distance he saw a snowmobile coming, but he couldn't bring himself to move. Ike tells me sometimes you have these experiences, and you spend the rest of your life thinking about them. Try to shut out what happened and it comes back stronger, a nagging unease, an unanswerable question, and you have to go through it all over again.

Marysue likes it when I pet her tongue. It is a large and frightening muscle, and as I rub my hand across it I try not to think about her swallowing my arm. I use my left, thinking that I would not miss it as much as my right. I take the hose and start a final rinse down her side. The coarse black hairs growing out from between the wrinkles in her skin hang dripping with the weight of the water. I think of these hairs later that night when I am home safe and sound and stepping out of a hot shower, having washed all the animal smells off from the day. I run the towel underneath my arms, across my chest and down each of my legs. When I reach my toes, I dry thoroughly between them and think about my ex-wife again. *Step there.*

I met her in a bar in Las Vegas. She was in for a convention, a gathering of nurses who'd worked in mobile hospitals during Vietnam. I was pouring drinks. She told me a story about how she saved a guy's life in a restaurant with a steak knife and a ballpoint pen, performing a tracheotomy between courses. I watched her throat as she drank her martini, the way the glands clutched and moved along

her neck. Cutting him was instinctive, she said, and I leaned across the bar and kissed her.

~~We had a drive-through wedding. Rented a convertible for the day and packed a picnic. She wore a white baseball cap with a veil stapled to the back. Afterward we drove over the Hoover Dam and she stood and hollered as we crossed, her dress flying up around her waist, her lipstick worn off. She had been divorced already, once. I used to kid her about it on our long-distance phone calls when we first started dating, but when I convinced her to move in—to leave her job and start over—she made me promise not to mention it again. I don't want to be reminded of anything, she said, and I told her that was why people got married.~~

Our daughter's name is Leigh Ann. She was born with Down syndrome, and even though my wife didn't say it, I could tell by the way she sniffed that she suspected my Midwestern genes. When she left me, she took Leigh Ann to her parents in New Mexico, where I would drive every weekend spending awkward hours on their front porch with my baby in my lap. I put up in a motel nearby, and on Monday morning I'd drive back to Las Vegas, the desert reaching out around me in every direction as if I were the center of something great. It used to make me feel like screaming, and sometimes I did, so I'd roll the windows down and the air rushing into my mouth.

She called the bar to let me know she was moving in with her boyfriend and taking Leigh Ann with her. I had a law school student who worked with me, paying loans with tips, get on the phone and tell her she had to let me know where they were going. She gave him an address, which turned out to be bogus, and I got on the highway to her parents' house. They wouldn't tell me where she was. They said I didn't deserve to know.

The year after we were married, we had an apartment in Carson City. It was on the third floor, off a railroad, one long hallway with a window at the end that opened onto a fire escape. Warm summer nights after I got off work, I would jump from the street to catch hold of the iron railing, pull myself up, and climb to our place. I thought it was romantic.

One night I got to the bar and they'd scheduled two of us by mistake. Maggie, a girl from the Philippines who was into astronomy, was already pouring. She told me that Mars was supposed to be out that night and how to look for it. She told me it had a radius of 2,110 miles and that it took 687 days to go around the sun. Once I got home, I stood outside our building and found it, a tiny red flickering light in the sky. It made me wonder how many other stars and planets were out there just beyond that I couldn't see, and how that didn't make them any less real.

I climbed the fire escape and found the window locked and the lights out in our apartment. I started banging on the frame, and just when I thought I was going to have to go back down, I saw the door at the end of the apartment open, and the light from the hall showed a man leaving.

My wife came to the window in a bathrobe. Her smile was weak as she turned the lock. She opened the sash and said, Aren't you going to come in, and I reached out and touched her cheek and she slammed her head into the windowsill, and that is the first time I hurt her that night. I pushed her back into the room and she fell on the floor and knocked over a table and a lamp and that was the second time I hurt her. The third time was when I grabbed her by the hair and dragged her down the hallway to the kitchen. The fourth happened when I kicked her. The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth came as I slapped her, my palm itching. I thought of a knife, but I took the blender sitting on the counter instead and I threw it, and that was the last time I hurt her. It knocked her out. Her nose was broken and there was blood seeping into the terry cloth. I leaned against the wall to catch my breath. Leigh Ann was crying in the bedroom.

I sat down at our kitchen table—the table where we ate English muffins and spread jelly—looked at my trembling fingers, and realized that I was happy. Later, after the bruises were gone and she left me, I sat in the same place and touched my skin, my muscles aching as if my body had been pulled in pieces and hastily patched back together, but in that moment I knew that I had touched something real.

and wonderful that resonated in my bones, and it wasn't until I heard the cries of my daughter that came back to that apartment, that room, and that life which was before me and I told myself, You have a child, you have to take care.

I've heard stories about elephants that go crazy. I look at Marysue and wonder if she's got it. I take the broom I use to guide her back to her cage and poke it hard under her ribs. She lets out a puff and then a groan and I know it hurt. She turns and gives me a look with her eye. I rub my hand up and down her back leg to make up and she lets loose a pile of shit, her tail lifting slightly to one side.

Joseph starts picking up the hoses with his arm, coiling them around his shoulder and holding them in place with the stump he has left. He says I think too much. He says, Why don't you work somewhere else. Then he looks sorry and says he's not trying to get rid of me. I wonder then if he knows, but he goes home the same time as usual and leaves me to do the final cleanup. I muck out the stall and spread down fresh hay for the night.

When I'm done I take off my shoes, lay my body on the floor of Marysue's cage, touch her under the knee like Joseph, and put my head under her foot. She lets the bottom rest on my ear, the cement chilling my cheek, the smell like the damp fertility of dirt under rocks. She shifts her weight and my head rolls gently back and forth. I can hear her breathing. It echoes off the walls and sounds piped in, recording of an elephant still living in the wild. I close my eyes, imagine banyan trees, and feel a heaviness lift.

home sweet home



Pat and Clyde were murdered on pot roast night. The doorbell rang just as Pat was setting the butter and margarine (Clyde was watching his cholesterol) on the table. She was thinking about James Dean. Pat had loved him desperately as a teenager, seen his movies dozens of times, written his name across her notebooks, carefully taped pictures of him to the inside of her locker so that she would have the pleasure of seeing his tortured, sullen face from *East of Eden* as she exchanged her French and English textbooks for science and math. When she graduated from high school, she took down the photos and pasted them to the inside cover of her yearbook, which she perused longingly several times over the summer and brought with her to the University of Massachusetts, where it sat, unopened, alongside her thesaurus and abridged collegiate dictionary until she met Clyde, received her M.R. degree, and packed her things to move into their two-bedroom ranch house on Bridge Street.

Before she put the meat in the oven that afternoon, Pat had made herself a cup of tea and turned on the television. Channel 56 was showing *Rebel without a Cause*, and as the light slowly began to ripple through the screen of their old Zenith, she saw James Dean on the steps of the planetarium, clutching at the mismatched socks of a dead Sal Mineo and crying. She put down her tea, slid her war-torn fingertips inside the V neck of her dress, and held her left breast. Her heart was suddenly pounding her nipple hard and erect against the palm of her hand. It was like seeing an old lover, like remembering a piece of herself that no longer existed. She watched the credits roll and glanced outside to see her husband mowing their lawn. He had a worried expression on his face and his sociopathy pulled up to his knees.

That evening before dinner, as she arranged the butter and margarine side by side on the table—on the yellow airy and light, the other hard and dark like the yolk of an egg—she wondered how she could have forgotten the way James Dean's eyebrows curved. *Isn't memory a strange thing*, she thought. *could forget all of this, how everything feels, what all of these things mean to me.* She was suddenly seized with the desire to grab the sticks of butter and margarine in her hands and squeeze them until her fingers went right through, to somehow imprint their textures and colors on her brain like a stamp to make them something that she would never lose. And then she heard the bell.

When she opened the door, Pat noticed that it was still daylight. The sky was blue and bright and clear and she had a fleeting, guilty thought that she should not have spent so much time indoors. After that she crumpled backward into the hall as the bullet from a .38-caliber Saturday Night Special pierced her chest, exited below her shoulder blade, and jammed into the wood of the stairs, where it would later be dug out with a pen knife by Lieutenant Sales and dropped gingerly into a transparent plastic baggie.

Pat's husband, Clyde, was found in the kitchen by the back door, a knife in his hand (first considered a defense against his attacker and later determined to be the carver of the roast). He had

been shot twice—once in the stomach and once in the head—and then covered with cereal, the box lined up on the counter beside him and the crispy golden contents of Cap'n Crunch, cornflakes, and Special K emptied out over what remained of his face.

Nothing had been stolen.

It was a warm spring evening full of summer promises. Pat and Clyde's bodies lay silent and still while the orange sunset crossed the floors of their house and the streetlights clicked on. As darkness came and the skunks waddled through the backyard and the raccoons crawled down from the trees, they were still there, holding their places, suspended in a moment of quiet blue before the sun came up and a new day started and life went on without them.

It was Clyde's mother who called the police. She dialed her son's number every Sunday morning from Rhode Island. These phone calls always somehow perfectly coincided with breakfast, whenever Pat and Clyde were on the verge of making love.

Thar she blows, Clyde would say, and take his hot coffee with him over to where the phone hung on the wall, or slide out of bed with an apologetic glance at his wife. The coffee and Pat would inevitably cool, and in this way his mother would ruin every Sunday. It had been years now since they had frolicked in the morning, but once, when they were first married and Pat was preparing breakfast, she had heard the phone, walked over to where her husband was reading the paper, dropped to her knees, pulled open his robe, and taken him in her mouth. *Let it ring*, she thought, and he had let it ring. Fifteen minutes later the police were on their front porch with smiles as Clyde, red-faced, bathrobe bulging, answered their questions at the door.

In most areas of her life Clyde's mother was a very nice person. She behaved in such a kind and decorous manner that people would often remark, having met her, *What a lovely woman*. But with Clyde she lost her head. She was suspicious, accusing, and tyrannical. After her husband died, she became even worse. Once she got through her grief, her son became her man. She pushed this sense of responsibility through him like fishhooks, plucking on the line, reeling him back in when she felt he was about to hold slipping, so that the points became embedded in his flesh so deep that it would kill him to take them out.

She dialed the police after trying her son thirty-two times, and because the lieutenant on duty was a soft touch, his own mother having recently passed, a cruiser was dispatched to Pat and Clyde's on Bridge Street, and because one of the policemen was looking to buy in the neighborhood, the officer decided to check out the back of the house after they got no answer, and because there was cereal blowing around in the yard, the men got suspicious, and because it was a windy day and because the door hinges had recently been oiled and because the door had been left unlocked and swung open and because one of them had seen a dead body before, a suicide up in Hanover, and knew blood and brains and bits of skull when he saw them, he made the call back to the station, because his partner was quietly vomiting in the rosebushes, and said, *We've got trouble*.

Earlier that morning Mrs. Mitchell had let her dog out with a sad, affectionate pat on his behind. Buster was a Labrador retriever and treated all the yards on Bridge Street as if they were his own, making his way leisurely through flower beds, pausing for a drink from a sprinkler, tearing into garbage bags, and relieving himself among patches of newly planted rutabagas. Before long he was digging a hole in Pat and Clyde's backyard.

There were small golden flakes scattered on the grass. Buster licked one up and crunched. The flakes were food, and the dog followed the promise of more across the lawn, through the back door and over to Clyde, stiff and covered with flies, the remaining cereal a soggy wet pile of pink plastic across his shoulders. The rug underneath the kitchen table was soaked in blood. Buster left red paw prints as he walked around the body and sniffed at the slippers on the dead man's feet. The dog smelled Clyde's last moment, curled into the arch of his foot.

The doorbell had chimed just as Clyde pierced the roast with the carving fork, releasing two streams of juice, which ran down the sides of the meat until they were captured by the raised edge of the serving plate. He paused then as he lifted the knife, waiting to hear and recognize the voices of his wife and whoever had come to visit. His stomach tightened in the silence. He was hungry. When the shot exploded he felt it all at once and everywhere—in the walls, in his eyes, in his chest, in his arms, in the utensils he was holding, in the piece of meat he was carving, in the slippers that placed him on the floor, in the kitchen, before their evening meal.

Buster pulled off one of the slippers and sank his teeth into it. He worked on removing the stuffing of the inner lining and kept his eye on the dead man, who used to shoo-shoo him away from garbage bags, from munching the daffodils that lined the walk, from humping strays behind the garage. Once after catching the dog relieving himself in the middle of the driveway, Clyde had dragged him by the collar all the way down Bridge Street. *Listen to me, pooch*, Mr. Mitchell had said after Clyde left, one hand smoothing where the collar had choked and the other hand vigorously scratching the dog behind. *You shit wherever you feel like shitting.*

When the dog decided to leave the house, he took the slipper with him. He dragged it over to the hole he'd already started and threw it in. Buster walked back and forth over the spot once it was filled, then lifted his leg to mark it.

The Mitchells had brought their dog with them when they moved into the neighborhood. Three years later, a son arrived—not a newborn baby decked out in bonnets but a thin, dark boy of indeterminate age. His name was Miguel, and it was unclear to the people living on Bridge Street whether he was adopted or a child from a previous marriage. He called the Mitchells his mother and father, enrolled in the public school for their district, and quietly became a part of their everyday lives.

In fact, Miguel was the true son of Mr. Mitchell, sired unknowingly on a business trip with a Venezuelan prostitute some seven years before. The mother had been killed in a bus accident along with 53 other travelers on a road outside of Caracas, and the local police had contacted Mr. Mitchell from a faded company card she had left pressed in her Bible. After a paternity test, the boy arrived at Logan Airport with a worn-out blanket and duffel bag full of chickens (his pets), which were quickly confiscated by customs officials. Mr. Mitchell drove down Route 128 in his station wagon, amazed and panicked at his sudden parenthood, trying to comfort the sobbing boy and wondering how Miguel had managed to keep the birds silent on the plane.

When they pulled into the driveway, Mrs. Mitchell was waiting with a glass of warm milk sweetened with sugar. She was wearing dungarees. She took the boy in her arms and carried him immediately into the bathroom, where she sat him on the counter and washed his face, his hands, his knees, and his feet. Miguel sipped the milk while Mrs. Mitchell gently ran the washcloth behind his ears. When she was finished she tucked him in to their guest bed and read him a stack of Curious George books in Spanish, which she had ordered from their local bookstore. She showed Miguel a picture of the little monkey in the hospital getting a shot from a nurse, and the boy fell asleep, a finger hooked around the belt loop of her jeans. Mrs. Mitchell sat on the bed beside him quietly until he rolled over and let it go.

Mr. Mitchell had met his wife at a gas station in northern California. He had just completed his business degree, and was driving a rented car up the coast to see the Olympic rain forest. She was in a pickup truck with Oregon plates. They both got out and started pumping. Mr. Mitchell finished first and on his way back to his car after paying, he watched the muscles in her thick arm flexing as she replaced the hose. She glanced up, caught him looking, and smiled. She was not beautiful, but one of her teeth stuck out charmingly sideways. There was a confidence about her, an air of efficiency that made him believe she was the kind of woman who could solve any problem. He started the car, turned

out of the station, and glanced into his rearview mirror. He watched the pickup take the opposite road and as it drove away he felt such a pull that he turned around and followed it for sixty miles.

At the rest stop, he pretended that he was surprised to see her. Later he discovered that many people followed his wife, and that she was used to this, and that it did not seem strange to her. People she had never met came up and began to speak to her in shopping malls, in elevators, in the waiting rooms of doctors, at traffic lights, at concerts, at coffee shops and bistros. An old man took hold of her arm outside of an amusement park and began whispering about his murdered son. A woman carrying three children placed her blanket right on top of theirs at the beach, stretched out next to Mrs. Mitchell, and began to cry. Even their dog, a stray she fed while camping in Tennessee, came scratching outside their door six weeks later. Mr. Mitchell was jealous and frightened by these strangers, and often used himself as a shield between them and his wife. *What do they want from her?* he found himself thinking. But he also felt, *What will they take from me?*

His wife was a quiet woman, in the way that large rocks just beyond the shore are quiet; the waves rush against them and the seaweed hangs on and the birds gather round on top. Mr. Mitchell was amazed that she had married him. He spent the first few years doing what he could to please her and watched for signs that she was leaving.

Sometimes she got depressed and locked herself in the bathroom. It made him furious. When she came out, tender and pink from washing, she would put her arms around him and tell him that he was a good man. Mr. Mitchell was not sure of this, because sometimes he found himself hating her. He wanted her to know what it felt like to be powerless. He began taking risks.

When he got the call from Venezuela telling him about Miguel, he was terrified that he might lose his wife and also secretly happy to have wounded her. But all of the control he felt as they prepared for his son's arrival slipped away as he watched her take the strange dark boy into her arms and tenderly wash his feet. He realized then that she was capable of taking everything from him.

The three of them formed an awkward family. Mr. Mitchell tried to place the boy in a home, but his wife would not let him. He had now been an accidental father for two years. He took the boy to baseball games and bought him comic books and drove him to school in the mornings. Sometimes Mr. Mitchell enjoyed these things; other times they made him angry. One day he walked in on Miguel talking to his wife in Spanish and the boy immediately stopped. He saw that his son was afraid of him and he was sure that his wife had done this too. Mr. Mitchell began to resent what had initially drawn him to her, and to offset these feelings he began an affair with their neighbor, Pat.

It did not begin innocently. Pat said hello to Mr. Mitchell at the supermarket, then turned and pressed up against him as someone passed in the aisle. Her breasts touched his arm. Mr. Mitchell had never had any conversation with Pat that went beyond the weather or the scheduling of trash, but later that week he walked over to her as she was planting bulbs in her garden and slid his hand into the elastic waistband of her Bermuda shorts. He leaned her up against the fence, underneath a birch tree, right there in the middle of a bright, sunny day when everyone could see. Mr. Mitchell didn't say anything, but he could tell by her breath and the way she rocked on his hand that she wasn't afraid.

He did not know it was in him to do something like this. He had been on his way to the library to return some books. Look, there they were, thrown aside on the grass, wrapped in plastic smeared with age and the fingers of readers who were unknown to him. And here was another person he did not know, panting in his ear, streaking his arms with dirt. Someone he had seen bent over in the sunlight, a slight glistening of sweat reflecting in the backs of her knees, and for whom he had suddenly felt a hard sense of lonesomeness and longing. A new kind of warmth spread in the palm of his hand and he tried not to think about his wife.

They had hard, raw sex in public places—movie theaters and parks, elevators and playgrounds

After dark, underneath the jungle gym, his knees pressing into the dirt, Mr. Mitchell began to wonder why they hadn't been caught. Once, sitting on a bench near the reservoir, Pat straddling him in a skirt with no underwear, they had actually waved to an elderly couple passing by. The couple continued on as if they hadn't seen them. The experience left the impression that his meetings with Pat were occurring in some kind of alternative reality, a bubble in time that he knew would eventually pop.

Pat told him that Clyde had been impotent since his father died. The old man had been a mechanic and was working underneath a bulldozer when the lift slipped, crushing him from the chest down. Clyde held his father's hand as he died, and the coldness that came as life left seemed to spread through Clyde's fingers and into his arms, and he stopped using them to reach for his wife. Since the funeral she'd had two lovers. Mr. Mitchell was number three.

There were rumors, later on, that the lift had been tampered with—that Clyde's father had owed someone money. Pat denied it, but Mr. Mitchell remembered driving by the garage and sensing he should rather buy his gas somewhere else. It seemed like a shady business.

He started arranging meetings with Pat that were closer to home. Mr. Mitchell's desire increased with the risk of discovery, and in his house he began to fantasize about the dining room table, the dryer in the laundry room, the space on the kitchen counter beside the mixer. He touched these places with his fingertips and trembled, thinking of how he would feel later, watching his wife sip her soup, fold sheets, mix batter for cookies in the same places.

On the day Pat was murdered, before she put the roast in the oven or reminisced about James Dean or thought about the difference between butter and margarine, she was having sex in the vestibule. The coiled inscription of HOME SWEET HOME scratched her behind. Mr. Mitchell had seen Clyde leave for a bowling lesson, and as he waited on the front porch for Pat to open the door, something had made him pick up the welcome mat. Mrs. Mitchell would soon be home with Miguel, and the thought of her so close pricked his ears. When Pat answered he'd thrown the mat down in the hall, then her, then himself, the soles of his shoes knocking over the entry table. Mr. Mitchell brought Pat's knees to his shoulders and listened for the hum of his wife's Reliant.

The following day when Lieutenant Sales climbed the stairs of Pat and Clyde's porch, he did not notice that there was nothing to wipe his feet on. He was an average-looking man: six foot two, 190 pounds, brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. He had once been a champion deep-sea diver, until a shark attack (which left him with a hole in his side crossed with the pink, puckered scars of new skin) dragged him from the waters with a sense of righteous authority and induced him to join the force. He lived thirty-five minutes away in a basement apartment with a Siamese cat named Frank.

When Sales was a boy he'd had a teacher who smelled like roses. Her name was Mrs. Bosco. She showed him how to blow eggs. Forcing the yolk out of the tiny hole always felt a little disgusting, like blowing a heavy wad of snot from his nose, but when he looked up at Mrs. Bosco's cheeks flushed red with effort, he knew it would be worth it, and it was—the empty shell in his hand like a held breath. Whenever he began an investigation, he'd get the same sensation, and as he stepped into the doorway of Pat and Clyde's house, he felt it rise in his chest and stay.

He interviewed the police who found the bodies first. They were sheepish about their reasons for going into the backyard, but before long they began loudly discussing drywall and Sheetrock and the pros and cons of lancet windows (all of the men, including Lieutenant Sales, carried weekend and part-time jobs in construction). The policeman who had thrown up in the bushes went home early. When Sales spoke to him later, he apologized for contaminating the scene.

Lieutenant Sales found the roast on the counter. He found green beans still on the stove. He found a sour cherry pie nearly burned in the oven. He found the butter and the margarine half-melted on the dining room table. He found that Pat and Clyde used cloth napkins and tiny separate plates for the dinner rolls. The silverware was polished. The edges of the steak knives were turned in.

He found their unpaid bills in a basket by the telephone. He found clean laundry inside the dryer—the basement—towels, sheets, T-shirts, socks, three sets of Fruit of the Loom and one pair of soft pink satin panties, the elastic starting to give, the bottom frayed and thin. He found an unfinished letter Pat had started writing to a friend who had recently moved to Arizona: *What is it like there? How can you stand the heat?* He found Clyde's stamp albums from when he was a boy—tiny spots of brilliant color, etchings of flowers and portraits of kings, painstakingly pasted over the names of countries Lieutenant Sales had never heard of.

He found the bullet that had passed through Pat's body, embedded in the stairs. He found a run in her stocking, starting at the heel and inching its way up the back of her leg. He thought about how Pat had been walking around the day she was going to die not realizing that there was a hole in her pantyhose. He found a stain, dark and blooming beneath her shoulders, spreading across the Oriental rug in the foyer and into the hardwood floors, which he noticed, as he got down on his knees for a closer look, still held the scent of Murphy's oil soap. He found a hairpin caught in the carpet fringe. He found a cluster of dandelion seeds, the tiny white filaments coming apart in his fingers. He found a look on Pat's face like a child trying to be brave, lips tightened and thin, forehead just beginning to crease, eyes glazed, dark, and unconvinced. Her body was stiff when they moved her.

There were dog tracks on the back porch. They were the prints of a midsized animal, red and clearly defined as they circled the body in the kitchen, then crisscrossing over themselves and heading out the door, fading down the steps and onto the driveway before disappearing into the yard. Lieutenant Sales sent a man to knock on doors in the neighborhood and find out who let their dogs off the leash. He interviewed Clyde's mother. He went back to the station and checked Pat's and Clyde's records—both clean. When he finally went to sleep that night, the small warmth of his cat tucked next to his shoulder, Lieutenant Sales thought about the feel of satin panties, missing slippers, stolen welcome mats, dandelion seeds from a yard with no dandelions, and the kind of killer who shuts off the oven.

A month before Pat and Clyde were murdered, Mrs. Mitchell was fixing the toilet. Her husband passed by on his way to the kitchen, paused at the door, shook his head, and told her that she was too good for him. The heavy porcelain top was off, her arms elbow deep in rusty water. The man she had married was standing at the entrance to the bathroom and speaking, but Mrs. Mitchell was concentrating on the particular tone in the pipes she was trying to clear, and so she did not respond.

Mr. Mitchell went into the kitchen and began popping popcorn. The kernels cracked against the insides of the kettle as his words settled into her, and when, with a twist of the coat hanger in her hand beneath the water, she stopped the ringing of the pipes, Mrs. Mitchell sensed in the quiet that came next that her husband had done something wrong. She had known in this same way before he told her about Miguel. A breeze came through the window and made the hair on her wet arms rise. She pulled her hands from the toilet and thought, *I fixed it.*

When Miguel came into their home, she had taken all the sorrow she felt at his existence and turned it into a fierce motherly love. Mrs. Mitchell thought her husband would be grateful; instead he seemed to hold it against her. He became dodgy and spiteful. He blamed her for what he'd done, for being a woman too hard to live up to. It was the closest she ever came to leaving. But she hadn't expected the boy.

Miguel spent the first three months of his life in America asking to go home. When the four-month came he began to sleepwalk. He wandered downstairs to the kitchen, emptied the garbage can onto the floor, and curled up inside. In the morning Mrs. Mitchell would find him asleep, shoulders against the barrel, feet in the coffee grounds and leftovers. He told her he was looking for his mother's head. She had been decapitated in the bus accident, and now she stepped from the corners of Miguel's dreams at night and beckoned him with her arms, his lost chickens resting on her shoulders, pecking at the empty neck.

Mrs. Mitchell suggested that they make her a new one. She bought materials for papier-mâché. ~~They cut strips of newspaper felt like bandages as she helped Miguel dip them in glue and smooth them over~~ the surface of the inflated balloon. They fashioned a nose and lips out of cardboard. Once it was done, Miguel described his mother's face and they painted the skin brown, added yarn for hair, cut eyelashes out of construction paper. Mrs. Mitchell took a pair of gold earrings, poked them through where they'd drawn the ears and said, heart sinking, *She's beautiful*. Miguel nodded. He smiled. He put his mother's head on top of the bookcase in his room and stopped sleeping in the garbage.

Sometimes when Mrs. Mitchell checked on the boy at night, she'd feel the head looking at her. It was unnerving. She imagined her husband making love to the papier-mâché face and discovered a hardness so strong and hard it made her afraid of herself. She considered swiping the head and destroying it, but she remembered how skinny and pitiful the boy's legs had looked against her kitchen floor. The day Miguel began to love her, and she suddenly felt capable of anything. She thumbed her nose at the face in the corner. She held her heart open.

Mrs. Mitchell had been raised by her aunts in a house near the river where her mother had drowned. The aunts were hunters; birds mostly, which they would clean and cook and eat. As a girl Mrs. Mitchell would retrieve the shots. Even on a clear day, the birds always seemed wet. Sometimes they were still alive when she found them—wings thrashing, pieces of their chests torn away. She learned to take hold of their necks and break them quickly.

Mrs. Mitchell kept a picture of her mother next to the mirror in her room, and whenever she checked her reflection, her eyes would naturally turn from her own face to that of the woman who gave birth to her. The photo was black-and-white and creased near the edges; she was fifteen, her hair braided, the end of one braid pressed between her lips. It made Mrs. Mitchell think of stories she'd heard of women who spent their lives spinning—years of passing flax through their mouths to make thread would leave them disfigured, lower lips drooping off their faces; a permanent look of being beaten.

The aunts built a shooting range on an area of property behind the house. It was Mrs. Mitchell's job to set up the targets and fetch them iced tea and ammo. She kept a glass jar full of shells in the back of her closet, shiny gold casings from her aunts' collection of .22 calibers and .45s. They made a shooting station out of an old shed, two tables set up with sandbags to hold the guns, nestling them in the shape of heavy metal as the pieces were placed down.

When she was twelve years old the aunts gave her a rifle. She already knew the shooting stances and she practiced them with her new gun every day after school. She could hit a target while kneeling, crouching, lying down, and standing tall, hips parallel to the barrel and her waist turned, the same way the aunts taught her to pose when a picture was being taken. She picked off tin cans and old metal signs and polka-dotted the paper outlines of men.

Mrs. Mitchell remembered this when she pulled into her driveway, glanced over the fence, and saw her husband having sex in the doorway of their neighbors' house. She turned to Miguel in the passenger seat and told him to close his eyes. The boy covered his face with his hands and sat quietly while she got out of the car. Mrs. Mitchell watched her husband moving back and forth and felt her feet give way from the ground. She had the sensation of being caught in a river, the current pulling her body outward, tugging at her ankles, and she wondered why she wasn't being swept away until she realized that she was holding on to the fence. The wood felt smooth and worn, like the handle of her first gun, and she used it to pull herself back down.

Later she thought of the look on Pat's face. It reminded Mrs. Mitchell of the Tin Woodman from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*— disarmingly lovely and greasy with expectation. In the book version she bought for Miguel she'd read that the Woodman had once been real, but his ax kept slipping and he'd dismembered himself, slowly exchanging his flesh piece by piece for hollow metal. Mrs.

Mitchell thought Pat's body would rattle with the same kind of emptiness, but it didn't; it fell with the heavy tone of meat. As she waited for the echo, Mrs. Mitchell heard a small cough from the kitchen, the kind a person does in polite society to remind someone else that they are there. She followed it and found Clyde in his slippers, the knife in the roast.

Hello. I just killed your wife. And when she said it, she knew she'd have to shoot Clyde too. The beans were boiling, the water frothing over the sides of the pan and sizzling into the low flame beneath. Mrs. Mitchell turned off the oven and spun all the burners to zero.

The aunts never married. They still lived in the house where they raised their niece. Occasionally they sent her photographs, recipes, information on the NRA, or obituaries of people she had known, clipped from the local newspaper. When a reporter called Mrs. Mitchell, asking questions about Pat and Clyde, she thought back to all the notices her aunts had sent over the years, and said: *They were good neighbors and wonderful people. I don't know who would have done something like this. They will be greatly missed.* The truth was that she felt very little for Pat. It was hard to forgive herself for this, so she didn't try. Instead she did her best to forget how Clyde had looked, the surprise on his face, as if he were about to offer her a drink before he crumpled to the floor.

She waited patiently through the following day for someone to come for her. She watched the police cruisers and the news vans come and go. On Monday morning she woke up and let the dog out. She made a sandwich for Miguel and fit it in his lunch box beside a thermos of milk. She poured juice into a glass and cereal into a bowl. Then she locked herself in the bathroom and watched her hands shake. She remembered that she had wanted to cover Clyde with something. Falling out of the box, the cereal had sounded crisp and new like water on rocks, but it quickly turned into a soggy mess that stayed with her as she left him, stepped over Pat, and picked up the welcome mat with her gloves. She could still see her husband moving back and forth on top of it. She wanted to make HOME SWEET HOME disappear, but the longest she could bring herself to touch it was the end of the driveway, and she left it in a garbage can on the street.

She found that she could not say good-bye. Not when her husband pounded on the door to take a shower and not when Miguel asked if he could brush his teeth. She sat on the toilet and listened to them move about the house and leave. Later, she watched through the window as a man wrapped his neighbors' house in police tape. To double it around a tree in the yard, he circled the trunk with his arms. It was a brief embrace and she thought, *That tree felt nothing.*

In the afternoon, when the sun began to slant, Lieutenant Sales crossed the Mitchells' front yard. He was carrying a chewed-up slipper in a bag, jostling the dandelions, and sending seeds of white flowers adrift. Mrs. Mitchell saw him coming. She turned the key in the lock, and once she was beyond the bathroom, she ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing down the rough spots. The bell rang. The dog barked. She opened the door, and offered him coffee.

Miguel turned nine that summer. In the past two years he'd spent with the Mitchells, the boy had grown no more than an inch; but with the warm weather that June, he'd suddenly sprouted—his legs stretching like brown sugar taffy tight over his new knobby bones, as if the genes of his American father had been lying dormant, biding their time until the right combination of spring breezes and processed food kissed them awake. He began to trip over himself. On his way home from baseball practice that Monday, he caught one of his newly distended feet on a trash can just outside the line of police tape that closed in Pat and Clyde's yard. Miguel fell to the sidewalk, smacking his hands against the concrete. The barrel toppled over beside him, and out came a welcome mat. HOME SWEET HOME.

Miguel was not the best student, but he had made friends easily once he hit several home runs in gym class. Norman and Greg Kessler, twins and the most popular kids in school, chose him for the team and for their friend. Norman and Greg helped him with his English, defended him against would-

be attackers, and told him when they saw his father naked.

Mr. Mitchell had driven past them on the highway, stripped bare from the waist down. From the window of their mother's minivan, Norman and Greg could see a woman leaning over the gearshift. *It's true*, said the twins. Miguel made them swear on the Bible, on a stack of Red Sox cards, and finally on their grandfather's grave, which they did, bikes thrown aside in the grass and sweaty hands pressed on the polished marble of his years. At dinner that night the boy watched his father eating. The angle of his jaw clenched and turned.

Miguel felt a memory push past hot dogs, past English, past Hostess cupcakes and his collection of Spiderman comic books. He was five years old and asked his mother where his father was. She was making coffee—squeezing the grounds through a sieve made out of cloth and wire. He'd collected eggs from their chickens for breakfast. He was holding them in his hands and they were still warm. His mother took one from him. *This is the world and we are here*, she said, and pointed to the bottom half of the egg. *Your father is there*. She ran her finger up along the edge and tapped the point with her dark red nail. Then she cracked the yolk in a pan and threw the rest of the egg in the garbage. He retrieved it later and pushed his fingertips back and forth across the slippery inner membrane until the shell came apart into pieces.

Miguel picked up the doormat and shook it to get the dust off. It seemed like something Mr. Mitchell might be fond of. That morning he had kept watch through the bathroom keyhole. She was out of sight, but he could sense her worry.

In Caracas he had gone through the trash regularly, looking for things to play with and at times for something to eat. Ever since he heard about his father being naked on the highway, he had been remembering more about his life there, and even reverting to some of his old habits, as if the noise of his father's nudity had tenderly shaken him awake. He lay in bed at night and looked in the eyes of the papier-mâché head for guidance. He had two lives now, two countries and two mothers. Soon he would find another life without his father, and another, when he went away to college, and another life, and another, and another, and another, each of them a thin, fragile casing echoing the hum of what had gone before.

The boy walked into the kitchen and found his American mother sitting with a strange man. They both held steaming mugs of coffee. Buster was under the table, waking from his afternoon nap. He saw Miguel and thumped his tail halfheartedly against the floor. The adults turned. *Now, what have you got there?*

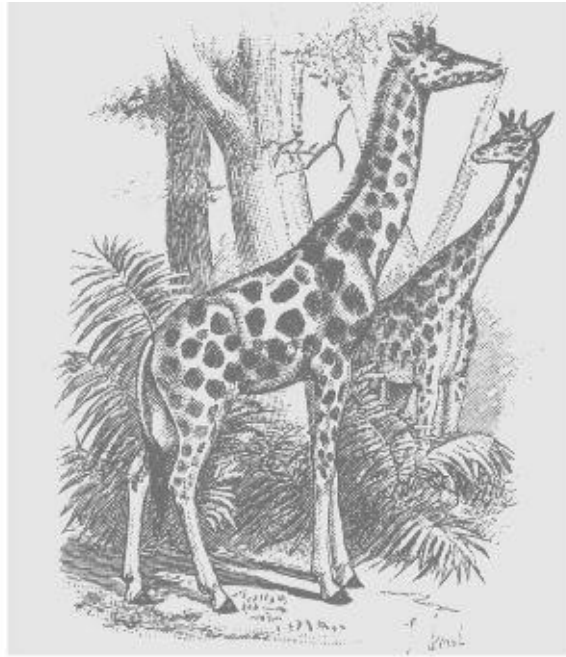
Lieutenant Sales took HOME SWEET HOME in his hands. There was something in the look of the boy and the feel of the rope that held possibility, and the twisted pink skin where the shark had bitten him began to itch. It had been tingling all afternoon. Later, in the lab, the welcome mat would reveal tiny spots of Pat's blood, dog saliva, gunpowder, dead ants, mud, fertilizer, and footprints—but not the impression of Mr. Mitchell's knees, or the hesitation of his jealous wife on the doorstep, or the hunger of his son in the garbage. All of this had been shaken off.

Lieutenant Sales would leave the Mitchells' house that afternoon with the same thrill he'd had when the shark passed and he realized his leg was still there. He was exhilarated and then exhausted, though his life had been drained, and he knew then that he had gone as far as he could go. There would be no scar and no solution to the murder, just the sense that he had missed something, and the familiar taste of things not done. For now, he reached out with a kind of hope and accepted the welcome mat as a gift.

Mrs. Mitchell put her arm around Miguel's shoulders and waited for Lieutenant Sales to arrest her son. She would continue to wait in the weeks ahead as suspects were raised and then dismissed and headlines changed and funerals were planned. The possibilities of these moments passed over her like shadows. When they were gone she was left standing chilled.

Clyde's mother arranged for closed caskets. In the pew Mrs. Mitchell sat quietly. Her husband looked nervous and cracked knuckles. After the service they went home and Mr. Mitchell started to pack. His wife listened to the suitcases being dragged down from the attic, the swing of hanger zipper teeth, the straps of leather buckles. Mr. Mitchell said he was leaving, and his wife felt her throat clutch. She wanted to ask him where he would go; she wanted to ask him what she had done there for; she wanted to ask him why he no longer loved her, but instead she asked for his son.

She had watched Miguel hand the frayed rope to the detective, and as it passed by her, she felt a ache in the back of her mouth as though she hadn't eaten for days. Lieutenant Sales turned HOME SWEET HOME over in his hands. He placed it carefully on the kitchen table and Mrs. Mitchell saw the word *Sweet*. She remembered the milk she had made for the boy when he arrived, and sensed that this would not be the end of her. She could hear the steady breathing of her sleeping dog. She could smell the coffee. She felt the small frame of Miguel steady beneath her hand. These bones, she thought, were everything. *Hey, sport*, Mrs. Mitchell asked, *is that for me?* The boy nodded, and she held him close.



It began with a list of demands, presented to the zookeeper. This had taken some time to prepare. The giraffes had to explain their situation to one of the mountain gorillas in the neighboring pen, and after intense negotiations (a percentage of food to be delivered in three installments: one-third upon translation, one-third upon contact with the gorilla's sign language tutor, and the final one-third upon receipt of the document), the giraffes had procured their list. In an appropriately dramatic gesture, their elected spokesanimal, Doë, approached the wire enclosure of their pen while the keeper was conducting a tour of the zoo for potential benefactors, and gracefully stretching her neck over the edge of the fence, she delicately laid the paper across the zookeeper's balding head with her teeth.

At first the zookeeper tried to laugh off the incident as a prank played on him by one of his favorite animals. But as he began to glance over said document, his ears turned red and a blush crept up across his neck like a rash. In bold, stiff lettering that the sign language tutor, a vexed woman in her mid-thirties, felt was appropriate to the occasion, the letter made the following statement:

DEAR ZOOKEEPER:

BEING ONE OF THE BIGGEST ATTRACTIONS AT THE ZOO (PROVIDING EIGHT PERCENT OF NET GROSS INCOME YEARLY), AS WELL AS MAKING THE TOP TEN LIST OF FAVORITE ANIMALS THREE YEARS IN A ROW, WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, HAVE RESORTED TO THE ATTACHED LIST OF DEMANDS IN RESPONSE TO THE INACTION ON YOUR PART IN PREVIOUS NEGOTIATIONS, NAMELY: ENLARGEMENT OF PEN, ALTERATIONS IN DIET, AND VIOLATION OF PRIVACY ACT 76865 CODE E. IF OUR DEMANDS CONTINUE TO BE IGNORED BY YOUR OFFICE, WE WILL BE FORCED TO TAKE NECESSARY ACTION TO ENSURE OUR RIGHTS WHICH WERE STATED IN OUR PRELIMINARY CONTRACT.

SINCERELY,

*DOË
LULU
FRANCESCO*

DEMANDS

1. **TOO MUCH ACACIA.** ALTHOUGH WE ARE IMPORTED AMERICANS, WE TOO WOULD LIKE TO SAVOR THE MIX OF CULTURES. HOW ABOUT SOME WISTERIA? BAMBOO? COMBRETUM? OR MAPLE LEAVES? LET'S HAVE A LITTLE CACTUS.

2 . **A BIGGER PEN.** THE VERTICAL MUST BE IN CORRESPONDENCE TO THE HORIZONTAL. THE OKAPI ARE ALLOTTED ONE HUNDRED SQUARE FEET MORE THAN WE ARE, AS NOTED IN PREVIOUS COMPLAINTS. UNDUE PRIVILEGES HAVE CONSISTENTLY BEEN GIVEN TO THE OKAPI FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE “MINI” FAD, ALL OF WHICH HAVE BEEN REPORTED AND ITEMIZED IN ADDENDUM A OF THIS DOCUMENT.

3. **PRIVACY.** DUE TO OBVIOUS PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES, PRIVATE MOMENTS ARE SUBJECT TO CONSTANT SUPERVISION. A SECTION OF HIGH TREES (TWENTY-FIVE FEET OR MORE) PLANTED IN THE REAR QUADRANT OF OUR PEN WOULD PROVIDE RELIEF SOLITUDE, A NOOK OF OUR OWN.

4. **QUALITY OF LIFE.** WE LIVE IN A WORLD DETERMINED BY YOUR BORDERS. BUT OUR GIFTS OF NATURE SUPPLY US WITH THE ABILITY TO SEE BEYOND THESE LINES TO BETTER THINGS. AUTOMATED SPRINKLER SYSTEMS. TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR CONVENIENCE STORES. THE SUCCULENT, ABUNDANT FOLIAGE OF THE NEULAND ARBORETUM (LOCATED FIVE MILES SOUTHWEST OF OUR ENCLOSURE). ALL THESE THINGS MAKE US DESIRE A MORE TEXTURED EXPERIENCE. A GREATER TOMORROW. AN EXPANSION OF OUR EXISTENCE. THE POSSIBILITY OF ICE CREAM.

P.S. BEWARE. DUE TO OUR FRAGILE CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEMS, IT IS DANGEROUS TO EXCITE US.

The zookeeper was not tickled by this disclosure. In fact, he was rather displeased. The giraffes were old reliables. They’d been part of the zoo since he started as a dung sweeper in high school. He had other things to worry about—a sick musk ox, the exhibit of South American tree frogs, and Disney. He folded the list of demands, slipped it into his front pocket, and steered the group of benefactors toward the emus.

This was not the reaction anticipated by the giraffes. It had been two years since the morning when, over a breakfast of acacia leaves, Doë had turned to Francesco and said she believed their lives were not what they could be. The giraffes had spent the next year and a half debating the pros and cons of declaring their dissatisfaction. The procurement of the document had taken four months. The gorilla’s payment was costly—his response time, grueling. The opportunity to present it to the director of the zoo had been a wait of thirteen weeks. They had been patient, and his apparent disregard for their wants and feelings and his dismissal of their threat (which Lulu had insisted they include in order to be taken seriously and, as she put it, “capture their mood”) was keenly felt.

After a catered luncheon with the patrons by the lion pit, the zookeeper returned to his office. He took the giraffes’ list of demands out of his pocket and spread it on his desk, smoothing it with his fingers. He knew that word of this would soon spread to the other animals, and he recognized the possibility of a disruption.

The zookeeper often compared management of the zoo to marriage with his wife, Matilda. She was a large, angry woman he’d met while traveling through Romania. He was often afraid of her. But he was also fascinated by her brooding and the thickness of where her legs met the beginnings of her behind. Early in their marriage, he discovered that the tone of authority was calming for Matilda. After barking a sharp retort, he could see her shoulders loosen and give way. He would follow through with kindness (sweet things he would like to smother her in), and he found it was only in the quiet moments that she would accept his love. He tried to imagine what he would do if Matilda gave him the list of demands. He would tear it up in her face. He would try to convince her that he was angry. He would scream obscenities, shake his fist, then secretly make sure everything she desired came true.

The zookeeper decided the best action would be to publicly refuse the giraffes’ demands. Perhaps even to make an initial show of punishment so the other animals would realize what defiance would cost them. He couldn’t have every species writing lists and such. What, for example, would the hippo

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